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# **AUTHORITARIAN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC**

**CASES OF CHINA, IRAN, RUSSIA,  
BELARUS AND HUNGARY**

Edited by Vladislav Inozemtsev

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FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION

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## **Free Russia Foundation**

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# INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic caused by a coronavirus, widely known as COVID-19, officially broke out in the city of Wuhan in China in late 2019, but most probably it originated from the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Wuhan-based Institute of Virology<sup>1</sup> authorized to conduct the most sophisticated experiments with different viruses. It is also widely believed that the outbreak started three to four months before it was confirmed by the Chinese officials.<sup>2</sup> No one actually knows when exactly it emerged and how many people had contracted the virus by the time the outbreak was reported to the WHO on New Year's Eve. What we do know is that the Chinese authorities first pretended the infection was not too dangerous, but by the end of January started to take radical measures—putting more than 50 million people in several provinces under quarantine.<sup>3</sup>

Because of both, the delayed response and downgraded dangers of the virus, it easily spread outside China's borders, causing a global disaster. As of June 1, 2020, five months after the emergence of the virus was officially recognized, it had spread to 212 countries and territories, infected more than 6 million people and killed around 375 thousand, with a quarter of all cases and casualties recorded in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

When the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020, not only vast regions of China were locked down, but the whole nation declared the state of emergency and sealed its borders, as Italy did just one day prior to WHO's move.<sup>5</sup> Such measures have resulted in immense

economic disruptions; China's GDP contracted by 6.8% in the first quarter;<sup>6</sup> all major airlines cut up to 90% of their regular flights by April 1;<sup>7</sup> the American economy virtually stalled with 38.6 million jobless by the end of May.<sup>8</sup> In June 2020, the IMF predicted that the American economy would contract by 5.9% in 2020 and the EU projection stood at 6.7%.<sup>9</sup> While it is difficult to calculate the overall economic effect of the crisis, even the most conservative estimates begin at \$6 trillion with an additional \$15 trillion in assets expected to evaporate due to the declining prices of stocks, real estate, and production facilities. National responses to the pandemic have varied greatly with most governments and communities initially unprepared for the speed and scale of impacts of COVID-19.

In the pre-coronavirus world, many politicians and political thinkers expected democracies to be better suited to manage economic issues, ensure personal liberties, and promote growth and communal well-being; and anticipated that 'strong' autocratic societies would be better equipped for facing emergencies and dealing with unexpected challenges. To some extent, the COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed such expectations. According to the Freedom House World Index 2020, the 83 nations recognized as "free" and amounting to roughly 37.6% of the global population,<sup>10</sup> account for 76.9% of all people infected with COVID-19 and more than 84.9% dead as of May 10, 2020.<sup>11</sup> There is little doubt free nations are the most economically developed, have better health-care systems and more advanced social safety nets than the rest of the world. Moreover, it should be noted that the most developed countries—like the United States, Cana-

1 Zachary Basu, "Pompeo Says There's 'Enormous Evidence' Coronavirus Originated in Wuhan Lab," *Axios* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/pompeo-coronavirus-wuhan-lab-5f305526-9ceb-49af-943a-fd8291a6d5d9.html>.

2 Kate Kelland, "New Coronavirus Spread Swiftly Around World From Late 2019, Study finds," *Reuters* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-evolution/new-coronavirus-spread-swiftly-around-world-from-late-2019-study-finds-idUSKBN221E3>.

3 Aylin Woodward and Rosie Perper, "Wuhan, China, and at least 15 other cities have been quarantined as China attempts to halt the spread of the coronavirus. That's about 50 million people on lockdown," *Business Insider* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/wuhan-coronavirus-officials-quarantine-entire-city-2020-1>.

4 See: "Daily coronavirus statistics," *Worldometer* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

5 See: "Coronavirus: Italy Imposes Nationwide Restrictions," *Deutsche Welle* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-italy-imposes-nationwide-restrictions/a-52687246>.

6 Laura He, "China's Economy Just Shrank for the First Time in Decades," *CNN Business* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/economy/china-economy-gdp/index.html>.

7 Andrew Freedman et al., "How Coronavirus Grounded the Airline Industry," *Washington Post* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/coronavirus-airline-industry-collapse/>.

8 Lance Lambert, "38.6 million have filed for unemployment during the pandemic—greater than the combined population of 21 states," *Fortune* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/05/21/us-unemployment-rate-numbers-claims-this-week-total-job-losses-may-21-2020-benefits-claims-job-losses/>.

9 See: IMF Data Mapper, April 2020, International Monetary Fund (website), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP\\_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOORLD](https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOORLD).

10 See: "Freedom in the World 2020 Database," *Freedom House* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

11 Calculated by the author according to country data as provided in: "Daily coronavirus statistics," *Worldometer* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

da, the United Kingdom, member-states of the European Union, Japan, Australia and New Zealand—have allocated enormous resources to stabilize their economies and have provided their people with basic needs during self-isolation and quarantine. The share of these nations in economic stimulus programs adopted worldwide exceeds 85%,<sup>12</sup> while the economic downturn seems to be one of the severest.

However, these statistics should not be taken at their face value. First of all, there is a lot of doubt (to put it mildly) about the validity of statistical data provided by authoritarian and non-democratic governments related to the initial reports, the extent of progress achieved in fighting the pandemic, and their likelihood to accurately report new “hot spots” or “the second wave.” Secondly, it seems that almost any country can survive even a one-month-long economic pause without enormous fiscal and financial stimulus, but such a disruption would definitely have long-term consequences that in many aspects might be even more disastrous than huge budget deficits caused by the growth of the national debt. The authoritarian states which bet on their citizens’ ability to muddle through the crisis without serious government help, could see them turn into “economically disabled” for years to come. Thirdly, it is hard to predict ways in which popular attitudes toward governments and political elites inside authoritarian states might change after the pandemic. Many of them have dialed up the repression against their citizens during the pandemic, a trend which in the long-term can become a destabilizing factor.

The longer the state of emergency is upheld globally, the more likely it is to result in profound societal changes, especially in non-democratic states. Therefore, documenting and analyzing state responses and their impact on domestic political situation is critical to developing a better understanding of contemporary authoritarian regimes.

This report examines four Eurasian states who were among the “recipients” of COVID-19, rather than its source as well as **China**, where the virus emerged (because the spread of the coronavirus infection in both Africa and Latin America started significantly later, those regions are not included in our analysis).

**Russia** is one of the key cases in this study for several reasons. It was a late-comer to the “club” of affected nations but had caught-up very quickly. It has extensively used disinformation to depict its efforts in fighting CO-

VID-19 as effective. It has used the pandemic to legitimize further assault on democracy and freedoms of its citizens. Finally, it has dedicated minimal resources to supporting its own economy and population during the COVID-19 crisis.

**Iran**, a theocratic Muslim state in the heart of the Gulf region, has borne disproportionate losses due to its close ties with China and the dynamics of disease’s spread inside communities of faith.

**Belarus**, a relatively small post-Soviet state on the European Union’s eastern borders, is a unique case of a nation whose leadership has remained unwavering in its denial of the challenges posed by the virus. This policy has made Belarus one of the most affected countries in Europe with no clear outlook as to how and when the pandemic might recede there.

**Hungary** is included as the only country inside the European Union approaching the description of an autocratic state, with a highly personality-driven system of governance and a growing trend of pervasive corruption and nepotism. It serves as an opportune case for examining specific features that a corrupt, though formally democratic, regime may adopt in its response to a pandemic.

This report was produced by a team of experts chaired by **Dr Vladislav Inozemtsev**, Founder and Director of the Center of Post-Industrial Studies in Moscow and Senior Associate with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington who also wrote the chapter on Russia; **Dr Clément Therme**, former Director of the Iran Research Program at the International Institute of Strategic Studies, currently serving as Research Associate at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales and as Research Fellow with the Institut français des relations internationales in Paris who produced the chapter on Iran; **Dr Arsen Sivitsky**, Co-Founder and Director of the Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, an independent Belarusian Minsk-based foreign policy think-tank who contributed to the study; and **Bálint Madlovics**, a Hungarian investigative journalist who has penned the chapter on Hungary. This study attempts to present a comprehensive description of efforts by the governments of the aforementioned countries to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that this analysis will contribute to a better understanding of these countries’ political regimes, as well as their economic and social perspectives.

*Vladislav Inozemtsev*

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<sup>12</sup> See: Global Economic Effects of COVID-19, Paper R46270, May 2020, (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service), 7.





Xi Jinping during the launch of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline. Photo: kremlin.ru

Elizabeth Chen

# CHINA



## ABOUT AUTHOR

### Elizabeth Chen

Elizabeth Chen is a researcher focused on US-China national security and policy issues, with a particular interest in technology, privacy, and surveillance. She is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins University and has worked for a number of think-tanks, including the AI Alliance, the East West Institute, US-China Strong, and the Jamestown Foundation. At the Jamestown Foundation, she served as assistant editor for the China Brief publication and organized the annual China Defense and Security Conference (October 2019).

As with any new disease, much uncertainty surrounding the origins of what has now been named the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and the earliest days of the Covid-19 pandemic. A variety of speculation continues to run rampant. What is known is that, despite the government's protestations to the contrary, the People's Republic of China (PRC) failed to contain the virus during the late months of 2019, and stalled passing along key information to the WHO even after news of the outbreak became public, delaying the creation of an international strategy to address the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> After the pandemic spread in Wuhan, the PRC implemented historic measures to quarantine a record-breaking number of people, at great cost to individuals' civil liberties. Public health experts have questioned the efficacy of the Hubei cordon sanitaire, and while it appears to have been successful in containing the majority of China's domestic coronavirus cases to Hubei Province, it also set a dangerous precedent. Amidst the chaos of epidemic control and prevention, the Chinese central government repeatedly accelerated existing trends towards centralizing power and increasing social control. Overall, China's response to the coronavirus pandemic has showcased a number of key traits of authoritarian regimes, including: lack of transparency, censorship, surveillance, media restrictions, military interventions to control citizen populations, and limitations of

civil liberties—all exacerbated during a time of crisis. And while the Chinese party-state has fought hard to present its fight against Covid-19 as a story of triumph over adversity, it is important to understand what has been left out of this positive narrative. Persistent misinformation about the basic facts surrounding the pandemic has been exacerbated by a variety of factors, including the efforts of the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control the political narrative—both domestic and international—of its response to the COVID-19 outbreak. As the first nation to be impacted by the coronavirus, the PRC's response set a global standard. Its infection rate and death counts have been used as a benchmark to measure the spread of the coronavirus across the world. Its example will continue to serve as a reference for other countries' reopenings in the coming months and years. As of the time of writing, China has been ranked (with some caveats) as one of the top ten performing states in an independent evaluation of global responses to COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Along with its successes, China's pandemic response curtailed individuals' rights and liberties in the name of public safety, strengthened Xi Jinping's ongoing campaign to centralize political and state power, and rapidly expanded what was already the world's largest surveillance regime.

1 See: "China delayed releasing coronavirus info, frustrating WHO' at AP news website: <https://apnews.com/3c061794970661042b18d5aeaed9fae> (website accessed June 14, 2020).

2 See: "South Korea and China Earn High Marks in Pandemic Safety Ranking," Caixin (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-16/south-korea-and-china-earn-high-marks-in-pandemic-safety-ranking-101543298.html>.



China's comparatively low reported cases seem to indicate the success of its efforts in combatting Covid-19, burnishing its reputation while it maneuvers to establish itself as a global health leader in the post-pandemic era. However, more questions need to be asked about the consequences yielded by the authoritarian "China model" of pandemic response in the first four months of 2020. With the benefit of retrospection and, where possible, reference to multiple sources, I have laid out a general timeline of COVID-19's impact and epidemic control efforts in the PRC below. Focus in the timeline will be given to the earliest days of the outbreak when government hesitation and denial allowed the virus to spread. Details about the Chinese state's opacity and misinformation in its official reporting; public health policy and quarantine response; and the ongoing impact of the pandemic on China's economy and foreign relations will be discussed in later sections.

## EARLY COVERUPS AND RESPONSE DELAYS

Rumors of a new viral strain of "pneumonia with unexplained origin" (不明原因的病毒性肺炎) in the Chinese city of Wuhan, Hubei Province began surfacing in the Chinese medical community in mid-December 2019, and some doctors reported their concerns to hospital administrators and city health officials as early as December 25. An investigation in March by the *South China Morning Post* claimed that the Chinese government may have had records of abnormal "pneumonia" cases in Wuhan as early as November 17.<sup>3</sup> A preprint Harvard Medical School analysis of hospital traffic and search engine data in Wuhan concluded that the Covid-19 may have been circulating as early as August 2019, and US intelligence agencies had collected raw intelligence hinting at a public health crisis in Wuhan as early as November.<sup>4</sup> Doctors had warned Wuhan health leaders about cases of viral pneumonia caused by a "SARS-like" novel coronavirus

3 See: "Coronavirus: China's first confirmed Covid-19 case traced back to November 17," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3074991/coronavirus-chinas-first-confirmed-covid-19-case-traced-back>.

4 See: "Satellite images and online searches indicate China had coronavirus in the fall, Harvard study finds," *CNBC* (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/09/coronavirus-may-have-been-spreading-in-china-in-august-harvard-study.html>; see also: "U.S. spy agencies collected raw intelligence hinting at public health crisis in Wuhan, China, in November," *NBC* (website) accessed June 14, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/u-s-spy-agencies-collected-raw-intel-hinting-public-health-n1180646>.

as early as December 27,<sup>5</sup> but early whistleblowers were repeatedly silenced.

On December 30, the Wuhan Health Commission (WHC) (武汉市卫生健康委员会) notified city hospitals of a "pneumonia with unknown origin."<sup>6</sup> After a machine translation of a Chinese media report about the outbreak was posted to THE Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases (ProMED) a US-based open-access platform for early intelligence about infectious disease outbreaks, the WHO China Country office requested verification of the outbreak from Beijing on December 31.<sup>7</sup> That same day, the Wuhan Health Commission issued its first public bulletin about the new virus, confirming 27 cases of infection.<sup>8</sup> An analysis of the first 425 patients who were infected between December 10 and January 4, published on January 29 in the *New England Medical Journal*, extrapolated that the number of new coronavirus cases was doubling every seven days during the month of December.<sup>9</sup>

Reports which have emerged in recent months showed that although the state moved slowly to control the spread of the virus, the Chinese censorship regime was quick to crack down on rumors about the new pandemic, delaying the publication of crucial information from an early stage. Eight doctors, including Dr. Li Wenliang (李文亮), were taken in for questioning by Wuhan public security officers on charges of "spreading rumors [dangerous to the public]" (散布谣言) in the late evening on January 1.<sup>10</sup> (Two days before, Dr. Li had posted on WeChat warning of a new "SARS-like" virus and asked medical colleagues for advice. Dr. Li's death

5 See: "Early missteps and state secrecy in China probably allowed the coronavirus to spread farther and faster," *Washington Post* (website), accessed February 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/01/early-missteps-state-secrecy-china-likely-allowed-coronavirus-spread-farther-faster/>.

6 See: "Timeline: The early days of China's coronavirus outbreak and cover-up," *Axios* (website), accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/timeline-the-early-days-of-chinas-coronavirus-outbreak-and-cover-up-ee65211a-afb6-4641-97b8-353718a5faab.html>.

7 See: "How ProMED crowdsourced the arrival of Covid-19 and SARS" at *Wired* (website), accessed June 14, 2020.

8 See: "Wuhan Health Commission Notice on Pneumonia Epidemic [武汉市卫健委通报肺炎疫情]," *Hubei Daily*, (website), accessed May 4, 2020, [https://epaper.hubeidaily.net/pc/content/202001/01/content\\_15040.html](https://epaper.hubeidaily.net/pc/content/202001/01/content_15040.html).

9 See: "Early Transmission Dynamics in Wuhan, China, of Novel Coronavirus-Infected Pneumonia," *New England Journal of Medicine* (NEJM) (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2001316>.

10 See: "Spreading Rumors, Eight People Are Investigated [散布谣言, 8人被查处]," *Wuhan Broadcast Television* [武汉广电掌上武汉] (website), accessed May 4, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1654582380950520889&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

from COVID-19 just over a month later would make him a nationwide symbol for the heroism of healthcare workers and unleash a torrent of online protest against the CCP's early failures to control the outbreak).<sup>11</sup> Provincial labs—including the Wuhan Institute of Virology—studying the virus since mid-December positively identified it as a member of the coronavirus family by the end of 2019. On the first day of the new year, an official at the Hubei Health Commission ordered some labs to stop testing and destroy their existing samples.<sup>12</sup> On January 9, China's CDC retroactively announced the successful complete genomic sequencing and the creation of nucleic acid testing procedures.<sup>13</sup> An independent team from Shanghai's Fudan University uploaded the coronavirus' genetic sequence to an international open-source platform, sharing it with international scientists. Three other Chinese research teams, including one from the national Center for Disease Control (CCDC) subsequently posted their own genomic sequences as well.<sup>14</sup>

Progress in ameliorating the outbreak during the first three weeks of 2020 could best be described as "two steps forward, two steps back." Local cadres had likely been distracted from early virus response efforts by their preparations for the annual gatherings of the people's congresses and political consultative conferences at the provincial and city levels, colloquially referred to as the "two meetings" (两会), scheduled to run from January 6–17. Official reporting on the coronavirus was frozen during this period, and local newspapers in Wuhan referred to the outbreak only a handful of times. It is likely that newspapers in Wuhan were subject to stricter self-censorship in the spirit of "stability maintenance" (维稳) during the politically sensitive time. As a result, people in other provinces outside the epicenter of the outbreak were more aware of the virus's growth than Wuhan's citizens. Hubei Province, the site of the vast majority of infections in China, only declared the epidemic a pub-

lic health crisis after three other provincial-level divisions had already done so. As celebrations ahead of the Lunar New Year (January 24-30) took place on January 18, Wuhan's citizens gathered in the tens of thousands at government-sponsored parties, creating multiple hotspots for infection.<sup>15</sup>

The first public health measures were implemented at the epicenter of the outbreak two weeks after the disease had been reported to the WHO, when temperature checks were implemented at airports, train stations, and bus stations in Wuhan on January 14.<sup>16</sup> (Protocols for such checks are commonplace in China, particularly during flu season, and have been rolled out occasionally since the time of SARS.) The news agency AP later reported that China's central and local authorities had internally acknowledged the possibility of a pandemic as early as January 15, as per a leaked teleconference meeting between the head of the National Health Commission and provincial health authorities, wherein participants also discussed the first foreign infection in Thailand (reported a day before) and concerns about viral spread amid the upcoming holiday travel.<sup>17</sup>

By this point, the virus had begun to spread outside of China. Despite the Chinese government's claims that it had been transparent in sharing information about the outbreak, both the initial warning (December 31) and the complete genome sequencing (January 11) had been published internationally by non-governmental sources.<sup>18</sup> Repeatedly, we see officials prioritizing the tight control of information at first, and only reacting to the epidemic once that information failed to be contained. China's stronger cooperation with global public health authorities to address the Covid-19 epidemic was not improved because of lessons learned from SARS; instead, it was a reactive strategy necessitated by breakages in the PRC's continued tendency to censor bad news.

January 20 marked the beginnings of a turnaround

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11 See: "Grief, anger in China as doctor who warned about coronavirus dies," *Foreign Policy* (website), accessed February 10, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/06/li-wenliang-coronavirus-likes-wuhan-gets-its-first-virus-martyr/>.

12 See: "How early signs of the coronavirus were spotted, spread, and throttled in China," *Straits Times* (website), accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/how-early-signs-of-the-coronavirus-were-spotted-spread-and-throttled-in-china>.

13 See: "A novel coronavirus outbreak of global health concern," *Lancet* (website), accessed January 27, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30185-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30185-9/fulltext).

14 See: "Covid-19 and China: a chronology of events (December 2019 – January 2020)," *Congressional Research Service* (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://china.usc.edu/sites/default/files/article/attachments/crs-2020-covid-19-and-china-chronology.pdf>.

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15 See: "Wuhan neighborhood sees infections after 40,000 families gather for potluck," *Star* (Malaysia) (website), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/regional/2020/02/06/wuhan-neighborhood-sees-infections-after-40000-families-gather-for-potluck>.

16 See: "China confirms human-to-human transmission of coronavirus," *Guardian* (US edition) (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/20/coronavirus-spreads-to-beijing-as-china-confirms-new-cases>.

17 See: "China didn't warn public of likely pandemic for six key days," *AP News* (website), accessed April 15, 2020, <https://apnews.com/68a9e1b91de4ffc166acd6012d82c2f9>.

18 See: "Beijing updates sanitized timeline of Covid-19 response" at *SupChina* (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/06/08/beijing-updates-sanitized-timeline-of-covid-19-response/>.

in China's response to COVID-19 as the central government became more visibly involved in epidemic control measures. The PRC President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping gave his first public remarks on the outbreak, calling for "all-out efforts" at all layers of government to treat patients and curb the spread of the virus. He also stressed the need for "the necessity of informing the public of relevant policies to safeguard social stability and ensure people have a peaceful and auspicious Chinese New Year."<sup>19</sup> State media, previously largely silent on the outbreak, began publishing articles about the situation in Wuhan, and a surge of what China media scholar Maria Repnikova has called "extraterritorial journalism" began reporting on all aspects of the epidemic.<sup>20</sup>

By this time, 217 total cases had been reported, with new infections confirmed in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong Province. In Wuhan, hospitals were operating over capacity to treat the outbreak, turning away new cases.<sup>21</sup> Suspected cases were reported in the provinces of Shandong, Sichuan, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Zhejiang. China's National Health Commission established a leading group to coordinate the government's epidemic response and began publishing daily updates about the epidemic online.<sup>22</sup> That evening, Dr. Zhong Nanshan (钟南山)—a popular and trusted doctor and hero of the 2003–2004 SARS outbreak—was summoned from retirement to declare on state television that the virus was capable of person-to-person transmission.<sup>23</sup>

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19 See: "Xi orders resolute efforts to curb virus spread," Xinhua (website), accessed May 1, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/20/c\\_138721535.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/20/c_138721535.htm).

20 See: "Minitrue: Early Coronavirus Directives (January 2020)," China Digital Times (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/04/minitrue-early-coronavirus-directives-january-2020/>; also see: "Too Busy for an Epidemic," China Media Project (website), accessed March 25, 2020, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2020/01/30/too-busy-for-an-epidemic/>; and see: "The Subtle Muckrakers of the Coronavirus Epidemic," New York Times (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/opinion/coronavirus-china-news-journalism.html>.

21 See: "How a military style lockdown unfolded in Wuhan," Reuters (website), accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-wuhan-scientists-i/painful-lesson-how-a-military-style-lockdown-unfolded-in-wuhan-idUSKBN21Q0KD>.

22 See: "Instructions from Xi Jinping on the epidemic situation of new pneumonia infected with coronavirus [习近平对新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎做出重要指示]," The State Council. The People's Republic of China (website), accessed May 5, 2020, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-01/20/content\\_5471057.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-01/20/content_5471057.htm); see also: "January 21 situation update on the epidemic situation of new pneumonia infected with coronavirus [1月21日新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情情况]," China National Health (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/yqtb/202001/930c021cdd1f46dc832fc27e0cc465c8.shtml>.

23 See: "China confirms human-to-human transmission of 2019-nCoV, infection of medical staff," Xinhua (website), accessed May 5, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/20/c\\_138721762.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/20/c_138721762.htm).

The Chinese state's inclination towards stability maintenance muddled official messaging and hindered crisis response efforts. By the third week of January, Beijing had begun coordinating state-owned and private enterprises to ramp up production of essential medical equipment and prepare for a nationwide shut down. China's health authorities had been in communication with the WHO about the developing epidemic since December 31, but no travel bans were enacted until the evening of China's biggest national holiday, and Xi did not once mention the coronavirus in his prepared Spring Festival remarks given January 23.<sup>24</sup>

On January 22, the Wuhan city government announced a city quarantine and implemented strict population restriction measures: cancelling outgoing flights, trains and suspending public transportation effective from 10:00 a.m. the next day.<sup>25</sup> But statistics from the China Railway Administration showed that about 100,000 people had departed from Wuhan's main train station on January 23 before the deadline. Later reports estimated that about five million people were able to leave the city after quarantine measures were announced.<sup>26</sup>

Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Hunan provinces declared a level 1 public health emergency (公共卫生事件一级) on January 23. Hubei province, the center of the viral outbreak, declared a level 1 public health emergency on January 24. A level 1 public health emergency authorizes provincial-level governments to requisition resources for epidemic control from the central state. It grants provincial-level authorities more power to organize treatment, carry out investigations, and issue compulsory orders managing citizens' movement.<sup>27</sup> Hubei's delay in declaring the emergency state of response was a noteworthy oddity—while surrounding provinces made their decisions from a relative distance, Hubei provincial leaders countering the outbreak's severity were slower to act than their neighbors. By January 25, level 1 health

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24 See: "Speech at the 2020 Spring Festival Reception [在2020年春节团拜会上的讲话]," Xinhua (website), accessed May 5, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-01/23/c\\_1125498094.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-01/23/c_1125498094.htm).

25 See: "China News Weekly cover article deleted Wuhan regrets: How did the golden prevention and control program fail?" [中国新闻周刊被删封面文章 | 武汉之憾: 黄金防控期是如何错过的?], China Digital Times (website), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2020/02/>.

26 See: "5 million people who left Wuhan are now outcasts in their own land," Inkstone (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.inkstonenews.com/society/wuhan-residents-who-left-lockdown-shunned-across-china/article/3048907>.

27 See: "What does issuing a level 1 public health emergency mean? (突发公共卫生事件 1 及应急响应意味着什么?)," Jilin Television (website), accessed May 8, 2020, <http://www.jlntv.cn/folder2228/folder2229/folder2441/2020-01-26/1111429.html>.

emergencies had been declared in all provincial-level divisions across mainland China except for Tibet.<sup>28</sup> The central government ordered national public transit operators to “immediately take isolation, ventilation and sterilization measures” and instructed local governments to set up observation stations and temperature checks at major transport hubs.<sup>29</sup> On January 26, Beijing announced the halt of all interprovincial train and bus services until further notice and extended the national Spring Festival holiday until February 3 to account for travel restrictions. (A later update would extend the holiday to February 7.)<sup>30</sup> The next day, China began implementing a nationwide campaign to screen, identify, and immediately isolate infected travelers at airports, railway stations, bus terminals, and ports.<sup>31</sup> By January 29, suspected cases had been reported in all 31 provincial divisions, and Tibet was the final provincial-level division to declare a level 1 health emergency in the evening. The Chinese political expert Willy Wo-Lap Lam has suggested that People’s Armed Police (PAP) units may have been deployed to other key cities such as Beijing and Shanghai by the end of January 30 for stability maintenance purposes.<sup>32</sup>

The WHO declared the epidemic to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30. States such as Russia and the United States began issuing bans on travelers coming from China, despite WHO experts arguing that such bans hurt more than they helped.<sup>33</sup> On the last day of January, the National Health Commission reported 1,791 confirmed cases and 259 deaths from the coronavirus. By this time 136,987

close contacts had been traced, and 118,478 people were undergoing medical observation.<sup>34</sup>

More than 50 prefecture-level cities, mostly along China’s eastern seaboard, were under semi-lockdown by February 8, with some estimates suggesting that 80 percent of China’s economy had been shut down.<sup>35</sup> Measures akin to martial law were implemented on February 12–14 in the three hardest-hit cities of Wuhan, Huanggang, and Xiaogan, in Hubei Province, with citizens ordered to stay at home under threat of fines and/or arbitrary detention, and soldiers from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) tasked with the transportation and delivery of essential goods around the cities.<sup>36</sup> As the Chinese government’s outbreak control measures began, media reports revealed a series of scandals connected with the epidemic. These reports, many of which were later censored, revealed snapshots of how vulnerable populations were sacrificed as the government rushed to control the outbreak.

Almost exactly a year before, the Tsinghua university professor Sun Li Ping posted an article titled “Social Observations” (孙立平社会观察) discussing China’s “movement method” of governance, which translator David Bandurski explains: “is essentially about the power to mobilize and direct all sectors of society toward a concrete policy objective even if it means (and it always does) casting procedure aside.” In Sun’s words: “The necessity of movement-style governance methods is directly related to general negligence, and directly related to the breakdown of regular procedures and rules that occur in the midst of movements. Movements very often become a race to destroy the rules, and the result is that rule of law is destroyed.”<sup>37</sup> Absent established procedures and a robust rule of law, the priorities of local government are skewed to pleasing the center instead of serving the people. Under this reality, many things fall through the cracks, especially during periods of chaos. This theory

28 Ibid.

29 See: “China steps up public transport coronavirus quarantine,” English.gov.cn (website), accessed May 5, 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202001/25/content\\_WS5e2bf225c6d019625c603ef4.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202001/25/content_WS5e2bf225c6d019625c603ef4.html).

30 See: “First-wave COVID-19 transmissibility and severity in China outside Hubei after control measures, and second-wave scenario planning: a modelling impact assessment,” *Lancet* (website), accessed May 7, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30746-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30746-7/fulltext).

31 See: “China orders community organizations to suspend mass gatherings amid coronavirus outbreak,” *Xinhua* (website), accessed May 7, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/30/c\\_138743358.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/30/c_138743358.htm).

32 See: “How the Wuhan Epidemic Has Dented Xi Jinping’s Authority and Prestige,” *Jamestown Foundation* (website), accessed February 26, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/how-the-wuhan-epidemic-has-dented-xi-jinpings-authority-and-prestige/>.

33 See: “Statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV),” WHO (website), accessed February 2, 2020, [https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/30-01-2020-statement-on-the-second-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-outbreak-of-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov)).

34 See: “January 31, 24:00 update on the pneumonia infected with novel coronavirus epidemic situation(截至1月31日24时新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情最新情况),” NHC (China) (website), accessed May 8, 2020, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/yqtb/202002/84faf71e096446fdb1ae44939ba5c528.shtml>.

35 See: “More than half of China extends shutdown over virus,” *CNBC* (website), accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/01/coronavirus-more-of-china-extend-shutdown-accounting-for-80percent-of-gdp.html>.

36 See: “PLA steps up to assist transport of essentials,” *China Military Online (English)* (website), accessed May 5, 2020, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-02/03/content\\_9731024.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-02/03/content_9731024.htm).

37 See: “Mobilizing for the ‘China Solution,’” *China Media Project* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2018/02/13/mobilizing-for-the-china-solution/>.



neatly summarizes China's response to Covid-19. After an initial effort to limit information sharing about the virus, the PRC was stymied by Covid-19's rapid spread throughout Wuhan and around the globe. At this point, the central government mobilized massive resources for damage control, using the "movement method" to ramp up production of medical supplies, devote both public and private enterprises to researching and combating the new virus, and implementing strict *ad hoc* social control measures—enforced by military and paramilitary forces—at the center of the coronavirus outbreak.

As epidemic control became a priority and local authorities came under pressure to mitigate their early failures to address the outbreak in late January, both official and semi-independent media sources began reporting on early missteps in the state's coronavirus response. The quasi-independent Caixin newspaper reported that chronic disease patients were being neglected by a hospital system mobilized to fight coronavirus.<sup>38</sup> State media outlets such as China Daily and People's Daily did not shy away from publishing articles criticizing the shortage of medical supplies in Hubei Province.<sup>39</sup> Overwhelmed and undersupplied, medical workers pleaded for help from citizens online, and millions of RMB in private donations from citizens and enterprises flowed into Wuhan. However, official charity organizations were slow to pass along donations. In particular, the China Red Cross (a state NGO which is a separate entity from the International Red Cross) came under fire after citizens online publicized its misallocation of equipment in Wuhan; three leaders were subsequently disciplined.<sup>40</sup>

Journalists broke quarantine rules and ignored gag orders to report on frontline conditions inside Wuhan, and several investigative reports published during this time had a notable impact on the state's response mea-

asures.<sup>41</sup> Following a late January story by *Beijing News* on viral outbreaks in China's overcrowded prison population, the Ministry of Justice investigated the scandal and officials in Hubei, Shandong, and Zhejiang were fired or reprimanded.<sup>42</sup> In late February, Caixin reporters published an investigation into nursing home deaths related to the coronavirus.<sup>43</sup> After the report was published, the State Council released a circular stressing prevention and control of COVID-19 in civil service institutions such as homeless shelters, child welfare institutes, and senior care facilities, and prioritized testing in nursing homes.<sup>44</sup>

An exhaustive report into the Wuhan government's early missteps in epidemic response by Caixin detailed how, more than a decade after SARS, China's pandemic preparedness was impeded by ambiguous regulations and systemic fractures between local governments and national health authorities.<sup>45</sup> In an interview with BBC China, sociologist Zhou Xueguang (周雪光) explained that China's political system has become more "rigid" in recent years, with increased institutional constraints stifling local initiative. Zhou summarized: "The rigid system has led to two potential problems: first, the difficulty of information flowing from the bottom up, and second, the delay in initiating emergency countermeasures."<sup>46</sup> These systemic weaknesses were perfectly demonstrated by

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41 See: "China clamps down on independent reporting of epidemic as cases, deaths keep rising," Radio Free Asia (website), accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/reporting-02032020122115.html>.

42 See: "207 people confirmed diagnosed in Rencheng prison [任城监狱207人确诊事件查清, 司法部要求监狱大整顿]," *Beijing News* (新京报网) (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2020/03/04/699014.html>; see also: "China sends in top investigators after coronavirus erupts in jails," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3051858/china-sends-top-investigators-after-coronavirus-erupts-jails>.

43 See: "Exclusive: Cluster of death found at Wuhan nursing home near seafood market," *Caixin Global* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-25/exclusive-cluster-of-death-found-at-wuhan-nursing-home-near-seafood-market-101519854.html>.

44 See: "State Council urges special care of vulnerable groups," *English.gov.cn* (website), accessed May 1, 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202002/28/wuhan\\_WS5e590e6c6d0c201c2cbd32d.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202002/28/wuhan_WS5e590e6c6d0c201c2cbd32d.html); see also: "Wuhan nursing homes have all residents tested for coronavirus," *English.gov.cn* (website), accessed May 1, 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202003/09/content\\_WS5e65d6f8c6d0c201c2cbddd2.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202003/09/content_WS5e65d6f8c6d0c201c2cbddd2.html).

45 See: "In Depth: How Wuhan lost the fight to contain the coronavirus," *Caixin Global* (website), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-03/in-depth-how-wuhan-lost-the-fight-to-contain-the-coronavirus-101510749.html>.

46 See: "How the pneumonia epidemic darkened China's glowing reputation as a 'rising power' state [肺炎疫情如何令中国“崛起大国”的光环黯然失色]," *BBC (China)* (website), accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-51942287>.

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38 See: "Chronic disease patients made to walk hours for care as Wuhan fights coronavirus," *Caixin Global* (website), accessed February 2, 2020,

39 See: "Medical supply shortage haunts Hubei," *Global Times* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1178128.shtml>; see also: "Resource Shortages Raise Risk of Death, Official Says," *ECNS.cn* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <http://www.ecns.cn/news/2020-02-05/detail-iftewca0596600.shtml>.

40 See: "Coronavirus: China Red Cross under fire over poor distribution of masks, medical supplies," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed February 3, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3048512/china-red-cross-under-fire-poor-delivery-coronavirus-supplies>; see also: "In Coronavirus fight, China sidelines an ally: its own people," *New York Times* (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/business/china-coronavirus-charity-supplies.html>.



China's response to Covid-19. Despite the creation of a RMB 1.1 billion "direct-reporting" system for public health emergencies ( ) in the wake of SARS, the Chinese state's coronavirus response was delayed by a minimum of several weeks. A China Youth Daily investigation found that early samples of the novel coronavirus were sent to private labs for testing, rather than the CDC, which circumvented the involvement of national health authorities in December.<sup>47</sup>

Even as China's rigid bureaucracy stifled emergency alert mechanisms, its robust censorship apparatus moved quickly to ban the sharing of general information about the novel coronavirus. As the China journalist James Palmer has noted, "the kind of repression that occurred in Wuhan didn't even need any special conspiracy behind it to specifically cover up the coronavirus." Instead, it was an indicator of an "automatic and routine" censorship system working to plan.<sup>48</sup> The Toronto-based media watchdog *Citizen Lab* found evidence that Chinese internet platforms YY and WeChat had begun censoring information related to the epidemic as early as December 2019. The study's conclusion observed that because companies in China are held responsible for the content on their platforms, major platforms such as WeChat and Weibo enacted broad content restrictions "pertaining to government criticism, speculation about the COVID-19 epidemic, and collective action, factual information related to COVID-19 and neutral references to government policies and responses [amid the] outbreak."<sup>49</sup>

While the precise government propaganda directives about COVID-19 reporting are unknown, public speeches show that Party leaders stressed "public opinion guidance" (舆论监督) and "stability maintenance" (社会维稳) during the outbreak.<sup>50</sup> These broad guidelines led censors to limit general discussion as well as the dissemination of factual information which could have aided public awareness and response to the coronavirus

alongside restrictions on "harmful" information. For example, the sociologist Joy Y. Zhang has argued that as rumors about the new outbreak spread to other, less affected cities, Wuhan's local media was subject to stricter censorship. As a result, the "localized disinformation [led] to a seemingly paradoxical public reaction: Towards the end of January, when most major cities around China started to get anxious about the virus, Wuhan residents were generally still relaxed."<sup>51</sup>

As in previous crises, amid a dearth of trustworthy official news sources and broad restrictions on coronavirus reporting, the work of citizen journalists gained prominence during the early days of the epidemic.<sup>52</sup> Some, such as the author of *The Wuhan Diaries*, worked with foreigners to publish their accounts of the epidemic and quarantine.<sup>53</sup> Notably, even as official reports continued to deny the deaths of healthcare workers from COVID-19 as late as April 1, doctors in China leveraged their connections to international medical journals to publicize warnings about the pandemic's dangers for healthcare workers.<sup>54</sup> On February 24, two Chinese doctors published a letter (later retracted) in the British medical journal *The Lancet* which stated, "The conditions and environment here in Wuhan are more difficult and extreme than we could ever have imagined . . ." and reported that 1,716 medical staff had been infected, with 9 fatalities.<sup>55</sup> A letter in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, published April 15, reported that 3,387 patients, or about 4.4 percent of China's total COVID-19 cases, were

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47 Ibid.

48 See: "Chinese officials can't help lying about the Wuhan virus," Foreign Policy (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/03/wuhan-coronavirus-coverup-lies-chinese-officials-xi-jinping/>.

49 See: "Censored Contagion: How Information on the Coronavirus is Managed on Chinese Social Media," Citizen Lab (website), accessed March 10, 2020, <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/03/censored-contagion-how-information-on-the-coronavirus-is-managed-on-chinese-social-media/>.

50 See: "Ying Yong presided over a special meeting to study and implement epidemic prevention and control propaganda work [应勇主持召开专题会议研究部署疫情防控新闻舆论工作]," CPC News (website), accessed February 15, 2020, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/1/2020/0220/c117005-31596279.html>.

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51 See: "Harmoniously denied: the wider implications of China's censorship on COVID-19," Open Democracy (website), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciabierta/harmoniously-denied-the-wider-implications-of-chinas-censorship-on-covid-19/>.

52 See: "Wuhan: a tale of immune system failure and social strength," Chpublic Opinion (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://chpublicopinion.com/2020/02/04/wuhan-a-tale-of-immune-system-failure-and-social-strength/>; see also: "Protecting the truth about the coronavirus in China," the Nation (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/china-journalism-coronavirus/>.

53 See: "Fang Fang: the Wuhan writer whose virus diary angered China," BBC (website), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52712358>.

54 See: "Doctors on Covid-19: What we learned in Wuhan," South China Morning Post (website), accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-01/doctors-on-covid-19-what-we-learned-in-wuhan-101537346.html>.

55 See: "RETRACTED: Chinese medical staff request international medical assistance in fighting against Covid-19," *Lancet* (website), accessed May 1, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30065-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30065-6/fulltext).

healthcare workers, with 23 fatalities.<sup>56</sup> The lack of reported cases among PLA personnel who were deployed with much fanfare to the frontlines of the pandemic is also suspicious, but because information about China's military forces is even more tightly controlled, there have been little to no reports contradicting the Ministry of Defense's March 3 pronouncement that no PLA members were infected by the coronavirus.<sup>57</sup>

#### [CENSORSHIP]

Government efforts to crack down on negative information surrounding the coronavirus led to the detention of vocal critics and journalists alike. The nongovernmental organization China Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) documented almost a thousand netizens punished for "spreading rumors" by March 30, and noted that the Ministry of Public Security reported handling 5,511 cases of "fabricating and deliberately disseminating false and harmful information" over a month previously.<sup>58</sup> Some notable cases of arbitrary detentions linked to citizens reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak or criticizing the government's response are listed below:

Three high-profile citizen journalists: Li Zehua, Chen Qiushi, and Fang Bin, were detained while reporting from Wuhan in February. Li resurfaced in late April. He told reporters that he had been interrogated by police for "disrupting the social order" and then detained in forced quarantine for a month.<sup>59</sup> Three volunteers for Terminus 2049, an open-source project to archive censored digital materials on the coronavirus outbreak, were arrested and placed under "residential surveillance" on April 19.<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch called for the release of Chen, Fang, and the three Beijing-based activists on

April 27,<sup>61</sup> but none have reappeared as of the time of writing.

In addition to reporters, the state has arbitrarily detained critics and whistleblowers: Xu Zhiyong, a prominent Chinese activist who had publicly criticized Xi's handling of the coronavirus epidemic and called for Xi to resign, was detained on the charge of "inciting subversion of state power," a charge which can carry a maximum prison sentence of 15 years.<sup>62</sup> Ren Zhiqiang, a former real estate magnate who penned a viral essay critical of the government's response to coronavirus, went missing on March 12. The Beijing Commission for Discipline Inspection issued a statement a month later declaring that Ren was being investigated for "serious violations of law and discipline."<sup>63</sup> After giving interviews to domestic and international media, the whistleblower doctor Ai Fen was reported missing in late March. She reappeared via video on April 13 and told Radio Free Asia (RFA) that she "hadn't been detained, just working." Both RFA and the press-freedom group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have expressed concerns over the authenticity of Ai's statements and her continuing liberty.<sup>64</sup>

Citizen reporters and freedom of information are imperative factors in the creation of a well-informed and educated public. As mentioned above, they were the source of the first international indicators about the outbreak, and continued to break important stories about bureaucratic obfuscation and mismanagement of resources during the pandemic. Yet even the most intrepid and dedicated reporters can only give snapshots of a pandemic which has impacted a country as populous and complex as China. Unfortunately, a lack of transparency means that much of the Chinese government's official reporting on the coronavirus pandemic—including reported treat-

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56 See: "Death from Covid-19 of 23 Healthcare Workers in China," *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc2005696>.

57 See: "China's military claims to be virus-free" *Foreign Policy* (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/pla-coronavirus-invasion-chinas-military-claims-to-be-virus-free/>.

58 See: "China: Protect human rights while combatting coronavirus outbreak," *Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD)* (website), accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.nchr.org/2020/01/china-protect-human-rights-while-combatting-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

59 See: "Missing Chinese citizen journalist Li Zehua back online after 'quarantine' in coronavirus epicentre," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3081298/missing-chinese-citizen-journalist-li-zehua-back-online-after>.

60 See: "Chinese internet users who uploaded coronavirus memories to GitHub have been arrested," *Quartz* (website), accessed May 15, 2020, <https://qz.com/1846277/china-arrests-users-behind-github-coronavirus-memories-page/>.

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61 See: "China: Free Covid-19 activists, 'citizen journalists,'" *Human Rights Watch* (website), accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/27/china-free-covid-19-activists-citizen-journalists>.

62 See: "China activist who called Xi clueless on coronavirus faces years in jail for subversion," *Guardian (US edition)* (website), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/08/china-activist-who-called-xi-clueless-on-coronavirus-faces-years-in-jail-for-subversion>.

63 See: "Ren Zhiqiang said the Chinese government mishandled the coronavirus. He is now under investigation," *Inkstone News* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.inkstonenews.com/politics/ren-zhiqiang-said-chinese-government-mishandled-coronavirus-he-now-under-investigation/article/3078925>.

64 See: "Chinese doctor says she is safe and well amid concern she was detained," *Radio Free Asia* (website), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/wuhan-doctor-04142020114914.html>; see also: "Whistleblowing doctor missing after criticizing Beijing's coronavirus censorship," *Reporters Without Borders (RSF)* (website), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/news/whistleblowing-doctor-missing-after-criticizing-beijings-coronavirus-censorship>.

ment statistics and economic figures, are suspect and impossible to verify. The Chinese government's reporting of coronavirus statistics has been particularly problematic, with multiple changes in diagnostic and reporting parameters further confusing the facts. After early delays in reporting the virus to the WHO and continued efforts to repress negative news about the government's handling of the outbreak—efforts which have ramped up as the pandemic has been controlled—China has also criticized and blocked calls for an independent investigation into the origins of the coronavirus.<sup>65</sup>

Early reports on the outbreak situation in Wuhan were suppressed during the annual “two meetings” review of CCP activities at the municipal and prefectural level, which took place from January 6–17.<sup>66</sup> In daily press briefings beginning January 11, the Wuhan Health Commission insisted that there had been no new cases of coronavirus since January 3, reporting for each day that there were 41 confirmed cases of infection and 1 fatality. Ten minutes after midnight on the day the “two meetings” ended, the city health commission added 4 new cases to the record.<sup>67</sup>

Based on lessons learned from past epidemics such as SARS and MERS, civil and health authorities had established protocols for contact tracing. In its early reports, the Wuhan Health Commission identified 739 close contacts (to confirmed cases) (密切按接着) under observation. Somewhat contradictorily, early reports also stressed that no medical personnel had been infected and that there was little to no evidence of human-to-human transmission of the virus.<sup>68</sup> As already mentioned, later investigations would show that several medical workers had been infected by this time, and that some of the earliest confirmed cases from December had been infected from

family members.<sup>69</sup>

By January 20, China's National Health Commission (NHC) began issuing daily briefings on the number of confirmed coronavirus cases, number of recovered patients, and contact tracing numbers. On average, the case count rose by between 2,500 and 3,400 cases per day in early February. National health authorities changed their reporting parameters repeatedly. On February 12, China's daily new confirmed cases (15,152) spiked by more than 13,000 cases due to a change in statistical reporting. The National Health Commission had released a fifth edition of its diagnostic criteria for COVID-19 allowing cases to be diagnosed clinically. This was supposed to help circumvent the problem of “false negatives” in nucleic acid testing which caused patients with severe symptoms to miss out on timely medical treatment.<sup>70</sup> Both local doctors and international medical experts praised the diagnostic change as a productive decision that would enable necessary treatments. However, the data jump caused widespread concern and gave the impression that the outbreak was out of control. Speaking from Wuhan the day after the dramatic reporting changes were published, the Secretary-General of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (中共中央政法委员会) Chen Yixin (陈一新) cautioned calm, and seemed to warn that the number of daily new cases would continue to go up before they went down: “Estimates from relevant authorities show the number of potential infections in Wuhan may still be quite large.”<sup>71</sup> But then the national health authorities seemed to reprioritize lower daily new case reports over accurate treatment.

On February 13, China reported 5,090 new cases, a figure which, while still higher than numbers from before February 11, was 10,000 less than the previous day's count. A sixth edition of diagnostic criteria, released on February 20, reversed the February 12 change and directed doctors to use a combination of traditional nucleic acid tests (NATs) in combination with rapid antibody screening tests (developed by a team at the Guangzhou

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65 See: “Why the WHO Investigation Won't Work,” Foreign Policy (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/20/world-health-organization-investigation-china-coronavirus-pandemic-origin/>.

66 See: “Questions for Hubei's Delegates,” China Media Project (website), accessed February 10, 2020, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2020/02/10/questions-for-hubeis-delegates/>.

67 See: “Early missteps and state secrecy in China probably allowed the coronavirus to spread farther and faster,” Washington Post (website), accessed February 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/01/early-missteps-state-secrecy-china-likely-allowed-coronavirus-spread-farther-faster/>.

68 See: “Wuhan Health Commission report on the situation of the pneumonia with unknown origins [武汉市卫生健康委关于不明原因的病毒性肺炎情况通报],” National Health Commission of the PRC [中华人民共和国国家卫生健康委员会] (website), accessed February 3, 2020, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/yqtb/202001/1beb46f061704372b7ca41ef3e682229.shtml>.

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69 See: “Effect of changing case definitions for COVID-19 on the epidemic curve and transmission parameters in mainland China: a modelling study,” *Lancet* (website), accessed May 15, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30089-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30089-X/fulltext).

70 See: “What's behind China's massive spike in coronavirus cases,” *Caixin Global* (website), accessed February 13, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-13/whats-behind-chinas-massive-spike-in-coronavirus-cases-101515101.html>.

71 See: “Chen Yixin: We must make a total effort to in the war for Wuhan's health [陈一新: 打好武汉保卫战要发起总攻],” WeChat (website), accessed February 17, 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TpcCDQjzbu5MypuXlwT\\_Sw](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TpcCDQjzbu5MypuXlwT_Sw).

Medical University under the guidance of Zhong Nanshan) to alleviate the problem of “false negatives.”<sup>72</sup> As a result, China reported only 394 new cases for February 19, down from 1,749 new cases reported on the 18th. A study conducted by a Hong Kong research team suggested that if the February 12 diagnostic criteria had been applied consistently throughout the epidemic with sufficient testing capacity, China would have reported 232,000 cases of COVID-19 on February 20, in contrast to the official 55,508.<sup>73</sup>

On April 17, Wuhan added 1,300 “missed” deaths to its case record, bringing its new total figures up to 50,333 confirmed cases and 3,869 fatalities. Officials stated that the increase in reported fatalities represented the addition of incidents which had gone unreported amid the early chaos of the pandemic, including patients who had died at home and data from private hospitals and temporary treatment facilities.<sup>74</sup> Even this updated number remains suspiciously low. An international study found that the case fatality rate (CFR), or number of reported deaths per reported cases in China was significantly higher for cases reported in the early stages of the outbreak (17 percent for cases reported until January 10) and fell to 0.7 percent for patients with symptom onset after February 1. The epidemic curve peaked around January 23–26.<sup>75</sup> CFR rates for COVID-19 have varied wildly across different countries and are affected by testing shortages as well as variances in public health systems and statistical reporting. For reference, South Korea, which implemented a robust testing regime and has widely been praised for successfully containing the spread of COVID-19, had a CFR of 0.79 percent.<sup>76</sup> Hong Kong’s

CFR was 0.3 percent. As of May 19, the U.S.’s CFR was calculated to be 5.93 percent.<sup>77</sup> The wild discrepancy in China’s CFR across the course of the pandemic implies that there remain significant gaps in its reporting of infections, deaths, or both metrics tracking total confirmed COVID-19 cases, in addition to the lacunae in information surrounding particularly vulnerable populations such as healthcare workers and military responders discussed above

## RESPONSE

While—much has already been said, both here and elsewhere, about the consequences of the PRC’s early failure to contain the virus, once it began implementing measures to control the virus in late January the speed and efficacy of its response was undeniable. A Southampton University study estimated that “without non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI)—such as early detection, isolation of cases, travel restrictions, and cordon sanitaire—the number of infected people would have been 67 times larger than that which actually occurred.”<sup>78</sup> The researchers’ model indicated that if NPIs had been rolled out three weeks earlier, cases could have been reduced by 95 percent. Conversely, if NPIs had been conducted a week later, the number of cases might have tripled.

Where other states failed to effectively implement quarantine measures, China’s authoritarian “movement method” style of governance was well suited to the massive logistical challenge of COVID-19. One week after Xi’s signaling speech on January 20, the Ministry of Finance published a plan to distribute RMB 11.21 billion for nationwide epidemic control.<sup>79</sup> Health insurance payments for patients diagnosed with COVID-19 were taken over by the state, and measures were passed to cut national interest rates and defer debt payments for struggling individuals and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The government also mobilized state owned en-

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72 See: “Coronavirus Wednesday Update: China gradually gets back to work in face of worker, material shortages,” Caixin Global (website), accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-02-19/coronavirus-wednesday-update-death-toll-passes-2000-as-russia-announces-ban-on-chinese-citizens-101517506.html>.

73 See: “Effect of changing case definitions for COVID-19 on the epidemic curve and transmission parameters in mainland China: a modelling study,” Lancet (website), accessed May 15, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30089-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30089-X/fulltext).

74 See: “Notice on the revision of the number of confirmed cases of pneumonia caused by novel coronavirus in Wuhan [关于武汉市新冠肺炎确诊病例数确诊病例死亡数订正情况的通报],” Xinhua (website), accessed May 5, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/17/c\\_1125869574.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/17/c_1125869574.htm).

75 See: “Global Covid-19 Case Fatality Rates,” University of Oxford Center for Evidenced-Based Medicine (website), accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.cebm.net/covid-19/global-covid-19-case-fatality-rates/>.

76 See: “Cross-country comparison of case fatality rates of Covid-19/SARS-COV-2,” National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7104689/>.

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77 See: “Global Covid-19 Case Fatality Rates,” University of Oxford Center for Evidenced-Based Medicine (website), accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.cebm.net/covid-19/global-covid-19-case-fatality-rates/>.

78 See: “Early and combined interventions crucial in tackling Covid-19 spread in China,” Southampton University (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/news/2020/03/covid-19-china.page>.

79 See: “China opens ‘green channel’ for procurement of epidemic control materials,” Xinhua (website), accessed February 1, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/27/c\\_138735669.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/27/c_138735669.htm); see also: “China allocates 11.21b yuan for epidemic prevention,” English.gov.cn (website), accessed February 1, 2020, [http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202001/27/content\\_WS5e2eb3bcc6d019625c604019.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202001/27/content_WS5e2eb3bcc6d019625c604019.html).



terprises (SOEs) and simplified regulations permitting the manufacture and distribution of medical supplies on a nationwide scale.<sup>80</sup> By February 20, Chinese manufacturers had the capacity to produce and distribute up to 1.65 million tests a week.<sup>81</sup>

The appointment of Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) as the leader of the Coronavirus Leading Small Group (中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组) (CLSG)—formalized on January 26 as the visible head of the central government’s epidemic response—made him the public face of China’s fight against COVID-19, leading some to question whether Xi was taking a backseat in (or attempting to avoid responsibility for) handling the crisis.<sup>82</sup> But although Li was given public responsibility for leading policy-making decision in Beijing, Xi’s protégé Sun Chunlan quickly became the most active leader on the ground in Wuhan. Sun was identified on February 3 as the leader of an ad hoc “central (authorities) guidance group” (中央督导组) for medical relief efforts in Wuhan. In this role, she was able to cut through much of the bureaucratic red tape separating central and local levels of authority and oversaw daily operations to supply relief efforts at the epicenter of the outbreak.<sup>83</sup>

Although Xi claimed in mid-February that he had been aware of the outbreak and personally involved in coordinating the state’s response as early as January 7, critics have commented on the oddity of the fact that China’s most powerful leader in decades, who had spent the majority of his rule centralizing power to the state and increasing his own cult of authority, did not appear to

play a direct role in the state’s crisis response.<sup>84</sup> While Xi stressed his personal responsibility for directing the crisis response repeatedly during his rare public appearances at the height of the outbreak—including a January 30 meeting with the Director-General of the WHO and a nationwide teleconference broadcast to more than 170,000 county-level officials and military personnel on February 23—he did not visit the center of the outbreak until March 11.<sup>85</sup> Willy Wo-Lap Lam, an expert on China’s elite politics, noted that as “state president, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the ‘life-long core’ of the party leadership,” Xi’s performance is deeply linked to the “sustainability of state power and Beijing’s ability to ‘uphold stability’ in Chinese society.”<sup>86</sup>

While Xi may not have been directly involved in coordinating epidemic relief, he remained in solid control of China’s security forces, and demonstrated his power by deploying the PLA to Hubei by January 30. The PLA played a key role in the epidemic response, supplanting Hubei’s crippled civilian supply networks to distribute emergency resources such as food and medical equipment. From late January until the end of February, the Joint Logistic Support Force (联合保障部队) (JLSF) coordinated the deployment of 4,000 military medics and transported critical medical supplies to Wuhan.<sup>87</sup> This operation marked the JLSF’s first deployment since its creation as part of Xi’s 2016 military overhaul; China military analyst Joel Wuthnow has suggested that the crisis in Wuhan tested the abilities and deficiencies of the new force, and likely resulted in valuable “lessons learned”

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80 See: “China’s SOEs pitch in to combat virus spread,” English.gov.cn (website), accessed February 1, 2020, [http://english.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202001/24/content\\_WS5e2adb71c6d019625c603e55.html](http://english.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/202001/24/content_WS5e2adb71c6d019625c603e55.html).

81 See: “Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” World Health Organization (WHO) (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.

82 See: “Li Keqiang chaired the first meeting of the Coronavirus Leading Small Group [李克强主持召开中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组会议],” Xinhua (website), accessed May 10, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-01/26/c\\_1125504004.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-01/26/c_1125504004.htm); see also: “The CCP’s New Leading Small Group for Countering the Coronavirus Epidemic and the Mysterious Absence of Xi Jinping,” Jamestown Foundation (website), accessed February 13, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ccps-new-leading-small-group-for-countering-the-coronavirus-epidemic-and-the-mysterious-absence-of-xi-jinping/>.

83 See: “Beijing purges Wuhan: the CCP central authorities tighten political control over Hubei Province,” Jamestown Foundation (website), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/beijing-purges-wuhan-the-ccp-central-authorities-tighten-political-control-over-hubei-province/>.

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84 See: “China’s Leader, Under Fire, Says He Led Coronavirus Fight Early On,” New York Times (website), accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/world/asia/xi-china-coronavirus.html>.

85 See: “Xi Jinping meets with WHO Head Ghebreyesus [习近平会见世界卫生组织总干事谭德塞],” Xinhua (website), accessed May 3, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-01/28/c\\_1125508752.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-01/28/c_1125508752.htm); see also: “Why Chinese President Xi Jinping called 170,000 cadres about the coronavirus epidemic,” South China Morning Post (website), accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3052159/why-chinese-president-xi-jinping-called-170000-cadres-about>.

86 See: “How the Wuhan Epidemic Has Dented Xi Jinping’s Authority and Prestige,” Jamestown Foundation (website), accessed May 3, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/how-the-wuhan-epidemic-has-dented-xi-jinping-s-authority-and-prestige/>.

87 See: “How China’s military took a frontline role in the coronavirus crisis,” South China Morning Post (website), accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3075396/how-chinas-military-took-frontline-role-coronavirus-crisis>; see also: “PLA logistics force swings into action to boost flow of medical supplies,” China Military Online, accessed May 10, 2020, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-02/05/content\\_9733486.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-02/05/content_9733486.htm).



for future deployments.<sup>88</sup>

Teams from the CCP Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (CDIC) (中共中央纪律检查委员会), China's national anti-corruption body, were also sent to monitor local officials and conditions in affected areas.<sup>89</sup> In addition to providing oversight, CDIC agents carried out politically sensitive objectives such as removing corrupt officials and investigating the contentious death of the whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang.<sup>90</sup> As Michael Laha from the *CCP Watch* blog notes, the CDIC's remit had expanded dramatically under Xi's regime. Its agents have previously been deployed to buoy controversy-ridden Belt and Road initiatives abroad as well as shuttering dissent in academia becoming a "multi-purpose oversight organization for and of the CCP," or a kind of institutional "swiss army knife" that can be relied upon in a variety of crisis situations.<sup>91</sup>

A narrative emerged that provincial and municipal authorities had failed in their duties. Gao Yu (高雨), an infectious diseases expert from the National Health Commission stressed on February 5 that the coronavirus was "preventable and controllable," and blamed mismanagement at lower levels of government for the outbreak. Jiao Yahui, deputy chief of the National Health Commission's medical administration and supervision department, said that medical shortages and a lack of health workers had contributed to fatalities in Wuhan.<sup>92</sup> Party officials and journalists alike blamed local authorities for having "failed Wuhan during a wartime situation," with one Wuhan resident declaring on January 27 that "both the provincial and municipal governments have already effectively been shut down [during the quarantine], and to a large extent can be said to now be only caretaker governments (看守政府)."<sup>93</sup>

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88 See: "Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan: Insights into Chinese Military Logistics," Jamestown Foundation (website), accessed April 13, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/responding-to-the-epidemic-in-wuhan-insights-into-chinese-military-logistics/>.

89 See: "China's anti-graft body joins the fight to control the coronavirus narrative," Center for Advanced China Research (website), accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2020/02/06/China%E2%80%99s-Anti-Graft-Body-Joins-the-Fight-to-Control-the-Coronavirus-Narrative>.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 See: "Resource shortages raise risk of death, official says," *China Daily* (website), accessed May 6, 2020, <http://www.ecns.cn/news/2020-02-05/detail-1fz2ewca0596600.shtml>.

93 See: "(NHC) Central Steering Group interviewed relevant personnel in Wuhan [中央指导组约谈武汉市相关人员]," *CPC* (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0212/c419242-31582469.html>; see also: "The Truth About 'Dramatic Action,'" *China Media Project* (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2020/01/27/dramatic-actions/>.

Three days after quarantine measures were implemented, reports from inside Wuhan were full of chaos and uncertainty. One resident said, "what we have is the shutting off and shutting down of a city, plain and simple. . . no one seems to have considered how public order will be maintained, and how our lives here in Wuhan will be supported."<sup>94</sup> Amid this chaos, the three organizations described above quickly took control from flailing local authorities. Sun's guidance group established the central government's authority to coordinate epidemic response measures in Hubei Province, and military transit and supply networks were leveraged where civilian systems had failed. The powerful CDIC put pressure on local officials to obey central guidance and effect results.

No one was surprised when Hubei health commission leaders as well as leaders of the Hubei and Wuhan communist party branches were replaced in mid-February. China's government operates in a parallel hierarchy of party and state, with many officials holding simultaneous roles as both government administrators and party cadres. It is worth noting here that although the top communist party cadres were removed at the municipal and provincial levels, Wuhan's top political leader, Mayor Zhou Xianwang (周先旺), kept his position, despite vocally criticizing government early-warning systems and even offering to resign.<sup>95</sup>

With the hobbling of local authorities, the central government steamed ahead. RMB 300 million was granted by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) for the construction, staffing, and supply of two field hospitals (Huoshenshan (火神山) and Leishenshan (雷神山)) to supplement an existing 45 hospitals designated to treat COVID-19 (定点收治医院).<sup>96</sup> Construction on Huoshenshan began on January 25 and was completed a week later.<sup>97</sup> Together, the two field hospitals added 2,600 beds to Wuhan's COVID-19 treatment capacity. By February 20, the WHO reported that

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94 See: "The Truth About 'Dramatic Action,'" *China Media Project* (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2020/01/27/dramatic-actions/>.

95 See: "Wuhan mayor admits that early information disclosures were not timely [武汉市市长承认前期信息披露不及]," *Caixin* (website), accessed May 5, 2020, <http://china.caixin.com/2020-01-27/101508817.html>.

96 See: "Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," *World Health Organization (WHO)* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.

97 See: "Fury in China as footage appears to show officials taking doctors' face masks," *Guardian* (US edition) (website), accessed February 14, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/02/shameless-outrage-china-coronavirus-outbreak-mask>.

Wuhan had a total treatment capacity of over 50,000 beds.<sup>98</sup> A reported 40,000 medical personnel, including PLA staff and civilian doctors from other provinces, travelled to Hubei to support local healthcare workers.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to the much-publicized new construction, a network of testing facilities (also known as fever clinics (发热门诊)) and centralized quarantine sites (referred to as cabin hospitals (方舱院)) was constructed from new and existing facilities. From February until March 10, suspected carriers and patients with mild symptoms were quarantined throughout Wuhan in sixteen cabin hospitals including former conference centers, hotels, and sports facilities. By February 20, Wuhan's centralized quarantine system had a total capacity of more than 20,000 beds.<sup>100</sup> This infrastructure allowed healthcare workers to provide targeted treatment for COVID-19.

Aspects of China's existing surveillance regime, such as facial recognition, internet monitoring and its dense street surveillance system, were augmented by new features which relied on using citizens personal health information.<sup>101</sup> A robust existing ecosystem of apps was reengineered to direct people to medical resources and provide real-time information mapping of the outbreak, as well as providing platforms for contact tracing, telemedicine, and sourcing emergency supplies.<sup>102</sup> The WHO expert Bruce Aylward cited the integration of telemedicine as a major strength in China's strategy for

fighting COVID-19.<sup>103</sup> Citizens in Wuhan were ordered to install an app called Wuhan Weilinli (武汉微邻里), which could provide an immediate diagnosis of infection risk without the need for a doctor's visit.

Telecom companies provided reports on people's movement history (个人行程证明), and social media platforms such as WeChat established hotlines for citizens to report suspected cases of COVID-19. China's controversial social credit system, which combines almost every imaginable form of personal information to create a social and financial ranking score for every individual, was expanded to incorporate medical information and aid in enforcing public health measures. One awed report described how Alibaba's QR Health Code "allowed millions of people to leave lockdown after only two weeks," with people's ability to travel determined by whether they had rated a green, yellow, or red code.<sup>104</sup> These QR codes were generated using opaque algorithms and rushed to market. Both citizens and civil society advocates have voiced concerns about the consequences of China's COVID-19 healthcare surveillance and worried about its future impact, with one office worker from Shanghai noting: "The epidemic has just made [state] monitoring, which we don't normally see during ordinary times, more obvious."<sup>105</sup> With daily health checks as well as opportunities for consumption and travel restriction dependent on QR code results, it has also made China's surveillance regime more onerous for common citizens.

Many efforts to apply China's high-tech COVID-19 surveillance in other state systems have failed because they only adapted half of China's formula for social control. Crucially, China's high-tech solutions for tracking people's movement and infection risk succeeded in combination with a low-tech system for social control using people, called a grid management system (社会网格化管理).<sup>106</sup> The grid management system, which was im-

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98 See: "Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," World Health Organization (WHO) (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.

99 See: "Sun Chunlan hails the medical teams from other provinces," CGTN (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-01/Sun-Chunlan-hails-the-medical-teams-from-other-provinces-OvFRtqzhYc/index.html>.

100 See: "Wuhan cabin hospitals to increase by twelve, with plans for 20,000 capacity [武汉方舱医院增至12家 计划启用床位超两万张]," Xinhua (website), accessed February 25, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-02/19/c\\_1125596243.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-02/19/c_1125596243.htm); see also: "Critical Role of Wuhan Cabin Hospitals in Controlling the Local Covid-19 Pandemic," PubMed (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32319877/>.

101 See: "'The new normal': China's excessive coronavirus public monitoring could be here to stay," Guardian (US edition) (website), accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/09/the-new-normal-chinas-excessive-coronavirus-public-monitoring-could-be-here-to-stay>.

102 See: "Don't panic! Baidu, WeChat, etc. launch online maps for fever resources [发烧先别慌! 百度微信等APP上线发热门诊地图]," Beijing Daily (website), accessed April 15, 2020, <http://www.bjd.com.cn/a/202001/23/WS5e296317e4b0e6e58393bbf3.html>; see also: Dan Grover, "How Chinese Apps Handled Covid-19," (blog), accessed April 15, 2020, <http://dangrover.com/blog/2020/04/05/covid-in-ui.html>.

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103 See: "Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," World Health Organization (WHO) (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.

104 See: "China Voices: How Alibaba built China's health code," TechNode (website), accessed May 15, 2020, <https://technode.com/2020/04/07/china-voices-how-alibaba-built-chinas-health-code/>.

105 See: "'The new normal': China's excessive coronavirus public monitoring could be here to stay," Guardian (US edition) (website), accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/09/the-new-normal-chinas-excessive-coronavirus-public-monitoring-could-be-here-to-stay>.

106 See: "Community grid system helps China fight virus," Global Times (website), accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1178528.shtml>.

plemented nationally in 2016, was itself an evolution of a Cultural Revolution-era policy called the *danwei* system, which relied on cadres at the grassroots level to surveil and report on their neighbors and community members. Put another way, technological advances were not responsible for China's success against COVID-19. Under its authoritarian system and absent rules of law, the foundations for the successful implementation of NPIs were well-established in Chinese society. Advances in technology simply allowed the state to do what it had already been doing on a broader and deeper level.

#### [INCREASES IN AUTHORITARIAN REPRESSION ENABLED BY COVID-19 CHAOS]

Under this so-called healthcare surveillance state, principles of protecting citizens' personal data was all but ignored in favor of the speedy realization of results. Predictably, leaked personal health data and widespread violations of China's legal protections on personal data created many opportunities for abuses of civil liberty.<sup>107</sup> One chilling trend repeated across the nation was the ostracism and discrimination against people with Hubei residency, who were sometimes unfairly blamed for spreading the virus.<sup>108</sup> In addition to the censorship and arbitrary detentions stifling freedom of information documented above, there were notable increases in cases persecution against already-vulnerable minorities during the beginning months of 2020. Chinese Christians, whose faith is technically legal under the Chinese constitution, reported an apparent revitalization of the Chinese state's periodic anti-religion campaigns during COVID-19. In Heilongjiang and Shandong province, municipal coronavirus task forces cracked down on illegal worship, and church crosses were demolished in the provinces of Jiangsu and Anhui.<sup>109</sup> And although China has succeeded

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107 See: "China Silences Reporting on Covid-19, Expands Surveillance and Arrests Hong Kong Protest Leaders," Civicus Monitor (website), accessed May 19, 2020, <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/05/20/china-silences-reporting-covid-19-expands-surveillance-and-arrests-hong-kong-protest-leaders/>.

108 See: "After this, I am most worried for the psychological trauma of people from Wuhan [经过这次, 我最担心的是武汉人的心理创伤]," Wayback Machine (website, archived February 29, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2ARwpoE>; see also: "Wuhan citizens whose personal data information have been leaked but deserve respect and privacy [自武汉返乡人员个人信息泄露 当事人称愿配合但应尊重隐私]," Caixin (website), accessed February 29, 2020, <http://china.caixin.com/2020-01-26/101508509.html>.

109 See: "Crosses were removed from numerous state-run protestant churches," Bitter Winter (website), accessed April 15, 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/crosses-removed-from-numerous-state-run-protestant-churches/>; see also: "China demolishes church, removes crosses as Christians worship at home," Christian Post (website), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/china-demolishes-church-removes-crosses-as-christians-worship-at-home.html>.

thus far in implementing a media blackout in Xinjiang, human rights watchers have voiced their concerns about the lack of data on COVID-19 cases in internment camps, and warned that pandemic developments in surveillance and social control have likely worsened China's ongoing genocide against Uighur Muslims.<sup>110</sup>

While Hong Kong dealt with the pandemic independent from the mainland, central authorities moved to crack down on the remnants of last year's protests and deal a death blow to the fragile "one country two systems" framework for autonomy. Throughout March and April, police arrested waves of prominent pro-democracy activists for "organizing and participating in unlawful assemblies" during the past year. The coup de grace came with the May 21 announcement that Beijing would move to implement a controversial national security law, bypassing Hong Kong's own government.<sup>111</sup> In response, Human Rights Watch warned that, "Beijing seems to be banking on the COVID-19 crisis to keep other governments silent. But the Chinese government's repression of human rights that contributed to the pandemic is on full display in Hong Kong, and governments need to take strong measures in response."<sup>112</sup>

It's worth taking a moment here to recall that at the start of the pandemic, China's rapid roll out of NPIs was unprecedented, with a WHO observer saying on January 23, "As far as I know, trying to contain a city of 11 million people is new to science."<sup>113</sup> Multiple studies since have concluded that NPIs were necessary and effective in limiting viral spread; with the global spread of COVID-19, many other countries have adopted similar measures, but few have been able to match China's success. Although its implementation of a cordon sanitaire around Hubei Province and the city of Wuhan was initially chaotic, China succeeded in locking down more than 30 million people in just days. As of May 1, over 80 percent (68,128 of 82,874) of total confirmed cases in China were from Hubei province, with 50,333 (of these 68,128)

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110 See: "The Impact of COVID-19 on Uighur Muslims: An Ignored Crisis," London School of Economics (website), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/humanrights/2020/04/23/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-uighur-muslims-an-ignored-crisis/>.

111 See: "'Highly necessary': Beijing to discuss enacting national security law in Hong Kong following months of protest," Hong Kong Free Press (website), accessed May 21, 2020, <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/05/21/breaking-beijing-to-discuss-enacting-national-security-law-in-hong-kong-following-months-of-protest/>.

112 See: "Hong Kong: Crackdown Amid Covid-19," Human Rights Watch (website), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/20/hong-kong-crackdown-amid-covid-19>.

113 See: "China shows Covid-19 Coronavirus can be 'stopped in its tracks,'" UN (website), accessed April 17, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059502>.

cases coming from Wuhan.<sup>114</sup> Between January 27 and February 9 (at the height of China's quarantine restrictions) the percentage of nationwide travel and contact had been reduced to an average of 20 percent of normal travel patterns (compared to the 2014 holiday period), and the rate of daily new cases began to decline around mid-February. The rollout of high- and low-tech systems to continuously track citizens' health and movement allowed the state to become cautiously optimistic about its ability to ameliorate a so-called secondary wave of reinfections, and Beijing turned to the challenge of reopening the economy.

## CHALLENGES TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

China's economy was weak before the impact of COVID-19. In 2019, protracted political crises such as the US-China trade war and Hong Kong protests struck major blows to the Chinese economy. Since Deng Xiaoping ordered the gradual opening of the Chinese economy in the 1980s, the legitimacy of the Chinese Party-state's authoritarian governance was always predicated upon a promise of continuous national economic growth (and commensurately increasing citizens' wealth). Although Xi Jinping has tried to bolster the state's authority by a combination of appeals to Han nationalism and creating a Mao-like cult of personality around himself, political economists still tie the CCP's survival to its ability to maintain a strong, stable economy. As we have seen above, Chinese state authoritarianism was well-suited to controlling the public health crisis of COVID-19, but the pandemic's economic impact may prove to be an even greater existential threat to the Chinese state.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Ministry of Finance issued policies providing financial support to companies affected by COVID-19, including tax and rent relief programs, deferred loans, national social security payment waivers, energy cost reductions, and incentives for companies to reopen.<sup>115</sup> By mid-February, a majority of China's factories outside of Hubei Province began

to restart production.<sup>116</sup> China's manufacturing sector recovery showed the strongest recovery, with the State Council reporting on March 30 that Chinese factories had regained 98.6% of their pre-pandemic operating capacity. But surveys found that actual production, stymied by weakened international demand and dislocated supply chains, has been lethargic.<sup>117</sup>

Per data from China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), China's economy experienced its first contraction in 40 years during the pandemic, with a negative Q1 GDP growth of 6.8 percent.<sup>118</sup> And despite the state's strong push to reopen factories, a weak April manufacturing purchasing managers index indicate low morale for factory owners amid a patchy recovery.<sup>119</sup> China's construction sector showed the second-strongest recovery, due in part to numerous high-value projects ordered by provincial governments, including new projects worth RMB 783.6 billion in Fujian and RMB 450 billion in Anhui. However, China's service sector recovery remained slow, with retail, travel and entertainment industries being some of the hardest hit by the pandemic.<sup>120</sup> Following global trends, technology sectors and online retail saw a boom during the pandemic as businesses and local governments accelerated the shift to telework.<sup>121</sup> And while conspiracy theories linking 5G to the coronavirus have hurt ongoing efforts to develop infrastructure networks for the cutting-edge technology in other countries, China was able to leverage its comparative advancements in

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116 See: "China's main manufacturing hubs reboot after virus shutdown," Reuters (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-bigdata/chinas-main-manufacturing-hubs-reboot-after-virus-shutdown-idUSKCN20J15Y>; see also: "Updated: China Factory and Offices Reopening Schedules after Lunar New Year" at China Briefing (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-factory-offices-reopening-schedules-coronavirus-impact/>.

117 See: "China's manufacturing rebounds in March," Caixin (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-01/chinas-manufacturing-activity-rebounds-in-march-101536926.html>.

118 See: "Coronavirus: China faces historic test as pandemic stokes fears of looming unemployment crisis," South China Morning Post (website), accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3083513/coronavirus-china-faces-historic-test-pandemic-stokes-fears>.

119 See: "Caixin China General Manufacturing PMI (April 2020)," Caixin (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-05-13/caixin-china-general-manufacturing-pmi-april-2020-101553707.html>.

120 See: "Why is China's service sector employment resumption slow?" Global Times (website), accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1186699.shtml>.

121 See: "In depth: China's remote office platforms see boom during outbreak," Caixin (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-09/in-depth-chinas-remote-office-platforms-see-boom-during-outbreak-101540676.html>.

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114 See: "China's Hubei reports no increase in Covid-19 for 27 consecutive days," Xinhua (website), accessed May 1, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c\\_139023031.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/01/c_139023031.htm).

115 See: "China's support policies for businesses under COVID-19: A comprehensive list," China Briefing (website), accessed June 6, 2020, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-covid-19-policy-tracker-benefiting-business-enterprises-comprehensive-updated-list/>.



5G to aid in prevention and control measures during the pandemic, as well as looking to 5G as a key target for investment amid the pandemic recovery process.<sup>122</sup>

Overall, the central government pushed policies incentivizing foreign investment and digitization to stimulate economic recovery consistent with its pre-pandemic strategy for economic development.<sup>123</sup> But a global recession caused by the pandemic—in combination with increasingly loud calls from certain countries to decouple from the Chinese economy for strategic and national security reasons—may make it harder for China to rely on foreign aid to boost growth in the future. Past activist economic policies have left the country battling a severe and persistent debt crisis which made further state investments risky. Thus, instead of providing direct stimulus packages, China favored targeted interest rate cuts and liquidity injections with a focus on supporting SME recovery.<sup>124</sup> Beijing's total spending on pandemic recovery as a percentage of GDP has been an order of magnitude less than that of other states, and, despite the strains on an already creaky financial system, economists both within and outside the state have called for increased fiscal relief.<sup>125</sup>

Job market shocks due to the coronavirus may represent the greatest threat to China's economic recovery. China's massive labor supply has historically served as a stabilizer for the economy and was relatively unaffected

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122 See: "Coronavirus helps China pull ahead in the 5G race," *Nikkei Asian Review* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/5G-networks/Coronavirus-helps-China-pull-ahead-in-the-5G-race>; see also: "China expects over 600,000 5G base stations constructed by 2020: MIIT," *Xinhua* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/31/c\\_138935088.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/31/c_138935088.htm).

123 See: "Ministry of Commerce strengthens regulations for foreign-funded enterprises to attract investment [商务部围绕稳外资加强外资企业服务和招商引资工作]," Ministry of Commerce (China) (website), accessed February 13, 2020, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/ae/ai/202002/20200202934745.shtml>.

124 See: "China claims stimulus '10 times more efficient' than US Fed, as new loans top US \$ 1 trillion," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3079423/coronavirus-china-claims-stimulus-10-times-more-efficient-us>.

125 See: "Coronavirus: think the worst is over for China's economy? Not so fast," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3081465/coronavirus-think-worst-over-chinas-economy-not-so-fast>; "China needs more active fiscal policy as pressure on economy increasing: People's Daily," *Reuters* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy/china-needs-more-active-fiscal-policy-as-pressure-on-economy-increasing-peoples-daily-idUSKBN22Q06D>; see also: "China pledges largest-ever economic rescue package to save jobs and livelihoods amid coronavirus," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3086569/china-pledges-largest-ever-economic-rescue-package-save-jobs>.

by past events such as SARS or the 2008 financial crisis. COVID-19 has created the largest unemployment crisis in China's recent history.<sup>126</sup> The NBS reported China's unemployment rate at 6 percent in April, but experts have argued that the official methodology for calculating unemployment undercounts migrant worker joblessness and employment by smaller enterprises—two sectors which have been especially hard hit by the epidemic—and unofficial reports estimated China's unemployment rate to be as high as 20 percent near the end of April.<sup>127</sup>

Ameliorating unemployment has become a top priority for the Chinese party-state, as signaled by Premier Li's announcement in March that the government was prioritizing job creation instead of its historic emphasis on GDP growth: "As long as employment is stable this year, it will not be a big deal if the economic growth rate is higher or lower."<sup>128</sup> This change was confirmed at the national "two sessions" meetings in late May—a series of high-level annual meetings which set political and economic developmental goals for the year—where state leaders doubled down on the need to address post-pandemic unemployment and fiscal reform. As noted in *Bloomberg News*: "With jobs and income growth vital for the unelected Communist Party's political legitimacy, stabilizing employment has become [the state's] first priority."<sup>129</sup>

Themes from the "two sessions" can often serve as a general indicator of the Chinese state's priorities in a given year, and the outcomes from the 2020 meetings show the state's concern with the overlapping issues of economic growth, stability, security, political control, and regime legitimacy in the aftermath of COVID-19. During the meetings, the CCP leadership also moved ahead with implementing a controversial national security law in Hong Kong and increased its security spending by 6.6

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126 See: "Coronavirus: China faces historic test as pandemic stokes fears of looming unemployment crisis," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3083513/coronavirus-china-faces-historic-test-pandemic-stokes-fears>.

127 See: "Coronavirus: China economy facing uneven recovery, three months after lockdown," *South China Morning Post* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3082343/coronavirus-china-economy-facing-uneven-recovery-three-months>.

128 See: "In Depth: How a rugged Covid-19 recovery risks more than 100 million jobs," *Caixin* (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-03-30/in-depth-how-a-rugged-covid-19-recovery-risks-more-than-100-million-jobs-101535780.html>.

129 See: "China abandons hard growth target, shifts stimulus focus to jobs," *Bloomberg* (website), accessed May 22, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-22/china-to-abandon-numerical-growth-target-amid-virus-uncertainty>.



percent.<sup>130</sup> Although open criticism online of the government reached a fever point during the pandemic, it did not crystalize into real-world protests against the government, as have been seen in democratic countries faced with the pandemic, particularly the United States. However, the threat of collective action nonetheless remains relevant for the Chinese leadership. The Jamestown Foundation's John Dotson observes that even relatively small-scale incidents of epidemic-related unrest have been brutally repressed, and state security forces have been subjected to intensified propaganda and political loyalty campaigns in the wake of the pandemic.<sup>131</sup>

The 2020 coronavirus showcased both systemic strengths and weaknesses in China's political system. At first, China failed to produce timely and transparent reports in the early weeks that the outbreak was developing in Wuhan, despite having experience with previous coronavirus epidemics such as SARS and MERS and having a supposedly cutting edge early-warning system built into the public health system. But once the central government was spurred into action it leveraged technological advancements, a recently reformed military, state controls of production and transit, and a robust "movement method" of authoritarian governance to mobilize a massive public health response which implemented record-breaking NPIs and largely succeeded in containing the majority of China's COVID-19 cases to Hubei Province. Missteps and scandals beset the government's response, and online criticisms—much of which were later censored—showed citizens' dissatisfaction with the state. Domestic unrest may continue to simmer amid a slow recovery, and as the pandemic has spread to the rest of the world, China's leaders have had to simultaneously juggle a crisis in foreign affairs.

International markets were plunged into a recession amid national shutdowns and breakages in global transportation and manufacturing supply chains due to COVID-19 control and prevention efforts. More developed countries such as the US and UK struggled to contain the outbreak within their own borders, and in the resulting vacuum of international leadership China has moved to

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130 See: "Two Sessions 2020: China increases defense spending by 6.6 percent but set no GDP target, focuses on Hong Kong national security law," South China Morning Post (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3085552/two-sessions-2020-live-national-peoples-congress-gets-under-way>.

131 See: "Epidemic-Related Unrest and the CCP's Reinforced Political Loyalty Indoctrination for China's Police," Jamestown Foundation (website), accessed April 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/epidemic-related-unrest-and-the-ccps-reinforced-political-loyalty-indoctrination-for-chinas-police/>.

position itself as a political, economic, and healthcare leader in the post-pandemic world.<sup>132</sup> As China's domestic propaganda machine has worked to reframe the narrative of the coronavirus as a story of triumph over adversity for Xi Jinping, the foreign ministry has also accelerated its recent push for a more combative, nationalistic form of "wolf warrior" diplomacy which has spread disinformation and openly attacked critics of the Chinese regime abroad.<sup>133</sup> Yet despite Beijing's best efforts to distance China from the origins of COVID-19 and rewrite the narrative of China's fight against COVID-19, the 2020 pandemic has been indelibly linked with the rising superpower, tainting its international reputation and fomenting increased suspicion and fear from other countries. International observers have raised concerns about the rise in anti-Asian racism and xenophobia connected with the outbreak, notably represented by the US President Trump's persistence in using terms such as "Wuhan flu" and "China virus" to blame the Chinese state for the global pandemic.<sup>134</sup>

Nationalist suspicion has also traveled both ways: while China criticized other countries' bans on travelers coming from the mainland as being racist and unnecessary at the beginning of the pandemic, it was quick to implement travel restrictions for foreigners as the corona-

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132 See: "As China's cases dwindle, Beijing strives to take the lead in the coronavirus crisis," CNBC (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/03/china-pursues-global-leadership-ambitions-in-coronavirus-response.html>.

133 See: "As coronavirus goes global, China's Xi asserts victory on first trip to Wuhan since outbreak," Washington Post (website), accessed June 7, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/chinas-xi-attempts-a-coronavirus-victory-lap-with-visit-to-wuhan/2020/03/10/ca585ddc-6281-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-xi-attempts-a-coronavirus-victory-lap-with-visit-to-wuhan/2020/03/10/ca585ddc-6281-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html); see also: "'Put on a mask and shut up': China's new 'Wolf Warriors' spread hoaxes and attack a world of critics," Los Angeles Times (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-04/wolf-warrior-diplomats-defend-china-handling-coronavirus>; see also: "'Wolf warrior' diplomats reveal China's ambitions," Financial Times (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7d500105-4349-4721-b4f5-179de6a58f08>.

134 See: "Trump's use of the term 'Chinese virus' for coronavirus hurts Asian Americans, says expert," Hill (DC) (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/489464-trumps-use-of-the-term-chinese-virus-for>; see also: "Covid-19 fueling anti-Asian racism and xenophobia worldwide," Human Rights Watch (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>.

virus spread around the world.<sup>135</sup> Imported coronavirus cases have also threatened China's recovery efforts: by mid-April, many of China's new coronavirus outbreaks had been traced back to imported cases, and a brief scare over a "secondary surge" from an imported case caused city authorities in Wuhan to spend RMB 900 million to test nearly 10 million people for new COVID-19 cases in late May.<sup>136</sup>

The pandemic has been devastating for the already rocky US-China relationship, which had barely reached a brief détente with the signing of the Phase 1 trade deal in early January. Since then, it has reached new lows. As the US has struggled to contain the coronavirus within its own borders, its leaders have tried to cast blame for the pandemic on China. The US has also largely stepped back from its role as an international leader, even distancing itself from the WHO at a critical time for global healthcare. This created a golden opportunity for China, but despite state media efforts to push positive stories of recovery and highlight issuances of aid to other countries for coronavirus relief, it has been unable to successfully position itself as a believable replacement for the decades-long global leadership of the US.<sup>137</sup> Instead, Chinese coronavirus-related aid has come under scrutiny by recipients searching for strings attached, and economic shocks have threatened ongoing financing for many of its existing "debt-trap diplomacy" projects along the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi Jinping's trillion dollar foreign policy project.<sup>138</sup> China has also failed to lever-

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135 See: "Health experts warn China travel ban will hinder coronavirus response," Stat News (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/31/as-far-right-calls-for-china-travel-ban-health-experts-warn-coronavirus-response-would-suffer/>; see also: "Coronavirus travel: China bars foreign visitors as imported cases rise," BBC News (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52059085>.

136 See: "Beijing's affluent Chaoyang district becomes China's lone virus hot zone on new cluster," Caixin (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-22/beijing-steps-up-disease-control-measures-after-covid-19-cluster-emerges-101545470.html>; see also: "Remote border town grapples with Covid-19 cases imported from Russia," Caixin (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-04-11/remote-border-town-grapples-with-covid-19-cases-imported-from-russia-101541270.html>; see also: "Tests on nearly 10 million people in Chinese city of Wuhan turn up only 300 coronavirus cases," South China Morning Post (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/video/coronavirus/3087342/tests-nearly-10-million-people-chinese-city-wuhan-turn-only-300>.

137 See: "China's post-covid propaganda push," Economist (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/04/16/chinas-post-covid-propaganda-push>.

138 See: "Poor countries borrowed billions from china. They can't pay it back," New York Times (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/business/china-loans-coronavirus-belt-road.html>.

age its standing as a manufacturing powerhouse to supply personal protective equipment (PPE) and other essential medical gear to other countries hit by the coronavirus. Although factories throughout China were rapidly repurposed to produce coronavirus-related equipment for domestic use and export, many recipients such as Spain, the Netherlands, and India complained about the quality of goods they received.<sup>139</sup> A regulatory backlash created further blockages in the medical equipment supply chain as the pandemic was peaking globally.<sup>140</sup>

Maintaining the state's tight control on information allowed China's leaders to silence dissent and reframe the coronavirus story at home even amid a slow recovery. However, without parallel international corollaries for its powerful domestic censorship and propaganda organs, it has failed to push this success story to foreign audiences. Instead, Chinese diplomats have picked fights with international journalists and foreign officials questioning its transparency and used social media tools to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation online.<sup>141</sup>

In the long-run, the Chinese state's prioritizing of information control will be detrimental to global pandemic recovery efforts. The media watchdog *China Digital Times* reported that Chinese propaganda organs issued restrictions on academic research relating to COVID-19 in an effort to control negative information about the outbreak.<sup>142</sup> Stories such as these will hurt China's international credibility and potentially delay scientific discoveries. In a final example of how information control hurts China's international reputation, early missteps have called into question the trustworthiness of both China's national CDC and the international WHO, which has been widely criticized for its early gullibility and refusal to criticize China's early reporting and response to the coronavirus. The WHO has long played a key role in coordination of international public health actions, but

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139 See: "China pushes to churn out coronavirus gear, yet struggles to police it," New York Times (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/business/china-coronavirus-masks-tests.html>.

140 See: "China: New Medical Supplies Export-Control Measures Issued," Library of Congress Law (website), accessed June 14, 2020, <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/china-new-medical-supplies-export-control-measures-issued/>.

141 See: "How China is ruthlessly exploiting the coronavirus pandemic it helped cause," Vox (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/28/21234598/coronavirus-china-xi-jinping-foreign-policy>.

142 See: "China censors academic research, spreads disinformation about Covid," China Digital Times (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/04/china-censors-academic-research-spreads-disinformation-about-covid/>.

its reputation—and capability for future efficacy in leading the global healthcare community—has been severely tarnished by its complicity in China’s coronavirus cover-up.<sup>143</sup>

In broad terms, the coronavirus outbreak has accelerated many existing trends in China, to include the coalescing of power in the central government at the expense of local government autonomy; strains on the trustworthiness of state institutions caused by ham-fisted censorship and failures of information control; and repeated instances of increasingly aggressive state behavior both domestic and foreign as China grows more confident about its ability to counter the American-led model of liberalism, which has been deeply wounded by the failure of the US to respond to the pandemic.

This report has also shown the limits of authoritarian states’ response to the coronavirus crisis, as well as exposing deep fractures at the core of the Chinese state. Despite early missteps and failures in local government, China was able to mobilize in a short amount of time to contain the COVID-19 because of the central government’s tight control over the means of production and stability maintenance forces (i.e., state security). The central state’s success came at the expense of local autonomy, as well as sacrificing lesser political priorities (such as civil liberties—particularly for Wuhan’s citizens, the health and safety of essential medical workers and PLA responders, freedom of information, etc.) for the sake of rapidly locking down the outbreak’s spread. The consequences of China’s response to the pandemic have dealt a historic blow to an already weakened economy and exacerbated a looming debt crisis. And while the party-state’s efforts to control the narrative of its coronavirus response have apparently succeeded in silencing domestic dissent, its efforts to export information controls have been less successful. Diplomatic miscalculations have dealt a major blow to China’s international reputation and trustworthiness even as pandemic-related chaos has destabilized the existing global leadership, leaving an uncertain path forward as other states begin the process of recovering from COVID-19.

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143 See: “Yes, blame WHO for its disastrous coronavirus response,” Foreign Policy (website), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/27/who-health-china-coronavirus-tedros/>.





Portrait of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Isfahan, Iran. Photo: Adam Jones, flickr.com

Clément Therme

# IRAN



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## THE VIRUS OF “CRISIS” IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Crisis management has always been a central tool in the survival strategy of Iranian political elites since their rise to power after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. From the First Gulf War (1980–1988) to structural hostility with Washington and Tel Aviv through the recurrent repression of social movements such as the student revolt of 1999 or the Green Movement of 2009, the authoritarian regime of the Islamic Republic seems to be fueled by crises. The management of crisis is designed to justify the restriction of the scope of civil rights of Iranian citizens in the name of Khomeinist ideals. Can the COVID-19 crisis lead to the strengthening of the institutions of the Islamic Republic or, on the contrary, after a short-term anti-protest effect linked to the fear of the spread of the virus within the Iranian population, can we expect a weakening of the regime of the Islamic Republic on the internal and regional fronts? In addition, one should wonder about a possible specificity of the political response of the authoritarian states towards COVID-19 starting from the Iranian example. In other words, are there any ideological convergences between Iran, Russia, and China and to what extent does the health challenge reveal similar questions between authoritarian states and democratic societies?

At the end of Ramadan, it seems that the authorities' attempt to stop travel inside the country was not followed by the population. Traffic jams were heavy in Tehran for

the *eid-e fetr* (celebration of the end of Ramadan). On May 25, 2020, Iran's Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour announced there were 135,701 COVID-19 cases in Iran with an official death toll of 7,417. During the week before, more than 2,000 new infections were reported, raising fears of a second wave in Iran. As of May 25, 2020, 105,801 patients have recovered from COVID-19 and 2,615 are in critical condition. Jahanpour also announced that that 800,519 tests have been carried out in Iran since the crisis started. Before the end of May the end of restrictions included the reopening of holy sites, museums, tourist attractions, and the reopening of all administrations. Despite official announcements, the average increase of 2,000 new cases per day of COVID-19 during the week May 18-24, 2020 marks the largest increase in the number of infections since the end of the first wave of the spread of the virus, which raises fears of a second wave in particular in the provinces of Khuzestan and Tehran which account for half of all hospitalizations in the country.<sup>1</sup>

This situation can be best explained by the economic imperative which pushed the Iranian government to partially leverage the sanitary measures to avoid the economic collapse as well as the return of the popular expression in the public space of a deep dissatisfaction regarding the (mis)management of the crisis by the au-

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<sup>1</sup> See “Iran Confirms over 2,100 New Cases of COVID-19 Infection,” Iran Front Page, May 15, 2020, <https://ifpnews.com/iran-confirms-over-2100-new-cases-of-covid-19-infection>.



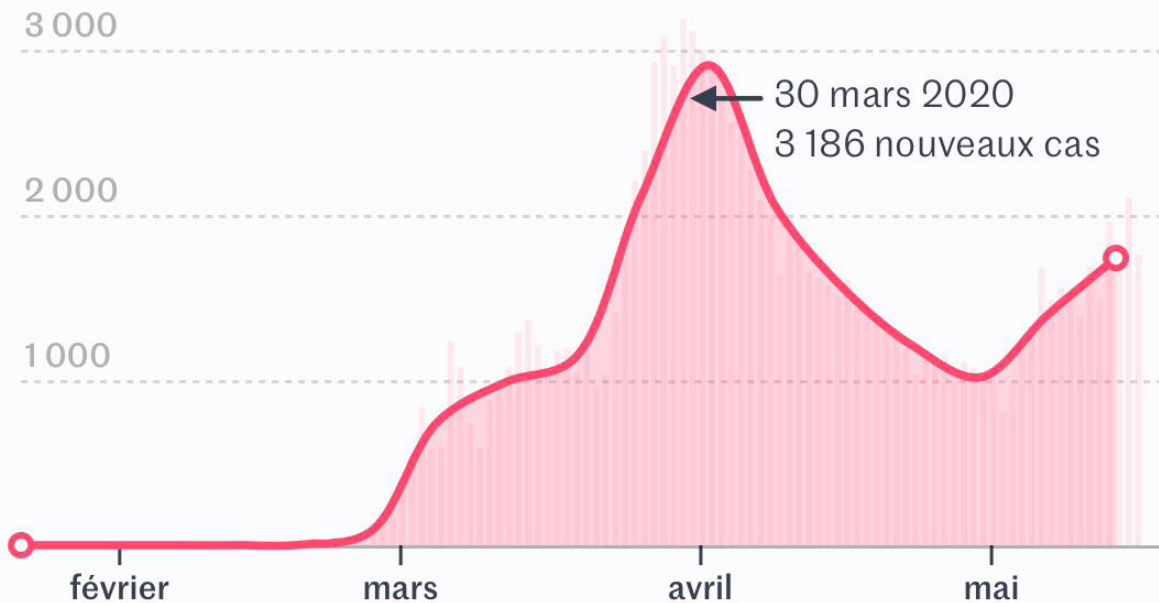
## Iran

118 392 cas au 16 mai

Soit 14,47 pour 10 000 hab.

4 000

12 172 cas ces 7 derniers jours



Source: [https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2020/03/27/coronavirus-visualisez-les-pays-qui-ont-aplati-la-courbe-de-l-infection-et-ceux-qui-n-y-sont-pas-encore-parvenus\\_6034627\\_4355770.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2020/03/27/coronavirus-visualisez-les-pays-qui-ont-aplati-la-courbe-de-l-infection-et-ceux-qui-n-y-sont-pas-encore-parvenus_6034627_4355770.html)

thorities. Indeed, their strategy focuses more on the interests of the regime rather than those of the population. This is why the government became the main political force advocating the suspension of restrictions that could further deteriorate the economic situation. The government based its strategy on ending the partial lockdown based on regional differences.<sup>2</sup> There is also a debate between moderate and hardliners on when to reopen the holy shrines and the Friday prayers.<sup>3</sup>

In February 2020 the government was trying to convince members of non-elected institutions (the Supreme Leader and Revolutionary guards) to act rapidly. The government had to wait one month to obtain the closure of the shrines and the suspension of Friday prayers. Then, after the *nowrouz* holydays it appears that the government's priority has been to avoid the economic collapse of the country and to downplay the consequences of the

health crisis. The government is facing a crisis of credibility and the health crisis will not reinforce the state's credibility in the long term. Indeed, if in the short-term, the spread of the virus is a hurdle for the public expression of social discontent, the level of distrust will remain very high among the Iranian public opinion.<sup>4</sup>

The decision taken by the government at the start of the Iranian year 1399 (starting March 20, 2020) with the announcement of travel restrictions and the allocation of 20% of the state budget to fight against the spread of COVID-19 has not compensated for the initial slow reaction to preserve the official demonstrations commemorating the 41st anniversary of the Revolution (February 11, 2020) and to organize the first round of legislative elections (February 21, 2020). Concealing information about the first cases in January 2020 only reinforced the crisis of confidence between the majority of the population and the political system (*nezam*). Moreover, from the popular demonstrations of November 2019, which left more than

<sup>2</sup> See "Iran to be divided in three quarantine zones," Trend News Agency, April 27, 2020, <https://en.trend.az/iran/3229994.html>

<sup>3</sup> "All Iran mosques set to reopen on Tuesday," Al Jazeera, May 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/iran-mosques-set-reopen-tuesday-200511173810576.html>

<sup>4</sup> Shahed Alavi, "Lies, Misinformation and Makeshift Graves: a Chronology of Coronavirus in Iran," Iranwire, April 19, 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/special-features/6857>

300 dead, until the firing of missiles on the civilian plane of Ukrainian Airlines, the credibility crisis of the Islamic Republic has compromised its management of the health crisis. Iran quickly became a regional hub for COVID-19 contamination, and the Iranian state's response shows the limits of its health crisis management based on the interests of the political system rather than those of the Iranian people. This defense of the regime's interests to the detriment of the imperative of giving priority to the health of the population can be seen through several decisions taken by the authorities of the Islamic Republic: first, the decision to pursue a normal political life and economic activities; second, the refusal to quarantine the religious city of Qom, the epicenter of the epidemic in Iran,<sup>5</sup> and not to close the Friday prayers and pilgrimage locations during the first few weeks of the health crisis; and third, priority was given to security and economic survival issues by the regime rather than developing a strategy with a focus on the protection of Iranian citizens' health. To study the health crisis in Iran, there is also the question of reliability of statistics and the ideological narrative promoted by the Islamic Republic. For official statistics, they are estimated to be three to five times lower than reality,<sup>6</sup> and the official narrative is part of the broader propaganda war between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Trump administration.

On the internal political scene, one can consider the rise of tensions between the so-called moderates and the most conservative factions because of their respective attempts to use the health crisis to promote their respective interests. During the legislative elections of February 2020, the non-selection of moderate and reforming candidates by the Council of Guardians of the Constitution was a tool for the most conservative factions to eliminate potential candidates who favored a transformation of the institutions of the Islamic Republic towards more openness to the outside world and more transparency towards Iranian civil society. The low turnout (officially 42% nationally, 25% in Tehran) was one of the main factors behind the Conservatives' victory.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the recognition of this low participation shows that the unelected religious authorities are aware of the massive disaffec-

5 Karim Sadjapour, "Iran's Coronavirus Disaster," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 25, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/iran-s-coronavirus-disaster-pub-81367>

6 Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Coronavirus Won't Kill the Islamic Republic," Foreign Policy, April 2, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-pandemic-iran-regime-change-revolution/>.

7 Garrett Nada, "2020 Parliamentary Election Results," The Iran Primer, February 24, 2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/feb/24/2020-parliamentary-election-results>.



Pouya Bakhtiari's father killed during the November 2019 protests says, "This year will be the year of science's victory over superstition."

tion of citizens for the institutions of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, the supreme guide, Ayatollah Khamenei, had himself called on the population to vote out of religious and patriotic duty.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore a personal failure for the supreme guide, who was personally involved in the mobilization. In addition, the filtering of the candidates made it possible to eliminate political personalities, who are also oligarchs like the former spokesman of the Parliament Ali Larijani, to better organize the political competition within the most ideological conservative factions of the Islamic Republic.

The Supreme Leader purified the system by strengthening the factions still loyal to him in order to control the process leading to his succession. This includes the group consisting of his son Mojtaba Khamenei, Ebrahim Raïssi, the head of the Judicial Authority who was however defeated during the last presidential election in Iran, Hossen Taeb, who is in charge of the intelligence services of the Guardians of the Revolution, and his brother Mehdi, as well as the new commander of the Al-Quds force, the successor of Qassem Soleimani, Esmail Qaani. This is a group of personalities that plays a decisive role for the nomination of the next Supreme Leader. They wish to control the parliament in order to have a group of depu-

8 "Khamenei tells Iranians voter turnout a religious duty," Al-Monitor, February 18, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/iran-supreme-leader-khamenei-voter-turnout-elections.html>.

ties who reflect their vision and feed their speeches. On the other side, the reformers and moderates want institutional reform to limit the screening of candidates by the Guardian Council and favor either the emergence of a collective religious body to replace the current Supreme Leader or the election of a religious figure who believes that popular legitimacy is just as important as divine legitimacy for the legitimacy of the supreme office in the Islamic Republic.

We can find this very same division between moderate and conservative camps around the question of the relationship between science, superstition, and religion. At the beginning of the health crisis, the government wanted to give priority to health issues at the expense of religious principles but in a theocratic regime it took many weeks to reach the cancellation of Friday prayers, the closure of the main places of pilgrimage and, finally, the restriction of movement of the population between the different provinces of the country. This is why a movement is emerging from civil society, illustrated by the letter released by activists calling for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Islamic country's supreme leader, to step down<sup>9</sup> as well as the video of the father of Pouya Bakhtiari, killed during the demonstrations in November 2019, demands that Iran's political priorities be based on scientific arguments and not on political-religious ideology.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of the pandemic several young nurses and renowned doctors lost their lives to COVID-19. The news about their death was broadcast through Telegram and unofficial social networks. In some regions (Guilan, Mazandaran) people started to take measures to protect themselves without waiting for any official guidance and in a total distrust of official broadcasters.<sup>11</sup> The situation was very complicated at the beginning of the spread of the virus:

"In the beginning, medical staffers faced the outbreak with very limited equipment. Some washed their own gowns and masks or sterilized them in regular ovens. Others wrapped their bodies in plastic bags they bought at supermarkets."<sup>12</sup>

Since January 2020, the health sector has been pushing political authorities to avoid an ideological response to the spread of the virus. The popular distrust

towards officials was reinforced by the contradictions in the statements of the deputy-health minister. Indeed, the deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi also advised against mandatory quarantine and called it a "pre world war era" strategy. But, the day after, Harirchi himself tested positive for the virus.<sup>13</sup> This was a blow for the strategy of the Islamic Republic to minimize the danger of the virus. After this event, we noticed a change of strategy and the recognition both internally and externally of the reality of the health crisis inside Iran. Nevertheless, it was too late and the majority of the population remains defiant regarding the official discourse of the Islamic Republic.

According to semi-official figures, the number of deaths of COVID-19 among the medical profession was 107 while 10,000 Iranian health workers have tested positive for the virus.<sup>14</sup> According to Peyman Foroughi, a 30-year-old doctor working with COVID-19 patients in the northwestern city of Tabriz, the risk of a second wave is high in Iran:

"Considering that the pandemic has not been completely repelled yet, the extensive reopening of businesses, offices and universities, which are venues for the gathering of many people in indoor environments, can distribute the disease in the society at a rapid pace.... It is highly likely that the disease emerges as a heavy weight falling on the healthcare system, which would exceed its capacity."<sup>15</sup>

Another Iranian doctor working in one of Tehran's largest hospitals, who prefers to remain anonymous, confirms that his country's health system may not be ready for a second wave:

"During the two weeks of vacation [Iranian New Year (Nowrouz) holydays], the situation was almost back to normal. Whereas in early March we had dedicated 120 beds to Covid-19 patients, today we have 80 beds with patients with Covid-19 and other illnesses. We are concerned about this resumption of activity which may lead to a return to the catastrophic period of early

9 "14 Activists Inside Iran Call for Khamenei's Resignation Civil," Iranwire, June 12, 2019, <https://iranwire.com/en/blogs/29/6089>.

10 <https://twitter.com/VOAIran/status/1241104434312208384>

11 "Doctors And Nurses Died as Iran Ignored Virus Concerns, Medical Professionals Say," Associated Press, May 12, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/doctors-and-nurses-died-iran-ignored-virus-concerns-medical-professionals-say>

12 "Doctors And Nurses Died," Associated Press.

13 Tara Kangarlou, "Doctors Inside Iran Believe Coronavirus Is More Serious Than Reported, and Getting Worse," Time Magazine, February 27, 2020, <https://time.com/5791516/iran-doctors-coronavirus-middle-east/>

14 Parisa Hafezi, "Some 10,000 Iranian health workers infected with coronavirus: state media," Reuters, May 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-idUSKBN22X10X>

15 Kourosh Ziabari, "Iran reopens as Covid-19 cases surge past 100k," Asia Times, May 12, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/iran-reopens-as-covid-19-cases-surge-past-100k/>

March.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite blaming the US, Iranian officials claimed throughout the crisis that national industries made enough protective material to fight the virus.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that there have been many calls among Iranian civil society to give priority to a scientific based decision-making process for the Iranian New Year (*Nowrouz*) rather than a religious-ideological driven agenda. This is also a way to answer the slogan that the Supreme Leader gives every year: “Last year’s slogan was Boosting Production.... This year is the year of Surge in Production. This is the slogan of the year. Officials should act in a way that production will witness a surge, God willing, and that there will be a tangible change in the lives of the people.”<sup>18</sup> This popular demand for a policy focusing on a scientific agenda is a new challenge for the authorities of the Islamic Republic who use religious feeling and sometimes superstitions of some parts of their population as a political tool to remain in power. Consequently, if the virus seems anti-revolutionary in the short-term, it is likely that in the long-term it will further deepen the credibility crisis of the Islamic Republic.

Civil society and the Iranian doctors are doing an effective job to inform and protect the population despite the political mismanagement of the Islamic Republic. Doctors broadcasted videos to confront the fake news and to teach people how to make their own masks. This will have a positive effect in the long-term in raising social awareness among the population on what it means to live under a political rule based on a Khomeinist ideology that is not designed to overcome the challenges of the 21st Century. This crisis will deepen the gap between the hardliners (*osulgarayan*) that are focusing on the next presidential election (2021) and the succession of the Supreme Leader (who is 81 years old) on the one hand, and the majority of the population who want to live in a normal country on the other hand.

It should however be stressed that, during the first weeks, a debate took place within the Iranian Shiite clergy on the imperative to base health policy on scientific parameters, and on the need to give priority to the health

of Iranian citizens rather than the politico-religious ideology of the political system. Here too, we have seen that the state is lagging behind a civil society whose demands in terms of health policy are based on scientific knowledge rather than religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup> The question about the reliability of the statistics (previously mentioned) can be best explained by the politicization of health issues and by the internal power struggles in the Islamic Republic which affect the ability of the system (*nezam*) to respond effectively and consistently to the spread of the virus.

In addition, there is an internal and external propaganda dimension to this health crisis, the dimensions of which are local, national, regional, and global. On the COVID-19 issue, we find the war of narratives that has opposed Iran to the United States for more than forty years. There is therefore a double problem of reliability with regard to the situation in Iran: reliability of the figures, firstly; reliability of the presentation of events, secondly, because of the inclusion of health policy in the framework of Tehran propaganda, which constantly refers to the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and accuses the Trump administration to use the health crisis to weaken the Islamic Republic. Thus the Islamic Republic presents health personnel as the heirs of the fighters of the Iran-Iraq war and confers on them the role of new saviors of Iran. Following the same logic, the Supreme Leader has proclaimed martyr status for doctors and nurses who die from COVID-19.<sup>20</sup>

## ECONOMIC EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC

The Iranian response to the health challenge is part of the original context of a triple economic crisis that precedes it and is worsening at the same time as the health crisis is developing. The first economic crisis began two years ago with the announcement of the US withdrawal from the Nuclear Agreement in May 2018, which then

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16 Ghazal Golshiri, “L’Iran met fin au confinement pour éviter l’effondrement économique,” *Le Monde*, April 9, 2020, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/04/09/coronavirus-l-iran-met-fin-au-confinement-pour-eviter-l-effondrement-economique\\_6036053\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/04/09/coronavirus-l-iran-met-fin-au-confinement-pour-eviter-l-effondrement-economique_6036053_3210.html)

17 “Doctors And Nurses Died,” Associated Press.

18 “Khamenei’s New Year Message Acknowledges Challenges, Omitting Attacks On The US,” *Radio Farda*, March 20, 2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/khamenei-s-new-year-message-acknowledges-challenges-omitting-attacks-on-the-us/30499241.html>.

19 On the clergy’s lack of credibility regarding “Islamic medicine” or in being the leading political force in shaping public health policy at the State level, see Erin Cunningham, “Iran’s clerics have bungled their coronavirus response, stoking doubts about their rule,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/irans-clerics-have-bungled-their-coronavirus-response-stoking-doubts-about-their-rule/2020/05/15/e85856ba-8898-11ea-80df-d24b35a568ae\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/irans-clerics-have-bungled-their-coronavirus-response-stoking-doubts-about-their-rule/2020/05/15/e85856ba-8898-11ea-80df-d24b35a568ae_story.html).

20 Kasra Aarabi, “Iran Knows Who to Blame for the Virus: America and Israel,” *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/19/iran-irgc-coronavirus-propaganda-blames-america-israel/>



involved the reimplementation of unilateral economic sanctions by the Trump administration. Two years later, US secondary sanctions made Iran the most punished country in the world.<sup>21</sup> Far from the idea of “smart sanctions” promoted by previous US Presidents (from Clinton to Obama), the Trump Administration’s idea this time is to suffocate the Islamic Republic of Iran to seek regime change. The health crisis is therefore seen by the Trump administration as an opportunity to further weaken the Iranian regime. The extent of the extra-territorial American legal regime complicates humanitarian trade with Iran and therefore the possibility for Iran to import medical supplies to overcome the health crisis. This is visible for barter systems because the US sanctions are aimed more specifically at oil exports from the Islamic Republic, which fell to less than 300,000 barrels per day during spring 2020. As a result, Iran is having difficulty paying for humanitarian goods and even using banking channels like the Swiss channel<sup>22</sup> or the channel set up by the European Union called INSTEX.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the impact of the sanctions on Iran’s health care sector has been a factor that has endangered Iranian health workers and has put the lives of Iranian citizens at risk. Indeed, even if, *de jure*, humanitarian goods and medical purchases are excluded from the legal scope of secondary US sanctions, the phenomena of over compliance make banking transactions with Iran more difficult even for this kind of product.<sup>24</sup>

The second economic crisis is linked to the fall in oil prices, which stood at around \$30 in May 2020. Paradoxically, Iran is one of the oil-producing countries least affected by the fall in oil prices due to the decrease of its oil exports from 2.5 million barrels per day in 2017 to less than 300,000 b/d in 2020 due to the US sanctions. However, the Iranian government’s budget has been directly affected by the collapse in oil revenues. Paradoxically, what is positive is the obligation of the Iranian government to generate non-oil revenues, but the objective for the Iranian year March 2020-March 2021 of \$10

billion in oil revenues already seems too optimistic. Five billion seems a more realistic goal while we are witnessing, at the same time, the collapse of regional non-oil trade with the closure of borders in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> These non-oil exports were, however, central to Tehran’s economic strategy to compensate for the collapse in oil exports. This is what explains Iran’s request for a \$5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—the first Iranian request in 60 years. Finally, the third and final external shock to the Iranian economy is the result of the measures taken by the Iranian authorities to curb the spread of the virus.

In this context of a triple economic crisis, the question of the country’s economic survival is raised. One has to consider that Iran experienced a recession of almost 10% in 2019 and that some estimate a possible recession at almost 25% for the next coming year.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the government’s hesitations are primarily linked to these economic concerns, while for the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards questions of identity and political-religious principles are decisive in defining the country’s health priorities. The result of these dissensions is the implementation of a confused and erratic policy for managing disorder. In these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine how a stable and lasting health order could come about.

## THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNMENTS AND OUTSIDE WORLD

As for the conspiracy theory promoted by the guide Khamenei, which highlights the alleged American responsibility in the creation of the virus, we observe here similarities with the official Chinese version: the virus is, according to these perceptions, a geopolitical means for Washington to weaken his rivals.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke of what he described as the failure of the United States and Europe in the fight against COVID-19:

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21 Mark Fitzpatrick, “Sanctioning Pandemic-plagued Iran,” *Survival*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2020/05/sanctioning-pandemic-plagued-iran>.

22 Luis Lema, “Un ‘canal suisse’ achemine des médicaments en Iran,” *Le Temps*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/un-canal-suisse-achemine-medicaments-iran>.

23 Tyler Cullis, “EU’s INSTEX transaction offers glimmer of hope but unlikely to satisfy Iran,” *Responsible Statecraft*, April 3, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/04/03/eus-instex-transaction-offers-glimmer-of-hope-but-unlikely-to-satisfy-iran/>.

24 Vira Ameli, “How Sanctions Put the Health of Ordinary Iranians at Risk,” *ISPI*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/how-sanctions-put-health-ordinary-iranians-risk-26078>.

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25 “Iran’s Non-Oil Trade Declines 27%,” *Financial Tribune*, May 8, 2020, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/103246/irans-non-oil-trade-declines-27>

26 “Iran has let its covid-19 outbreak get out of hand,” *The Economist*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/03/12/iran-has-let-its-covid-19-outbreak-get-out-of-hand>.

27 “Khamenei Says the US May Have Manufactured Coronavirus,” *Iranwire*, March 22, 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/speaking-of-iran/6837>.



Disinfection of public and urban thoroughfares in Tehran's Nabrad neighborhood, March 2020, Photo: Hamed Jafarnejad

"This failure manifested itself in three areas: managerial capability, social philosophy and morality... The spirit and basis of the social philosophy of the west rests on materialistic motives. For this reason, they have ignored the elderly, the sick, the poor and individuals with various disabilities, because such groups of people do not have the capability to earn money and generate wealth. For this reason, many have died in nursing homes. This reality vividly exhibits the failure of the western social philosophy."<sup>28</sup> This climate of media confrontation has effects on Iran's ability to benefit from international cooperation to combat the pandemic. Indeed, because of these conspiracy theories, the Islamic Republic refuses any US humanitarian aid—in principle because of the hostile nature of US actions.<sup>29</sup> And therein lays the Iranian specificity in relation to the Chinese and Russian accounts of the pandemic. Indeed, for Beijing and Moscow the anti-US ideological dimension in the construction of their media narrative does not take precedence over their economic interests. In the case of Iran, it is the ideological vision that determines the nature of relations with Wash-

ington and not its geopolitical and economic interests. There is therefore more pragmatism in Chinese and Russian foreign policies despite the same anti-US and even, sometimes, conspiratorial ideological tone.

In addition, there are rivalries between the various centers of power in the Islamic Republic in the management of the pandemic. Each group is trying to recover a legitimacy that has been tarnished in the eyes of the population. This explains why Tehran has created complications for the deployment of a team from the NGO Doctors Without Borders in Iran, accusing MSF of being a "foreign force." There are therefore apparent contradictions in the Iranian authorities' vision of the need (or not) for international assistance. On the one hand, the Rohani government calls for cooperation to meet the health challenge: request for a loan from the IMF, request for assistance from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Union, acceptance of MSF aid, request for the lifting of US sanctions. These demands are unlikely to succeed at the IMF level because of US opposition, but the European Union supports the idea of cooperation with Iran in this health crisis. But these external obstacles are not the only ones that the Rohani government must overcome. Indeed, the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards denounce foreign influences and the risk of infiltration if Iran opens up to international aid. These internal tensions and the failed bet of the Europeans to reinforce the so-called moderates within the political es-

28 Ali Khamenei, "The U.S. and Europe have failed in the fight against Corona in three areas," Official Website, May 10, 2020, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7537/The-U-S-and-Europe-have-failed-in-the-fight-against-Corona-in>.

29 Somayeh Malekian, "Iran rejects coronavirus aid amid conspiracy theories and sanctions," ABC News, March 24, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/iran-rejects-coronavirus-aid-amid-conspiracy-theories-sanctions/story?id=69775776>

establishment of the Islamic Republic explain the inability of Brussels to implement an otherwise smart Iranian strategy in theory and to offer a credible alternative to the confrontational policy of the Trump Administration.<sup>30</sup>

On the whole, the Islamic Republic is adopting a reactive policy rather than a proactive policy with regards to anticipating the spread of the virus. This can be best explained by the Islamic Republic's dependency towards China and by the political infighting inside the system (*nezam*) to use the public health crisis as a means to increase its share of power inside the establishment. Because of the US economic blockade, Iran is forced to rely on China for trade despite the health crisis. Moreover this credibility crisis is also regional because Iranian neighbors such as the Kingdom of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are accusing Iran of not being a constructive partner in the fight against the pandemic. Nevertheless, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Kuwait have chosen to cooperate with Iran on this aspect of the health crisis rather than using the spread of the virus as a political tool to challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. Eventually, the Islamic Republic will face an internal opposition from the hardliners inside the establishment (criticizing the management by the "moderate" government) and from the civil society front because of disinformation regarding the health crisis (reliability of the statistics, management of the health system, etc.). The use of anti-US propaganda (blaming US sanctions and conspiracy theories) will not help the establishment to convince their own population that their management of the health crisis was designed for the protection of the health of their citizens. Rather the authorities are still focusing on the survival of the regime rather than the interests of the population.

After having downplayed the importance of the health crisis, Khamenei accused the US of being responsible of the outbreak of the health crisis inside Iran with the hidden agenda of weakening the Islamic Revolution. This has to be understood in the context of the fear of the Iranian elite of being the target of a US soft war (*jang-e narm*) against the Islamic Republic. Indeed, there is an intellectual debate on the beginning of the implosion of the Islamic Republic which is a recurring question in the media and Western think tanks. There is the famous reference to "Ayatollah Gorbachev" in comparison with the former Iranian "reformer" president Khatami (1997-2005) that

30 Cornelius Adebahr, "Europe Needs a Regional Strategy on Iran," Carnegie Europe, May 13, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Adebahr-EU-Iran.pdf>.

was very popular in the West.<sup>31</sup> The comparison with the USSR of the 1980s has been present in Western analyses since the 1990s. The Iranian reform movement is often compared to the attempt to reform the USSR, under Gorbachev, during the years of Perestroika. There is certainly common ground: weakening of ideology, gerontocracy, territorial expansion outside national borders, and weakening of political legitimacy internally, crisis of credibility of the system as highlighted by the Chernobyl crisis in 1986.

These convergences led certain analysts to speak in January 2020 about the "Chernobyl moment" of the Islamic Republic with the official lie about the firing of missiles by the Revolutionary Guards on the Ukrainian Airlines plane that was carrying civilians.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, there are notable differences between the Islamic Republic of the 2010s and the USSR of the 1980s: first the use of repression and the use of violence to suppress social movements which is more and more recurrent in the Islamic Republic since the Green Movement of 2009; second, the maintenance of a hard core group of political factions which follows the precepts of the Khomeinist ideology with dedication while pledging allegiance to its successor the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Furthermore, while the will to reform emanated from the supreme authority in the USSR, it is carried to the Islamic Republic by a president of the Islamic Republic with increasingly limited power in Iran (From Rafsanjani to Khatami and Rohani). Finally, the ability to censor and the will to carry official propaganda despite the popularity of the Persian language media broadcasting from abroad remains intact among the political elites of the Islamic Republic.

While the Chernobyl moment of the Islamic Republic may not have yet come, the fact remains that internal vulnerabilities clash with the talk of "Iranian hegemony" in the Middle East. We are witnessing an economic crisis and a socio-cultural transformation of the country which widens the gap between the official discourse and the socio-cultural reality of the country. The fact remains that the perception of Iran as a great regional power remains present in the discourse of certain neighboring countries (Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, or Pakistan for example)

31 Suzanne Maloney, Ayatollah Gorbachev. The Politics of Change in Khatami's Iran (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

32 Arash Azizi, "Iran's Saturday of Rage: Online Anger Pours into the Streets," The Daily Beast, January 12, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/irans-saturday-of-rage-online-anger-pours-into-the-streets?ref=scroll>. Pour une opinion contraire voir Bobby Ghosh, "Iran Isn't Facing a Chernobyl Moment," Bloomberg, January 13, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-01-13/iran-isn-t-facing-a-chernobyl-moment>.



and in the West. This perception was built with the elimination of the Taliban regime after 2001 and the military intervention in Iraq (2003). The Arab Spring of 2011 also reinforced this idea of the rise of non-Arab states in the Middle East: Turkey, Israel, and Iran. However, seen from the Arab world (apart from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), it appears that in terms of public opinion, anti-US discourse remains generally more widespread than opposition to regional Iranian or Turkish influence.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the internal credibility crisis also has a regional dimension for Iran, perceived by neighboring countries as one of the main sources of the virus spread. It is noted that Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom of Bahrain have designated the Islamic Republic as responsible for the spread of the virus in their country. Manama even accused Tehran of “biological aggression.”<sup>34</sup> Conversely, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman favor the path of cooperation with Iran on this issue. The greatest risk concerns Iraqi and Afghan societies due to the multiple ties that unite their populations with Iran and the weakness of their respective health systems. This health challenge is therefore also a reminder: the links between the societies of the region are not reduced to regional geopolitical fractures. Internationally, Iranian conservatives are proposing to increase dependence on China and Russia, further isolating the country from the rest of the world. This policy is built within the slogan of the quest for self-sufficiency (*khodkafaei*), a principle at the heart of the ideological project of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. But the rapprochement with China and Russia does not ensure this economic development, particularly in the oil and gas sector. In addition, with the implementation of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy, Iran’s dependence on Russia and China has led the country to a form of powerlessness and loneliness while confronting the health challenge.

This situation caused a controversy in Iran between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the statements of Kianush Jahanpur, spokesperson for the Ministry of Health who considered that the Chinese statistics on the COVID-19 pandemic were

“a bitter joke.”<sup>35</sup> In response, the Iranian spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Moussavi praised China’s “courage, commitment and professionalism” in its fight against COVID-19.<sup>36</sup> This internal controversy shows that beyond the ideological convergences between Iran, China and Russia, the COVID-19 health crisis is an obstacle to Chinese soft power. Indeed, even if the political and religious elites of the Islamic Republic are looking more and more towards the East (Russia is included in this dynamic), Iranian civil society remains lucid on the negative effects of this political strategy and its limits in times of health crisis. Likewise, the inability of political elites in the Islamic Republic to overcome the crisis of confidence with public opinion, which has worsened since the popular demonstrations in late 2017–early 2018,<sup>37</sup> is confirmed by the chaotic management of the health crisis. The will of each power center of the Islamic Republic to instrumentalize the pandemic to promote its own interests comes up against the incredulity of the majority of Iranian public opinion and makes the Iranian authoritarian model based on fragmentation a more fragile model than China’s Unique Political Party System or the Russian model built on the verticality of President Putin’s power. Even if Russia’s political system is not much stronger as it is centered on the personality of one man—President Vladimir Putin—and is supported by a resource-oriented economy, there is not the same degree of ideologization of the decision making process as is the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, Russia is more a “sultanistic regime”<sup>38</sup> rather than a theocratic political system even if there are some similarities between the political discourses regarding the “religious identity” in the two countries.<sup>39</sup> The Iranian regime is weaker than the Chinese and Russian ones given that some estimates put the

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35 “Iran Official Calls China’s Coronavirus Numbers A ‘Bitter Joke,’” Radio Farda, April 5, 2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-official-calls-china-s-coronavirus-figures-a-bitter-joke-/30532450.html>.

36 Jedâl-e twitteri sokhangou-ye vezârat-e behdâsh-t-e Irân va safir-e tchin dar bâre-ye koronâ (the controversy on Twitter between the spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Health and the Chinese ambassador about the Corona), Radio Farda, 18 farvardin 1399 (April 6, 2020), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-china-dispute-corona-statistics/30533630.html>.

37 Asef Bayat, “The Fire That Fueled the Iran Protests,” Atlantic, January 27, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-protest-mashaad-green-class-labor-economy/551690/>.

38 See H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, eds, *Sultanistic regimes* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

39 See Clément Therme, “Russia and the Islamic Worlds: The Case of Shia Islam,” in *Islam in Russia, Russia in the Islamic World*, ed. Marlène Laruelle, CAP paper no. 220, (June 2019): 25–31, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, George Washington University, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CAP-paper-220-Russia-Islamic-Diplomacy.pdf>.

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33 Orlit Perlov, “Arab Discourse on Non-Arab Countries; Status Report on Trends in Middle East Discourse; and the Iranian Model in Syria,” INSS, no. 7 (September 2018), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/arab-discourse-on-non-arab-countries-status-report-on-trends-in-middle-east-discourse-and-the-iranian-model-in-syria/>

34 “Bahrain accuses Iran of ‘biological aggression’ for coronavirus cover up,” Arab News, March 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1640576/middle-east>



popular support of the Islamic system (*nezam*) in Iran as 15% of the population.<sup>40</sup> Last but not least, the use of force to repress popular movements before the spread of the virus was recurrent in Iran since the rise of discontents in the popular class in 2017, 2018 and November 2019.

This lack of popular support and the ideological dimension explain the recurrent reference to the demise of the USSR. Is it plausible to have an Iranian Gorbachev within the next decade? Are there pro-Western, more secular sentiments within the Iranian society? Iranian people, including some among the ruling elites, are losing faith in the khomeinist ideology in a way similar to that of the USSR of the late 1980s. Therefore, strategic patience is a better policy choice for Western leaders rather than containment, information war and escalation. The “rotten” Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>41</sup> is stronger when under “maximum pressures” of the Trump Administration and weaker under Obama’s smart policy of strategic patience and dialogue. The US factor is also a key factor in the definition of Iranian in Moscow and Beijing. Iran is not vital to their geopolitical interests but rather a little pawn in the current phase of great power competition. This is the result of the confusion among the Iranian political elite since 1979 between “self-isolation” and the quest for independence. It is therefore less than likely that Russia and/or China will help Iran in case of conflict or complete economic collapse. The COVID-19 crisis confirms that Iran came from the “US dependency” before the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to a new foreign policy that increasingly relies on Russian and Chinese support. Since the end of the Cold War, this double dependency is based on two main factors. For Tehran, there is a security-dependency towards Moscow (both in the definition of bilateral relations and at a regional level)<sup>42</sup> and an economic one towards China. With the decline of interdependency in the post-COVID 19 international system, it will be harder for the Islamic Republic to hide this double strategic vulnerability as a result of Khamenei’s quest for defying what he perceives as a US-dominated international system not only in the Middle East but worldwide.

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40 Dexter Filkins, “The Twilight of the Iranian Revolution,” *New Yorker*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/25/the-twilight-of-the-iranian-revolution>

41 David Patrikarakos, “Coronavirus has exposed Iran’s rotten republic,” *Spectator*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/coronavirus-has-exposed-iran-s-rotten-republic?fbclid=IwAR33bR29KgbpVqHrOvnp9aeOAXul3Vc1WPfE7vM4Pu7K75DmAtbUg7GH1jQ>.

42 See Clément Therme, “Iran and Russia in the Middle East: Towards a regional alliance?” *The Middle East Journal*, Fall 2018.



Vladimir Putin in a hospital in the Moscow village of Kommunarka. Photo: kremlin.ru

Vladislav Inozemtsev

# RUSSIA



## ABOUT AUTHOR

### Vladislav INOZEMTSEV

Vladislav INOZEMTSEV (\* 1968) is an economist and political scientist. He holds a PhD in Economics (1994) from Moscow State Lomonossov University in Russia and served as Professor at the Higher School of Economics and MSU's Department for Public Governance. He was invited as a Visiting Fellow to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University and Atlantic Council in Washington, Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna and German Council for Foreign Relations in Berlin. In 1996 he founded a Moscow-based NGO, The Center for Post Industrial Studies, and has been its Director since then. He is the author and editor of around 20 books, among them *Democracy vs Modernization: A Dilemma for Russia and for the World* (Routledge, 2011) and *Unmodern Country* (Russian edition 2018, Polish and German 2020).

As in most other features, Russia remains unique as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The country was a latecomer to the “club” of affected nations with the first 1,000 cases officially recorded on March 27,<sup>1</sup> nine weeks after China, three-and-a-half weeks after Italy, and two weeks after the U.S. passed the same threshold.<sup>2</sup> Then it suddenly caught up, advancing during the month of April from 29th to 7th in the list of countries with the most people infected and then surging to 2nd place by May 12,<sup>3</sup> later being overtaken by Brazil. By the end of May the official count of people diagnosed with COVID-19 in Russia approached 400,000<sup>4</sup>—but it has still recorded the smallest number of casualties among the first 10 most affected countries<sup>5</sup> which was definitely a result of a massive misinformation campaign, which I address below. Moreover, I would say that during the entire course of the emergency, Russia has appeared as

the most inconsistent actor in which tactics have changed several times, the regulatory moves were highly controversial and contested, often contradicting each other.

## THE OVERALL TIMELINE OF COVID-19 IN RUSSIA

COVID-19 arrived in Russia relatively late—on January 31<sup>6</sup>—and the outbreak was widely expected (no one can be sure that this is the correct date, but here I cite the official data). At the time, two Chinese individuals were diagnosed with the virus in Tyumen' and Chita. Both men were taken to the hospitals, treated, recovered, and sent back to China before new cases arrived en masse in mid-March. Monitoring the spread of the disease and learning from China's practices, the Russians responded unexpectedly fast, declaring the closure of the land border with China on January 31,<sup>7</sup> then banning all Chinese

1 See: “Timeline of Covid-19 Spread in Russia [Хронология распространения Covid-19 в России],” Wikipedia (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология\\_распространения\\_COVID-19\\_в\\_России](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология_распространения_COVID-19_в_России).

2 See: “2019-20 coronavirus pandemic cases,” Wikipedia, accessed April 27, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019-20\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_cases](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019-20_coronavirus_pandemic_cases).

3 See: “Russia Advances to the Second Rank Worldwide in COVID-19 Cases [Россия вышла на второе место в мире по числу случаев COVID-19],” Interfax News agency (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/708220>.

4 See: “Russia [Россия],” Official Covid-19 Russia (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/information/>.

5 See: “Daily coronavirus statistics,” Worldometer (website), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

6 See: “First Two Cases of Coronavirus Infection Detected in Russia [В России выявили первые два случая заражения коронавирусом],” TASS News Agency (website; in Russian) accessed April 27, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/7656549>.

7 See: “Russia Locks 16 Checkpoints of the Border with China [Россия закрыла 16 КПП на границе с Китаем],” Rossiyskaya Gazeta (website; in Russian) accessed April 27, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/01/30/rossiia-zakryla-16-kpp-na-granice-s-kitaem.html>.



nationals from entering the country on February 20<sup>8</sup> and cutting off air traffic with Iran on February 28.<sup>9</sup> But I would argue that from the first days the actions undertaken by the Russian authorities became subject to endless exceptions. After it was announced on February 14 that all air traffic with China was cut off,<sup>10</sup> it appeared that Aeroflot, the national state-owned carrier, still had permission to fly “only” to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong until March 29.<sup>11</sup> Even after the Chinese were formally banned from entering Russia, on April 6 it suddenly appeared that 20 Chinese nationals, coming from Europe to China via Belarus and Russia, tested positive after crossing the border into China near Vladivostok.<sup>12</sup> Even though it was obvious that Europe turned into the most affected region since early March, and official warnings were issued concerning travel there, hundreds of wealthy Russians disregarded these, causing numerous infection cases, with the most famous cluster resulting from trips to the luxury French ski resort of Courchevel during the long weekend of March 6-9.<sup>13</sup> While it was announced that all Russia’s borders had been sealed by March 30,<sup>14</sup> it is well known that private jets never discontinued their services given the massive advertising to be found on the Russian segment of the Internet (the average one-way ticket price to different European destinations with departures from Moscow in May, 2020 was between €3,500

and €5,500).<sup>15</sup>

The most specific feature of the early stage of the pandemic was the very slow advance of the virus. It was then that the Russian authorities started to promote two opposite approaches to the pandemic: on the one hand, many loyal experts and TV anchors described COVID-19 as a kind of harmless flu no one should be afraid of;<sup>16</sup> on the other hand they became cautious about the possible spread of the disease because it endangered their political and ideological agenda that dominated the first half of the year. Moreover, what made Russia’s case very special were the numerous and severe outbreaks of what was called “out-of-care house pneumonia” (*внебольничная пневмония*)<sup>17</sup> that spread through the country well before the Chinese declared the Wuhan outbreak on December 31, 2019. In Russia the disease was widespread even in 2019, as the Ministry of Health confirmed up to 18 thousands deaths due to pneumonia for first 9 months of 2019.<sup>18</sup> This issue seems crucial because as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified, the Russian authorities started to count many of its victims as dying from this “out-of-care house pneumonia” which explains to some degree the low official death count. In October and November of 2019 in approximately 20 regions, pneumonia cases were recorded in the thousands, and schools were shut down for a week or more in Rostov, Orenburg and Samara oblasts as well as in Krasnoyarsk region.<sup>19</sup> The 2019-20 winter in the European part of Russia, unusually warm and wet with an average daily temperature not falling below -5°C until February

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8 See: “Russia Bans Chinese Nationals from Entry due to Coronavirus [Россия закрыла въезд для граждан Китая из-за коронавируса],” *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/3770450/>.

9 See: “Russia Restricts Air Traffic with Iran [Россия ограничила авиасообщение с Ираном],” *RIA Novosti News Agency* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200228/1565303280.html>.

10 See: “Russia Discontinues Air Traffic With China due to Coronavirus [Россия прекратила авиасообщение с Китаем из-за коронавируса],” *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5e45c31d9a79478245e865b4>.

11 See: “‘Aeroflot’ Wins the War on Coronavirus [Войну с коронавирусом выигрывает «Аэрофлот»],” *Kommersant Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4241453>.

12 See: “Brought from Russia: The Chinese Authorities Diagnosed 20 People with Coronavirus [Привезли из России: власти Китая нашли коронавирус у 20 человек],” *Gazeta.ru* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2020/04/06/13037887.shtml>.

13 See: “Sobyanin Tells about Infection in Those Who Thought the Warning About Courchevel Was a Mockery [Собянин рассказал о заражении увидевших издёвку в совете про Куршевель],” *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/10/04/2020/5e902c649a79479caf0117c4>.

14 See: “Russia Has Completely Sealed the Borders due to Coronavirus [Россия полностью закрыла границы из-за коронавируса],” *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27110.5/4186523/>.

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15 See: “Business Jet as the Only Way to Fly Away [Бизнес-авиация как единственный способ улётеть],” *Immigrant Invest* (corporate website; in Russian), <https://immigrantinvest.com/lp/business-jet-only-way-to-fly-away/>; The tariffs as of April 27 as advertised on <https://jet-partners.ru>, accessed April 27, 2020.

16 See: “Alexander Myasnikov speaking on Spas TV Channel, March 20, 2020 [Александр Мясников, интервью телеканалу «Спас» 20 марта 2020 года],” (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vu-hZsGC384>.

17 See: “A Strange Pneumonia Outbreak Recorded in Russia in Autumn 2019 [Осенью 2019 года в России была зафиксирована вспышка странной пневмонии],” (in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <http://ursa-tm.ru/forum/index.php?/topic/345520-osenyu-2019-goda-v-rossii-byla-zafiksirovana-vspyshka-strannoy-pnevmonii/>.

18 See: “What One Should Know about Pneumonia [Что нужно знать о пневмонии],” *TASS News Agency* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4715756>.

19 See: “Caution, Virus! Schools are Quarantined due to Pneumonia [Осторожно, вирус! Школы закрывают на карантин из-за пневмонии],” *Regnum News Agency* (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2779494.html>.



5, 2020 in Moscow,<sup>20</sup> contributed to the dispersion of the disease. There were a lot of rumors explaining the mildness of the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia by immune resistance that has presumably developed in many people during the course of this mysterious outbreak.<sup>21</sup> Another popular theory that hit the Russian social networks and websites claimed that the low rates of infections could be explained by the Soviet immunization practices that included an obligatory vaccination against tuberculosis (the so called vaccine of Calmette and Guérin, BCG) for all newborns that was once again repeated at the ages of 7 and 14.<sup>22</sup> Supporters of this theory suggested this vaccine made people in Russia and in the entire post-Soviet space, as well in some post-Communist countries in Central Europe, better fit for the pandemic preventing the most severe cases of pneumonia from developing in humans.<sup>23</sup>

By late March, however, it appeared that the pandemic started to advance quickly with 5,000 cases reported on April 5.<sup>24</sup> At this point some most crucial shortcomings became obvious. On the one hand, I would mention the incredible recklessness expressed by mostly wealthy and privileged people who deliberately avoided quarantines, ceased to declare their travels abroad, and continued either to maintain contact with colleagues or socialize at formal events.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, as the country's leadership realized the danger of the pandemic, the "war on coronavirus" became a competitive business that each top official wanted to get involved with.

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20 See: "Archive of Daily Temperatures in Moscow, Feb. 2020 [Архив погоды в Москве в феврале 2020 года]," WeatherArchive.ru (website; in Russian), April 27, 2020, <http://www.weatherarchive.ru/Temperature/Moscow/February-2020>.

21 See: "Did 7 Million Russians Experience Coronavirus Out of Bed Already? [На ногах переболели 7 миллионов россиян?]" Life News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://life.ru/p/1317950>.

22 See: "BCG Vaccination: How Many Times is it Made? [Прививка БЦЖ: сколько раз её делают?]" Pervyy po tuberkulezu (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://1tuberkulez.ru/vaknaciya/bczh/bczh-skolko-raz-delayut.html>.

23 See: Andrey Illarionov, "BCG Vaccination and Mortality due to Coronavirus at the Stage of Pandemic 'Explosion' [Андрей Илларионов, Вакцинация БЦЖ и смертность от коронавируса на стадии эпидемического «взрыва»]," Livejournal (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://aillarionov.livejournal.com/1169468.html>.

24 See: "Timeline of Covid-19 Spread in Russia [Хронология распространения Covid-19 в России]," Wikipedia (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология\\_распространения\\_COVID-19\\_в\\_России](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология_распространения_COVID-19_в_России).

25 See: "The Disaster Came from the Holidays: Coronavirus in Russia Turned into a Disease of the Wealthy and Reckless [Беда пришла из отпуска. Коронавирус стал для России болезнью состоятельных и беспечных]," 360 TV (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://360tv.ru/news/tekst/beda-iz-otpuska/>.

Within a couple of days, at least three centers emerged as the Council of Ministers, the Security Council, and the Mayor of Moscow each set up a commission on coronavirus (Mr. Sobyanin, the Mayor of Moscow, still plays a decisive role in drafting the coronavirus strategy as the Russian capital remains the center of the pandemic with more than 180 thousand people officially diagnosed with COVID-19 as of June 1,<sup>26</sup> which accounts for around 45% of all cases registered in Russia).<sup>27</sup> This unusual style of management with so many people responsible for different tasks became even more unique as President Putin disappeared from public soon after his visit to a COVID-19 hospital near Moscow on March 24<sup>28</sup> where he met its director who tested positive a couple of days later, and since then participated only in online meetings, and recorded addresses to the nation. All the government sessions in which he took part were conducted remotely for almost two months; the president briefly appeared near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the VE-Day tribute and watched the Air Force parade from inside the Kremlin<sup>29</sup> until he returned to his official study in the Kremlin for several formal meetings on May 25,<sup>30</sup> two weeks after he announced the "reopening" of the country's economy on May 11.<sup>31</sup>

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26 See: "Moscow [Москва]," Official Covid-19 Russia (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/information/>.

27 See: "Russia [Россия]," Official Covid-19 Russia (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/information/>.

28 See: "Putin Will Work Remotely at Least For Another Week [Путин еще как минимум неделю будет работать удаленно]," Rosbalt News Agency (website; in Russian) accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2020/04/05/1836544.html>.

29 See: Vladimir Putin, "75th Anniversary of Victory, May 9, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed May 27, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63329>.

30 See: Vladimir Putin, "Meeting with Russian Railways CEO Oleg Belozеров, May 25, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63407>.

31 See: Vladimir Putin, "Meeting on Sanitary and Epidemiological Situation, May 11, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed June 1, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63340>.

## BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSE AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

Assessing the quality of information about the spread of the disease, which is actively (and rightfully) disputed, I would mention two important phases the official attitude to the pandemic has passed.

At the early stage, the Russian authorities seemed to be concerned by the spread of the disease. One might dispute the accuracy of the number of overall cases registered in Russia in March, but the fact is that President Putin decided to introduce a kind of a stay-at-home order that he called “short vacations,” as early as March 28 when there were only 1,264 recorded cases of COVID-19 in the whole of Russia and only 4 people were pronounced dead because of coronavirus.<sup>32</sup> I should mention that when the lockdown was announced in Italy on March 11, there were more than 10 thousand people diagnosed with COVID-19 and 631 deaths;<sup>33</sup> the same figures for the State of New York on March 22 were 9 thousand and 56 deaths.<sup>34</sup> So the Russians acted quite timely; moreover, the Kremlin rescheduled both the nationwide voting on the newly introduced constitutional amendments that had to be organized on April 22 and cancelled official VE-Day celebrations on May 9.<sup>35</sup> Both events were later rescheduled—the military parade will take place on June 24<sup>36</sup> in memory of the original Parade of 1945 when the victorious troops performed on Red Square, and the voting may take place later during the summer. For all this to be done the scope of the pandemic needed to be considered huge enough rather than neglected (the contrary happened in Belarus where President Lukashenka denies

the danger of the virus until nowadays—see Chapter 3). Even though there were attempts for misreporting the number of cases—but at this stage some of the local governors who tried to hide the outbreak fearing they would be dismissed by the Kremlin were in fact fired (as it happened in Komi Republic on April 2 after two local hospitals turned into hot spots for the pandemic<sup>37</sup>).

But almost everything has changed in mid-April when it appeared that the “stay-at-home” regime was not so effective, and the economic difficulties mounted. After April 19 the number of new cases started to fall<sup>38</sup>—by this time the Kremlin realized that the economic impact of the pandemic looks catastrophic and so the quarantine must be lifted quite soon, so the “victory” was considered more important than the “fight.” This was the time when the authorities required all people with acute respiratory disease to stay home starting from April 22 while previously they ordered this only for those who tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>39</sup> So I would say it became easier to hide the real number of people with COVID-19 as those potentially infected stayed in their homes. The number of those people was estimated at around 20,000—and immediately thereafter Moscow doctors and nurses mentioned that the share of those hospitalized in a severe condition started to rise, which might suggest people were not taken to hospitals as long as it was possible. With some respect to the authorities I would say that after a week of this new approach they ceased to “correct” the statistics of new cases so their numbers shot up to an all-time high of 7,933 cases on May 1; 10,102 cases on May 5; and finally reached 11,656 cases on May 11.<sup>40</sup>

The spread of the pandemic in Russia, as the Russian authorities recently confirmed, resembles what hap-

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32 See: “Timeline of Covid-19 Spread in Russia [Хронология распространения Covid-19 в России],” Wikipedia (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология\\_распространения\\_COVID-19\\_в\\_России](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология_распространения_COVID-19_в_России).

33 See: “Italy Passes 10,000 Coronavirus Cases as National Quarantine Moves Closer to Total Shutdown,” CNBC (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/11/italy-passes-10000-coronavirus-cases.html>.

34 See: “Cuomo Orders All Nonessential New York Workers To Stay Home,” CNN (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/20/politics/new-york-workforce-stay-home/index.html>.

35 See: Vladimir Putin, “Address to the Nation, March 25, 2020,” Events. President of Russia (website), accessed April 28, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63061> and “Putin Announced the Delay of VE-Day Parade [Путин объявил о переносе парада Победы],” Lenta.ru (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/04/16/paradd/>.

36 See: “VE-Day Parade in Russia Is Set for June 24 [Парад Победы в России назначили на 24 июня],” Interfax News agency (website; in Russian), accessed May 27, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/710362>.

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37 See: “Putin Fired Two Governors After Addressing the Nation on Coronavirus [Путин уволил глав двух регионов после обращения к народу по коронавирусу],” RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/04/2020/5e86069d9a79470ef6452aa2>.

38 See: “Timeline of Covid-19 Spread in Russia [Хронология распространения Covid-19 в России],” Wikipedia (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология\\_распространения\\_COVID-19\\_в\\_России](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология_распространения_COVID-19_в_России).

39 See: “Muscovites with Acute Respiratory Disease Should Follow the Same Guidelines as Those Infected with Covid [Москвичи с ОРВИ должны соблюдать такой же режим, как и люди с COVID],” Ridus (website; in Russian) accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.ridus.ru/news/325409>.

40 See: “Timeline of Covid-19 Spread in Russia [Хронология распространения Covid-19 в России],” Wikipedia (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология\\_распространения\\_COVID-19\\_в\\_России](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология_распространения_COVID-19_в_России).

pened in Europe rather than in China<sup>41</sup>—while as Moscow is concerned, the city looked in April very similar to New York in March in terms of growth in the overall number of cases<sup>42</sup>. By the end of April another disturbing trend appeared: due to the poor quality of tests (in many cases testing people, who were almost certainly infected with COVID-19, two or three times produced negative results) major Russian cities experienced an explosion in pneumonia cases many of which were deadly. In Moscow alone, the number of patients with pneumonia rose by 70% during the last week of April,<sup>43</sup> and many of the patients were reported dead without being counted as COVID-19 victims (as was the case of Andrey Varichev, the CEO of one of Russia's largest industrial conglomerates, Metalloinvest, who passed away on March, 27<sup>44</sup>). Later it appeared that both in Moscow and in other large cities the authorities counted the deaths most likely caused by COVID-19 as resulting from the infamous "out-of-care house pneumonia": in Moscow, as it was unintentionally revealed in mid-May, the number of virus-related deaths stood at least 70% higher than what was announced,<sup>45</sup> and in St. Petersburg where only 99 people were counted as COVID-19 victims, around 700 more died of pneumonia,<sup>46</sup> which quite probably was the same coronavirus. I will return to this profound misinformation later.

Another striking point was the authorities' actions

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41 See: "Sobyainin: The Covid-19 Situation in Russia Resembles Europe's Path, Not China's, and This was Inevitable [Собянин: ситуация с Covid-19 в России идёт по европейскому, а не китайскому сценарию, и это было неизбежно]," Newsru.com (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, [https://www.newsru.com/russia/02may2020/europe\\_scenario.html](https://www.newsru.com/russia/02may2020/europe_scenario.html).

42 Compare: "Moscow [Москва]," Official Covid-19 Russia (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/information/>; and "New Reported Cases by Day in New York" New York Times (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/new-york-coronavirus-cases.html#cases>.

43 See: "Moscow Authorities Reported 70% Rise in Hospitalizations Due to Pneumonia [Власти Москвы сообщили о росте числа госпитализаций с пневмонией на 70%]," RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/04/2020/5ea722f29a7947bbc913b654>.

44 See: "CEO of Alisher Usmanov's Mining and Smelting Holding Dies from Pneumonia [Глава горно-металлургической компании Алишера Усманова умер от пневмонии]," Forbes.ru (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.forbes.ru/newsroom/biznes/399219-glava-gorno-metallurgicheskoy-kompanii-alishera-usmanova-umer-ot-pnevmonii>.

45 Pjotr Sauer, "Moscow Sees 20% Surge in Mortality in April: Official Data," Moscow Times (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/10/moscow-sees-20-surge-in-mortality-in-april-official-data-a70235>.

46 See: "Out-of-care house Pneumonia Claims 694 Deaths in St Petersburg [От внебольничной пневмонии в Петербурге умерли 694 человека]," Neva Today (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://neva.today/news/ot-vnebolnichnoj-pnevmonii-v-peterburge-umerli-694-cheloveka-195839/>.

concerning the implementation of emergency measures. If one assesses them from the functional side, they look very similar to those imposed by Western governments. Between March 16 and 20, all mass gatherings and events (from sport venues to street rallies) were suspended in Moscow and later in the majority of provincial cities, schools were shut down for the spring holidays from March 21 and haven't been reopened since<sup>47</sup>; many businesses (from beauty parlors to restaurants and shopping malls, except food outlets located inside them) were closed since March 21<sup>48</sup>; and between March 29 and 31, the stay-at-home orders were issued in almost every large city across Russia (how they are respected might be seen from the so-called self-isolation indices for various cities).<sup>49</sup> The local governors were declared primarily responsible for fighting the pandemic in their regions as President Putin stated in his two speeches broadcasted on March 25 and April 2<sup>50</sup>. (Later the president declared that the governors were the ones who might decide whether their regions are ready for a partial "reopening" after the national state of awareness was lifted on May 11<sup>51</sup>).

But it should be noted the measures implemented were largely copied from those introduced in Moscow even if they proved to be not very effective. But at the same time the regime was very different from either the American or European one. First, the authorities actually failed to call it a formal emergency: in their initial attempt to counter the COVID-19 spread at production facilities and in offices they announced "a holiday week" from Saturday, March 28 until Monday, April 5 trying to send people to their homes.<sup>52</sup> The attempt desperately failed as thousands took to the public parks and recreational sites, went to visit friends, or opted for outdoor

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47 See: "Events of 50 People or More Banned in Moscow [В Москве запретили проводить мероприятия с участием более 50 человек]," Vedomosti (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/03/16/825319-v-moskve-zapretili-provodit-meropriyatiya>.

48 See: "Fitness Clubs and Pools are Closed in Moscow [В Москве закрыли фитнес-клубы и бассейны]," Moskovskii Komsomlets (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2020/03/21/v-moskve-zakryli-fitnesskluby-i-bassejny.html>.

49 For 'Self-Isolation Index' in real time see: <https://yandex.ru/maps/covid19/isolation>.

50 See, e.g. Putin, "Address to the Nation, March 25, 2020"; and Vladimir Putin, "Address to the Nation, April 2, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed April 28, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63133>.

51 See: Vladimir Putin, "Meeting on Sanitary and Epidemiological Situation, May 11, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed June 1, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63340>.

52 See: Putin, "Address to the Nation, March 25, 2020"

barbecue parties<sup>53</sup> while around two-thirds proceeded to work as usual.<sup>54</sup> Immediately thereafter, more strict guidelines were issued aimed at introducing a real lockdown. Secondly, the Russian authorities tried to introduce an unprecedented practice of fining those who did not comply with the new regulations with penalties as high as 4,000 rubles (\$55) per case.<sup>55</sup> National Guard servicemen and police officers were allocated to patrolling the streets of the Russian cities with more than 30 thousands penalties imposed amounting to 160 million rubles (\$2.3 million) by May 1.<sup>56</sup> (Later it appeared that so many of these penalties were issued mistakenly, often to people who were physically unable to go out of their houses, that even one of the most loyal pro-Kremlin bureaucrats currently serving as the Head of the Presidential Human Rights Council, Mr. Valery Fadeyev, proposed all these fines to be nullified<sup>57</sup>). Thirdly, on March 30 it was announced in Moscow that everyone walking or having a ride in the city should possess a valid authorization that could be acquired via a special mobile application in a form of a QR-code as the person had to indicate her or his address, passport number, personal tax identification code, the purpose for leaving the house and the time by which she or he intends to return home.<sup>58</sup> The system was widely criticized since it wasn't available for those not in possession of smartphones, was difficult to access, the web-

site it operated failed from time to time, and the overall practice didn't comply with the Russian laws governing the access to, and storage of, personal data since it was said many of the servers the information was sent to were located abroad, which is outlawed by the current legislation.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the introduction of such authorizations caused an actual collapse in the Moscow underground on April 15 as dozens of thousands of metro riders spent up to an hour in dense crowds at the stations' entrances instead of respecting social distancing as the policemen checked their smartphones<sup>60</sup> (later on, since April 23, the Moscow authorities imposed penalties for not respecting social distancing on public transport<sup>61</sup>). The fourth measure that was introduced on April 13, attempted to seal Moscow from the rest of the country—the checkpoints were established on all roads leading to the city on April 15, causing huge traffic jams and disruptions.<sup>62</sup> Because of this, the overall checkups were abandoned the next day with an announcement that the street CCTV cameras will monitor the cars while every driver must apply for permission to enter the city beforehand. On April 22 it was announced that the system introduced in Moscow would be replicated in more than twenty other Russian regions,<sup>63</sup> but this plan has not been implemented.

So I would say that the measures the Russians introduced, were in general similar (at least in their design) to those that were used either by the Chinese (the full quarantine in large cities most severely affected) or by

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53 See: "The Russians Rushed to Sochi and BBQ Parties Neglecting the Restrictions [Россияне рванули в Сочи и на шашлыки, несмотря на запреты]," 360° TV (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://360tv.ru/news/tekst/prestupnoe-otritsanie/>.

54 See: "64% of Russians Continue to Work During the Holiday Week [На нерабочей неделе продолжили работать 64% россиян]," RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/30/03/2020/5e81e2719a7947b7ad34919a>.

55 See: "Moscow City Duma Approves the Charge for Breaking the Self-Isolation Regime [В Мосгордуме утвердили штраф за несоблюдение режима самоизоляции]," Komsomolskaya Pravda (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/3819344/>.

56 See: "More than 30,000 Tickets were Issued in Moscow for Violating 'Self-Isolation' [В Москве выписали более 30 тысяч штрафов о нарушении самоизоляции]," Izvestia Daily (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://iz.ru/1006800/2020-05-01/v-moskve-vypisali-bolee-3-tys-shtrafov-o-narushenii-samoizoliatcii>.

57 See: "Head of the Presidential Human Rights Council Proposes to Eliminate All the Fines Levied by 'Social Monitoring' App [Глава СПЧ предложил отменить штрафы от приложения «Социальный мониторинг»]," RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/26/05/2020/5ecc66279a79476b2f41963>.

58 See: Sergey Sobyaniin, "Coronavirus: The Restrictions Concerning Free Move Around the City and Social Support Measures [Коронавирус. Ограничение передвижения по городу и социальная поддержка]," Sergey Sobyaniin's Website (in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.sobyaniin.ru/koronavirus-ogranichenie-peredvizheniya-i-sospodderzhka-grazhdan>.

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59 A good analysis of the issue might be found: "QR-code Legal Status and the Assessment of Illegality of Total Tracing [Правовой статус QR-кода и анализ незаконности тотальной слежки]," Rys' sidyaschaya (human rights group's website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://zekovnet.ru/pravovoy-status-qr-koda-i-analiz-nezakonnosti-totalnoy-slezhki/>.

60 See: "Moscow Paralyzed the First Day Electronic Passes are Introduced [Москву парализовало в первый день электронных пропусков]," Moskovskii Komsomolets (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2020/04/15/tolpy-i-koronavirus-moskvu-paralizovalo-v-pervyy-den-elektronnykh-propuskov.html>.

61 See: "In Moscow, Penalties Introduced for Violating Social Distancing in Public Transport [В Москве стали штрафовать за нарушение дистанции в транспорте]," RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/23/04/2020/5ea1e75f9a7947494c2c8dd0>.

62 See: "In Moscow, Traffic Jams Emerge After the Introduction of Passes [На въездах в Москву образовались пробки после начала действия пропусков]," RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/15/04/2020/5e9698069a79471685a195c>.

63 See: "Digital Passes Will Cover 21 Russian Region [Цифровые пропуска можно будет оформить в 21 регионе]," Rossiyskaya Gazeta (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/04/22/cifrovy-e-propuska-mozhno-budet-oformit-v-21-regione-rf.html>.



the Western governments (as the stay-at-home orders). But very unique in the Russian case were two important points.

On the one hand, all the introduced measures had very limited success. According to Moscow city government reports, what can be called “mobility index” (индекс самоизоляции) stood between 2.9 and 4.4 from April 15 to May 1 with its highest reading of 4.4 recorded on April 19.<sup>64</sup> At the highest point around 80% of the people living in the city stayed at home. This was quite a low number compared not only to Wuhan in February where only one person from a household was allowed to leave either the house or an apartment once in three days,<sup>65</sup> but also compared to Milan and Madrid where the numbers of people in the streets were as low as 3-5% of those being outside their homes before the quarantine.<sup>66</sup> The large grocery stores remained overcrowded while no strict government requirements to wear either gloves or masks were issued in any of the Russian cities until late April (in Moscow wearing masks and gloves became obligatory only on May 12 as the city was partially “reopened” and many enterprises resumed their ordinary work<sup>67</sup>), presumably because these were in short supply everywhere across the country (as of May 1, only 13 out of 85 Russian regions made it obligatory to wear masks in public places<sup>68</sup>). It should be added that during the time all the above measures were slowly imposed, the Orthodox Easter was celebrated on April 19 preceded by the Palm Sunday on April 12. The Russian Orthodox Church appeared to be the most important dissenter in the country with dozens of bishops declining to comply

64 See: “Self-Isolation Index in Moscow Stays at 4.2 Sunday Morning [Индекс самоизоляции в Москве утром в воскресенье составил 4,2],” Interfax News agency (website; in Russian), <https://www.interfax.ru/moscow/706102>; and “Self-Isolation Index in Moscow Falls to 2.9 [Индекс самоизоляции в Москве опустился до 2,9],” *Izvestia Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://iz.ru/1005009/2020-04-27/indeks-samoizoliatcii-v-moskve-opustilsia-do-29>.

65 See: Paulina Cachero, “Wuhan residents on coronavirus lockdown are facing food shortages,” *Business Insider* (website), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/wuhan-residents-coronavirus-lockdown-forced-order-food-apps-delivered-home-2020-3>.

66 See, e.g.: <https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-streets-of-milan-under-quarantine> and <https://thepointsguy.com/news/living-in-spain-during-mandatory-quarantine/> (websites accessed April 29, 2020).

67 See: “Moscow Imposes Mask Wearing Regime from May 12 [В Москве с 12 мая введён масочный режим],” *Mosday* (website; in Russian), accessed May 29, 2020, <http://mosday.ru/news/item.php?2360782>.

68 See: “More than Ten Russian Regions Mandate to Wear Face Masks in Public Places [Более десяти российских регионов обяжали носить маски в общественных местах],” *BFM Radio* (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://bfm.ru/news/442544>.

with the government regulation citing freedom of worship reasons.<sup>69</sup> Patriarch Kirill actually disappeared from the public as President Putin did, allowing the local bishops to act as they wanted (the general observance saying that the services should be held without the public appeared after Palm Sunday<sup>70</sup> when churches were full of worshippers). So, all over the country, except several cities including Saint-Petersburg, thousands of people attended the vigil services (in Moscow some “closed” churches welcomed the crowds of superrich who got special invitations<sup>71</sup>). As the result of these celebrations hundreds of clerics and monks became infected, causing the most famous Russian monasteries to shut down by the end of April.<sup>72</sup> The Dean of St. Euloch Patriarchal Cathedral in Moscow died of COVID-19 two days after Easter Sunday.<sup>73</sup> In Kyiv, Ukraine, the entire staff of the Kyiv-Pechery Monastery, founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and still being part of the Russian Orthodox Church, tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>74</sup> But I would say Russian authorities never tried to quarrel with the Orthodox Church on all these issues. So I would say nowhere in Russia a genuine lockdown was effectively implemented.

On the other hand, all the measures introduced were wicked and in their greater part unconstitutional. The most important among of them, an actual stay-at-home order, was called “self-isolation” that supposedly meant it was

69 See: “There Is no Such Thing as Coronavirus in Church Rules [Коронавируса в церковном уставе нет],” *Meduza.io* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/04/14/koronavirusa-v-tserkovnom-ustave-net>.

70 See: “From April 13–19 the Believers Will Be Unable to Take Part in Worships in Churches and Monasteries in Moscow and Moscow Region [С 13 по 19 апреля прихожане не смогут посещать службы в храмах и монастырях Москвы и области],” *Foma journal* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://foma.ru/s-13-po-19-aprelja-prihozhane-ne-smogut-poseshhat-sluzhby-v-hramah-i-monastyriah-moskvy-i-oblasti.html>.

71 See: “Mr. Okhlobystin and His Family Participated in a Closed Easter Service in Moscow [Охлобыстин с семьей поучаствовал в закрытой пасхальной службе в Москве],” *Gazeta.ru* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2020/04/20/n\\_14315491.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2020/04/20/n_14315491.shtml).

72 See: Alexander Soldatov, “The Clergy Is Striked Out’ [Александр Солдатов. ‘Выбило клир’],” *Novaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/25/85095-vybilo-klir>.

73 See: “Alexander Ageykin, the Dean of St. Euloch Cathedral, Dies in Moscow [В Москве умер настоятель Елоховского собора Александр Агейкин],” *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/21/04/2020/5e9ef3c49a79477dc35b4e66>.

74 See: “All the Priests in Kyiv-Pechery Monastery Got Infected with Coronavirus [Всі священники в Києво-Печерській лаврі заразилися коронавірусом],” *Novoye Vremya* (website; in Ukrainian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://nv.ua/ukr/kyiv/koronavirus-v-kiyevno-pecherskiy-lavri-zahvorili-vsi-svyashcheniki-novini-kiyeva-50084533.html>.

a voluntary action when in fact it wasn't as breaking the rule resulted in charges. The authorities never announced a formal state of emergency, as it was widely believed, for three reasons. First, the Russian legislation (even in a new version which was adopted on March 31<sup>75</sup>) requires that after the emergency situation (чрезвычайная ситуация) is declared a single authority managed by the government should become responsible for almost all the actions undertaken afterwards<sup>76</sup>—but as I mentioned earlier, the competition between the branches of power is too intensive to allow this. Second, the state of emergency (чрезвычайное положение) presupposes something close to the military rule when the powers of the local authorities became nullified and the temporary administrations take over; such a move was considered too dangerous by a large part of the top officials who feared that it would eventually equal to a coup d'état.<sup>77</sup> Third, and the most important point that applied to both conditions was that if any kind of emergency is declared, it must be considered as force majeure concerning all contracts and obligations; moreover, the governments, both federal and local, are obliged to provide citizens with all the equipment and funds needed for survival.<sup>78</sup> But the Russian authorities never expressed their willingness not only for disbursing some emergency funding to the needy but also for postponing loan repayments, tax collection or other day-to-day financial transactions.<sup>79</sup> The Kremlin believed that the implementation of the state of emergency would actually ruin what remained of the Russian economy and empty the government reserves. I would argue this was by far the most important reason for not declaring a nationwide emergency in Russia.

What came as a result of all the above was the major

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75 See: "The State Duma Adopts a Law Granting the Government a Right to Declare Emergency Situation [Госдума приняла закон о праве правительства вводить режим ЧС]," RIA Novosti News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200331/1569388011.html>.

76 See: "Why Don't the Authorities Declare Emergency Situation? [Почему власти не вводят режим ЧС]," Vzglyad (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://vz.ru/society/2020/4/15/1034287.html>

77 See: Yulia Latynina, "Do You Want an Endless Emergency? [Юлия Латынина, А ЧС насовсем не хотите?]," Novaya Gazeta (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/03/84688-a-chs-nasovsem-ne-hotite>.

78 See for greater detail: Vladislav Inozemtsev, "The Harsh Summer of 2020" Riddle (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/the-harsh-summer-of-2020/>.

79 See: "The Government Didn't Find a Chance for Cancelling Taxes on Businesses [Правительство не нашло денег на отмену налогов для бизнеса]," Finanz.ru (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.finanz.ru/novosti/aktsii/pravitelstvo-ne-nashlo-deneg-na-otmenu-nalogo-v-dlya-biznesa-1029066911>.

outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic on Russian politics. Before 2020 President Putin and his clique undertook dozens of measures aimed on curtailing people's constitutional rights and freedoms. But, even while the governing institutions (like the State Duma, Federation Council, the judiciary system, etc.) were in great part fictitious, there were formal laws and rulings adopted by the parliament or announced by the courts that constituted the entire body of the Russian law. Since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Russia, all this has changed: now the local authorities, police generals, those responsible for different ministries and agencies, started to issue their own orders, often inconsistent with each other, pretending to become as valid as the laws themselves. During the early months of 2020, Russia transformed from the country that was ruled by laws (but not by Law) to one that is ruled by decrees and orders.<sup>80</sup> I would add that this transformation actually started on January 15 as President Putin began to push the amendments to the Constitution neglecting all the existing procedural requirements, including those that were clearly spelled out in the Constitution itself and weren't a subject to change (I and many of my colleagues drafted and signed a petition to the Council of Europe on these issues, which has so far been supported by 170,000 Russians<sup>81</sup>). COVID-19 has perfectly fit into the process of dismantling the Russian judicial system and contributed greatly to the advance of lawlessness in the country even though the final result of this process is still unclear. But as the entire story of Putin's stay in power suggests, the current Russian leadership rarely gives back any of the powers amassed during the previous stages of its rule, so it took another step towards transforming Russia into a dictatorship.

In May as the "opening" of the country appeared to be quite close, President Putin initiated a dramatic electoral reform. Since his approval rating went down during all these months (VTsIOM, the All-Russia Center for Monitoring Public Opinion reported it hit 27% in April<sup>82</sup>—and

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80 See my post on growing lawlessness in Russia on the Kremlyovskiy Bezbashennik Telegram Channel, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://t.me/kremlbezBashennik/13231> [in Russian].

81 See: "Human Rights Activists Address the Council of Europe on the Constitution Vote [Правозащитники обратились к Совету Европы из-за голосования по Конституции]," Change.org (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.change.org/p/совет-европы-провдите-срочную-правовую-экспертизу-изменений-в-конституцию-россии>.

82 See: "Trust in Political Leaders [Доверие политикам]," Wciom.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/doverie\\_politikam/](https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/doverie_politikam/).

as Bloomberg republished this news,<sup>83</sup> the Kremlin and the Russian Embassy in Washington called for its journalists to apologize<sup>84</sup>) the State Duma enacted three new laws in just two weeks. First, it banned all those convicted for minor misbehavior (like participation in unsanctioned rallies) from running for any elected office, thus effectively excluding the majority of opposition politicians from legal political activity.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, the deputies allowed the Electoral Commission to organize voting either by mail or using the highly compromised web engine called *Gosuslugi* that gives people some online access to government services—this measure, most of the independent analysts mentioned, deprives Russian elections of any meaning at all.<sup>86</sup> Thirdly, the State Duma approved the creation of a nationwide database where all the personal information about citizens should be collected and stored.<sup>87</sup> So in quite a short time of “self-isolation” the civil rights of the Russian people were effectively “nullified” even before the vote on the constitutional amendments would nullify President Putin’s terms in the Kremlin turning Russia from a simply nondemocratic to a truly dictatorial state.<sup>88†</sup>

## BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSE AND ITS SHORTCOMINGS

Of course, the measures taken by the Russian authorities were unable to prevent the pandemic from expanding—and the tricky thing was that it accelerated just as the quarantine became stronger. During the week before the “holidays” were announced, i.e. between March 22–28, the average daily number of new cases stood at 137 nationwide, while during the holiday week (March 29–April 4) it rose up to 486, and later reached 5,399 between April 19 and 25.<sup>89</sup> The pandemic put enormous pressure on Russia’s healthcare system which was not in the best shape when the virus arrived. In just four years, 42% of hospital staff were either fired or downgraded to “technical specialists” for reporting a rise in medical doctors’ salaries, as was required by Putin’s “May Decrees,” so now only around 40% of Russians say they trust their doctors.<sup>90</sup> Many observers added that the system designed to treat infectious diseases was particularly hard hit during the current “optimization.”<sup>91</sup> The strategy the Russian government tried to implement was based on developing a high-tech health service concentrating them in large cities; as a result vast portions of the country were in fact stripped of any reliable medical centers. The most striking feature during the pandemic’s first weeks was a need to send the probes being analyzed to a single research facility located in Novosibirsk, so the results might take several days (the facilities in other cities started to work after March 23).<sup>92</sup> Also it appeared almost immediately that Russia is critically dependent on imports—not only for advanced medical devices and the newest drugs, but also for any types of masks, gloves and pro-

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83 See: Henry Meyer, “Putin Approval Rating Hits Record Low As Virus Crisis Deepens,” Bloomberg (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-06/putin-approval-rating-hits-record-low-as-virus-crisis-deepens>.

84 See: “The Russian Embassy to the US Asks Bloomberg to Apologize for VTsIOM’s Data on Putin Approval Rating [Посольство России в США потребовало от Bloomberg извинений за данные ВЦИОМ и рейтинге Путина],” Thebell.io (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://thebell.io/posolstvo-rossii-v-ssha-potrebovalo-ot-bloomberg-izvinenij-za-dannye-vtsiom-o-rejtinge-putina>.

85 See: “Bill № 894460-7 [Законопроект № 894460-7 «О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации»,” Duma.gov.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 29, 2020, <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/894460-7>.

86 See: “Bill № 912249-7 [Законопроект № 912249-7 «О внесении изменений в статьи 37 и 38 Федерального закона «Об основных гарантиях избирательных прав и права на участие в референдуме граждан Российской Федерации»,” Duma.gov.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 29, 2020, <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/912249-7>.

87 See: “Bill № 759897-7 [Законопроект № 759897-7 «О едином федеральном информационном регистре, содержащем сведения о населении Российской Федерации»,” Duma.gov.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 29, 2020, <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/759897-7>.

88 See for more detail: Vladislav Inozemtsev, “2020: Russia’s historical watershed” Ridl.io (website), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/2020-russia-s-historical-watershed/>.

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89 See: “Timeline of Covid-19 Spread in Russia [Хронология распространения Covid-19 в России],” Wikipedia (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология\\_распространения\\_COVID-19\\_в\\_России](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хронология_распространения_COVID-19_в_России).

90 See: “The Accounting Chamber: Since 2017, 42% of all Medical Staff Were Fired in Russia [Счётная палата: С 2017 года в России уволили 42% медперсонала],” Finanz.ru (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.finanz.ru/novosti/aktsii/schetnaya-palata-s-2017-goda-v-rossii-uvolili-42percent-medpersonala-1029131401>.

91 See: Anton Kass, “What Went Wrong: The Coronavirus Uncovers the Consequences of Healthcare ‘Optimization’ [Антон Касс, Вышло боком: коронавирус обнажил последствия оптимизации медицины],” News.ru (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://news.ru/investigations/vyshlo-bokom-koronavirus-obnazhil-posledstviya-optimizacii-mediciny/>.

92 See: “The Coronavirus Tests Will Not be Sent Anymore to the Vector Lab in Novosibirsk [Анализы на коронавирус перестанут отправлять в новосибирский центр «Вектор»,” Sib.fm (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://sib.fm/news/2020/03/23/analizy-na-koronavirus-perestanut-otpravlyat-v-novosibirskij-tsentr-vektor>.

tective garments. All these are still in short supply and in many cases even the doctors cannot afford them. Acute shortages of vital drugs were recorded in many Russian hospitals that treated COVID-19 patients.

If one looks at the crucial problems the Russian healthcare system experienced during the pandemic, I would call the most acute one being poor organization of initial treatment of patients. In general, as someone fell ill with symptoms resembling COVID-19 she or he is taken to the closest hospital where some tests were carried out. The tests, most of them being manufactured in China and sent to Russia as a part of humanitarian assistance campaign, were of pure quality, and to get accurate results the patients have to be tested two or even three times.<sup>93</sup> During all this time many of them were kept among other patients, spreading the virus. Only by April 4 in Moscow, and even later in provincial cities, were those suspected as COVID-infected taken to specially designated hospitals<sup>94</sup> (some of them were built anew in a couple of weeks for an enormous price: the latest facility at Golovastovo settlement south of Moscow capable of welcoming 900 patients was built in just one month at a cost of 22 billion rubles [\$300 million]<sup>95</sup> and an exhibition center owned by Mr. Agalarov, a businessman accused of meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections, was leased for use as a temporary shelter without any formal auction procedures for one billion rubles<sup>96</sup> while many others were just refurbished from the general hospitals and their patients were relocated to other facilities causing a lot of problems, possibly even deaths, for those waiting for regular cardiovascular, cancer, or other kinds of treat-

ment<sup>97</sup>). As the hospitals became overloaded, the authorities first tried to mobilize military doctors and later also students from medical universities to fill hospital positions in treating COVID-19 patients.<sup>98</sup> Medical professionals' payments were also increased by 80,000 rubles per month for doctors and up to 50,000 rubles per month for nurses,<sup>99</sup> but these measures not only appeared to be insufficient to ease the deficit of medical professionals but produced a nationwide scandal as it appeared that a large part of the money was never disbursed from the government's reserve fund<sup>100</sup> and the doctors were paid for hours and minutes they presumably dealt with the COVID-19 patients that resulted in payments of several hundreds of rubles up to 2 thousand rubles<sup>101</sup> instead of the sums indicated by the President. Mr. Putin had to address his cabinet twice to force the bureaucrats to release the money,<sup>102</sup> but there have been a lot of rumors that a large part of it never reached doctors' wallets.

Another difficult issue arose from how the treatment and nursing was organized. In the earlier stages of the pandemic many doctors were unaware about the real dangers of the disease. Since the testing wasn't organized in a due manner, several doctors were infected with COVID-19 and later transmitted it to their patients: this was the case in which a doctor returning from Italy started to work as usual in Komi Republican hospital in

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93 See: Anastasia Napalkova, and Svetlana Reiter, "Suffocating Labs and Suspicious Pneumonias [Анастасия Напалкова, и Светлана Рейтер, Задыхающиеся лаборатории и подозрительные пневмонии]," BBC Russian Service (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-52270216>.

94 See: "Moscow Coronavirus Hospitals [Больницы в Москве для больных коронавирусом]," Komsomolskaya Pravda in Moscow (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/27115/4193751/>.

95 See: Elena Petrova, "How Much Has Moscow Paid for a New Infectious Disease Hospital [Елена Петрова, Во сколько Москве обошлась новая инфекционная больница]," Vedomosti (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/04/23/828863-infektsionnaya-bolnitsa>.

96 See: "One Billion for 'Crocus': Businessman Agalarov Gets a State Contract for COVID-19 Hospital Without Any Competition [Миллиард для «Крокуса»: Бизнесмен Агаларов без тендера получил госконтракт на госпиталь для инфицированных COVID-19]," Munscanner.com (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://munscanner.com/2020/05/covidexpo/>.

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97 In Yekaterinburg an attempt to turn a birthing home into a Covid-19 facility resulted in massive public outcry, see: "Do Not Treat Covid-19 at the Expense of the Newborn [Children] and Pregnant [Women]!" [Covid-19 не за счет детей и беременных!]" Komsomolskaya Pravda at the Urals (website; in Russian), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.ural.kp.ru/daily/27122/4206531/>.

98 See: "Ministry of Health Prepares for Mobilization [Минздрав готовит мобилизацию]," Newsru.com (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [https://www.newsru.com/russia/09apr2020/medics\\_call\\_to\\_arms.html](https://www.newsru.com/russia/09apr2020/medics_call_to_arms.html).

99 See: Putin, "Meeting with Regional Heads"

100 See: "Russian Government Executive Order № 976-p, April 12, 2020 [Распоряжение Правительства Российской Федерации № 976-p от 12 апреля 2020 г.]," Government.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <http://static.government.ru/media/files/7WaRhXw60H WZH7hYhzS7U9sMzoFAXUG.pdf>.

101 See: Irina Tumakova, "There's Nothing More to Add [Ирина Тумакова, Добавить больше нечего]," Novaya Gazeta (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/13/85354-dobavit-bolshe-nechego>.

102 See: Vladimir Putin, "Meeting on Implementing Economic and Social Support Measures, May 19, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed June 1, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63369>.



Syktvykar where 19 people became infected,<sup>103</sup> or the cases of the Mariinsky hospital in Saint Petersburg (where 50 people fell ill) or the three clinics in Murmansk (where there were 29 infections), became the most notable ones. Even doctors who were not on “active duty” contributed to the pandemic such as Irina Sannikova, a healthcare manager from Stavropol who lectured at the local Medical Institute just after returning from Spain,<sup>104</sup> or the military doctors from the Nakhimov Academy in St Petersburg who advised their cadets not to wear masks as they underwent training sessions preparing for the VE-Day parade<sup>105</sup> (as the result, 17 and 31 people respectively became infected).

Much more critical were numerous cases when the hospital management insisted the doctors should work without adequate protection, greatly increasing the chances of being infected themselves. Because the appropriate clothes and masks were and continue to be in short supply in many Russian hospitals, doctors and nurses became the most COVID-19 affected professional group in Russia. According to a list created and managed by enthusiasts, more than 320 doctors and nurses died because of COVID-19 as of June 1<sup>106</sup>—making the count an astonishing 7.5% of all officially recorded casualties<sup>107</sup> while in Europe the number never exceeded 0.5%, and has stayed lower than 0.3% in the United States<sup>108</sup> (In some

large Russian cities the hospital personnel accounted for up 80% of all those who became infected,<sup>109</sup> and new cases are appearing almost daily). As some paramedics started to record their complaints and disseminate them via the Internet, calling for signing appeals and petitions, several of them faced criminal prosecution.<sup>110</sup> Some doctors and medical managers were so embarrassed that a couple of cases of suicide have been reported across the country.<sup>111</sup> As it often happens in Russia, the Chechen Republic appeared to be the most special case as several times the doctors who were forced to work without necessary precautions and were short of medical supplies first complained about the situation and then later had to publicly beg the Chechen strongman Mr. Kadyrov for pardon, as if their complaints were false from the very beginning.<sup>112</sup>

Quite fast, I would say, the bureaucracy took over the handling of the pandemic from the medical professionals. The newly appointed head of the Coronavirus Monitoring Center, Alexander Myasnikov, has been known mostly as someone who spent several years in Angola serving as a nurse in the Russian military at the same time as Igor Sechin,<sup>113</sup> the powerful CEO of Rosneft, was an interpreter there (this person later became famous for saying that during the pandemic those people who die due to coronavirus, will die anyway no matter what—that is already known in Russia as “Myasnikov syndrome”<sup>114</sup>). The local governors started to ask for more money for constructing new hospitals even as it appeared in many

103 See: Tatyana Britskaya, “In Six Departments of a Syktvykar Hospital Patients and Doctors Got Infected with Covid-19 [Татьяна Брицкая, ‘В шести отделениях сыктывкарской больницы выявили пациентов и медиков, зараженных Covid-19’],” *Novaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/04/06/160459-v-shesti-otdeleniyah-syktvykarskoy-bolnitsy-vyyavili-patsientov-i-medikov-zarazhennyh-covid-19>.

104 See: “Investigative Committee Opens a Criminal Case against the Chief Infectious Disease Specialist in Stavropol who Got Coronavirus [СК возбудил уголовное дело на главного инфекциониста Ставрополя, заразившуюся коронавирусом],” *New Kuban’* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://newkuban.ru/news/24037112/>.

105 See: Alexandra Djordjevich, “The Infected Cadets Awaited more than a Day to Be Admitted to a Sanatorium [Александра Джорджевич, Заболевшие коронавирусом нахимовцы ждали размещения в санатории почти сутки],” *Novaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/04/17/160800-zabolevshih-koronavirusom-vospitannikov-nahimovskogo-uchilisha-neskolko-chasov-vozili-po-moskve-i-podmoskovyu>.

106 See: “The Memory List Project for Deceased Healthcare Workers [Проект «Список памяти»],” (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/view/covid-memory/home>.

107 See: “Russia [Россия],” *Official Covid-19 Russia* (website; in Russian), accessed June 1, 2020, <https://стопкоронавирус.рф/information/>.

108 See: Erika Edwards, “COVID-19 Cases Among Health Care Workers Top 62,000, CDC Reports,” *NBC* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/covid-19-cases-among-health-care-workers-top-62-000-n1215056>.

109 See: Sergei Dyachkov’s post on the situation in Novosibirsk as of April 26, Facebook (in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=3721861374550998&id=100001815160365](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3721861374550998&id=100001815160365).

110 See: “‘The Doctors’ Alliance’ Under Attack [«Альянс врачей» попытались разбить],” *Kommersant Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4311229>.

111 See: “The Analysts Told How Coronavirus Forces Doctors to Commit Suicides [Эксперты рассказали, как коронавирус толкает медиков на самоубийство],” *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2020/04/27/eksperty-rasskazali-kak-koronavirus-tolkaet-medikov-na-samoubiystvo.html>.

112 See: “The Health Care Workers from a Gudermes’ Hospital Apologize after a Protest Action [Медики больницы Гудермеса извинились после акции протеста],” *Svoboda Radio* (website; in Russian), accessed May 27, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30616850.html>.

113 See: “Doctor Alexander Myasnikov Appears to Be Mr. Sechin’s Friend [Доктор Александр Мясников оказался другом Сечина],” *Newsland* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://newsland.com/user/4297700092/content/doktor-aleksandr-miasnikov-okazalsia-drugom-sechina/7099967>.

114 See: Mike Meerer and Alexander Fuchs, “Myasnikov’s Syndrome [Майк Мирер и Александр Фукс, Синдром Мясникова],” *Novaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/26/85540-sindrom-myasnikova>.

cases that they will not become operational until the end of the year, while the well-equipped buildings of sanatoriums located outside the large cities, remain unused. The entire system of certification of drugs, which was already in poor shape in Russia, allowed the sale of nonprescription medicines banned in many countries but produced locally by companies closely associated with Russian government officials,<sup>115</sup> entirely collapsed during the pandemic as the Prime Minister issued an order formally authorizing the use of hydroxychloroquine, a Chinese-manufactured substance sent to Russia as a part of humanitarian assistance, without even a formal trial.<sup>116</sup>

## CASE AND DEATH COUNT AND ITS IRREGULARITIES

But of course the issue that attracted huge attention, both domestic and international, was the COVID-19 death count which was dramatically underestimated by the Russian authorities. I would say once again that there is not so much doubt about the overall numbers of people exposed to the virus (in April and May Russia recorded the second-largest number of new daily cases in the world for more than 30 times<sup>117</sup>), but the death toll was artificially lowered for softening the effect the pandemic might have on the public. For more than two months Russia recorded one of the world's lowest rates for casualties, so by mid-May the number of dead was 3.5 times less than in Germany, which is considered to be the most effective case of fighting the pandemic in Europe. Many independent analysts in Russia actively questioned these data even before, but the wave of accusations against the authorities erupted after May 10 when the Moscow statistical service revealed the overall city death toll for April that suggested that the average number of deceased was around 2,000, or roughly 20% higher than

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115 See: "Ms. Tatyana Golikova – the 'Queen of the Budget' and 'Mdm. Arbidol' [Татьяна Голикова – 'Королева бюджета' и 'Мадам Арбидол']," *Rucompromat* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [http://rucompromat.com/articles/tatyana\\_golikova\\_\\_koroleva\\_byudzheteta\\_i\\_madam\\_arbidol](http://rucompromat.com/articles/tatyana_golikova__koroleva_byudzheteta_i_madam_arbidol).

116 See: "Mishustin Clears the Use of a Dubious Chinese Substance against Covid-19 [Мишустин разрешил применять против COVID-19 сомнительный препарат из Китая]," *Novye Izvestia* (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://newizv.ru/news/science/17-04-2020/mishustin-razreshil-primenyat-protiv-sovid-19-somnitelnyy-preparat-iz-kitaya>.

117 See: "Daily coronavirus statistics"

in previous years.<sup>118</sup> The Russian experts suggested that at least 500 deaths in addition to 658 COVID-19-related cases recorded as of May 1 were attributed to different kinds of lung infections, which were, in most part, the same COVID-19 cases.<sup>119</sup> The Financial Times posted an article the next day on the topic<sup>120</sup> and immediately thereafter new shocking numbers were revealed—in St. Petersburg there were 10 times more deaths from "pneumonia" compared to coronavirus,<sup>121</sup> and in Dagestan, 24 times more as the Caucasian republic descended into chaos and the officials were aware of how huge the problem had become.<sup>122</sup> President Putin was forced to arrange an urgent online meeting with the local leadership<sup>123</sup> as the infection rate shot up to around 35% in all tested persons in Makhachkala.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, the number of COVID-19 related deaths in Russia continues to climb even as the number of newly registered cases decreases, partly because many people are trying to escape hospital stay and are going to the hospital only if the disease progresses too far.<sup>125</sup>

The reasons for statistical falsifications were numerous and complex. First, on the hospital level many leading doctors tried to keep the numbers lower for motivating the doctors and nurses to underestimate COVID-19-related dangers and risks; moreover, as I said ear-

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118 See: "Mortality in Moscow at a 10 Year High [В Москве смертность в апреле побила десятилетний рекорд]," *Kommersant Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4341662>.

119 See: Pjotr Sauer, "Moscow Sees 20% Surge in Mortality in April: Official Data," *Moscow Times* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/10/moscow-sees-20-surge-in-mortality-in-april-official-data-a70235>.

120 See: John Burn-Murdoch and Henry Foy, "Russia's COVID Death Toll Could Be 70 Per Cent Higher Than Official Figure," *Financial Times* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/77cd2cba-b0e2-4022-a265-e0a9a7930bda>.

121 See: "Out-of-care house Pneumonia Claims 694 Deaths in St Petersburg [От внебольничной пневмонии в Петербурге умерли 694 человека]," *Neva Today* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://neva.today/news/ot-vnebolnichnoj-pnevmonii-v-peterburge-umerli-694-cheloveka-195839/>.

122 See: "The Minister Was Aware that a Collapse Approached [Министр понимал, что назревает катастрофа]," *Meduza.io* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/05/20/ministr-ponimal-cto-nazrevaet-katastrofa>.

123 See: Vladimir Putin, "Meeting with Leaders and Public Representatives of Dagestan, May 18, 2020," *Events. President of Russia* (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63362>.

124 See: "The Scope of COVID-19 Testing in Dagestan Is Just Half of the Normal [Охват тестированием на коронавирус в Дагестане вдвое меньше нормы]," *Tass.ru* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8499731>.

125 See: "The St Petersburg Hospitals are Testing Their Limits [Больницы Петербурга на пределе]," *Ekho Moskvy* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://echo.msk.ru/blog/statya/2649911-echo/>.

lier, the tests were, and still are, very unreliable, so the doctors were actually unable to file a COVID-19 death without an infection being confirmed. In many cases the tests were made posthumously and took up to a week to be confirmed, so they were not counted afterwards anyway. But, of course, a major part of falsifications came from regional officials who, being aware of Mr. Putin's anger, didn't want to depict the real scope of the problem. The case of Dagestan is a perfect example of this, and I would say no one knows how high the actual death toll might be (I would put it at least five times higher than the official one—the difference might be bigger in remote regions, but as the most cases are recorded in Moscow where the statistics are less “modified,” the overall number of 20,000 deaths as of June 1 might be a reasonable one). I should also mention that several observers argued that the final statistical tables that are drafted at the National anti-pandemic headquarters, were also falsified since probability theory cannot explain why the daily count of the cases ended on numbers like 98 or 99 so many times in a row.<sup>126</sup> And, last but not least, it might not be a coincidence that the number of new cases started to fall on May 12 and the next day President Putin announced the “reopening” of the Russian economy.<sup>127</sup> So I would say that even now there is not a single reason one should take the Russian coronavirus statistics seriously.

Two other points should be mentioned here as well. First, I would say that Russia is now facing if not a new wave of pandemic then a very special “professional” element in its development. Not only the hospitals became hot spots for the virus, but also military installments, large corporations, and even government bodies. More than 340 servicemen are already infected within the National Guard's anti-riot regiment headquartered in Moscow<sup>128</sup>; close to 150 people became ill at Roscosmos facilities<sup>129</sup>; around 3,000 workers at a strategic Gazprom Chayanda gas project are either infected or blocked at the

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126 See: Boris Ovchinnikov, “The Falsification of COVID-19 Statistics on the Federal Level Is Put Atop of that Orchestrated on the Regional One [Борис Овчинников, На фальсификации коронавирусной статистики в регионах накладывается фальсификация на федеральном уровне],” Newsru.com (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://www.newsru.com/blog/26may2020/covid\\_stat.html](https://www.newsru.com/blog/26may2020/covid_stat.html).

127 See: “Daily coronavirus statistics.”

128 See: “Rosgvardia Confirms 339 Servicemen Are Infected with Coronavirus [В Росгвардии подтвердили заражение коронавирусом 339 сотрудников],” Rossiyskaya Gazeta (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/04/30/v-rosgvardii-podtverdili-zarazhenie-koronavirusom-339-sotrudnikov.html>.

129 See: “The Number of Coronavirus Cases at Roscosmos Facilities Up to 148 [Число случаев коронавируса на предприятиях «Роскосмоса» достигло 148],” RIA Novosti News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200429/1570770629.html>.

construction site for a new gas field, and on the brink of uprising.<sup>130</sup> The top government officials surrounded by dozens of guards, drivers, and assistants, became one of the most exposed groups—and the prime minister, who was taken to the hospital on April 30, proves this perfectly.<sup>131</sup> The second crucial moment that looks totally specific for Russia is the scope of corruption that takes shape as the efforts to fight the pandemic intensify. The cases when a regional administration buys the face masks from a company owned by local minister's husband at a price thirty times higher than the market price,<sup>132</sup> are recorded almost everywhere, as well as the supply of overpriced ventilators from companies managed by President Putin's close friends.<sup>133</sup> Russian corruption seems to reach new heights as the pandemic spreads and I would be very skeptical in assessing chances to fight it.

## MAJOR ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

The next big issue which must be addressed is the economic impact of the pandemic. I would argue that in all the autocracies—even in those where the governments recognized the scope of disaster—their approach to its economic consequences was very similar and combined elements of negligence and denial. In Russia, from the first time the government ordered fitness centers and restaurants to be closed and people to stay in their homes, the official approach consists in a formula: we should save lives first, and address any economic issues later. President Putin addressed the issue several times both in his messages to the nation and in numerous remarks at

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130 See: “One Third of Employees on Chayanda Gas Field Got Infected with Coronavirus [Треть работников Чаяндинского месторождения заразились коронавирусом],” RIA Novosti News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200502/1570892575.html>.

131 See: “Mishustin, Diagnosed with Coronavirus Goes to a Clinic for Treatment [Заболевший коронавирусом Мишустин отправится на лечение в клинику],” RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/30/04/2020/5eab164a9a7947015055ba9e>.

132 See: “A Local Saratov Official Fired After a Scandalous Purchase of ‘Golden Masks’ [Саратовская чиновница лишилась поста после скандала с закупкой «золотых масок»],” Life.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://life.ru/p/1321390>.

133 See: “Chemezov's Enterprise and Its Intermediary Firms: How Low-Quality Ventilators Are Sold at Highest Prices [Завод Чемезова и его фирмы-прокладки: как взвинтили цены на не самые качественные аппараты ИВЛ],” Pasm.ru (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://pasm.ru/archive/267489/>.

different government meetings,<sup>134</sup> but in general the authorities' approach focused only on some tax and fiscal relief, but not on direct financial support in any form. The government authorized some tax "holidays" as small businesses were allowed to postpone tax and lease payments for up to six months (but was not freed of them), proposed unemployment benefits to be increased up to 12,100 rubles (\$175) a month,<sup>135</sup> allowed small and medium enterprises to pay only half of the social security contributions for their workers (15% of the net wages instead of 30%), proclaimed that it will cover salaries of the workers that the entrepreneurs didn't fire, paying them monthly unemployment benefits even if they remain formally employed during the stay-at-home regime,<sup>136</sup> and even promised that borrowers with bank loans could restructure their obligations.<sup>137</sup> But almost all of these measures proved largely fictitious when it came to the details. The leasing was made free for some time even the owner (of a shop or other business) had a contract with local authorities and not with commercial developers<sup>138</sup> (so the measure applied to only 5–20% of small businesses); to get an unemployment benefit one was obliged to collect numerous papers that was next to impossible during the time of quarantine, so by mid-May only 40 thousand people in Moscow succeeded in getting their unemployment status;<sup>139</sup> the ease of social security contributions appeared to be applied not to the all the wages the employer pays to his workers but only to the amount that exceeds minimum wage,<sup>140</sup> so the relief was in fact two to three times less than it was believed it would be and again it takes dozens of hours to fill out paperwork to be

134 See, e.g.: Putin, "Address to the Nation, March 25, 2020"; and Putin, "Meeting with Regional Heads."

135 See: Putin, "Address to the Nation, March 25, 2020"

136 Putin, Vladimir. "Meeting with Government Members, April 15, 2020," Events. President of Russia (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63204>.

137 See: "Putin Signs a Law About Loan Holidays for both Citizens and Businesses [Путин подписал закон о кредитных каникулах для граждан и бизнеса]," *Izvestia Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://iz.ru/995541/2020-04-03/putin-podpisal-zakon-o-kreditnykh-kanikulakh-dlia-grazhdan-i-biznesa>.

138 See: "After Pause [После паузы]," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/04/15/reg-cfo/sobianin-podpisal-novyi-paket-mer-podderzhki-moskovskogo-biznesa.html>.

139 See: "More than 40 Thousand Muscovites Get Unemployment Benefits [Пособие по безработице получают более 40 тысяч москвичей]," *M24.ru* (website; in Russian), accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.m24.ru/news/gorod/21052020/118613>.

140 See: "The State Duma Halves the Social Security Contributions for Small Businesses [Дума одобрила двукратное снижение социальных платежей для малого бизнеса]," *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/31/03/2020/5e831f469a794741cb8cf8a5>.

formalized; the partial repayment of wages for the quarantined workers is to start from May 18 (!)<sup>141</sup>—almost two months after the stay-at-home orders were announced, and the relief from the loan repayment, as it was later clarified, was limited to mortgages smaller than 1.5 million rubles (\$20,000) (in Russia the average amount of a mortgage was estimated at 2.7 million rubles at that time) and to the consumer loans of less than 150,000 rubles (\$2,000) and only if the borrower can confirm her or his income has decreased not less than 30% due to the pandemic.<sup>142</sup> In total this applies to less than 10% of all outstanding mortgages and consumer loans.

Russia's economic response to the crisis, even if it resembles other authoritarian states' reaction, nevertheless seems unique in different aspects. Russia was well prepared for economic emergency: its government reserves amounted to \$165.4 billion by April 1 that equaled two-thirds of all federal budget outlays expected for 2020<sup>143</sup>; its gross debt stood at an exceptionally low level of 14% of GDP compared to 86% in the Eurozone and 107% in the United States.<sup>144</sup> But nevertheless by the end of April the overall direct additional funding was estimated just between 0.3 and 1.4% of GDP<sup>145</sup> while in many Western nations and in Japan it already exceeded 10% of GDP at that time. Moreover, the Russian economy remained relatively untouched by the crisis until the end of March since the effect of the pandemic was delayed—the federal budget run a surplus in Q1 with all the projected receipts

141 See: Putin, "Meeting with Government members."

142 See: "Loan Holidays: Who Will Get Payments Postponed Due to the Pandemic" [Кредитные каникулы: кому предоставят отсрочку по ипотеке из-за пандемии]," *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://realty.rbc.ru/news/5e8c50e99a79476fe538e03e>.

143 "Russia's Finance Ministry official database," (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, [https://www.minfin.ru/ru/performance/nationalwealthfund/statistics/?id\\_65=27068-obem\\_fonda\\_natsionalnogo\\_blagosostoyaniya](https://www.minfin.ru/ru/performance/nationalwealthfund/statistics/?id_65=27068-obem_fonda_natsionalnogo_blagosostoyaniya).

144 Data according to Eurostat (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10159223/2-21012020-AP-EN.pdf>; and Bloomberg (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-debt-and-deficit-projections-hit-records/>.

145 See: "Alfa-Bank Economists Estimated the Amount of Direct Economy Support Measures at 0.3% of GDP [Экономисты Альфа-Банка оценили прямую поддержку экономики в 0,3% ВВП]," *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/21/04/2020/5e9eb37e9a794757971d5591>; and Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya and Artyom Schtennikov, "The Scope of Economic Support Measures Is Terribly Small [Катя Бонч-Осмоловская и Артём Щенников, Объем поддержки экономики престуно мал]," *Novaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/14/84895-ob-em-podderzhki-ekonomiki-prestupno-mal>.



collected.<sup>146</sup> The Central Bank remained the only one in the world that hadn't cut its key rate until April 24 when it lowered it only marginally, bringing the figure down from 6 to 5.5%.<sup>147</sup> So there were a lot of measures Russia was able to introduce as a response to the pandemic, but actually the Kremlin decided to do almost nothing even as many independent economists repeatedly warned the government that Russia might face an 8.6% decline of its GDP in 2020<sup>148</sup> and all the polls suggested that close to 70% of the population simply possessed no savings to rely on during the lockdown.<sup>149</sup> Until early May the Russian government actually pretended that financing of a huge budget deficit (it's now expected to rise to 5.6 trillion rubles,<sup>150</sup> or over 5% of GDP by the end of the year) from the National Welfare Fund should be seen as an anti-crisis response—and in this case the “support for the economy” is close to 7% of GDP,<sup>151</sup> which seems to be quite appropriate. At the same time high-ranked officials tried to explain to the people why Russia cannot introduce the measures that were used by either the US or the European countries, and why the risks of inflation should attract more attention than people's real disposable incomes.<sup>152</sup> So by the time of writing, no measures that implied either the disbursement of money from the National Welfare Fund or a massive lending from the Central Bank

were introduced or announced (many expected some initiatives to be delivered by President Putin in his April 28 speech, but this was not the case).

The latest developments included a move by President Putin who, addressing the nation on May 11 proposed additional financial assistance for families with children—disbursing 10,000 rubles per every child aged between 3 and 16, and 5,000 rubles a month for three months to those aged under 3<sup>153</sup> (this assistance was estimated to cost the budget 249 billion rubles<sup>154</sup>). As of the end of May, the national plan for economic reconstruction that Mr. Putin ordered to be drafted by May 25<sup>155</sup> was not released, but the Minister for Economic Development, addressing the State Duma on May 27, declared that all the economic relief programs amounted to 3.3 trillion rubles (or around 3% of GDP), and the economic activity contracted in May by 21% compared to a 33% decrease in April.<sup>156</sup> The “reopening” of the Russian economy now seems inevitable for both purely economic and political reasons but President Putin already mentioned that the second wave of infection may arrive by the year's end,<sup>157</sup> leaving an open window for another round of restrictive measures to be implemented.

The most reasonable explanation of why the Kremlin adopted such an approach may be based on two points. On the one hand, the official Russian economic doctrine that was developed in the early 2000s presupposed that any significant amount of government debt is a major threat to economic stability, with the next most important one being high inflation rates. President Putin continuously praised his successes in repaying foreign debt and combating inflation—so therefore the officials don't want to opt for new borrowing, except from the Central Bank.

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146 See: “Russia Finishes Q1 with Tiny Budget Surplus [Россия завершила I квартал с минимальным профицитом бюджета],” Rosbalt (website; in Russian), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/business/2020/04/10/1837704.html>.

147 See: Elliott Smith, “Russia cuts key interest rate and slashes forecasts as coronavirus and oil price plunge take hold,” CNBC (website), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/24/russia-cuts-key-interest-rate-as-coronavirus-and-oil-price-plunge-take-hold.html>.

148 See a consensual forecast in: Kirill Rogov, (ed.) *Coronacrisis-2020: What May Happen and What Is To Be Done*, (Moscow: Liberal Mission Foundation, 2020), 11 [Кирилл Рогов, (ред.) *Коронакризис-2020: что будет и что делать*, (Москва: Фонд «Либеральная миссия», 2020), 11] [in Russian].

149 See: “The Majority of Russians Without Any Savings as the Crisis Erupts [Большинство россиян оказались без сбережений кризис],” RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/31/03/2020/5e7dd7c59a7947c7f63c1e66>.

150 See: “Russian Federal Budget Deficit May Reach 5.6 trillion rubles in 2020 [Дефицит бюджета России в 2020 году может составить 5,6 трлн рублей],” TASS News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/8282643>.

151 See: “Kudrin Assesses the Economic Relief Needed as at Least 7% of GDP [Кудрин оценил необходимую экономике господдержку как минимум в 7% ВВП],” RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/08/04/2020/5e8cf0e89a7947c077f4550f>.

152 See Elvira Nabiullina, Bank of Russia Chairperson's remarks: “Nabiullina Explains the Consequences of Disbursing Money to People [Набиуллина объяснила к чему приведёт раздача денег населению],” Rosbalt News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/business/2020/04/24/1840283.html>.

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153 See: Vladimir Putin, “Meeting on Sanitary and Epidemiological Situation, May 11, 2020,” Events. President of Russia (website), accessed June 1, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63340>.

154 Calculated in: “Putin Promises a One-Time Allowance to Every Child Between 3 and 16 Years of Age [Путин пообещал разовую выплату на каждого ребёнка от 3 до 16 лет],” RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/11/05/2020/5eb9563c9a7947710a03123b>.

155 See: Vladimir Putin, “Meeting with Regional Heads on Countering the Spread of the Coronavirus, April 28, 2020,” Events. President of Russia (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63288>.

156 See: “Reshetnikov Revealed the Scope of Economic Activity Downturn in Russia [Решетников раскрыл масштаб спада экономической активности в России],” RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/27/05/2020/5ece41769a7947b144bf9209>.

157 See: Vladimir Putin, “Meeting on Sanitary and Epidemiological Situation, May 22, 2020,” Events. President of Russia (website), accessed May 28, 2020, <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/63382>.

At the same time, the National Welfare Fund (that originated from the Stabilization Fund that existed in 2004-2008 and the Reserve Fund, in place between 2008 and 2018<sup>158</sup>) is seen as the last option that should be used when the situation turns to be catastrophic. Moreover, many analysts suggested President Putin treats this fund as pocket money reserved to himself and his closest friends, so no one should expect it to be spent with enthusiasm. On the other hand, Russia was hit not only by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by the falling oil prices (in Q2 the federal budget will get less than \$1 for every barrel of oil exported compared to \$36 it collected in 2019<sup>159</sup>). The oil revenue is also essential for many Russian companies and their suppliers—so the government is aware about spending the reserves while fighting the spread of the virus and later to be faced with a prolonged economic downturn without any money available to be used for economic recovery. So I would see the Kremlin's "grand strategy" in trying to let both ordinary people and businesses survive somehow during the lockdown, and then assess the overall losses, evaluate the situation on the oil market, and elaborate a more reasonable economic recovery plan.

How successful may this strategy be? I would argue President Putin made quite reasonable choice since he wants to combat one crisis at a time: currently he wishes to deal with the pandemic, and as it calms he will turn to purely economic issues—both provoked by the oil price decline and the consequences of the quarantine. The Russian leadership will definitely claim that both issues were out of its control, caused by external factors—so, as Mr. Putin already said about the oil crisis, no one is to blame personally for the hardships.<sup>160</sup> And as the crisis is depicted as an economic one, it would be possible to declare himself the victor against the COVID-19, to take credit for a small number of casualties, praise all the bureaucrats, doctors and policemen—and to take on the economic crisis which I see as much less challenging for the political stability in the country since, neither in Russia nor in any of the post-Soviet states, economic and finan-

cial hardships never caused political upheaval. Russia, as I had said before, is a "society without citizens"<sup>161</sup>; Russians are able to respond collectively to political issues as happened in 2011-2012, and later in 2019 but they opt for individual survival if it comes to combating economic problems—so therefore I insist the risks for the current Russian regime will diminish almost entirely if the COVID-19 pandemic is over. But all this will largely depend on what happens in May and whether the opening of the Russian economy currently scheduled to start by May 12, proceeds smoothly as the pandemic eases.

## RUSSIAN OUTWARD-ORIENTED COVID-19 RELATED PROPAGANDA

But the entire story would not be complete without addressing the issue of how the Russian government reacted on the coronavirus pandemic outside Russia to project its vision and its ideological preferences both to its domestic audience and to the outside world.

On the one hand it should be noted that the information that was directed towards Russians was designed to justify their approach by praising the Chinese and downplaying the European and American practices. Russian propaganda issued dozens of fakes trying to depict the situation in Europe almost catastrophically, insisting that many countries didn't have any counter epidemic facilities and the overall healthcare systems were in dire conditions; that the European Union was unable to cope with the pandemic to provide necessary assistance to its most affected members; that the pandemic was caused by numerous migrants who arrived to Europe in recent years; many times Moscow-based media issued warnings about a possible dissolution of the European Union after the pandemic;<sup>162</sup> to which Brussels responded with a special report on Russian fakes and propaganda in-

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158 On the history of the Reserve Fund see: Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Business as Usual: Russia Exhausts Its Reserve Fund" (website), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.jamestown.org/program/business-usual-russia-exhausts-reserve-fund/>.

159 See: Olga Tanas and Dina Khrennikova, "Russia's Oil Pain Deepens as OPEC+ Prepares to Cut Output," Bloomberg (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-16/russia-s-oil-pain-deepens-as-opec-prepares-to-cut-output>.

160 See: Vladimir Putin's Interview on the Economic Stability and Standstill for TASS News Agency [Владимир Путин о стабильности и застое в экономике], "TASS News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://putin.tass.ru/ru/o-stabilnosti-v-ekonomike/>.

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161 See: Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Russie, une société libre sous contrôle autoritaire," *Le Monde diplomatique*, 2010, no. 10 (Octobre): 4–5.

162 See: "Fakes About the Coronavirus: Kremlin Tales and the 'War' Against the EU [Фейки о коронавирусе: сказки Кремля и 'война' против ЕС]," TV Channel 24 Ukraine (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, [https://24tv.ua/ru/fejki\\_o\\_koronaviruse\\_basni\\_kremlja\\_i\\_vojna\\_protiv\\_es\\_n1308883](https://24tv.ua/ru/fejki_o_koronaviruse_basni_kremlja_i_vojna_protiv_es_n1308883) (website).

struments<sup>163</sup>. The Russian social networks were full of stories presumably written by Russian immigrants all over Europe who insisted that the British or French healthcare systems provided terrible services so they wished to be home<sup>164</sup>—these calls were replicated by the Russian Foreign Ministry<sup>165</sup> which organized (though not very effectively) rescue evacuation for the Russian citizens who presumably had no chance to get good care abroad.<sup>166</sup> The mass media presented the situation in the US, and in particular in New York City, as a doomsday scenario depicting military hospitals deployed in Central Park<sup>167</sup> and refrigerated lorries brought close to major hospitals to store corpses.<sup>168</sup> The main purpose here, I would repeat, was to convince Russian citizens that their government is in control over the pandemic, makes everything possible to combat it and there's no better place than Russia to survive it.

On the other hand, in many other cases, Russia tried to use the COVID-19 pandemic to promote its own geopolitical/ideological agenda—and here I would mention two important points.

First, as the pandemic hit Europe the Russian government declared that it's ready to help all the countries that suffer from the new pandemic;<sup>169</sup> I would mention that nothing like that was said as the virus spread across Rus-

sia's allies like China or Iran. Later Russia was asked for help from several regions of Italy and the Russian military sent 30 virologists and 55 disinfection specialists to Lombardy where the Russian specialists actively engaged in cleaning local medical facilities and public places.<sup>170</sup> This mission was covered almost daily by the Russian state media while the Western press mentioned that less than half of the staff Russia dispatched to Italy actively participated in the cleaning operation and the others were either military commanders or (supposedly) intelligence officers.<sup>171</sup> Most of the Western press suggested Russian assistance was nonessential,<sup>172</sup> while some Italian media emphasized that it was delivered at a time when the European Union "neglected" Italy's needs.<sup>173</sup> Anti-European or at least Euro pessimistic sentiments were omnipresent at Russian coverage of the events.<sup>174</sup> Russia provided some support for its longtime ally, Serbia, and this operation was also widely covered by the Russian press.<sup>175</sup> On April 1, a Russian cargo plane delivered "humanitarian assistance" to the US including medical masks, protective equipment and several dozens of ventilators produced by the Ural instrument-making plant which is a part of Radioelectronic Technologies Co., which has been targeted by US sanctions since 2014.<sup>176</sup> The Russian authorities claimed the cargo was a gift from the Russian

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163 See: "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic" EU vs. Disinformation (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

164 See: "You Should Pray for Russian Healthcare: Where is the Best Place to Be Treated from Covid-19 [Молитесь на российскую медицину. Где лучше лечиться от COVID-19]," Svoboda Radio (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30561396.html>.

165 See: Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's post on Facebook (in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/maria.zakharova.167/posts/10222575120196410>.

166 See: "Data Collection on the Russian Citizens that Need Assistance, and the Organization of the Assistance in Connection with the Spread of the New Coronavirus Pandemic [Сбор сведений о гражданах, нуждающихся в помощи, и организация предоставления помощи в связи с распространением новой коронавирусной инфекции]," Gosuslugi (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.gosuslugi.ru/395103/1>.

167 See: "A Mobile Hospital Will Be Built in New York's Central Park in Two Days [В Нью-Йорке в Центральном парке за два дня развернут мобильный госпиталь]," TASS News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8111147>.

168 See: "US Military Will Send 'Mortuary Services' Staff to New York to Cope with Covid-19 Deaths as FEMA Deploys Mobile Morgue Trucks," RT (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/usa/484533-new-york-pentagon-mortuary/>.

169 See: "Russia Will Help to Fight Coronavirus to All Countries that Need it Most [Россия поможет бороться с коронавирусом наиболее нуждающимся странам]," RIA Novosti News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 26, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200325/1569122979.html>.

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170 See: "Russian Military Specialists Arrive to Bergamo for Fighting Coronavirus [В Бергамо прибыли российские военные для борьбы с коронавирусом]," RIA Novosti News Agency (website; in Russian), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200326/1569160244.html>.

171 See: "Moscow's Motives Questioned over Coronavirus Aid Shipment to Italy" Guardian (US edition), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/moscow-motives-questioned-over-coronavirus-aid-shipment-to-italy>.

172 See: "80% of Russia's Coronavirus Aid to Italy 'Useless' – La Stampa," The Moscow Times (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/26/80-of-russias-coronavirus-aid-to-italy-useless-la-stampa-a69756>.

173 See: Oli Smith, "Anti-EU fury: Italian mayors rip down EU flags in outrage as row with Brussels intensifies," The Moscow Times (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1264946/EU-coronavirus-fury-flag-Brussels-Italy-European-Union-aid-latest-news>.

174 See: "The influence operation behind Russia's coronavirus aid to Italy," Coda Story (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/soft-power/russia-coronavirus-aid-italy/>.

175 See: "Russia Starts its Assistance to Serbia in Fighting Coronavirus [Россия начинает оказывать помощь Сербии в борьбе с коронавирусом]," TV One (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, [https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-04-03/383184-rossiya\\_nachinaet\\_okazyvat\\_pomosch\\_serbii\\_v\\_borbe\\_s\\_koronavirusom](https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-04-03/383184-rossiya_nachinaet_okazyvat_pomosch_serbii_v_borbe_s_koronavirusom).

176 See: "U.S. Accepts Russian Ventilators Manufactured by a Sanctions-Hit Company [США приняли от России произведённые компанией под санкциями аппараты ИВЛ]," RBC Daily (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/04/2020/5e8617ef9a794717ba5653ff>.

people,<sup>177</sup> but immediately thereafter the White House said in a statement that it was half paid for by the US.<sup>178</sup> Later the Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed this was the case.<sup>179</sup> It should be noted that this “help” not only wasn’t needed but the ventilators proved dangerous for the patients as several weeks later they caused fires in hospitals in St Petersburg and Moscow that took the lives of six patients<sup>180</sup> (the devices that the Russians sent to the U.S. were immediately put out of stock thereafter).<sup>181</sup> The investigation that started afterwards revealed that the machines were just assembled at the Russian factory after all their parts were imported from China,<sup>182</sup> bought from a little known company and was probably counterfeit. Later the American plane delivered cargo of the US-manufactured ventilators to Russia,<sup>183</sup> but this fact attracted expectedly little attention in the Russian media.

While Russia delivered assistance to Western countries, the Russian authorities proposed that the Western sanctions against Russia should be lifted for facilitating the fight against the pandemic.<sup>184</sup> This thesis was strongly

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177 See: “Russia Sends to U.S. Humanitarian Aid for Fighting Coronavirus [Россия отправит США гуманитарную помощь для борьбы с коронавирусом],” *Kommersant Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4309673>.

178 See: “U.S. Paying Russia for Entire Planeload of Coronavirus Equipment: U.S. Official,” *U.S. News & World Report* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-04-02/us-paying-russia-for-entire-planeload-of-coronavirus-equipment-sent-by-moscow-us-official>.

179 See: “Russian Foreign Ministry Reveals Who Paid the U.S.-Bound Cargo [В МИД рассказали, кто оплатил медицинский груз для США],” *TASS News Agency* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/8143379>.

180 See: “Russia-Manufactured Ventilators Banned After Fires [Аппаратами ИВЛ от российского завода запретили пользоваться после пожаров],” *Lenta.ru* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://lenta.ru/news/2020/05/13/stop\\_ivl/](https://lenta.ru/news/2020/05/13/stop_ivl/).

181 See: “In the U.S., the Russian Ventilators Taken Out of Stock Because of Hospital Fires in Moscow and St Petersburg [США изъяли поставленные Россией аппараты ИВЛ из-за пожаров в московской и петербургской больницах],” *Novaya Gazeta* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/05/13/161412-ssha-iz-yali-postavlennye-rossiye-apparaty-ivl-iz-za-pozhara-v-moskovskoy-i-peterburgskoy-bolnitsah>.

182 See: “Chinese Suppliers and American Elements [Китайские компании и комплектующие из США],” *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, [https://www.znak.com/2020-05-18/otechestvennye\\_apparaty\\_ivl\\_zavoda\\_rosteha\\_na\\_90\\_sobranij\\_iz\\_importnyh\\_detaley](https://www.znak.com/2020-05-18/otechestvennye_apparaty_ivl_zavoda_rosteha_na_90_sobranij_iz_importnyh_detaley).

183 See: “An Aircraft Loaded with Ventilators Arrived from the U.S. to Russia [Самолёт с аппаратами ИВЛ прибыл из США в Россию],” *RBC Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5ec68d3c9a7947c84960b399>.

184 See: “Russian Foreign Ministry Calls for Lifting the Sanctions in the Age of Pandemic [МИД России призвал снять санкции в условиях пандемии],” *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/03/27/mid-rossii-prizval-snyat-sankcii-v-usloviyakh-pandemii.html>.

voiced by President Putin at the G20 meeting on March 26,<sup>185</sup> so it’s easy to link this intention to Russia’s extensive “assistance campaign” (it was mentioned later that the Russians pressed the Italian government to vote in Brussels for lifting sanctions previously imposed on Russia<sup>186</sup>). The Russians also insisted they would help many other European Union countries as well—but some “elder brothers” supposedly put pressure on them to refuse Russia’s aid<sup>187</sup> (which was denied many times).

Second, the Russian state and Russian state media have engaged in another media campaign promoting different conspiracy theories aiming to explain the emergence of the coronavirus. Such propaganda, of course, blamed the United States media and “intellectuals” openly accused the Americans either of creating the virus for executing more control over the world<sup>188</sup> or brought it to China for making the Chinese leadership responsible and thus secure their prevalence vis-à-vis Beijing in the ongoing trade showdown.<sup>189</sup> The Russian officials de facto shared this vision but supported it in a different way by supporting the Chinese position as China rejected its responsibility for creating the virus.<sup>190</sup> By mid-March both the American and European officials started to condemn China for its supposed failure to control the viruses in the

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185 See: “Putin, at G20 Summit, Proposes Lifting Sanctions on Essential Goods Amid Coronavirus,” *Reuters* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-g20-putin/putin-at-g20-summit-proposes-lifting-sanctions-on-essential-goods-amid-coronavirus-idUSKBN21D3DR>.

186 See: Nicola Biondo, “Mosca presenta il conto: vuole che l’Italia le dia una mano a togliere le sanzioni,” *Linkiesta* (website), accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/05/aiuti-russia-italia-coronavirus/>.

187 See: “Lavrov Says Several EU Countries Got Banned from Accepting Assistance from Russia [Лавров рассказал, что ряду стран ЕС запрещено принимать помощь от России],” *Argumenti & Fakty* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, [https://aif.ru/politics/world/lavrov\\_rasskazal\\_chno\\_ryadu\\_stran\\_es\\_zapreshcheno\\_prinimat\\_pomoshch\\_ot\\_rossii](https://aif.ru/politics/world/lavrov_rasskazal_chno_ryadu_stran_es_zapreshcheno_prinimat_pomoshch_ot_rossii).

188 See: “American Lethal Weapon Covid-19: A Plan for Cutting the World Population and ID2020 [Смертельное оружие США COVID-19: План по сокращению населения Земли и ID2020],” *Free Press* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://svpressa.ru/world/article/259822/>.

189 See: “Taken with the Mainour: China Blames the U.S. for Exporting the Coronavirus; the Experts Confirm a Bio-Warfare Version [Пойманы с поличным: Китай обвинил США в занесении коронавируса-jeksperty-podtvzhdajut-versiju-biooruzhija\_242789].” *Tsargrad* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, [https://tsargrad.tv/news/pojmany-s-polichnym-kitaj-obvinil-ssha-v-zanesenii-koronavirusa-jeksperty-podtvzhdajut-versiju-biooruzhija\\_242789](https://tsargrad.tv/news/pojmany-s-polichnym-kitaj-obvinil-ssha-v-zanesenii-koronavirusa-jeksperty-podtvzhdajut-versiju-biooruzhija_242789).

190 See: “Russian Foreign Ministry Condemns the Attempts to Make China and WHO Responsible for Covid-19 [МИД осудил попытки возложить на Китай и ВОЗ ответственность за COVID-19],” *Izvestia Daily* (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://iz.ru/1003634/2020-04-23/mid-osudil-popytki-vozlozhit-na-kitai-i-voz-otvetstvennost-za-covid-19>.



Wuhan lab from where the COVID-19 presumably originated.<sup>191</sup> Some countries had not excluded a chance to sue China for the damage caused by the pandemics<sup>192</sup>—and Moscow vigorously sided with Beijing in its quarrel with the Western powers.<sup>193</sup> The Russian officials never openly accused the United States of creating the virus but their support for the Chinese position brought them quite close to this position, allowing the Western media to talk about a “Russian and Chinese misinformation campaign” as if it was a single and well-coordinated effort.<sup>194</sup> What was the main rationale behind this campaign is still unclear but it was quite clear that the climate of deep and overall suspiciousness that was created by coronavirus pandemic seemed to be very comfortable for the Russian spin-doctors. It would be very interesting to see how far Russia will go along with China if the Western nations seriously pursue their complaints against Beijing and China will become much less welcomed in the international scene in coming years.

To finalize, I would conclude that Russia encountered the COVID-19 pandemic not as a truly authoritarian, or even dictatorial, state but rather as a poorly managed bureaucratic country. It tried to pretend coronavirus was not too dangerous and Russia possesses all the necessary resources to combat it successfully—but it soon changed its policies by accepting the risk and trying to act as many other affected nations did. It attempted to introduce Chinese-styled quarantine measures but failed, and its digital capabilities proved insufficient to organize a high-tech lockdown. It used all the measures every authoritarian state uses for disseminating misinformation about its own effectiveness as well as about statistical issues, but desperately failed as the real news leaked to the Internet and foreign media. It possesses huge financial reserves and was almost debt-free, but until now its citizens and businesses haven’t got anything from the government. The Kremlin tried to impose strict regulations and rule over Russian society, disrespecting the laws and neglecting constitutional liberties—but it still is unclear whether President Putin’s plan for amending the Constitution, enforcing remote voting and collecting all the information about his subjects will be successful. Russia tried to use its propaganda machine for reinstating its geopolitical positions and for gaining some support from the great powers, but actually failed to get it—and at the end found itself in company with China trying to clear it from Western accusations. In no aspect has Russia emerged victorious from the battle with coronavirus, and it seems that the fight against the pandemic will, for a long time, have its influence over Russia’s economic and political development.

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191 See: “In Rare Move, U.S. Intelligence Agencies Confirm Investigating if Coronavirus Emerged From Lab Accident,” *Wall Street Journal* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-intelligence-agencies-say-coronavirus-originated-in-china-wasnt-man-made-or-genetically-modified-11588260228>.

192 See: Keith Johnson, “Missouri Opens Up a New Front Against China in Coronavirus Blame Game,” *Foreign Policy* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/24/missouri-opens-up-a-new-front-against-china-in-coronavirus-blame-game/>; and Jackie Salo, “Top German Paper Demands \$165 Billion Coronavirus Reparations From China,” *New York Post* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/04/22/top-german-paper-demands-coronavirus-reparations-from-china/>.

193 See: Tom O’Connor, “Russia Defends China’s Record on Coronavirus Response Amid U.S. Attacks,” *Newsweek* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-defends-chinas-record-coronavirus-response-amid-us-attacks-1498361>.

194 See: Florian Eder, “Russia and China Promote Coronavirus ‘Conspiracy Narratives’ Online, Says EU Agency,” *Politico* (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-and-china-promote-coronavirus-conspiracy-narratives-online-says-eu-agency/>.



Alexander Lukashenko in Krasnaya Polyana. Photo: kremlin.ru

Arseny Sivitsky

# BELARUS



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## INTRODUCTION: PARADOX OF THE BELARUSIAN APPROACH

As of May 1, 2020, and in contrast to other investigated countries in this report (China, Russia, Hungary, Iran), Belarus hasn't experienced either a peak of the COVID-19 epidemic or even approached it. Although Belarusian authorities have managed to contain the spread of the epidemic at the first stage without introduction of a nation-wide quarantine effort, the worst consequences are yet to come since the peak of the epidemic is expected in the beginning of June. It will be a real vitality test for the Belarusian authorities and President Alexander Lukashenka himself amid the presidential election campaign which has already started. However unpopular within the Belarusian society, the inconsistent response strategy of fighting against COVID-19 risks the epidemiological situation will develop according to the worst case scenario in Belarus, with all concomitant implications to the political stability and legitimacy of current political leadership.

Almost all European countries affected by the coronavirus pandemic have been trying to combat its spread through more or less severe quarantine measures and social distancing regimes. But there are

two countries that refused to impose quarantine and chose a very different way of fighting the infection: these are Belarus and Sweden. Belarusian authorities often claim similarity between the "unique paths" of both countries in responding to the pandemic. Although there are more differences than similarities between the two approaches, the real paradox of the Belarus case is the conflict between official narratives and practical responses to COVID-19 on the ground.

On the one hand, on the rhetorical level the Belarusian leadership simply denies the gravity of the epidemic. On the other—the national healthcare system was involved in tackling the problem from the very beginning, when COVID-19 arrived in Belarus, despite controversial statements. However, occasionally effective anti-epidemic measures were devalued by shocking decisions like the refusal to postpone the national football and hockey championships or holding a nation-wide *Subbotnik*<sup>1</sup> on April 25 and an army parade to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Soviet people's victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 on May 9. At the same time, President Alexander Lukashenka postponed his annual ad-

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<sup>1</sup> Subbotnik—from the Russian word *subбота* meaning Saturday—is a day of unpaid voluntary work, usually on a Saturday, and originated from the Soviet Union after the October Revolution.

dress to the Belarusian parliament in April and mass rallies on Labor Day on May 1 were canceled.

Another paradox is the controversial public perception of the Belarusian authorities' COVID-19 response strategy. Although majority of Belarusians considered the authorities' reaction to the coronavirus pandemic to be insufficient from an epidemiological point of view, they didn't advocate a total lockdown. It can be explained by the fact that Belarusian society hadn't yet experienced all the dramatic epidemiological consequences, but already faced negative global economic implications from the coronavirus pandemic.

Nevertheless, the strategy of the Belarusian authorities regarding the COVID-19 epidemic has undergone significant changes, primarily under the influence of the development of the epidemic itself, reaction of civil society and surrounding countries to it, as well as the forthcoming presidential elections planned on August 9 this year. A strategic task for Belarusian authorities in this regard can be described as containing negative consequences of the "coronacrisis" in different dimensions—preventing panic within society, collapse of the national economy and escalation of the epidemic. Although, initially the national healthcare system was well prepared to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic at the first stages underestimation of the gravity of problem and inconsistency in actions has allowed the situation develop out of control and provoke a serious crisis of legitimacy.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 infection was recorded in Belarus on February 28, 2020. A student from Iran tested positive on February 27 and was admitted to a hospital in Minsk. The individual arrived in Belarus via a flight from Baku, Azerbaijan, on 22 February.<sup>2</sup> On March 13, twenty-seven cases were confirmed in Hrodna, Homiel, Viciebsk, Minsk Regions, and Minsk city—five of seven main territorial-administrative units of Belarus.

Belarus President Alexander Lukashenka's initial position regarding the possibility of a COVID-19 epidemic in Belarus was dismissive and

anti-alarmist. His personal medical advice in which he recommended working in fields and driving tractors,<sup>3</sup> drinking vodka and attending the sauna<sup>4</sup> (*banya*) or playing ice hockey<sup>5</sup> as the best ways of overcoming the epidemic immediately became the subject of different satiric reports by world media outlets.<sup>6</sup> The president even continued to play ice hockey on an amateur team. During the break in one of the hockey matches, he commented on the fact that his work and sport schedule was not affected by the coronavirus epidemic and declared "It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees." He also challenged a journalist saying, "There are no viruses here. Did you see any of them flying around?"<sup>7</sup>

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3 See: "Belarusian Leader Proposes 'Tractor' Therapy For Coronavirus," The Moscow Times, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/16/belarusian-leader-proposes-tractor-therapy-for-coronavirus-a69644>.

4 See: "Post-Soviet strongmen prescribe vodka, hockey and folk medicine against coronavirus," CNN, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/30/europe/soviet-strongmen-coronavirus-intl/index.html>.

5 Scott Gleeson, "Belarus president plays hockey, says global coronavirus measures are result of 'psychosis,'" accessed April 29, 2020, USA Today, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/hockey/2020/03/31/belarus-president-plays-hockey-calls-fear-coronavirus-psychosis/5093894002/>.

6 Oleg Kalnik, "Statements by Lukashenka about the coronavirus are quoted by the world media. What the press writes about our country [Высказывания Лукашенко о коронавирусе цитируют мировые СМИ. Что пишет пресса о нашей стране]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/world/678589.html>.

7 See: "'It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.' Lukashenka advised the best antivirus [«Лучше умереть стоя, чем жить на коленях». Лукашенко посоветовал лучшее антивирусное]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/culture/678307.html>.

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2 See: "COVID-19 pandemic in Belarus," Wikipedia, accessed April 27, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_in\\_Belarus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Belarus).



## AUTHORITIES' FIRST REACTION AND CHANGING ATTITUDE: BEHIND THE PACE OF EVENTS

In practice since the second week of March President Lukashenka was receiving daily reports from different ministers about the epidemiological situation in the country. Although, throughout March the authorities' stance on the COVID-19 epidemic was changing, it remained behind the pace of events.

On March 12, during a meeting with the Minister of Health, President Lukashenka praised the national healthcare system and spoke against exaggerating the scale of the epidemic.<sup>8</sup> One week later, the Belarusian president held a meeting on the epidemiological situation in the country with the Head of the Belarus President Administration, Ihar Sierhienka, the State Secretary of the Security Council, Andrej Raukou, and the Health Minister, Uladzimir Karanik. Among participants of the meeting were also representatives of the Belarusian Center of Hygiene, Epidemiology and Public Health, the Minsk Research Center of Surgery, Transplantology and Hematology, the Belarusian State Medical University, the Belarusian Research Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology.

In his remarks, he called coronavirus nothing else but a psychosis, adding that nobody will die of the coronavirus infection in Belarus. He was absolutely convinced that this was another psychosis playing into the hands of some forces and being detrimental to others. He was also concerned about Belarus suffering more from panic than from the virus itself. According to Lukashenka, the civilized world had gone mad and politicians already started to use the situation for the sake of their interests. Although the Belarusian leader continued to downplay the scale of the threat and compared COVID-19 with the usual seasonal flu and other diseases, he tasked

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8 See: "Report of Healthcare Minister Uladzimir Karanik [Доклад Министра здравоохранения Владимира Караника]," Official Website of the President of the Republic of Belarus (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/doklad-ministra-zdravooxranenija-Uladzimir-a-karanika-23205/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/doklad-ministra-zdravooxranenija-Uladzimir-a-karanika-23205/)

Belarusians to take additional anti-epidemiological measures, including establishing the production of respirators, encouraging Belarusian citizens to stay in isolation if possible, mobilizing social services and paying more attention to elder people, rescheduling public transport in Minsk and the beginning of classes in high schools, etc.

However, the Belarusian leadership refused to impose a national quarantine and close the state border, so there was no talk of restricting public activities, economic activity, cross-border and internal mobility. Local authorities were tasked with taking appropriate local quarantine measures according to the epidemiological situation. The Ministry of Health and other bodies were fully focused on tracking single cases of infection and contacts of the first and second levels as well as their isolation.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic the Ministry of Health demonstrated confidence in keeping the epidemiological situation under control and was well-prepared in terms of infrastructure to deal with the first phase of the epidemic. According to official data, there are 80,000 hospital beds, including more than two thousand each of resuscitation beds and mechanical ventilation apparatuses and almost one-and-a-half thousand anesthesia-respiratory apparatuses, which in some cases can be used for artificial ventilation of the lungs. Therefore, according to Health Minister Karanik, there were enough equipment for resuscitation services, mechanical ventilation in Belarus.<sup>10</sup>

According to the WHO technical mission, initially Belarus was focusing on preparedness and surge capacity of the health care infrastructure to manage COVID-19 patients. Clinical case management instructions for patients suspected or diagnosed with COVID-19 were developed and were published by

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9 See: "Report on epidemiological situation in Belarus [Доклад об эпидемиологической ситуации в Беларуси]," Official Website of the President of the Republic of Belarus (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/doklad-ob-epidemiologicheskoi-situatsii-23245/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/doklad-ob-epidemiologicheskoi-situatsii-23245/)

10 See: "Belarus has enough equipment for mechanical ventilation [В Беларуси достаточно оборудования для искусственной вентиляции легких]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/v-belarusi-dostatochno-oborudovaniya-dlja-iskusstvennoj-ventiljatsii-legkih-382521-2020/>



Signature collection for nominating candidates for the 2020 presidential election in Belarus during a pandemic COVID-19, May, 2020. Photo: Serge Serebro

the Minister of Health on March 6, 2020. This included guidance on diagnostic investigations and recommendations on the use of pharmaceutical interventions including antiviral combination therapy—lopinavir/ritonavir and hydroxychloroquine.

Starting on March 16, 2020, designated hospitals in Minsk city and all regional centers were organized and repurposed in anticipation of an increasing workload due to COVID-19. Preparedness measures included point-of-access screening and triage protocols, which were gradually being implemented in polyclinics and emergency medical services.

Efforts were made to ensure the continuity of essential, life-saving health care services—emergency and acute medical services, obstetrics, continuity of chronic diseases care, and mental health. COVID-19 infection prevention and control (IPC) measures were gradually expanded to prevent health care-associated transmission of the virus and to ensure the safety of health care workers and patients.

Given the substantial regional and global shortages of COVID-19 essential supplies, Belarus made

a commitment to domestic production of protective equipment for health care workers, disinfectants, and laboratory diagnostic kits, according to the WHO experts.<sup>11</sup>

By the beginning of April, this line of behavior was supplemented, behind the scenes, by more proactive measures in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in individual locations (Minsk,<sup>12</sup>

11 See: Executive Summary COVID-19 Technical Mission of Experts to the Republic of Belarus: 8–11 April 2020, WHO Regional Office for Europe (website), accessed April 30, 2020, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/440608/Belarus-Mission-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/440608/Belarus-Mission-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf).

12 See: “Plan of additional measures to prevent and reduce the spread of acute respiratory infections, including those caused by COVID-19, in Minsk [План дополнительных мероприятий по профилактике и снижению распространения острых респираторных инфекций, в том числе вызванных COVID-19, в г. Минске],” Minsk City Executive Committee (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [https://minsk.gov.by/ru/normdoc/4328/1069\\_plan.shtml](https://minsk.gov.by/ru/normdoc/4328/1069_plan.shtml).

Viciebsk<sup>13</sup>). At this stage, the authorities were steadily developing restrictive, sanitary, and other preventive measures aimed at containing the spread of the epidemic. Implementation of these response measures ended with the adoption of comprehensive plans to combat the epidemic in Viciebsk and other areas, including the creation of an operational headquarters in the Viciebsk region,<sup>14</sup> the introduction of compulsory two-weeks quarantine<sup>15</sup> for all people coming from abroad and other measures similar to the experience of countries neighboring Belarus. At the same time, the “anti-alarmist” line of the Belarusian authorities also did not go away, but at this stage it was transformed to deny the need for any quarantine and closing the state border.

In the beginning of April when the number of confirmed cases exceeded 100<sup>16</sup> and began to increase rapidly, and containment of the epidemic took priority in the public agenda, the authorities made another turn in their anti-coronavirus response. As it became pointless to deny the scale of the epidemic, the authorities acted as the main entity responsible

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13 See: “Plan of additional measures in Viciebsk to prevent and reduce the spread of acute respiratory infections, including those caused by COVID-19 in Viciebsk [План дополнительных мероприятий в г.Витебске по профилактике и снижению распространения острых респираторных инфекций, в том числе вызванных COVID-19 в городе Витебске],” Viciebsk City Executive Committee (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <http://Viciebsk.gov.by/uploads/files/Resheniem-Viciebskogo-gorodskogo-ispolnitelnogo-komiteta.docx>.

14 See: “Plan of additional measures to prevent and reduce the spread of acute respiratory infections, including those caused by COVID-19, in the Viciebsk region [План дополнительных мероприятий по профилактике и снижению распространения острых респираторных инфекций, в том числе вызванных COVID-19, в Витебской области],” Viciebsk Regional Executive Committee (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, [http://Viciebsk-region.gov.by/uploads/files/Plan.doc\\_](http://Viciebsk-region.gov.by/uploads/files/Plan.doc_).

15 See: “About measures to prevent the importation and spread of infections caused by COVID-19 [О мерах по предотвращению завоза и распространения инфекции, вызванной коронавирусом COVID-19],” Government of the Republic of Belarus (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.government.by/ru/content/9339>.

16 On 1 April, the second death of an elderly COVID-19 patient with chronic diseases was reported by the Ministry of Health. According to the report, as of 1 April 2020, there were 163 COVID-19 cases registered in Belarus, including 2 deaths and at least 47 recoveries. However, the ambiguity of the latest government reports has led to unofficial counting attempts, based on the official data, according to which the actual number of COVID-19 cases in Belarus could be as high as 217. On that same day, the first COVID-19 case in Brest Region was reported by the officials. Thus, in the beginning of April the Coronavirus reached almost all regions of Belarus except Mahiliou.

See: “COVID-19 pandemic in Belarus,” Wikipedia, accessed April 29, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_in\\_Belarus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Belarus).

for countering the epidemic and therefore “inaccessible” to criticism. State-owned media began to focus on the role of the authorities in the fight against the epidemic, and President Lukashenka began mentioning COVID-19 in each of his public speeches. In other words, from trying to be a “coronavirus-dissident” in relation to this threat, the authorities switched to position themselves as “effective managers,” able to resolve the situation and protect people.

The Ministry of Health issued a package of information materials related to the epidemic, including recommendations for elderly people, social workers, post offices and volunteers, on self-isolation of citizens and social-distancing, etc.<sup>17</sup>

At the local level, only a few local authorities (executive committees of Hrodna, Minsk, Minsk region) in early April began to take measures to prevent and reduce the spread of acute respiratory infections, including those caused by coronavirus. The main measures envisage, in particular, the personal responsibility of the heads of enterprises and organizations to prevent employees with signs of respiratory infections, as well as workers who arrived from abroad before the expiration of their self-isolation, from working. Both state-owned and private organizations should, at least once a day, do wet cleaning using disinfectants and ventilate the premises as often as possible. In addition, it is necessary to provide public places with dispensers of antiseptics, liquid soap, and, if necessary, personal protective equipment. Measures also includes disinfection of public transport and train station rooms. Drivers should be provided with masks, gloves, antiseptics.

According to the list of measures, housing and communal services must clean up common areas in apartment buildings using detergents and disinfectants. The availability of medical masks, disposable gloves is now mandatory for trade workers. In shopping facilities, it is recommended that a social distance of at least one meter be maintained. In catering facilities (cafes, bars, restaurants), tables are to be placed at a distance of at least one-and-a-half

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17 See: COVID-19 Information Papers [Информационные материалы по COVID-19],” Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <http://minzdrav.gov.by/ru/dlya-belorusskikh-grazhdan/COVID-19/>.



meters. Exhibitions, presentations, trade fairs and other events in closed rooms are canceled in cities. Sports, cultural, entertainment and other events are limited. Suspended activities of discos, the work of sports and fitness rooms, reading rooms, libraries are limited. It is forbidden to smoke hookah in public catering facilities. Religious organizations are encouraged to reduce mass worship. In several cities it was decided not to hold public events on May holidays (Baranavičy, Brest).<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the Health Ministry refrained from recommending quarantine measures on educational institutions due to inexpediency. However, the spring school holidays were extended for a week.<sup>19</sup> Later, parents of pupils were allowed to decide whether to send their children to schools or educate them remotely.<sup>20</sup>

Although these recommendations and measures are voluntary in nature, they have significantly changed the lifestyle of Belarusians and mode of activity in big cities of the country. Cinemas, theaters, and concert halls have been closed, more people are working remotely and have voluntarily switched to an isolation mode.<sup>21</sup>

## CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE: VOLUNTEERS TOGETHER WITH DOCTORS

At the end of March, in response to petitions and fund-raising initiatives by volunteers and activists, the Health Ministry opened a special charity account in support of the national healthcare system.<sup>22</sup> However, as soon as the Belarusian society got to know about the lack of protective equipment for hospital personnel, Minsk Hackerspace, NGO Imena, web-design agency Global Travel and many Belarusian bloggers launched an impressive campaign (#ByCovid19) providing direct assistance to hospitals upon requests from medical staff. It also invites individuals and businesses to support the project financially, to become a volunteer, to 3D print the face protection, to sew protective masks and other medical uniforms, etc.<sup>23</sup> The campaigners have been raising money via the crowdfunding platform MolaMola.<sup>24</sup> Private businesses have invested in the campaign by supplying washing machines, medical shoes, hygiene and food products to the hospitals. NGO Imena and Belarus Red Cross established a telephone hotline for self-isolated elderly people to socialize and provide psychological support. In early April, the Telegram-channel Host A Superhero was created as a response to numerous cases of doctors who have to spend nights at workplaces in order to avoid infecting their relatives. The initiative connects doctors with people who have empty apartments and can temporarily provide medics with accommodation for free.<sup>25</sup>

Civil society and volunteer campaigns as well as a visit of the WHO mission to Belarus on April 8–11,

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18 See: "Coronavirus in Belarus: Impact on Human Rights [Коронавирус в Беларуси: воздействие на права человека]," Human Constanta (website; in Russian), accessed May 8, 2020. <https://humanconstantaby/koronavirus-v-belarusi-vozdfejstvie-na-prava-cheloveka/>.

19 See: "Belarus: No quarantine, but school holidays extended," Belsat TV (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/belarus-no-quarantine-but-school-holidays-extended/>.

20 Elena Spasyuk, "Distance learning in Belarusian schools: on the go and who knows how [Дистанционное обучение в белорусских школах: на ходу и кто как умеет]," Naviny (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200424/1587708828-distancionnoe-obuchenie-v-belorusskih-shkolah-na-hodu-i-kto-kak-umeet>.

21 Galina Dudina, "Schrödinger Quarantine. How Belarus copes with a pandemic without taking restrictive measures [Карантин Шредингера. Как Белоруссия справляется с пандемией, не принимая ограничительных мер]," Kommersant (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4331803>.

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22 See: "'To fight COVID-19 and help patients': The Ministry of Health opened a charity account [«Для борьбы с COVID-19 и оказания помощи больным»: Минздрав открыл благотворительный счет]," Tut. By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/677797.html>.

23 See: "#ByCovid19," Volunteer campaign (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <http://bycovid19.com/ru>.

24 See: "MolaMola," Crowdfunding platform (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://molamola.by/>.

25 Alesia Rudnik, "Belarusian civil society steps forward as strongman defies coronavirus threat," Belsat TV (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/belarusian-civil-society-steps-forward-as-strongman-defies-coronavirus-threat/>.



urged Belarusian governmental NGOs (Belaya Rus,<sup>26</sup> Belarusian Republican Youth Union,<sup>27</sup> Belarusian Women's Union,<sup>28</sup> and others) to join this campaign. They started to monitor the epidemiological situation and provide assistance to doctors as well.

However, by April aggravation about the epidemiological situation revealed a significant shortage of medical and sanitary equipment, especially protective equipment, which failed to meet ongoing needs due to the escalating situation. In the beginning of April, Belarusian doctors used per day approximately two thousand protective suits, two-and-a-half to three thousand respirators and three hundred to three hundred and fifty thousand masks. For comparison, earlier forty to one hundred and fifty protective suits, ten to fifteen thousand masks, and fifty to one hundred and fifty respirators were spent. In Belarus, there were more than two million medical masks, more than ninety thousand respirators, over eighty-five thousand suits, more than ten million pairs of gloves, and twenty-four thousand goggles. Stocks were regularly replenished, according to Belarusian officials.<sup>29</sup>

However, by mid-April the #ByCovid-19 civil society campaign focusing on medical supplies received requests from eight hundred healthcare facilities from across the country. By that time it raised more than USD 135,000 and delivered more than fifty thousand respirators. The Health Ministry report-

ed that about four hundred doctors were infected with the coronavirus, announced high premiums for doctors, and banned them from communicating with the media about appeals to civic initiatives for assistance.<sup>30</sup> The President also signed a decree proposing temporary pay rises for doctors working with infectious diseases from BYN 900 to BYN 4,000 per month (USD 370 to USD 1,640).<sup>31</sup> About one hundred enterprises in Belarus expanded their product range with protective face masks.<sup>32</sup>

In the beginning of May, civil society initiatives and campaigns continued to raise funds and assist doctors and vulnerable groups directly or through crowdfunding platforms.<sup>33</sup> The #ByCovid19 volunteers managed to raise over USD 200,000 to help Belarusian doctors.<sup>34</sup> Such a state of affairs demonstrated that the Belarusian authorities were still not able to satisfy all the needs of the national healthcare system amid the deteriorating epidemic situation in the country.

26 See: "Belarus takes seriously the situation with coronavirus seriously and without panic – Shatko [В Беларуси серьезно и без паники относятся к ситуации с коронавирусом – Шатко]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/v-belarusi-serjezno-i-bez-paniki-otnosjatsja-k-situatsii-s-koronavirusom-shatko-387583-2020>.

27 See: "Belarusian Republican Youth Union launched #ThankstoMedics campaign in Minsk [В Минске стартовала республиканская акция БРСМ #СпасибоМедикам]," Minsk City Executive Committee (website; in Russian), <https://minsk.gov.by/ru/news/new/2020/04/14/740/>.

28 See: "Belarusian Union of Women Launches Large-Scale Support Campaign for Doctors [Белорусский союз женщин дает старт масштабной акции поддержки медиков]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/beloruskij-sojuz-zhenschin-daet-start-masshtabnoj-aktsii-podderzhki-medikov-386526-2020/>.

29 See: "Belarusian doctors spend up to 2.2 thousand protective suits and 300-350 thousand masks per day [Белорусские медики расходуют в день до 2,2 тыс. защитных костюмов и 300-350 тыс. масок]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/beloruskie-mediki-rashodujut-v-den-do-22-tys-zaschitnyh-kostjumov-i-300-350-tys-masok-385854-2020/>.

30 Zmicer Kuchlej, "Political organizations engage new supporters through social media; civil society has resumed a debate about a dialogue with the authorities," Belarus in Focus (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://belarusinfo.com/society-and-political-parties/political-organizations-engage-new-supporters-through-social-media>.

31 See: "Up to 4000 rubles per month. Which of the doctors and what rises in wages they can get for working with coronavirus [До 4000 рублей в месяц. Кто из медиков и какие надбавки сможет получить за работу с коронавирусом]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://finance.tut.by/news681200.html>.

32 See: "About 100 Belarusian enterprises reoriented to make face masks," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/about-100-belarusian-enterprises-reoriented-to-make-face-masks-129824-2020/>.

33 Ekaterina Panteleeva, "'Once we worked until three at night.' Look at the volunteers who are collecting shields for doctors [«Однажды мы работали до трех ночи». Посмотрите на волонтеров, которые собирают щитки для медиков]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/682822.html>.

34 See: "#BYCOVID19. Collecting assistance to Belarusian doctors in five sensitive questions [BYCOVID19. Сбор помощи медикам Беларуси в пяти острых вопросах]," Naviny (website; in Russian), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200428/1588081504-byCOVID19-sbor-pomoshchi-medikam-belarusi-v-pyati-ostryh-voprosah>

## INFORMATION TRANSPARENCY PROBLEM:

From the very beginning, the Belarusian authorities didn't provide any data about the COVID-19 epidemic to avoid panic. However, the Belarusian leadership was forced to revise the information policy amidst the further spread of the coronavirus and its impact on society as well as because of pressure from international organizations (such as WTO). When the first case of coronavirus infection appeared in Belarus, the Ministry of Health promised to be as open as possible. And it was for a while. But then authorities stopped specifying the exact locations where the infections were recorded, justifying this on the basis that they allegedly disclosed personal information, simultaneously accusing the media of disclosing this information. Then they decided not to report daily new information on the number of people infected. Eventually the messages turned into puzzles: in order to find out the number of people infected throughout the country, journalists had to add up the number of people who recovered and were being monitored<sup>35</sup>.

On April 7, one day before the visit of the WHO technical mission to conduct an expert assessment of the COVID-19 situation in Belarus, President Lukashenka instructed not to hide information about the coronavirus epidemic in the country. He said that the Presidential Administration has a corresponding headquarters in which all current information on the spread of coronavirus is collected.<sup>36</sup>

The same day, the website, StopCOVID, was launched together by the Ministry of Health and the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA). This has become the official Internet resource for informing the public about coronavirus issues. On April 11, a map

with regional statistics was removed from the site. The Minister of Health, Uladzimir Karanik, transferred responsibility for this from the authorities to journalists, blaming them of investigating new infection cases against the will of patients.<sup>37</sup> Although it is worth noting that sometimes statistics on regions of Belarus appear on the website, however, as a rule, such information, contrary to WHO recommendations, is not provided, and statistics that would indicate how the situation has been developing are not available. As of the end of April, only data on the number of tests performed, registered cases, and the number of patients who have recovered, been released, or died from COVID-19 were published on the official Internet resource StopCOVID. Also on the site is a selection of news (only from BelTA), information about campaigns in support of doctors, infographics, and links to maps depicting the spread of coronavirus (WHO, J. Hopkins University, Yandex).<sup>38</sup>

In its executive summary, experts of the WHO technical mission emphasized the need for a regular and comprehensive exchange of information, including epidemiological data and its geographical distribution, which is vital to improve understanding about the progression of the outbreak and to explain response measures, such as postponing gatherings or curtailing movements.

The WHO also recognized the COVID-19 response in Belarus provides valuable insight towards understanding the transmission of the virus and the importance of a multisectoral approach to this pandemic. At the time of the mission, COVID-19 testing throughout the country was led by the national and subnational public health systems and supported by the national laboratory network using test kits produced in Belarus. Measures focused on testing individuals suspected of having coronavirus, identifying and tracing contacts, and isolating cases and first-

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35 See: "Why should information on the spread of coronavirus in Belarus be as open as possible. Address by the editorial staff of TUT.BY [Почему информация о распространении коронавируса в Беларуси должна быть максимально открытой. Обращение редакции TUT.BY]," Tut.By (website in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/678474.html>.

36 See: "Lukashenka instructed not to hide information about coronavirus [Лукашенко поручил не скрывать информацию о коронавирусе]," Interfax (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, [https://interfax.by/news/policy/vnutrennyaya\\_politika/1274227/](https://interfax.by/news/policy/vnutrennyaya_politika/1274227/).

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37 See: "Ministry of Health explained why it began to limit information on COVID-19 [Минздрав объяснил, почему стал ограничивать информацию о COVID-19]," Naviny (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://naviny.by/new/20200411/1586620597-pochemu-vlast-skryvaet-pravdu-o-covid-19-v-belarusi>.

38 See: "Coronavirus in Belarus: Impact on Human Rights [Коронавирус в Беларуси: воздействие на права человека]," Human Constanta (website; in Russian), accessed May 8, 2020. <https://humanconstanta.by/koronavirus-v-belarusi-vozdeystvie-na-prava-cheloveka/>.

level contacts in health care and specially designated facilities. As part of the strategy to identify suspected cases, entry screening and laboratory testing at the international airport in Minsk was put into place for passengers arriving from designated countries. A 14-day compulsory self-isolation for individuals arriving from COVID-19-affected countries was introduced on April 8, 2020. To preserve the health care capacity as case counts were increasing, plans were being developed to shift contacts and mild cases to home isolation. Also, partial and voluntary physical distancing measures were introduced.

Although the WHO experts stressed that this experience will benefit not only the development of the next phase of the response in Belarus, but also the responses in other European countries as well as globally, the overall conclusion was pessimistic.

Measures to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 in long-term care facilities and in prisons were implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and the Ministry of Interior, respectively. However, by the end of March, surveillance and epidemiology data provided evidence of a steady increase in COVID-19 cases that approached exponential growth and indicated the beginning of community-level transmission.<sup>39</sup>

After the WHO technical mission left the country, Belarusian authorities continued manipulating the statistics. On April 13, President Lukashenka held a meeting on the epidemiological situation in the country and instructed security services (the State Security Committee, still known as the KGB), the Ministry of Interior, as well as the Ministry of Information to take over control social media and other outlets in order to prevent any attempts to hype up the coronavirus situation in Belarus.<sup>40</sup> As a result of this conversation, the Health Ministry became less transparent and consid-

39 See: "Executive Summary COVID-19 Technical Mission of Experts to the Republic of Belarus: 8–11 April 2020," WHO Regional Office for Europe (website), accessed April 30, 2020, [http://www.euro.who.int/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/440608/Belarus-Mission-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/440608/Belarus-Mission-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf)

40 See: "Meeting with Head of Belarus President Administration, Chairwoman of Council of Republic, State Secretary of Security Council, Healthcare Minister," Official Website of the President of the Republic of Belarus (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/report-of-head-of-belarus-president-administration-chairwoman-of-council-of-republic-state-secretary-of-23389/](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/report-of-head-of-belarus-president-administration-chairwoman-of-council-of-republic-state-secretary-of-23389/).

ered this instruction as a *carte blanche* for continuing manipulations with official COVID-19 statistics.

On the same day, statistical information disappeared from the website of the Brest Regional and Baranavičy Zonal Centers for Hygiene, Epidemiology and Public Health. Volha Aniskievič, deputy head physician of the Baranavičy Zonal Center for Hygiene and Epidemiology, explained this fact the following way: "Nobody cares how much they [cases of illness] will increase. Statistics is not what people need to know. They need to understand when the process [the incidence of coronavirus] will subside."<sup>41</sup>

However in contrast to independent media, which faced a lack of transparency over the COVID-19 response from the Health Ministry and hospital facilities,<sup>42</sup> significant pressure was applied to the Belarusian medical staff who first sounded the alarm regarding the dramatic epidemiological situation in the country. For instance at the end of March, Nattalia Laryionava, a laboratory diagnostics doctor at the Viciebsk Hospital of Emergency Medicine, distributed a message on social networks that assessed the situation in Viciebsk as out of control and called the figures reported by the WHO from Belarus mythical. On April 1, she was called to the prosecutor's office for questioning about her comments, but she wasn't charged.<sup>43</sup> On April 30, the head physician of the Viciebsk Clinical Emergency Hospital, Siarhiei Lazar, was relieved of his position shortly after the

41 See: "'This is not what people need to know.' How we tried to find out the latest statistics on coronavirus in Baranovichy [«Это не то, что нужно людям знать». Как мы пытались узнать свежую статистику по коронавирусу в Барановичах]," Intex Press (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.intex-press.by/2020/04/13/eto-ne-to-chto-nuzhno-lyudyam-znat-kak-my-pytalis-uznat-svezhuystatistiku-po-koronavirusu-v-baranovichah/>.

42 See: "The best protection against fakes and panic is truthful and timely provided information. Belarusian Association of Journalists addresses Ministry of Health [Лучшая защита от фейков и паники — правдивая своевременная информация. БАЖ обращается к Минздраву. Заявление]," Belarusian Association of Journalists (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://baj.by/be/content/luchshaya-zashchita-ot-feykov-i-paniki-pravdivaya-svoevremennaya-informaciya-bazh>.

43 See: "Does know the real situation. The prosecutor's office – about a doctor who said that the situation in Viciebsk is getting out of control [«Не владеет обстановкой». Прокуратура — о враче, заявившей, что ситуация в Витебске выходит из-под контроля]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/679124.html>.

publication of his interview,<sup>44</sup> where he criticized the counter-pandemic measures taken by the government and mentioned the shortage of medical protective equipment.<sup>45</sup> These steps, however, encouraged medical staff to practice self-censorship since during further interviews their statements about the state's response to the COVID-19 epidemic became neutral. In addition on April 17, to ease the situation with medical staff, President Lukashenka signed a decree proposing temporary pay rises for doctors working with infectious diseases from BYN 900 to BYN 4,000 per month.<sup>46</sup>

## EPIDEMIOLOGICAL FORECASTS AND DATA MANIPULATIONS

Analysis of public statements by Belarusian officials revealed that there was no consensus about further direction of epidemic dynamics. This can either be explained by a low level of competence and false prediction techniques or underestimation of the gravity of the virus threat. For instance, on March 31, President Lukashenka, referring to a digital analysis of the sickness rate, said that Belarus had reached its peak. He also expected that the peak would go down by Orthodox Easter (April 19). As of March 30, a total of 152 confirmed cases had been reported, including 47 recoveries. On March 31, an officially unconfirmed death of a test-positive 75-year-old patient in Viciebsk was reported by the media. Reportedly, the patient suffered from chronic pulmonary disease. Later that day the Ministry of Health

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44 Tatyana Matveyeva, "It would have enough strength and personnel to survive to the end." Look at the doctors of the very intensive care unit, which is at the forefront [«Хватило бы сил и кадров дожить до конца». Посмотрите на медиков той самой реанимации, которая на передовой],” Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/682333.html>.

45 See: "The chief physician of the Viciebsk City Hospital was fired. Ministry of Health: no connection with publication on TUT.BY [Главврача витебской БСМП уволили. Минздрав: связи с публикацией на TUT. BY нет],” Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/682987.html>.

46 See: "Up to 4000 rubles per month. Which of the doctors and what rises in wages they can get for working with coronavirus [До 4000 рублей в месяц. Кто из медиков и какие надбавки сможет получить за работу с коронавирусом],” Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://finance.tut.by/news681200.html>.

confirmed the first death due to COVID-19. On April 19 the Ministry of Health reported a total of 3,538 hospitalized patients (i.e. excluding the ambulatory cases); forty-seven patients had died since the beginning of the pandemic and 494 recovered. The total number of confirmed cases was not given. More than ninety-eight thousand COVID-19 tests were conducted in Belarus as of date.<sup>47</sup>

Then, on April 9, Health Minister Uladzimir Karanik forecasted that the COVID-19 epidemic was expected to reach its peak in Belarus in late April—early May 2020.<sup>48</sup> This point of view was initially shared by the Head of the WHO Office in Belarus, Batyr Berdyklychev.<sup>49</sup> However, he had to change his position later.<sup>50</sup> According to the Ministry of Health, at least three to a maximum of eighteen new infections were detected per day during March. In April, the trend changed: the daily increase was first 100 cases, then—300-400 each day. It was assumed that this trend should continue until the beginning of May, when a peak incidence was expected in Belarus. At least one of these forecasts did not materialize: during last week of April, 700–900 new cases were recorded in the country per day. On April 29, another record was broken—973 new cases were reported.<sup>51</sup> As it was later revealed, Belarusian authorities simply had used epidemic forecasts

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47 See: "COVID-19 pandemic in Belarus," Wikipedia, accessed April 27, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_in\\_Belarus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Belarus).

48 See: "Karanik: peak of the COVID-19 epidemic in Belarus is forecasted in late April – early May [Караник: пик эпидемии COVID-19 в Беларуси прогнозируется в конце апреля – начале мая],” Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/karanik-pik-epidemii-covid-19-v-belarusi-prognoziyuetsja-v-kontse-aprelja-nachale-maja-386598-2020/>.

49 See: "WHO mission makes preliminary report on coronavirus situation in Belarus [Миссия ВОЗ делает предварительное заключение о ситуации с коронавирусом в Беларуси],” Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/missija-voz-sdelat-predvaritelnoe-zakljuchenie-o-situatsii-s-koronavirusom-v-belarusi-11-aprelja-386612-2020/>.

50 See: Natalya Benitsevich, "Head of the WHO Office in Belarus – why in the country now there is such an increase in new cases of COVID-19 [Глава бюро ВОЗ в Беларуси – о том, почему в стране сейчас такой прирост новых случаев COVID-19],” Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/682830.html>.

51 Lyubov Kasperovich, "Belarus overtakes neighboring countries in the number of new cases of COVID-19. The forecast did not materialize [Беларусь обгоняет соседние страны по количеству новых случаев COVID-19. Прогноз не оправдался],” Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/682528.html>.



for Belarus, provided by a COVID-19 predictive monitoring system developed at Singapore University of Technology and Design. However, this system was based on an inappropriate mathematical model (SIR) and data and couldn't generate accurate epidemiological forecasts. Thus developers of this software decided to delete information from the website of the project, including the forecast for Belarus.<sup>52</sup>

On May 1, a total of 14,917 confirmed cases have been reported, including 2,918 recoveries and 93 deaths. More than 186,000 COVID-19 tests have been conducted in Belarus as of that date. The Head of the WHO Office in Belarus Batyr Berdyklychev immediately called on the Belarusian authorities to take additional steps to stop the spread of the coronavirus in the country.<sup>53</sup> Earlier a team of WHO experts concluded that Belarus entered the community transmission phase, and the country had to introduce community-wide steps to increase physical distancing. Physical distancing measures refer to:

- postponing large gatherings, including sports, religious and cultural events;
- placing in quarantine contacts of confirmed patients and people potentially exposed to the virus;
- introducing options for teleworking, and distance learning for schools, universities, and other educational institutions, and suspending nonessential business;
- reducing nonessential movements, especially for high-risk groups.

The team of experts on a mission to Belarus also recommended:

- strong government commitment and leadership to implement a blend of containment and mitigation measures;

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52 Andrey Elisseyev, "About the coronavirus epidemic forecast in Belarus of the Ministry of Health: where did it come from and what is its problem [О прогнозе Минздрава развития коронавирусной эпидемии в Беларуси: откуда он взялся и в чем его проблема]," Facebook post (website; in Russian), accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/andrei.yelisseyev/posts/10223389200505217>.

53 Natalya Benitsevich, "Head of the WHO Office in Belarus – why in the country now there is such an increase in new cases of COVID-19 [Глава бюро ВОЗ в Беларуси – о том, почему в стране сейчас такой прирост новых случаев COVID-19]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/682830.html>.

- public engagement by all levels of government to clearly, transparently, and regularly communicate the risks, health advice and response measures, including postponing gatherings and curtailing movement;
- continuation of essential health services and socioeconomic support for those in need, especially the most vulnerable.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the negative dynamics of the COVID-19 epidemic in April, Belarusian authorities didn't ban or cancel public worships during Catholic and Orthodox Easter (April 12 and 19, respectively), nationwide *Subbotnik* (April 25) as well as the Victory Day Parade (May 9). Although these decisions had some ideological and political significance against the background of the presidential election campaign, it is highly likely it allowed the epidemiological situation to develop into a negative scenario.

In the beginning of April, the Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (CSFPS) commissioned from its tech-partner Pangramia company an epidemiological forecast<sup>55</sup> using the mathematical model based on SEIR<sup>56</sup> (one of the most common tools for forecasting epidemics) to calculate the possible dynamics of the incidence of COVID-19 in Belarus in a negative scenario (thus without taking additional containing measures). The model used about 20 epidemiological and infrastructural parameters, reliable estimates of which had not been obtained for Belarus, and instead used the global average values of the course of the epidemic in other countries. The model demonstrated following results:<sup>57</sup>

- In the first week of May (70th day of the epidemic),

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54 See: "WHO expert mission to Belarus recommends physical distancing measures as COVID-19 virus transmits in the community," WHO Regional Office for Europe (website), accessed April 30, 2020, <http://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/belarus/news/2020/4/who-expert-mission-to-belarus-recommends-physical-distancing-measures-as-covid-19-virus-transmits-in-the-community>.

55 See: "CSFPS estimated the possible scale of the coronavirus epidemic in Belarus," Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (website, in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://forstrategy.org/ru/posts/20200409>.

56 See: "Compartmental models in epidemiology," Wikipedia, accessed April 30, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compartmental\\_models\\_in\\_epidemiology#The\\_SEIR\\_model](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compartmental_models_in_epidemiology#The_SEIR_model)

57 Since the model has been updated several times in April, some results are provided here for the first time exclusively for this research paper.

the model gives a forecast of about 20 deaths per day and about 210 deaths from the beginning of the epidemic in the country. The number of incoming people with the need for hospitalization is about 1,830 per day, and a total of COVID-19 positive patients for hospitalization are 15,280.

- According to negative estimates, the peak of infection may occur with a slight shift, in the middle of May, and the peak of hospitalizations in early June with a risk of exceeding resources of the national health system.
- In the third week of May—beginning of June, the total number of deaths could be about three thousand with a predicted burden of more than 300 deaths per day, the total number of infected could exceed 115 thousand people (one-and-a-half times more than all available hospital beds), and the maximum number of applications for self-isolation or hospitalization could reach up to two thousand per day.
- In order to cope with the incoming number of patients, no later than mid-May, only moderate and serious cases could be taken to hospitals, leaving the mild and asymptomatic COVID-19 cases under home quarantine.
- This measure may help the national health system withstand the peak of the epidemic at the beginning of June (90th day)
- By mid-June, if the epidemic does not stop and appropriate measures are not taken to expand the current capacity of the health care system as well as the number of hospital beds and staff, it will be not enough to deal with even the most severe cases. In this case the epidemic will extend to the end of autumn—beginning of winter.

The model's figures for COVID-19 infected patients were close to the official data as of May 1 (15,280 vs 14,917). However, there is a significant gap between number of potential and confirmed deaths (210 vs 93). Experts analyzed video footage of the May 3 meeting held by President Lukashenka and found evidence of possible manipulations with statistics (the confirmed number of cases in late April might have been higher than 1,000 per day, but

was reported as being under 1,000).<sup>58</sup> Even more disturbing is journalists' analysis of the number of COVID-19 related casualties among medics. They found the share of medics in total fatalities to be 10% which was unrealistically high against the backdrop of other nations' statistics showing that share to be under 1%. Even if the share of casualties of medics in Belarus is indeed higher than in other nations and equals 2%, that means the total COVID-19 related death toll is around 500, three times higher than what has been officially reported.<sup>59</sup> According to journalist investigations, while the Ministry of Health was reassuring citizens with stable mortality rates from COVID-19, hundreds of special corpse bags were being purchased by hospitals and clinics. The Ministry of Health issued a special instruction to place all coronavirus-infected corpses in these bags, and only then the body in the bag is put into the coffin. For instance, as early as April 3, the Lida Central Hospital placed a tender on the procurement website for the acquisition of 600 pieces of such corpse bags.<sup>60</sup>

One of the reasons for such a state of affairs is that state ministries and agencies have to follow the line of President Lukashenka defined in his public statements. According to his remarks, no people had died from COVID-19 per se in Belarus as of that date: "Not a single person had died from coronavirus in our country. Not a single one! They died from a bouquet of chronic diseases, which they had. Coronavirus is not even a push, it is the atmosphere in which their chronic diseases develop." In his further remarks, Lukashenka addressed the currently hospi-

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58 Dmitry Ivanovich, "How to destroy the months-long work of falsifiers from the Ministry of Health in 1 second [Как за 1 секунду уничтожить многомесячный труд фальсификаторов из Минздрава]," Telegram post (website; in Russian), accessed May 11, 2020, [https://telegra.ph/Kak-za-1-sekundu-unichtozhit-mnogomesyachnyj-trud-falsifikatorov-iz-minzdrava-Glavnyj-po-kozochkam-dostavil-05-11?fbclid=IwAR2kPNTu1Eb1-uzl5Wpvlto2Yi6\\_aNLxNxmjnGn9iz\\_PeOdy6XMjraS-2wk](https://telegra.ph/Kak-za-1-sekundu-unichtozhit-mnogomesyachnyj-trud-falsifikatorov-iz-minzdrava-Glavnyj-po-kozochkam-dostavil-05-11?fbclid=IwAR2kPNTu1Eb1-uzl5Wpvlto2Yi6_aNLxNxmjnGn9iz_PeOdy6XMjraS-2wk).

59 Anton Trafimovich, "Mortality from COVID-19 among doctors in Belarus is 15-30 times higher than in other European countries? How it turned out [Смяротнасць ад COVID-19 сярод медыкаў у Беларусі ў 15-30 разоў вышэйшая за іншыя краіны Эўропы? Як такое атрымалася]," Radio Svaboda (website; in Belarusian), accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30596179.html>.

60 See: "Hospitals buy Hundreds of bags for the dead from COVID-19 [Больницы сотнями закупают мешки для умерших от COVID-19]," Belsat TV (website; in Russian), accessed May 11, 2020, <https://belsat.eu/ru/programs/bolnitsy-sotnyami-zakupayut-meshki-dlya-umershih-ot-covid-19/>.

talized COVID-19 patients: “There’s no reason for them to worry. No one will die from coronavirus in our country. I am stating this publicly.”<sup>61</sup> When publishing the coronavirus-related statistics, the Ministry of Health usually claimed that COVID-19 patients die due to chronic and co-existing illnesses. Those patients who die from coronavirus-infected pneumonia are not recorded by the official COVID-19 statistics.<sup>62</sup>

Belarusian authorities were trying to prove the adequacy of their response to COVID-19 by referring to assessments of the WHO experts<sup>63</sup> or even comparing its response with the so-called Sweden path.<sup>64</sup> However, these comparisons raised more questions than answers. As of May 13, in Belarus a total of 25,828 confirmed cases were reported, including 146 deaths. While Sweden is comparable to Belarus in terms of population (10 versus 9.5 million people) Sweden encouraged its population to practice social distancing earlier and has reported 27,909 confirmed cases, including 3,460 deaths. This comparison provides further insight about the scale of losses from COVID-19 while Belarusian authorities have continued to manipulate official data. They have allegedly been trying to prevent panic with this shady approach, but this could easily lead to the opposite effect as the epidemiological situation has been continuing to get out of the control.

Another indicator confirms this development. As of May 13, Belarus was also ahead of other countries of the former USSR in the number of detected

cases of COVID-19 per 1 million people, according to Our World In Data Research Project and based on data analysis from the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control. So on May 13 in Belarus, 2.6 thousand cases of infection were detected per 1 million people, while in neighboring Russia, 1.5 thousand; Estonia, 1.3 thousand; Moldova, 1.2 thousand; Armenia, 1.1 thousand. Also in Belarus, the highest rate was reported among neighboring countries. In Lithuania, 547 cases were detected per 1 million of the population, in Latvia, 503; in Poland, 447; in Ukraine, 336. For comparison, in Europe this figure is 2.1 thousand cases per 1 million people. Data for selected countries most affected by coronavirus: Spain, 4.8 thousand; Italy, 3.6 thousand; Britain, 3.3 thousand; France, 2.1 thousand; Germany, 2 thousand.<sup>65</sup>

There has been a consensus within the Belarusian expert community regarding the falsification and manipulation of official statistics. However, their scale is a matter of further expert discussion. When analyzing the available Belarus-wide mortality and infectious diseases statistics for Q1 2020, the picture is contradictory.<sup>66</sup> The mortality overall decreased in the whole country by 3.7% during this period. Against this background, Minsk and Viciebsk each demonstrated a 1.9% increase compared to Q1 2019.<sup>67</sup> Coincidentally, the first COVID-19 outbreaks started in Minsk and Viciebsk in April. According to accidentally disclosed data of the Belarusian Society of Resuscitation Anesthetists, at the end of April, 117 people died from coronavirus alone in the intensive care units of Minsk hospitals. Meanwhile, as of May 1, the Ministry of Health reported 93 deaths

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61 See: “Lukashenka: We have already found combinations of drugs to save people [Лукашенко: Мы уже нашли комбинации лекарств, чтобы спасать людей],” Onliner.by (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://people.onliner.by/2020/04/13/Lukashenka-326>.

62 See: “How deaths of patients with COVID-19 don’t get in official statistics [Как смерти пациентов с COVID-19 проходят мимо официальной статистик],” Euroradio (website; in Russian), accessed May 8, 2020, <https://euroradio.by/ru/kak-smerti-pacientov-s-covid-19-prohodyat-mimo-oficialnoy-statistiki>.

63 See: “Karanik: Belarus implements WHO recommendations and keeps the situation with coronavirus under control [Караник: Беларусь выполняет рекомендации ВОЗ и держит ситуацию с коронавирусом под контролем],” Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/karanik-belarus-vypolnjaet-rekomendatsii-voz-i-derzhit-situatsiju-s-koronavirusom-pod-kontrolem-383580-2020/>.

64 Marina Baranovskaya, “Is Sweden and Belarus going the same way in the fight against coronavirus? [Одним ли путем идут Швеция и Беларусь в борьбе с коронавирусом],” Deutsche Welle (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3bZQe>.

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65 See: “Belarus was also ahead of the countries of the former USSR in the number of detected cases of COVID-19 per 1 million people [Беларусь опережает страны бывшего СССР по числу выявленных случаев COVID-19 на 1 млн населения],” Naviny (website; in Russian), accessed May 13, 2020, <https://naviny.by/new/20200513/1589380281-belarus-operezhayet-strany-byvshego-sssr-po-chislu-vyyavlennyh-sluchaev-covid>.

66 This approach helps indirectly to understand the level of mortality from the COVID-19 even though Belarusian authorities have been falsifying the statistics by establishing other cause of death than the coronavirus infection, for instance pneumonia.

67 Dmitry Ivanovich, “With coronavirus, we forgot about the problems of demography. But they haven’t gone anywhere... [С коронавирусом мы забыли про проблемы демографии. А они никуда не делись...],” Facebook post (website; in Russian), Accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/iva.dim1/posts/3002064996517608/>

throughout the country.<sup>68</sup>

However, since the COVID-19 epidemic entered a new phase of community-level transmission in April and the peak is expected at the end of May—beginning of June, the statistics for Q1 2020 don't seem to be representative data. Thus, statistics for Q2 and Q3 2020 may be more relevant in this regard.

But there have been no reasons yet to be optimistic. According to the Eurasian States in Transition (EAST) Research Center, that applied a mathematical model developed by Imperial College London, the COVID-19 epidemic in Belarus may cause up to 68,000 deaths if the Belarusian authorities fail to take proper steps to combat the infection. Such a worst-case scenario also implies nearly 350,000 hospitalizations. If a soft package of measures is introduced in the country, the death toll may be volatile between 15,000 to 32,000. If Belarus imposes severe quarantine measures when the death rate is 18 per week, it will contribute to decreasing the number of coronavirus deaths to 1,860.<sup>69</sup>

## ANTI-CORONACRISIS MEASURES AND THEIR PUBLIC PERCEPTION

From the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Belarusian authorities were more concerned about its geopolitical and economic consequences than its implications to the epidemiological situation in the country. An important signal indicating the level of understanding of the problem in the Belarusian establishment came from President Lukashenka at the end of March—beginning of April. On the one hand, the Belarusian leader was critical of foreign governments for introducing lockdowns, declaring states of

68 See: "A slide appeared on the web about the number of COVID-19 related deaths in Minsk resuscitation departments. Ministry of Health explained where the figure comes from [В Сети появился слайд о числе умерших в «ковидных» реанимациях Минска. Минздрав объяснил, откуда цифра]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), Accessed May 22, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/society/685706.html>.

69 Andrey Yeliseyev, "Coronavirus Epidemic: Scenarios of Consequences for Belarus [Коронавирусная эпидемия: Сценарии последствий для Беларуси]," Eurasian States in Transition Research Center (website; in Russian), Accessed April 30, 2020, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Belarus-covid-scenarios.pdf>.

emergencies, and closing borders. According to him, the "coronapsychosis" crippled national economies almost everywhere in the world, but Belarus couldn't introduce a draconian quarantine due to the dramatic negative consequences it would have on the national economy since it "hasn't a money-printing machine or a pipe" unlike the US and Russia.<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, he claimed that the "mass hysteria" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic reflects not the threat posed by the disease, but rather the attempt of some world "powerful circles" to use this event in order to buy depreciated assets and otherwise transform the world to their benefit without a war.<sup>71</sup> These claims pointed to the fact that Lukashenka was under heavy influence of conspiracy theories produced by some state analytical institutions.<sup>72</sup>

Later, Lukashenka explained why enterprises were not stopped in Belarus. According to him, major global players will use this disaster to crush weaker countries and the prospect may be the following: "Either starve to death, or surrender without war and go under the protectorate, subordinate to the rich and strong states." He also called on people to think about what will happen to the Belarusian economy and people after the pandemic ends, thus emphasizing economic and sociopolitical stability as priorities.<sup>73</sup>

There were not only political, but also economic

70 See: "Lukashenka on the fight against coronavirus: doing without noise and dust [Лукашенко о борьбе с коронавирусом: занимаемся без шума и пыли]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/Lukashenka-poseschaet-belgips-cto-izvestno-ob-etom-predpriyatii-384911-2020/>.

71 See: "Where will Belarus be after coronavirus? – Lukashenka does not exclude attempts to reshape the world without war [Где будет Беларусь после коронавируса? – Лукашенко не исключает попыток поделить мир без войны]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/gde-budet-belarus-posle-koronavirusa-Lukashenka-ne-iskljuchayet-popytok-peredelit-mir-bez-vojnny-385650-2020/>.

72 See: "Expert environment. The project of BelTA and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. Topic – Crown: economics of fear [Экспертная среда. Проект БЕЛТА и Белорусского института стратегических исследований. Тема Корона: экономика страха]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <http://expert.belta.by/06>.

73 See: "Lukashenka: we need to think about what will happen to us after the pandemic ends [Лукашенко: надо думать о том, что будет с нами после того, как уйдет пандемия]," Belarusian Telegraph Agency (website; in Russian), accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/Lukashenka-nado-dumat-o-tom-cto-budet-s-nami-posle-togo-kak-ujdet-pandemija-388744-2020/>.



motives behind the authorities' reluctance to introduce quarantine measures and close the state border. As the Belarusian economy already entered recession shrinking 0.3% in Q1 2020, additional burdens and restrictions on growth would make the economic situation intolerable for large numbers of people especially in the contest of the forthcoming presidential elections on August 9. According to the World Bank, the country's GDP will shrink by 4%,<sup>74</sup> the IMF forecasts a contraction of 6%,<sup>75</sup> and the EBRD expects a decline of 5% in 2020.<sup>76</sup> Belarusian experts from BEROE economic research center have made even more dramatic forecasts predicting a decline in GDP in various scenarios between 3.5% and 18%,<sup>77</sup> and unemployment—between 500 thousand and 1.3 million Belarusians.<sup>78</sup>

While Belarusian authorities were still not recognizing the national epidemic as a problem, they were expressing serious concerns over the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to the national economy. In line with this approach, on April 24, President Lukashenka signed an anti-crisis decree to support the economy in order to minimize negative economic consequences from the pandemic.<sup>79</sup> The document provided support for companies in certain sectors of the economy that have been most affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The list included

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74 See: "Fighting Covid-19," World Bank (website), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33476/9781464815645.pdf>

75 See: "World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown," International Monetary Fund (website), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/~/-/media/Files/Publications/WEO/2020/April/English/text.ashx?la=en>

76 See: "Regional Economic Prospects report. May," European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (website), accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.ebrd.com/cs/Satellite?c=Content&cid=1395290493496&d=&pagename=EBRD%2FContent%2FDownloadDocument>.

77 See: "Dmitry Kruk: The best option for Belarus is a decline of 3.5% of GDP [Дмитрий Крук: Лучший вариант для Беларуси – спад 3,5% ВВП]," Thinktanks. Independent Researches (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2020/04/17/dmitriy-kruk-luchshiy-variant-dlya-belarusi-spad-35-vvp.html>.

78 See: "Up to 1.3 million Belarusians may lose their jobs due to a coronacrisis [Из-за коронакризиса работу могут потерять до 1,3 миллиона белорусов]," Naviny (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://naviny.by/article/20200403/1585924288-iz-zakoronakrizisa-rabotu-mogut-poteryat-do-13-milliona-belorusov>.

79 See: "Decree No. 143 of April 24, 2020, On Supporting the Economy [Указ № 143 от 24 апреля 2020 г. О поддержке экономики]," Official Website of the President of the Republic of Belarus (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <http://president.gov.by/uploads/documents/2020/143uk.pdf>.

manufacturing, textile and clothing manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, air travel, fitness centers, beauty salons, hairdressers, restaurants, bars, travel companies and others. Support measures include tax holidays provided by local authorities until September 30, rent free periods, and a moratorium on increasing rent rates. Individual entrepreneurs were given the opportunity to switch to other tax regimes in the course of the year.

The Ministers of health, antimonopoly regulation, and trade, as well as the chairman of the State Standardization Committee, were granted the power to suspend the operation of a shopping facility, catering facility for up to 90 days until violations of the legislation on pricing, trade, and sanitary and epidemiological welfare of the population were eliminated.

In order to preserve employment and increase labor mobility, the minimum period for warning employees about changes in essential working conditions by the employer was extended. The period of a possible temporary transfer of workers due to production needs was also extended to 3 months.

A sick leave payment will be provided to those who take care of a child under the age of ten years, attending a pre-school or general secondary education institution, if this child is a first or second level contact.

In order to simplify the procurement procedures, customers were granted the right to procure from one source (to the extent necessary to meet two month demand) if the contract with the previous supplier has been terminated. Suppliers who have not fulfilled their obligations and are forced to terminate the contract for objective reasons will temporarily not be included in the list of unscrupulous suppliers. In addition, the Government is empowered to determine, if necessary, a different procedure for public procurement.

Individuals who received antiseptics, disinfectants, and food, as part of the implementation of sanitary and anti-epidemic measures, were exempted from income tax.

The National Bank published its April survey on business sentiment. The survey was based on interviews of top-managers of 1,700 enterprises in

four aggregated sectors: industry, trade, construction, and transport. The resulting index is smoothed to factor out seasonal fluctuations. In April 2020, the survey reported the lowest smoothed aggregate business sentiment index on record. It went down to negative 17.3 versus negative 5.6 in March 2020 and positive 3.9 in April 2019. The smoothed index in industry was negative 13.2 down from negative 4.3 in March 2020 and positive 4.1 in April 2019. The business sentiment index in trade was down to negative 16.2 (a record low) from negative 1 in March 2020 and positive 7.5 in April 2019. The smoothed index in construction fell to negative 16.1 from negative 6.3 in March 2020 and negative 1.5 in April 2019.<sup>80</sup>

According to First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Krutoi, in addition to the already adopted package of measures, the government was preparing two more packages of measures to support the economy.<sup>81</sup>

They will authorize support for the social protection sector and labor market. In the social sphere the authorities plan to increase financial assistance for people with low incomes who were receiving state targeted social assistance (first of all, to respective families with children). The allowance for each family member will be increased to bring their income to the level of the minimum subsistence budget. A total of about 300 million rubles will be allocated to this.

The Government also plans to support the employees of those enterprises that were forced to halt production and employees that have been transferred to part-time employment during the crisis. These workers will be additionally paid up to the minimum wage, which is now 375 Belarusian rubles (BYN).

Another measure the Government plans is to increase the unemployment allowance for those who lost their jobs in the second quarter of 2020 (i.e.

due to the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the economy) to the subsistence minimum of BYN 247 / USD 100 (instead of the current maximum level of BYN 54 / USD 22). This step is designed to encourage the unemployed to register with the employment service. After such registration, if an unemployed person refuses two offers of suitable work from an employment service, he or she is removed from the unemployment record and ceases to receive the allowance accordingly. The same rule will apply to those who will receive the new, higher allowances.

With their unemployment allowance raise, the authorities are essentially using the anti-crisis policy as a pretext for creating the social protection mechanism that has been advocated for many years by supporters of structural reforms of the Belarusian economy. This, in its turn, opens the way to a more dynamic reform of the state enterprises even before voting day for the presidential election. Another motive for this is to take steps towards opening new loan programs from the IMF, within the framework of combating negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and for medium-term support of the structural reform of the Belarusian economy.

Overall the authorities intend to spend from BYN 5 to 6 billion (USD 2 to 2.5 billion) to minimize the fallout from the global pandemic on the economy and social sphere. The increase in financing of the health care sector alone will amount to about BYN 850 million (USD 350 million) in 2020. To this end, the government plans to attract foreign loans totaling USD 2–2.5 billion. While negotiations with international financial institutions are ongoing, Belarus has placed 10 billion Russian rubles (USD 133.8 million) worth of five-year bonds with a coupon rate of 8.5% per annum on the Moscow Stock Exchange. Besides, the Belarusian government is holding negotiations with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to allocate a USD 250 million credit line for Belarusbank and USD 100 million credit line from the development bank to support companies from the most affected sectors of the economy. By supporting the social sector, the authorities are compensating for their inability to keep many of the state-owned enterprises afloat.

Thus, the economic crisis and the response strat-

80 See: "Belarusian enterprises have the worst mood in the history of observations [У белорусских предприятий худшие настроения за всю историю наблюдений]," Banki24 (website; in Russian), accessed May 7, 2020, <https://banki24.by/news/4160-u-belorusskih-predpriyatiy-hudshie>.

81 See: "The authorities will spend up to 6 billion rubles to support the economy due to COVID-19 [Власти потратят до 6 млрд рублей на поддержку экономики при COVID-19]," Tut.By (website; in Russian), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://news.tut.by/economics/682366.html>.

egy chosen by the authorities put an increased burden on the private sector. The authorities' strategy allows them to "save" strategically important state-owned enterprises and dramatically increase social spending. All this will turn the state into the main source of stable jobs and income for the population. But instead of relying on the loyalty of the employees of the state-owned enterprises (which the government has no money to save) the authorities will now have to rely on the loyalty of employees of budget financed organizations and pensioners to maintain their political dominance. And the interests of the latter two groups are now opposed to the interests of the state enterprises and their employees as they both compete for the scarce budgetary funds. This creates prerequisites both for structural reform of the public sector of the economy and for regrouping on the political field, including transformation of the institutional design of the Belarusian state.

Interestingly, a public opinion poll conducted in April by BEROE economic research center and SA-TIO company demonstrated that the main concern of Belarusians during the coronavirus epidemic has been the decline in income, and only then—the collapse of the healthcare system. Many have expected from the authorities a greater reaction and proactive steps in the fight against the epidemic—the cancellation of mass events, the introduction of quarantine in educational institutions, although they haven't not advocated a total lockdown. On the whole, in April Belarusians began to look more pessimistically at the situation. Sixty-seven percent of respondents said that the situation had worsened over the month, 29% noted improvement, 4% did not notice changes.

According to the poll, the number of pessimists increased. Already 66% of respondents believed that within a month the situation would worsen. In March 62% believed the situation would worsen. Also the number of optimists increased by two percentage points up to 19%. The proportion of those who found it difficult to answer or did not expect changes, decreased.

The survey results also showed that Belarusians are more pessimistic about the prospects of the economic crisis provoked by the coronavirus pandemic. Forty-six percent of Belarusians expect a long crisis,

and 43% expect improvement within 6-12 months.

There is a connection between the expectations of the development of the epidemiological situation and the expectations of economic development. Fifty-four percent of those who expect the epidemiological situation to worsen also expect a protracted crisis. Among those who expect an improvement of the situation, only 27% expect a protracted crisis. But 28% expect an economic recovery within 2-3 months. Belarusians are increasingly feeling a drop in income. Fifty-two percent already reported a decline in revenue. The average revenue reduction was 45%. The outlook also remains negative. Forty-eight percent indicated a further drop in income.

According to the poll, Belarusians advocate state support to enterprises. In one form or another, 94% of respondents favor it. At the same time, 69% believe that assistance is needed for both state and private companies, regardless of ownership. Only 5% of respondents are sure that support should be provided first, only to the largest enterprises with a large number of employees.

Among Belarusians, there is a growing demand for a clearer and more active response by the authorities to epidemiological threats. Society remains heavily involved in coronavirus issues and follows the news. According to the poll, only 12% admitted that they did not follow the news. Moreover, the older people are, the more likely they follow news about the epidemic.

The April poll also revealed that the majority of Belarusians are in favor of a so-called soft quarantine based on social distancing measures. However, Belarusians understand these measures in their own way. The most anticipated measure of social distancing is the prohibition of mass social events (74%). The second area of consensus relates to the improvement of official information about the COVID-19 epidemic in the country (71%). The third most popular measure among Belarusians is the closure of educational institutions (52%). This is followed by remote work regime (49%) and then border closure (38%). The introduction of curfews and the ban on going out was supported by only 17% of respondents.

According to the poll, Belarusians understand quarantine as a rather soft option. Sixty-three per-

cent favor being able to go out of the house while maintaining the distance—55% favor staying at home and rarely going out on the streets.<sup>82</sup>

## INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE

The Belarusian leadership has chosen a very risky approach to managing the epidemic and covering it in the media. If the epidemic is controlled, this approach will allow Lukashenka to position himself as triumphant and “smarter than the rest.” But if the epidemic does get out of control and the number of fatalities becomes high, the political costs of the authorities’ strategy could be very high. The outrage against the erroneous anti-epidemic policies coupled with economic downturn might create preconditions for a serious crisis of domestic and international legitimacy against the background of forthcoming presidential elections on August 9 this year.

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82 See: “Research: how Belarusians react to coronavirus and whether they want to quarantine? [Исследование: как беларусы реагируют на коронавирус и хотят ли они карантина?]” BEROС economic research center (website; in Russian), accessed May 1, 2020, <http://www.beroc.by/media/issledovanie-kak-belarusy-reagirujut-na-koronavirus-i-hotjat-li-oni-karantina/>.





Viktor Orbán in Russian-Hungarian talks. Photo: kremlin.ru

Bálint Madlovics

# HUNGARY



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### Bálint Madlovics

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Two months after the first pair of cases were confirmed<sup>1</sup> on March 4, the total number of people officially diagnosed with COVID-19 in Hungary reached 3,035 with 351 deaths.<sup>2</sup> The same two months saw the Hungarian autocracy strengthening its position by accelerating the concentration of power in the political and economic spheres and paralyzing opposition. While this result is in line with the general aims of Viktor Orbán's regime,<sup>3</sup> reaching it did not happen because of a "masterplan" but rather a more evolutionary process. This required changing the course of action Orbán had planned for the year, as well as him accepting the gravity of the situation from the beginning.

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1 The first unconfirmed case is a Hungarian man who was later said to infect his father, the first Hungarian confirmed case. The son was examined on 27 February but released from the hospital. It is unclear whether he was tested for COVID. Bozzay Balázs, "Megvizsgálták, de elengedték az első magyar koronavírussos fiát. Most azt mondják, ő fertőzhetette meg az apját [They Tested and Released the Son of the First Hungarian Infected with COVID. Now They Say He Might Have Infected His Father]," March 8, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/08/kinai\\_koronavirus\\_magyarorszag\\_karanten\\_vizsgalat\\_teszt/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/08/kinai_koronavirus_magyarorszag_karanten_vizsgalat_teszt/).

2 As of 4 May. For up-to-date information, see "About Hungary - CORONAVIRUS: Here's the Latest," accessed May 4, 2020, <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/coronavirus-heres-the-latest/>.

3 On the Hungarian autocracy, see Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016); Peter Krasztev and Jon Van Til, eds., *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy* (Budapest; New York: CEU Press, 2015).

## FROM SUB-ISSUE TO CENTRAL ISSUE

For the Hungarian regime, the period between late January and late March can be described as a transition from COVID-19 being a sub-issue to it being a central issue. This may not be obvious if we look only at the official measures. Formal preparations for the pandemic were initiated by the government more than a month before the first confirmed cases. The Operational Group (*Operatív Törzs* in Hungarian) tasked with coordinating defense against the epidemic was set up on January 31 by decree, and it published an action plan the next day.<sup>4</sup> Also on February 1, a person arriving from Wuhan, the center of the pandemic in China, was quarantined at Budapest Airport, although he later tested negative for COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Orbán did not believe there would be a serious epidemic in Europe. On February 12, he announced a so-called national consultation, involving the population via mailed surveys on topics

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4 "The Operational Group's Action Plan for Protection against the Coronavirus Epidemic," Hungarian Government, February 1, 2020, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-interior/news/the-operational-group-s-action-plan-for-protection-against-the-coronavirus-epidemic>.

5 "Nem fertőzött koronavírussal a Wuhanban járt, Ferihegyen elkülönített férfi [The Man from Wuhan, Quarantined in Ferihegy, is Not Infected with COVID]," Index.hu, February 1, 2020, [https://index.hu/techtud/2020/02/01/egy\\_wuhanban\\_jart\\_lazas\\_beteget\\_kulonitettek\\_el\\_a\\_liszt\\_ferenc\\_repuloteren/](https://index.hu/techtud/2020/02/01/egy_wuhanban_jart_lazas_beteget_kulonitettek_el_a_liszt_ferenc_repuloteren/).

he and his party, Fidesz, had recently made central: the “unearned” compensation of Roma children for inferior education, and the “jail business” of prison inmates receiving redress for having been incarcerated in inhumane conditions.<sup>6</sup> As for COVID-19, it was treated as a sub-issue in the government’s anti-migration narrative, which had dominated governmental communication since 2015. When Orbán first mentioned the virus in a public interview he said that “now the coronavirus gathers all attention, but the historic challenge is still migration,”<sup>7</sup> and later he stated that “illegal migration and the COVID epidemic are clearly correlated.”<sup>8</sup> The first two confirmed cases of COVID-19—two Iranian students—were used as proof for this correlation, and they were depicted as disorderly and noncooperative in governmental media.<sup>9</sup>

Transition from COVID-19 being a sub-issue began when Orbán realized (1) the people did not connect the epidemic to migration but saw it as a new, and more burning problem, and (2) his own party members and MPs began treating the epidemic as a central issue. Based on the investigative article of Pál Dániel Rényi,<sup>10</sup> three signs of the latter could be noticed. First, Orbán was pressured by MPs whose constituents bombarded them with questions like “from where they will buy hand sanitizer, who will help with shopping, when will there be a curfew, how will we survive this.” Second, genuine fear appeared among members of the governing coalition as well, particularly older MPs of the smaller governing party, KDNP (Christian Democratic People’s Party) who started wearing masks during parliamentary sessions.

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6 “Orbán Bejelentett Egy Újabb Nemzeti Konzultációt [Orbán Announced a New National Consultation],” 444.hu, February 12, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/02/12/orban-bejelentett-egy-ujabb-nemzeti-konzultaciot>.

7 “Orbán: Bár a Koronavírus Minden Figyelmet Magához Vonz, a Történelmi Kihívás Továbbra Is a Migráció [Orbán: While COVID Gathers All Attention, the Historic Challenge Is Still Migration],” 444.hu, February 28, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/02/28/orban-bar-a-koronavirus-minden-figyelmet-magahoz-vonz-a-tortenelmi-kihivas-tovabbra-is-a-migracio>.

8 “Orbán: Az illegális migráció és a koronavírus-járvány között egyértelműen kapcsolat van [Orbán: Illegal Migration and the COVID Epidemic are Clearly Correlated],” 24.hu, March 10, 2020, <https://24.hu/kulfold/2020/03/10/koronavirus-orban-viktor/>.

9 Tamás Botos, “A Propaganda Ott Tart, Mintha a Koronavírus Nálunk Csak a Rendetlenkedő Iráni Diákok Miatt Lenne Probléma [According to the Propaganda, COVID Is a Problem Only Because of the Disorderly Iranian Students],” 444, March 10, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/03/10/a-propaganda-ott-tart-mintha-a-koronavirus-nalunk-csak-a-rendetlenkedo-irani-diakok-miatt-lenne-problema>.

10 Pál Dániel Rényi, “Saját Emberei Ébresztették Rá Orbánt, Hogy a Vírus Itt van a Nyakunkon [His Own People Forced Orbán to Realize That the Epidemic Was Imminent],” 444.hu, April 4, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/04/sajat-emberei-ebresztettek-ra-orbant-hogy-a-virus-itt-van-a-nyakunkon>.

Third, the most striking sign of discrepancy between Orbán and his own party members manifested after WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the government ordered a state of emergency on March 11. The government introduced numerous confinement restrictions (see below) but refused to close schools, claiming COVID-19 did not infect children.<sup>11</sup> Orbán formally took control of the work of the Operational Group, but he was still not involved in decision making—later that day, he travelled to Chişinău to discuss bilateral relations between Moldova and Hungary. On March 13, while Orbán still argued that schools should not be closed as the virus “has primarily been brought into Hungary by foreigners, and is spreading among foreigners,”<sup>12</sup> members of the governing coalition feared that the decision not to close schools would result in social resistance and self-organization of teachers and parents. MPs of both Fidesz and KDNP sided with the opposition in requesting the closing of schools, and Orbán received the statement of parliamentary parties only shortly before it was proclaimed. Orbán ordered that schools be closed that evening.<sup>13</sup>

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11 “Veszélyhelyzetet rendelt el a kormány [The Government Ordered a State of Emergency],” March 11, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/11/koronavirus-veszhelyzet\\_iskola\\_ovoda\\_bezaras\\_szunet\\_rendezvenyek\\_otthoni\\_karanten\\_kormany\\_sportesemenyek/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/11/koronavirus-veszhelyzet_iskola_ovoda_bezaras_szunet_rendezvenyek_otthoni_karanten_kormany_sportesemenyek/).

12 Viktor Orbán, Radio programme “Good Morning Hungary,” Kossuth Rádió, March 13, 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-9/>.

13 “Orbán: Hétfőtől bezárják az iskolákat [Orbán: Schools Close on Monday],” Index.hu, March 13, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/13/koronavirus\\_orban\\_viktor\\_vedekezes\\_jarvany\\_karanten\\_iskolak\\_bezaras/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/13/koronavirus_orban_viktor_vedekezes_jarvany_karanten_iskolak_bezaras/).



## THE ENABLING ACT: REFRAMING NATION AND SECURITY

From then on, Orbán treated COVID-19 as a central issue, and he took “manual control” of the defense against the pandemic. From March 16, Orbán has chaired the meetings of the Operational Group, and he took infrastructural-logistical control of health care in his own hands.<sup>14</sup> In the political arena, he managed to regain the narrative after the government submitted the Coronavirus Act, or the “Enabling Act” as it is usually referred to by opposition commentators.<sup>15</sup> The Act<sup>16</sup> approves the governmental decrees put into effect since March 11 (i.e., the restrictions following the declaration of state of emergency) and enables the government in advance to extend the effect of future emergency decrees, possibly deviating from ordinary law, until the end of the state of emergency. As the Fundamental Law of Hungary states that it is the government that can declare the end of a state of emergency, the Act—short of a sunset clause—allows the government to rule by decree until it sees fit. De jure, this power is constrained by (1) the parliament, which can revoke the Act, and (2) the Constitutional Court, which can nullify decrees not related to the crisis. De facto, Orbán’s autocratic setting has been built by placing clients of his single-pyramid patronal network in key positions, including the Constitutional Court and the MPs comprising his two-thirds majority.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this political patronalization, the kind of disobedience described above had virtually never happened since the beginning of the Orbán regime (2010). Thus, the Act indeed harmonizes Orbán’s de facto and de jure authority, formally granting him the unconstrained power he had previously held only informally. (The Act also declares

that, until the day following the end of the emergency, no referenda or midterm elections can be held, and already scheduled elections will be cancelled, but it does not mention general elections.)<sup>18</sup>

Talking about an authoritarian response to the pandemic, it is tempting to interpret the Act as the institutionalization of unconstrained power: using and abusing a situation when the emergency provides enough justification in people’s eyes to disable democratic checks for “effective crisis management.” But Orbán had already had unconstrained power, and there is nothing he can now achieve with the Act he could not achieve before under the autocratic setting he established. This is underlined by the fact that, apart from restricting the freedom of movement, the government has not used the “extra” power for anything it did not do earlier—extraordinary authority has been used for quite ordinary politics (ordinary for the Orbán regime), only now it is happening at a more accelerated pace. This includes several decrees that have, contrary to the Act, little or nothing to do with the pandemic, such as: annulling the decision of the City Council to stop building a “museum quarters” at the expense of Budapest’s City Park (*Városliget*); forbidding sex changes; changing the number of government-appointed board members in Budapest theaters; limiting the competences of local governments by creating 20 new bodies called “county and capital defense committees,” headed by 20 Fidesz politicians; and various economic measures, including the nationalization of certain companies (see below).<sup>19</sup> The only novel change passed as part of the Act was that which criminalizes those who publicize fake or “genuine facts distorted in a way that can hamper successful protection,” although this restriction of freedom of speech has not been used against critical journalists yet.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the Act helped Orbán not extend his power so much as regain his narrative. Fidesz deceived the opposition by inviting them to a parliamentary negotia-

14 Pál Dániel Rényi, “Járványkormányzás: Nem Vírusra Tesztelnek, Hanem Választópolgárokra [Epidemic Governance: Testing Not for the Virus but for the Voters],” 444, April 24, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/24/jarvanykormanyzas-nem-virusra-tesztelnek-hanem-valasztopolgarokra>.

15 For a fine legal analysis, see Kim Lane Scheppele, “Orban’s Emergency,” *Verfassungsblog* (blog), March 29, 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/orbans-emergency/>.

16 Eva S. Balogh, “Translation of Draft Law ‘On Protecting Against the Coronavirus,’” *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), March 22, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/03/21/translation-of-draft-law-on-protecting-against-the-coronavirus/>.

17 Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State. The Case of Hungary*, (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016), 113–30; cf. Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

18 Bakó Bea, “Tényleg diktatúrát csinál Orbán? Elmagyarázzuk a felhatalmazási törvényt! [Is Orbán Making a Dictatorship? We Explain the Enabling Act!],” *Azonali.hu*, March 30, 2020, [http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200330\\_most-akkor-diktaturat-csinal-orban-elmagyarazzuk-a-felhatalmazasi-torvenyt](http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200330_most-akkor-diktaturat-csinal-orban-elmagyarazzuk-a-felhatalmazasi-torvenyt).

19 Eva S. Balogh, “Decrees That Have Nothing to Do with the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), April 1, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/04/01/decrees-that-have-nothing-to-do-with-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>; “Diktatúra-monitoringot működtet az MSZP [MSZP Starts Dictatorship-Monitoring],” *Népszava*, April 20, 2020, [https://nepszava.hu/3075229\\_diktatura-monitoringot-mukodtet-az-mszp](https://nepszava.hu/3075229_diktatura-monitoringot-mukodtet-az-mszp).

20 Cf. “Koronavírus: Rémhírtérjesztés miatt emeltek vádat egy férfi ellen [COVID: One Man was Charged with Scaremongering],” *Magyar Hang*, May 6, 2020, <https://magyarhang.org/belfold/2020/05/06/koronavirus-remhirtarjesztzes-miatt-emeltek-vadat-egy-ferfi-ellen/>.



tion about the proposed Act on March 18, without telling them the bill would be submitted two days later.<sup>21</sup> When the bill was submitted, the opposition MPs refused to support it or vote on it with urgency (something that would have required deviation from the Standing Orders of the Parliament and, therefore, a four-fifths majority). This gave Orbán the chance to blame the opposition for breaking unity in the fight against the pandemic and hampering the government's efforts in protecting the population, all for political gain.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Orbán could expect that the Enabling Act would activate opposition reflexes and restart a debate, namely about democracy and the rule of law. This is a debate (1) he is already familiar and comfortable with, (2) his supporters know and understand as unjust criticism, and (3) ordinary citizens afraid of the crisis believe to be unnecessary criticism. In short, Orbán could use the Act to define a new political cleavage and activate those on both sides, making everyone play according to their roles: the opposition and the international environment criticizing Orbán, while he is posing as the protector and obstructed savior of the nation in a time of crisis. Government media interpreted the opposition's refusal to support the urgent vote on the bill as a "crime against humanity," and they started speaking about "pro-virus opposition."<sup>23</sup> A pro-government journalist in the parastatal channel HírTV opined that "certain opposition-leaning channels do not support the Hungarian people, the whole of Europe, or even the Hungarian economy, but openly support the virus," whereas another one on the same show went as far as to "recommend arresting them in such a state of emergency."<sup>24</sup>

The Act passed on March 30 with only pro-government votes.<sup>25</sup> Since then, every kind of criticism against government measures has been interpreted according to

the outlined narrative, as attacks on the government rather than efforts to protect the Hungarian people. Between 2015 and now, the regime talked about "pro-migrant opposition" and used the anti-migration narrative—not because it was xenophobic per se but because it combined two elements: the feeling of security and populist nationalism (an ideological instrument used by Orbán since the early 2000s to depict himself and his patronal network as the only legitimate representative of the national interest).<sup>26</sup> The political result of the Act was reframing these two elements in the frame of the epidemic. In the regime's narrative, the condition of legitimacy and even of belonging to the nation<sup>27</sup> is no longer supporting whatever Orbán does under the threat of migration, but supporting whatever Orbán does under the threat of the epidemic.

## RESTRICTIONS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: FROM CRISIS MANAGEMENT TO AUTOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

As I mentioned, the state of emergency was needed to legalize restrictions on freedom of movement, or more generally, confinement restrictions. On March 11, the government announced the inflow of people from Italy, China, South Korea, and Iran would be restricted; indoor events with over 100 people and outdoor events with over 500 people would be banned; and universities would close, meaning only online (distance) learning would be allowed.<sup>28</sup> The latter measures were followed by the closing of primary and secondary schools, under the political conditions described above. The government has been criticized for not providing necessary digital

21 Rényi, "Saját Emberei Ébresztették Rá Orbánt, Hogy a Vírus Itt van a Nyakunkon."

22 András Stumpf, "A legelkeserítőbb bravúr [The Most Appalling Bravura]," *Heti Válasz*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/03/24/kiveteles-jogrend-felhatalmazasi-torveny-velemeny/>.

23 Dóra Diószegi-Horváth, "Nép elleni bűncselekmény, magyarság gyilkosai, víruspárti ellenzék – így értékelték a tegnapi napot a kormánylapok [Crime against humanity, murderers of Hungarians, pro-virus opposition – here is how yesterday was presented in government papers]," *Mérce*, March 24, 2020, <https://merce.hu/2020/03/24/nep-elleni-buncselekmeny-magyarsag-gyilkosai-virusparti-ellenzek-igy-ertekelték-a-tegnapi-napot-a-kormanylapok/>.

24 Magyarország Élőben Extra: Megadja Gáborral És Békés Mártonnal, HírTV, March 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFEubASGwt8>.

25 "Megszavazta az Országgyűlés a koronavírus-törvényt, Áder pedig ki is hirdette [Coronavirus Act Passes in the Parliament, Áder already Proclaimed It]," March 30, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/30/koronavirus-torveny\\_koronavirus\\_szavazas\\_parlament/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/30/koronavirus-torveny_koronavirus_szavazas_parlament/).

26 Bálint Madlovics, "It's Not Just Hate: Attitudes toward Migrants in a Dominated Sphere of Communication in Hungary," in *After the Fence: Approaches and Attitudes about Migration in Central Eastern Europe*, ed. Dániel Mikecz, 1st ed. (Budapest: European Liberal Forum - Republikon Intézet, 2017), 6–31.

27 Cf. Eva S. Balogh, "László Kövér Calls Members of the Opposition Compradors in the Pay of the Jewish World Elite," *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), April 30, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/04/29/laszlo-kover-calls-members-of-the-opposition-compradors-in-the-pay-of-the-jewish-world-elite/>.

28 "Veszélyhelyzetet rendelt el a kormány [The Government Ordered a State of Emergency]."

equipment for poorer students,<sup>29</sup> and for not being ready with a digital curriculum despite there being a government commissioner for digital education in place for the last four years.<sup>30</sup>

On March 16, Orbán announced the second wave of restrictions: closing Hungarian borders from passenger traffic; closing nightclubs and movie theaters; banning outdoor events altogether; and restricting opening hours so that restaurants and cafés must close at 3 p.m.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the third wave of restrictions came with the lockdown, originally issued by the Hungarian Government for two weeks (from March 28 to April 11). During the lockdown, people in Hungary were only allowed to leave their homes for “substantial reasons,” although the list of such activities ranges from work through shopping to hairdressers. In public spaces, people must keep a 1.5-meter distance from each other. While groceries, pharmacies, markets, and drugstores remain open (with limited opening hours in some cases), people over the age of 65 are allowed to visit these places between 9 a.m. and noon, while others are banned from entering during this time. Violating restrictions is punishable with a fine up to HUF 500 thousand (ca. EUR 1400).<sup>32</sup> The stay-at-home regulations have been partially lifted in the countryside, while they have been prolonged indefinitely for Budapest and the agglomeration. From May 4, shops in the countryside have no limits on opening hours, and terraces and gardens of restaurants and open-air beaches and baths can open. Wearing facemasks in stores and on public transportation, however, is now compulsory nationwide.<sup>33</sup>

While confinement restrictions clearly reflect the government’s aim to mitigate the epidemiological crisis,

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29 “Akár Százezer Magyar Diák Is Kieshet a Digitális Oktatásból a Szegénység És Az Elszigeteltség Miatt [Up to One Hundred Thousand Hungarian Students May Drop out of Digital Education Due to Poverty and Isolation],” 168ora.hu, accessed May 8, 2020, <http://168ora.hu/itthon/digitalis-oktatas-szegenyseg-kimaradok-szamitogep-hozzaferes-kebelsberg-kozpont-diakok-184471>.

30 Zoltán Ceglédi, “Digitális oktatás – Czunyiné hol vagy? [Digital education - where are you, Czunyiné?],” hvg.hu, March 15, 2020, [https://hvg.hu/kultura/20200315\\_Cegledi\\_digitalis\\_oktatas\\_Czunyine\\_hol\\_vagy](https://hvg.hu/kultura/20200315_Cegledi_digitalis_oktatas_Czunyine_hol_vagy).

31 “Orbán: Magyarország határait a személyforgalom előtt lezárjuk [Orbán: We Close Hungary’s Borders for Passenger Traffic],” Index.hu, March 16, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/16/orban\\_parlament\\_koronavirus\\_magyarorszagon/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/16/orban_parlament_koronavirus_magyarorszagon/).

32 “Hungary Goes into Lockdown against Coronavirus,” Index.hu, March 27, 2020, [https://index.hu/english/2020/03/27/coronavirus\\_hungary\\_lockdown/](https://index.hu/english/2020/03/27/coronavirus_hungary_lockdown/).

33 “Coronavirus in Hungary: Government Partially Lifts Stay-at-Home Order, Budapest Remains under Lockdown,” Index.hu, April 29, 2020, [https://index.hu/english/2020/04/29/coronavirus\\_hungary\\_stay\\_at\\_home\\_order\\_partially\\_lifted/](https://index.hu/english/2020/04/29/coronavirus_hungary_stay_at_home_order_partially_lifted/).

political motives also became visible before Easter. On April 3, Orbán said in a radio interview that the government would decide whether the lockdown would be prolonged to the long weekend, but no decision was made—instead, the decision as well as responsibility was given to local governments. According to Rényi, Orbán did not focus on epidemiological arguments but instead focused on the fact that the lockdown was a very divisive issue, especially during Easter. He also adds that “By default, the government tends to delay further restrictions because it does not want to exacerbate the economic damage caused by the crisis with nationwide closures, and thus suffer additional political damage.”<sup>34</sup> The decree that regulated the competences of mayors for Easter was published on April 9 in the evening, only one and a half hours before Good Friday.<sup>35</sup> Making a decision on such short notice, some mayors decided to close down their whole city (like Nagykovácsi, Nagymaros, and Zebegény), whereas there were examples of no or partial lockdowns as well (like Margaret Island and Normafa in Budapest).<sup>36</sup>

Yet such steps point only to political motives, not distinctly authoritarian ones. The latter have manifested in the way the regime used COVID-19 as an excuse to cut state funding of the opposition, including both opposition parties and opposition-led local governments. The government used the ideological panel of “burden sharing” to legitimize channeling 50% of financing of every party to the special fund for the defense against the epidemic.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this cut affects Fidesz as well but it deprives the opposition from one of its main sources of revenue, while the funding of Fidesz dwarfs in comparison to the state resources and public (as well as parastatal) channels Orbán uses for campaigning. Similarly, the cuts affecting local governments do affect Fidesz as well as opposition-led municipalities, but they predominantly hit the latter. As

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34 Rényi, “Járványkormányzás.”

35 “Megjelent a rendelet, ezeket a jogosítványokat kapják a polgármesterek húsvét idejére [Here is the Decree about What Competences will Mayors have During Easter],” 24.hu, April 9, 2020, <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/04/09/koronavirus-husvet-kijarasi-korlatozas-lezaras-rendelet/>.

36 András Földes, “Ide NE menjen kirándulni húsvétkor! Meg ide se, meg ide se [Do NOT go here during Easter! And neither here, nor here],” Index.hu, April 11, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/11/kirandulas\\_kijarasi\\_korlatozas\\_lezarasok\\_margit-sziget\\_normafa\\_romai-part\\_szentendre\\_dunakanyar/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/11/kirandulas_kijarasi_korlatozas_lezarasok_margit-sziget_normafa_romai-part_szentendre_dunakanyar/).

37 “Különadókat vezet be a kormány, 1345 milliárd forint jut gazdaságvédelemre [The government introduces special taxes, 1345 billion forints are spent on protection of the economy],” Index.hu, April 4, 2020, [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/04/naponta\\_4\\_ezer\\_magyar\\_veszti\\_el\\_az\\_allasat\\_1345\\_milliard\\_forint\\_van\\_a\\_gazdasagvedelemre/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/04/naponta_4_ezer_magyar_veszti_el_az_allasat_1345_milliard_forint_van_a_gazdasagvedelemre/).

an economic journalist reminds us,<sup>38</sup> approximately half of the revenues of local governments comes from the central budget and half from local taxes. The pandemic already puts local governments in a difficult position as (1) their revenues from the local business tax, which makes up one-quarter of total revenues, dropped significantly due to the pandemic, and (2) they must take on special tasks in social programs such as elderly care, nursing homes, catering for children, and care for the homeless.<sup>39</sup> Again referring to “burden sharing,” the government channeled the vehicle tax from local governments into the above-mentioned fund, and made public parking free in the country to “help social distancing.”<sup>40</sup> The tax makes up 1% of the income of county towns, as opposed to 1.6% in the case of local governments of the districts of Budapest, the majority of which has been led by opposition mayors since 2019. The parking fee is a less significant source of revenue but it is collected only by 49 local governments, led predominantly by opposition mayors.<sup>41</sup> On April 7, a statement opposing the cut of municipal revenues was signed by 41 independent and opposition mayors, including Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Budapest.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, a Fidesz mayor argued that the cuts should not cause any trouble where there is prudent financing, and “a good leader does not complain but makes the most of the given circumstances.”<sup>43</sup>

Beyond normative cuts of funding, some opposition mayors also had to face discretionary or targeted budgetary withdrawals concerning only their municipality. The

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38 Bucsky Péter, “Már azelőtt padlóra kerültek az önkormányzatok, hogy a kormány tovább ütötte volna őket [Local governments had been in a bad shape even before the government started hitting them],” *G7.hu*, April 7, 2020, <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20200407/mar-azelőtt-padlora-kerultek-az-onkormanyzatok-hogy-a-kormany-tovabb-utotte-volna-oket/>.  
39 “Közös Közleményben Tiltakoznak Budapest Ellenzéki Polgármesterei a Kormány Megszorító Csomagja Miatt [Budapest Mayors Protest against Government Austerities in a Joint Statement],” *444.hu*, April 4, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/04/kozos-kozlemenyben-ertetlenkednek-budapest-ellenzeki-polgarmesterei-a-kormany-megszorito-csomagja-miatt>.

40 “Hétfőtől Díjmentes a Közterületi Parkolás [Public Parking Is Free from Monday],” Hungarian Government, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek/heftol-dijmentes-a-kozteruleti-parkolas>.

41 Bucsky, “Már azelőtt padlóra kerültek az önkormányzatok, hogy a kormány tovább ütötte volna őket [Local governments had been in a bad shape even before the government started hitting them].”

42 Dóra Matalin, “41 polgármester tiltakozik az önkormányzatok kivézetése ellen,” April 7, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/07/polgarmesterek\\_nyilatkozat\\_ellenzek\\_tiltakozas\\_forraselvonas/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/07/polgarmesterek_nyilatkozat_ellenzek_tiltakozas_forraselvonas/).

43 “Fideszes polgármester baloldali kollégáinak: a jó vezető nem siránkozik! [Fidesz mayor to left-wing colleagues: a good leader does not complain!],” *Origo.hu*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20200407-karsay-ferenc-poszt.html>.

first type of such action is the reallocation of development support from the government. An example is Budapest’s District VIII, led by opposition mayor András Pikó who shared the letter of the Ministry of Internal Affairs informing him that HUF 1.125 billion (ca. EUR 3.216 million) of development support was taken from the district for the defense against the epidemic.<sup>44</sup> The second type of discretionary action can be seen in the example of the Göd and the factory of Samsung in the city, which was declared a “special economic zone” by the government (see below). As a result the state took over regulatory duties over the area and directed the local business tax paid by Samsung from Göd’s opposition local government to the Fidesz-dominated county government. This effectively means cutting Göd’s budget by one-third.<sup>45</sup>

## SELECTIVE INFORMATION, TESTING, AND COMMUNICATION

In an open letter, the mayors of Budapest resented that “district governments do not receive substantial support from the government to address the health and social crisis, but they do not even receive satisfactory information. Neither the government offices nor the Operational Group provide information to facilitate crisis management, answers to our questions and suggestions are delayed or do not arrive at all.”<sup>46</sup> This leads us to the regime’s policy of sharing information, which has changed parallel to its changing political attitude to the epidemic.

The Hungarian government decided to publish detailed data about confirmed cases of coronavirus only three weeks after the first infections were confirmed. While still treating COVID-19 as a sub-issue to migration, they shared information about the nationality of those affected but not their age, gender, or spatial distribution. Government representatives argued that such data may

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44 “Lemondásra szólította fel Pikó András Kocsis Mátét az önkormányzattól elvont támogatások miatt [András Pikó asked Máté Kocsis to step down because of the withdrawn aid],” *Mérce*, May 7, 2020, <https://merce.hu/2020/05/07/mandatumanak-visszaadasaraszolította-fel-piko-andras-kocsis-matet-az-onkormanyzattol-elvont-tamogatások-miatt/>.

45 Máté Világi, “Göd az adóbevételei egyharmadától esik el egy új kormányrendelet miatt [Göd loses one-third of its tax revenues due to the new government decree],” *Index.hu*, April 18, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/18/koronavirus\\_magyarorszagon\\_kormanyrendelet\\_god\\_samsung/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/18/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_kormanyrendelet_god_samsung/).

46 “Közös Közleményben Tiltakoznak Budapest Ellenzéki Polgármesterei a Kormány Megszorító Csomagja Miatt [Budapest Mayors Protest against Government Austerities in a Joint Statement].”

not be published because they are sensitive.<sup>47</sup> In his investigative report, Rényi found it otherwise:

To win time for the government, the communications crew began to curb the speed of public information [...]. Epidemiological data were disclosed selectively to give the communications staff one step advantage over the public and the decision-makers, time to measure and monitor public opinion before announcing any further action. [...] 'If people don't know where there is the virus and where there isn't, they don't panic on the one hand and don't develop a false sense of security on the other hand,' explained a Secretary of State. He said this calculation was very successful; true, it was fortunate, too, that the epidemic did not break out in Hungary as it did in certain Western European countries.<sup>48</sup>

The weakness of the argument about sensitive data is further showed by the fact that the government eventually shared spatial data on its coronavirus information website, *koronavirus.gov.hu*. Set up on March 4, the website provides news, up-to-date information about governmental restrictions, and guides about the virus and about what people should do during the pandemic. It also contains the spatial data and data about the deceased, namely their gender, age, and underlying conditions.<sup>49</sup> According to the instructions of Miklós Kásler, the Minister of Human Resources (responsible for healthcare as well as education, culture, social and labor issues, and sports), if a deceased person who had COVID-19 infection also has a history of a critical illness, chronic illness or condition that could have resulted in death on its own, the known chronic illnesses and their acute complications should be listed as cause of death.<sup>50</sup> Kásler also forbade hospitals to communicate about the state of the epidemic, and they must direct all inquiries from the media to the

47 Cseke Balázs, "Koronavírus: nálunk szenzitív adat az, amit a legtöbb európai ország közül [COVID: What Most European Countries Publish Is Sensitive Information in Hungary]," *Index.hu*, March 16, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/16/koronavirus\\_magyarorszagon\\_operativ\\_torzsz\\_teruleti\\_adatok\\_nem\\_eletkor/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/16/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_operativ_torzsz_teruleti_adatok_nem_eletkor/).

48 Rényi, "Saját Emberei Ébresztették Rá Orbánt, Hogy a Vírus Itt van a Nyakunkon."

49 "Elhunytak [Deceased]," *Koronavirus.gov.hu*, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/elhunytak>.

50 Joób Sándor, "Nem a koronavírusos halálozás eltitkolásáról szól Kásler Miklós levele [Miklós Kásler's Mail is Not about Concealing COVID Deaths]," *Index.hu*, March 23, 2020, [https://index.hu/tech/hoax/2020/03/23/koronavirus\\_jarvany\\_kasler\\_miklos\\_halaloki\\_statisztika\\_halottvizsgalati\\_bizonyitvany\\_statisztika\\_emmi/](https://index.hu/tech/hoax/2020/03/23/koronavirus_jarvany_kasler_miklos_halaloki_statisztika_halottvizsgalati_bizonyitvany_statisztika_emmi/).

Operational Group.<sup>51</sup>

Independent journalists found evidence for potential data manipulation as well.<sup>52</sup> Originally, the official weekly influenza reports of the National Public Health Center showed a sudden growth in the number of patients with suspected influenza on 11th and 12th weeks of 2020 (i.e., the weeks starting on March 9 and 16). The data showed the Center received 1,248 and 2,855 new samples in the two weeks, respectively. However, these two figures have been changed in the official report to 165 and 70, respectively. No official explanation has been given. Another reason for suspicion is that, after the two weeks in question, weekly reporting about patients with suspected influenza stopped, and it restarted only on May 6.

Besides selective and potentially manipulated information, the official number of confirmed cases may understate the actual number of COVID-19 infections in Hungary because of the low number of diagnostic testing. According to the OECD, the average testing ratio in OECD37 is 27.7 tests per 1,000 people. In Hungary, the ratio is 8.5, which is the fifth lowest among the 37 examined countries (only Mexico, Japan, Colombia, and Greece test less).<sup>53</sup> Cecília Müller, the Surgeon General of Hungary argued there is no need for testing as "there is no test that would prevent the spread of the epidemic."<sup>54</sup> In addition, while most European countries publish the number of people tested for COVID-19, the Hungarian

51 "Kásler megtiltotta a kórházaknak, hogy a járványügyi helyzetről nyilatkozzanak [Kásler forbade hospitals to communicate about the state of the epidemic]," *Index.hu*, April 26, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/kasler\\_megtiltotta\\_a\\_korhazaknak\\_hogy\\_a\\_jarvanyugyi\\_helyzetrol\\_nyilatkozzanak/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/kasler_megtiltotta_a_korhazaknak_hogy_a_jarvanyugyi_helyzetrol_nyilatkozzanak/). "how az MSZP elnöke kérdéseket tett fel a kórházaknak.", "container-title": "Index.hu", "language": "hu", "note": "source: index.hu", "title": "Kásler megtiltotta a kórházaknak, hogy a járványügyi helyzetről nyilatkozzanak [Kásler forbade hospitals to communicate about the state of the epidemic]", "URL": "https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/kasler\_megtiltotta\_a\_korhazaknak\_hogy\_a\_jarvanyugyi\_helyzetrol\_nyilatkozzanak/", "accessed": {"date-parts": ["2020", 5, 8]}, "issued": {"date-parts": ["2020", 4, 26]}}, "schema": "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"

52 Élő Anita, "Több ezer vizsgálati minta tűnt el a héten a népegészségügyi központ adatai közül. Mit titkolnak? [Thousands of test samples were removed from the data of the National Public Health Center. What is kept in secret?]," *Válasz.hu*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/05/08/nnk-honlap-influenza-koronavirus-adatok/>.

53 "Testing for COVID-19: A Way to Lift Confinement Restrictions," *OECD*, May 4, 2020, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129\\_129658-l62d71r66u&title=Testing-for-COVID-19-A-way-to-lift-confinement-restrictions](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129658-l62d71r66u&title=Testing-for-COVID-19-A-way-to-lift-confinement-restrictions).

54 "Müller Cecília: Nincs az a teszt, ami meggátolná a járvány terjedését [Cecília Müller: There is No Test that Would Prevent the Spread of the Epidemic]," *hvg.hu*, March 30, 2020, [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200330\\_Koronavirus\\_az\\_Operativ\\_Torzsz\\_hefoi\\_tajekoztatoja](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200330_Koronavirus_az_Operativ_Torzsz_hefoi_tajekoztatoja).



government publishes “the number of samples examined in accredited laboratories,” which sometimes includes two to three tests per person.<sup>55</sup> At a government conference, epidemiological scholars who help the government devise action plans against the virus confirmed that the number of 52,409 tests administered as of April 20 means that 32,503 people have been tested, which is about 0.3% of the Hungarian population.<sup>56</sup>

This government conference was the only time the regime shared the scientific findings upon which it bases its strategy against the epidemic. No background study or report for the decision makers has been published. Beyond revealing technical data about the models the government uses, Beatrix Oroszi, epidemiologist and the science director of National Public Health Center also argued for a new strategy involving more tests. László Palkovics, the Minister of Innovation and Technology also confirmed at the conference that the government would conduct more tests to reveal the ratio of people who have been infected with COVID-19.<sup>57</sup> Countrywide testing by four domestic medical schools using a representative sample of nearly 18 thousand randomly selected people began on April 29.<sup>58</sup> The sample was collected between May 1 and 14, providing the information that is necessary for careful relaxation of restrictions, avoiding—as one participant at the conference warned—the sudden growth of the reproduction rate of the virus. However, the government already started to relax confinement restrictions on May 4, i.e., before the data collection could have been finished.

Going back to communication, the coronavirus information website, which is accompanied by a Face-

book page with currently over 149 thousand followers,<sup>59</sup> is the first of four important channels where the government communicates about the epidemic in Hungary. The second one is the information campaign carried out on billboards, newspapers, TV, and social media. The campaign disseminates information about the restrictions through this second channel, as well as the forms of behavior expected to minimize the risk of infection (e.g., the elderly should stay at home, handshakes should be avoided).<sup>60</sup> On May 3, a campaign to popularize the government’s economic measures was started as well.<sup>61</sup> The third channel is the use of the Operational Group which holds regular press conferences, usually featuring Cecilia Müller and two officers from law enforcement. While the Group is co-headed by the Minister of Human Resources and the Minister of the Interior, the prominence of law enforcement officials has been obvious: among its nine other members besides the two ministers, the Group includes four medical doctors and five people from law enforcement.<sup>62</sup> The Minister of Human Resources, Miklós Kásler rarely appears in public (according to investigative journalists, Orbán is dissatisfied with his performance)<sup>63</sup> and neither does the Secretary of State for Health, Ildikó Horváth. The medical line in the government is represented by Müller, who informs the public at the press conferences about the latest developments of the epidemic, including the number of infections and deaths and the government’s latest measures to prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>64</sup> Finally, the Facebook page of Viktor Orbán has become a major channel for propaganda as well as official information. According to Rényi, communication has been centralized to such an extent that even the govern-

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59 “Koronavírus tájékoztató oldal [Coronavirus Information Page],” accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/koronavirus.gov.hu/>

60 “A koronavírusról indít tájékoztató kampányt a kormány [The Government Starts Information Campaign About COVID],” Index.hu, March 6, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/06/a\\_koronavirusrol\\_indit\\_tajekoztato\\_kampanyt\\_a\\_kormany/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/06/a_koronavirusrol_indit_tajekoztato_kampanyt_a_kormany/).

61 “Plakátkampány Indul a Kormányzati Intézkedések Népszerűsítésére [Billboard Campaign Starts to Popularize Governmental Measures],” 444.hu, May 3, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/05/03/plakatkampany-indul-a-kormanyzati-intezkedesek-nepszerusitesere>.

62 “1012/2020. (I. 31.) Korm. Határozat a Koronavírus-Járvány Elleni Védekezésért Felelős Operatív Törzs Felállításáról [1012/2020. (I. 31.) Govt. Resolution on the Establishment of an Operational Group Responsible for Defense against the Coronavirus Epidemic],” accessed May 6, 2020, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A20H1012.KOR>.

63 Tamás Fábán, “A láthatatlan miniszter [The Invisible Minister],” Index.hu, April 24, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/24/kasler\\_miklos\\_koronavirus\\_orban\\_viktor\\_egeszsegugy/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/24/kasler_miklos_koronavirus_orban_viktor_egeszsegugy/).

64 “Magyarország Kormánya [Government of Hungary],” YouTube Channel, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/user/kormanyhu/search?query=operat%C3%ADv+%C3%B6rzs>.

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55 “A DK pert indít, amiért nem mondják el, hány embert teszteltek le eddig [DK Begins a Lawsuit for Not Telling How Many People have been Tested],” Index.hu, April 26, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/a\\_dk\\_pert\\_indit\\_amiert\\_nem\\_mondjak\\_el\\_hany\\_embert\\_teszteltek\\_le\\_eddig/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/26/a_dk_pert_indit_amiert_nem_mondjak_el_hany_embert_teszteltek_le_eddig/).

56 A Járvány matematikai És Egyéb Kutatások Szerepe a Koronavírussal Szembeni Védekezésben [The Role of Epidemiological Mathematical and Other Researches in the Defense Against COVID], Információs és Technológiai Minisztérium, Budapest, April 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7vnYzm00g>.

57 Dániel Bolcsó, “Új stratégia: sokkal többet tesztelnék [New Strategy: We Would Test Much More],” Index.hu, April 26, 2020, [https://index.hu/techtud/2020/04/26/koronavirus\\_jarvany\\_magyarorszag\\_jarvanykezeles\\_strategia\\_korlatozasok\\_lazitas\\_nyajimmunitas\\_teszteles/](https://index.hu/techtud/2020/04/26/koronavirus_jarvany_magyarorszag_jarvanykezeles_strategia_korlatozasok_lazitas_nyajimmunitas_teszteles/).

58 “Országos szűrővizsgálat-sorozatba kezdenek a hazai orvosképzők [Domestic Medical Schools begin Countrywide Testing],” April 28, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/orszagosszurovizsgalat-sorozatba-kezdenek-hazai-orvoskepzoek>.

ment media do not have much original content, and they mostly just follow the PM's staff.<sup>65</sup>

Rényi also cites an insider, who succinctly sums up how important the image is for the regime: "It is a mistake to say the government doesn't test much. Only they don't test for the virus but for the voters. More opinion polls are made for insiders than in any period in the last two-three years." As he explains, the parastatal think-tank Századvég conducts polls with 500–1000 people via telephone on a daily basis. Orbán "receives the results in the morning, after the meeting of the Operational Group, and he usually examines them together with the fresh media monitoring."<sup>66</sup> At the same time, outlets that are critical of the performance of the regime have been labelled as "fake news media" in governmental outlets.<sup>67</sup>

## LACK OF EQUIPMENT AND THE TRANSITION OF HEALTHCARE TO CRISIS MODE

The state and parastatal media have also been occupied with the opposition mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, who they blame for the spread of the virus in nursing homes. Nursing homes are known to be hot spots of the epidemic in European countries as well as North America. In Hungary, 22.7% of the cases were related to other closed communities like nursing homes, where 14 local epidemics were identified.<sup>68</sup> The infamous case of Pesti út nursing home counts 223 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (including 19 employees) and 23 deaths as of 20 April.<sup>69</sup>

In his defense, Karácsony published four letters revealing that government representatives rejected his proposal to send elderly people back to nursing homes from

65 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás." In addition to Facebook, Orbán also communicates through the state-owned Kossuth Rádió every Friday, although the "Friday interview" had been regular for Orbán for years.

66 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás."

67 Ágnes Urbán, "A független média végnapjai? [The Final Days of Independent Media?]" Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely, March 22, 2020, <https://mertek.eu/2020/03/22/a-fuggetlen-media-vegnapjai/>.

For examples, see Hamis Állítások a Tesztekről [False Statements about Testing], M1 - Híradó, April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pp6TOHJ-93E>; "Századvég - FAKE NEWS FIGYELŐ," accessed May 7, 2020, <https://szazadveg.hu/hu/kutatasok/az-alapitvany-kutatasai/fake-news-figyelo>.

68 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

69 "233 fertőzött a Pesti úti idősek otthonában, 23-an haltak meg [223 people infected in Pest út nursing home, 23 people died]," [hvg.hu](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200420_233_fertozott_a_Pesti_uti_idosek_othonaban_23an_haltak_meg), April 20, 2020, [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200420\\_233\\_fertozott\\_a\\_Pesti\\_uti\\_idosek\\_othonaban\\_23an\\_haltak\\_meg](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200420_233_fertozott_a_Pesti_uti_idosek_othonaban_23an_haltak_meg).

hospitals only after they tested negative for COVID-19.<sup>70</sup> According to existing laws in Hungary, it is the duty of the government offices to conduct testing and provide protective equipment.<sup>71</sup> These include, among other things, masks, gloves, disinfectant, and protective clothing. Accordingly, Budapest local government asked for at least 5 million surgeon masks, 20 thousand protective suits, 500 thousand gloves, and 1 million FFP2 masks from the government. In contrast, the Ministry of Internal Affairs supplied 20 thousand surgeon masks on March 27, and another 20 thousand surgeon masks, 1 thousand protective suits, 9 thousand gloves, 500 IgG tests, and 50 thermometers from the supplies of National Healthcare Services Center. The 11 nursing homes in Budapest received 35,800 surgeon masks, 16 thousand single-use gloves, and 200 FFP2 masks.<sup>72</sup> These numbers dwarf in comparison to the government's aid to foreign countries, too: 600 thousand masks and 30 thousand protective suits were sent to Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia; 710 thousand masks, 32 thousand protective suits and 200 thousand gloves were sent to Hungarians abroad.<sup>73</sup> On April 30, the local government of Budapest started a public procurement procedure for 1.5 million surgeon masks, 250 thousand FFP2 masks, and 300 thousand gloves, paying over half a billion HUF (ca. 1.4 million EUR) altogether.<sup>74</sup>

On March 19, it was acknowledged at the government's press conference that there was a shortage of protective supplies in healthcare as well, and in some

70 "Öntsünk Tiszta Vízet a Pohárba! 4 Levél, Amelyből Kiderül, Hogy Mi Vezethetett a Járvány Terjedéséhez Az Idősothonokban [Let's Make Things Clear! 4 Letters That Reveal the Reason of the Spread of the Virus in Nursing Homes]," Budapest Város Önkormányzata, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://koronavirus.budapest.hu/blog/2020/04/10/ontsunk-tiszta-vizet-a-poharba-4-level-amelybol-kiderul-hogy-mi-vezethetett-a-jarvany-terjedesehez-az-idosothonokban/>.

71 "Karácsony Gergely: Kezdjünk el azon gondolkodni, május közepétől hogyan lazítsunk a szigorításokon! [Let us start thinking about how restrictions may be relaxed from mid-May!]," [Azonnali.hu](http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200415_karacsony-gergely-kezdjunk-el-azon-gondolkodni-majus-kozeptol-hogyan-lehetne-lazitani-a-szigoritasokon), April 15, 2020, [http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200415\\_karacsony-gergely-kezdjunk-el-azon-gondolkodni-majus-kozeptol-hogyan-lehetne-lazitani-a-szigoritasokon](http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200415_karacsony-gergely-kezdjunk-el-azon-gondolkodni-majus-kozeptol-hogyan-lehetne-lazitani-a-szigoritasokon).

72 Zoltán Hanász and Illés Szurovecz, "A Kormány a Balkánra Is Több Védőeszközt Küldött, Mint a Fővárosi Önkormányzatnak [Even the Balkans Receive More Protective Equipment from the Government than the Municipal Government of Budapest]," [444.hu](https://444.hu/2020/04/16/a-kormany-a-balkanra-is-tobb-vedoeszkozt-kuldott-mint-a-fovarosi-onkormanyzatnak), April 16, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/16/a-kormany-a-balkanra-is-tobb-vedoeszkozt-kuldott-mint-a-fovarosi-onkormanyzatnak>.

73 Hanász and Szurovecz, "A Kormány a Balkánra Is Több Védőeszközt Küldött, Mint a Fővárosi Önkormányzatnak".

74 Eszter Katus, "Koronavírus: Több Mint Félmilliárd Forintért Vesz Maszkokat a Fővárosi Önkormányzat [COVID: The Local Government of the Capital Buys Masks for over Half Billion Forints]," [Átlászo Blog \(blog\)](https://blog.atlatszo.hu/2020/04/koronavirus-tobb-mint-felmilliard-forintert-vesz-maszkokat-a-fovarosi-okormanyzat/), April 30, 2020, <https://blog.atlatszo.hu/2020/04/koronavirus-tobb-mint-felmilliard-forintert-vesz-maszkokat-a-fovarosi-okormanyzat/>.

cases doctors and nurses need to disinfect and reuse single-use protective equipment.<sup>75</sup> In April, the government and particularly the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, acquired over 80 million surgeon masks from various countries, although it is not communicated how these masks are distributed in Hungary.<sup>76</sup> Arguably, much of the purchased equipment is used in healthcare, but that the supply is insufficient is exemplified by the fact that doctors and nurses still comprise a significant ratio of confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection. As of April 23, 30.6% of the infections were related to healthcare institutions, 34 local epidemics occurred in 20 hospitals (433 patients and 143 hospital workers were infected).<sup>77</sup>

As of May 4, out of the 3,035 confirmed cases, 1,027 patients or 33.8% received hospital treatment, and 55 patients or 1.8% were in critical condition, that is, in need of breathing machines.<sup>78</sup> These numbers are lower than those in April—when more than half of the infected received hospital treatment and over 3% were in critical condition—and closer to the April data of European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) which showed the averages of other countries were 29.6% and 2.4%, respectively.<sup>79</sup> However, the government began preparations in healthcare for the peak of the epidemic, which they awaited for on May 3.<sup>80</sup> In line with the regime's autocratic norms, what course of action would be followed in healthcare was decided—just like the entire strategy of the epidemic—without discussions

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75 "Gulyás Miniszter Elismerte, Hogy Egyszer Használatos Védőfelszereléseket Használhatnak Fel Újra Az Egészségügyben [Minister Gulyás Admitted That Single-Use Protective Equipments Are Used Multiple Times in Healthcare]," 444, March 19, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/03/19/gulyas-miniszter-elismerte-hogy-egyszer-hasznalatos-vedofelszereléseket-hasznalhatnak-fel-ujra-az-egeszsegugyben>.  
76 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás."  
77 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."  
78 "3035 főre nőtt a beazonosított fertőzöttek száma és elhunyt 11 idős beteg [3,035 confirmed cases, 11 elderly patients died]," Koronavírus Sajtóközpont, May 4, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/3035-fore-nott-beazonosított-fertőzöttek-száma-es-elhunyt-11-idos-beteg>.  
79 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."  
80 "Orbán: Május 3-ra várják a járvány csúcsát Magyarországon [Orbán: The Peak of the Epidemic in Hungary is Awaited on 3 May]," Index.hu, April 19, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/koronavirus\\_orban\\_viktor\\_facebook\\_video/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/koronavirus_orban_viktor_facebook_video/).

76 Rényi, "Járványkormányzás."

77 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

78 "3035 főre nőtt a beazonosított fertőzöttek száma és elhunyt 11 idős beteg [3,035 confirmed cases, 11 elderly patients died]," Koronavírus Sajtóközpont, May 4, 2020, <https://koronavirus.gov.hu/cikkek/3035-fore-nott-beazonosított-fertőzöttek-száma-es-elhunyt-11-idos-beteg>.

79 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

80 "Orbán: Május 3-ra várják a járvány csúcsát Magyarországon [Orbán: The Peak of the Epidemic in Hungary is Awaited on 3 May]," Index.hu, April 19, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/koronavirus\\_orban\\_viktor\\_facebook\\_video/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/koronavirus_orban_viktor_facebook_video/).

with those involved, or autonomous actors of civil society in general. Particularly, the government did not conduct any meaningful conversation with the Hungarian Medical Association (MOK), which published numerous criticisms and proposals during March and April. To cite two characteristic examples of government responses, the Ministry of Human Resources called MOK's statement on March 11 about insufficient protective equipment "extortion" in times of crisis,<sup>81</sup> whereas a month later Kásler reacted to an open letter of MOK as "creating tension and uncertainty" and opined that MOK should refrain from making political statements like open letters.<sup>82</sup>

In healthcare, the "transition to crisis mode" has involved both expansion of and freeing up existing capacities. Starting with the former, the government ordered the building of so-called mobile epidemic hospitals in Budapest, Miskolc, Szekszárd, Ajka, and Kiskunhalas.<sup>83</sup> These mobile hospitals are built exclusively for those with COVID-19 infections. The first such institution was finished in late April on the territory of the Kiskunhalas prison, and it can accept 150 patients in total and 16 patients in critical condition (i.e., it has 16 intensive care beds with breathing machines).<sup>84</sup> On April 10 in his "Friday interview" Orbán spoke about the need of 7,500–8,000 breathing machines, of which Hungary had only 2,000 at the time.<sup>85</sup> As it was later revealed, the government calculated that 2,000 machines would be enough only if the number of contacts between people could be reduced by half, but the government believed the number of contacts could be reduced only by one-fifth or one-third, and thus the country would need 7,330 breathing machines at the peak of the epidemic.<sup>86</sup> On April 16, it was announced

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81 "Emmi: Példátlan, hogy az orvosi kamara vészhelyzetben próbálja zsarolni a kormányt! [EMMI: It is unprecedented that the medical association tries to extort the government!]," Index.hu, March 11, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/11/emmi\\_magyar\\_orvosi\\_kamara\\_eszkozok\\_koronavirus\\_beef/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/11/emmi_magyar_orvosi_kamara_eszkozok_koronavirus_beef/).

82 "Kásler szerint a Magyar Orvosi Kamara feszültséget kelt [According to Kásler, MOK creates tension]," Index.hu, April 19, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/kasler\\_miklos\\_levele\\_politizal\\_az\\_orvosi\\_kamara\\_alaassa\\_a\\_bizalmat/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/19/kasler_miklos_levele_politizal_az_orvosi_kamara_alaassa_a_bizalmat/).

83 "Újabb kórházak lépnek hadba [New Hospitals are Deployed]," Népszava, March 17, 2020, <https://nepszava.hu/3071020-ujabb-korhazak-lepnek-hadba>.

84 Dániel Simor and Ádám Trencsényi, "Megnéztük a két hét alatt felhúzott járványkórházat [We checked the isolation hospital built in two weeks]," Index.hu, April 24, 2020, [https://index.hu/video/2020/04/24/jarvanykorhaz\\_koronavirus\\_kiskunhalas\\_mobilkorhaz\\_bejaras/](https://index.hu/video/2020/04/24/jarvanykorhaz_koronavirus_kiskunhalas_mobilkorhaz_bejaras/).

85 "Orbán: 7500-8000 lélegeztetőgép kellhet majd [Orbán: we will need 7,500-8,000 breathing machines]," Index.hu, April 10, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/10/orban\\_7500-8000\\_lelegeztetogep\\_kell\\_majd/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/10/orban_7500-8000_lelegeztetogep_kell_majd/).

86 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

that Hungary ordered 15 thousand machines in case not all of them would arrive in the country.<sup>87</sup>

Freeing up existing capacities involved, first, the restrictions regarding primary healthcare of non-COVID patients. The Ministry of Human Resources ordered that, from March 16, state healthcare will provide only emergency care, that is, treatment to avoid death or permanent damage to health.<sup>88</sup> General practitioner care, dentistry, one-day care, transplants, and private care were restricted until May 4, when these were allowed again under strict hygienic conditions.<sup>89</sup> However, the freeing up of primary health care capacities was somewhat offset by the reduction in the number of healthcare workers: the Ministry ordered doctors and nurses over the age of 65 not to meet their patients, and distant consultations were recommended instead. The population of healthcare providers in Hungary is aging, especially medical doctors, with 20.4% of active doctors over the age of 65.<sup>90</sup> In March, Orbán stated that there were 19,431 doctors under the age of 65, 4,312 residents, 690 medical students in their final year, and 105,000 other medical workers who can be deployed against the pandemic.<sup>91</sup>

Second, a government decision was made on April 7 to make 60% of beds in state hospitals available to the treatment of COVID patients.<sup>92</sup> According to the February report of National Health Insurance Fund, there were 67,543 hospital beds in Hungary, 41,147 of which

were active—i.e., used for typically short-term curative, preventive, or rehabilitative care—and 26,396 were chronic—i.e., used for typically long-term stabilization and maintenance of state of health. Approximately 72% of the former and 88% of the latter were in use.<sup>93</sup> It is unclear whether the government decision regards reducing both types of bed use, but there have been numerous reports in Hungarian media about chronic patients, patients in need of constant care, and even chronically ill patients being sent home.<sup>94</sup> On the one hand, there have certainly been mistakes due to the short deadline: the government gave hospital leaders eight days to empty the needed number of beds. It even happened that a patient recovering after surgery was sent home, and it later turned out that he was infected with COVID-19.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, the government did force the reduction of bed use even if a hospital could only release chronically ill patients. This attitude manifested most clearly in the case of the National Institute of Medical Rehabilitation (OORI), where every patient whose treatment could be postponed had already been sent home by the second half of March. Regardless, Kásler removed Péter Cserháti, the director of OORI on April 12 for refusing to free up 233 further beds.<sup>96</sup> The decision was met with disapproval from OORI employees and the public alike.<sup>97</sup>

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87 “15 ezer lélegeztetőgépet rendelt Magyarország [Hungary ordered 15 thousand breathing machines],” *Azonnali.hu*, April 16, 2020, [http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200416\\_15-ezer-lelegeztetogepet-rendelt-magyarorszag](http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20200416_15-ezer-lelegeztetogepet-rendelt-magyarorszag).

88 “Emmi: Hétfőtől a 65 Év Feletti Orvosok És Ápolók Ne Találkozzanak Betegekkel [EMMI: Doctors and Nurses above 65 Must Not Meet Patients from Monday],” *Index.hu*, March 15, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/15/kasler\\_miklos\\_jarobeteg\\_szakellatas\\_hatvanot\\_even\\_feluli\\_orvosok/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/03/15/kasler_miklos_jarobeteg_szakellatas_hatvanot_even_feluli_orvosok/).

89 “Kásler elrendelte: hétfőtől újraindul az egészségügyi ellátás [Patient care can restart on Monday, Kásler ordered],” *Index.hu*, May 2, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/05/02/koronavirus\\_egeszsegugy\\_ujraindul\\_kasler\\_miklos/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/05/02/koronavirus_egeszsegugy_ujraindul_kasler_miklos/).

90 “Beszámoló Az Egységes Ágazati Humánerőforrás-Monitoringrendszer Adatai Alapján Az Ágazati Humánerőforrás 2018. Évi Helyzetéről [Report on the Situation of the Sectoral Human Resources in 2018 Based on the Data of the Unified Sectoral Human Resources Monitoring System],” *Állami Egészségügyi Ellátó Központ*, July 1, 2019, [https://www.enkk.hu/hmr/documents/beszamolok/HR\\_beszamolok\\_2018.pdf](https://www.enkk.hu/hmr/documents/beszamolok/HR_beszamolok_2018.pdf).

91 Zoltán Kovács, “Orbán: Economic Relief Package Expanded as Mass Coronavirus Infections Are Expected,” *Index.hu*, March 23, 2020, [https://index.hu/english/2020/03/23/coronavirus\\_hungary\\_viktor\\_orban\\_fidesz\\_economic\\_relief\\_package\\_2/](https://index.hu/english/2020/03/23/coronavirus_hungary_viktor_orban_fidesz_economic_relief_package_2/).

92 “Koronavírus: nyolc nap alatt mintegy 36 ezer ágyat kell kiüríteniük a kórházaknak [COVID: hospitals need to empty 36 thousand beds in eight days],” 2020.04.09., *Népszava*, accessed May 8, 2020, [https://nepszava.hu/3074040\\_koronavirus-nyolc-nap-alatt-mintegy-36-ezer-agyat-kell-kiuriteniuk-a-korhazaknak](https://nepszava.hu/3074040_koronavirus-nyolc-nap-alatt-mintegy-36-ezer-agyat-kell-kiuriteniuk-a-korhazaknak).

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93 “Jelentés a Fekvőbeteg-Szakellátás Teljesítményéről [Report on the Performance of Inpatient Special Care]” *Nemzeti Egészségbiztosítási Alapkezelő*, February 2020, [http://neak.gov.hu/data/cms1025965/hf\\_202002.pdf](http://neak.gov.hu/data/cms1025965/hf_202002.pdf).

94 “A folyamatos ápolásra szoruló betegeket is hazaküldik a járvány miatt [Patients in need of constant care are sent home because of the epidemic],” *24.hu*, April 12, 2020, <https://24.hu/belfold/2020/04/12/koronavirus-jahn-ferenc-korhaz-kiurites-jarvany/>.

95 Joó Hajnalka, “Koronavírusosan került haza a kórházból a műtét után lábadozó beteg [Patient recovering after surgery goes home with COVID],” *hvg.hu*, April 15, 2020, [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200415\\_koronavirus\\_beteg\\_janos\\_korhaz\\_mutet](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20200415_koronavirus_beteg_janos_korhaz_mutet).

96 Joób Sándor, “Kásler Miklós menesztette a Rehabilitációs Intézet főigazgatóját is [Miklós Kásler removed the director of the Institute of Medical Rehabilitation],” *Index.hu*, April 12, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/12/kasler\\_miklos\\_menesztette\\_a\\_rehabilitacios\\_intezet\\_foigazgatojat\\_is/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/12/kasler_miklos_menesztette_a_rehabilitacios_intezet_foigazgatojat_is/).

97 Luca Pintér, “Egymásnak feszül az OORI stábjja és a kormány a leváltott igazgató miatt [Tension between the OORI staff and the government over the replaced director],” *Index.hu*, April 13, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/13/oori\\_dolgozok\\_nyilt\\_level/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/13/oori_dolgozok_nyilt_level/).



## ECONOMIC MEASURES: NORMATIVE AND DISCRETIONAL

As Orbán did not regard COVID-19 to be a central issue until mid-March, no preparations for the economic crisis to come were made either. According to a Hungarian economist who analyzed the government's allocations between February and the March 11 (the ordering of the state of emergency), the government (1) made ordinary decisions, such as the financing of cultural and sports events which are incompatible with the future restrictions, and (2) did not build up reserves but reallocated monies from existing ones, for purposes like ministerial administration and supporting events and institutions commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon.<sup>98</sup> Yet economic crisis did come, primarily as a result of the above-described confinement restrictions. Service providers like restaurants, nightclubs, and movie theaters were closed; 86 thousand shops, including restaurants and cafes, were allowed to stay open until 3 p.m. (50 thousand shops could remain open without limits).<sup>99</sup> The ban on outdoor events also meant that summer festivals like Sziget and Balaton Sound could not be organized in their usual form, and experts estimate that this could cause a loss of income for the Hungarian economy up to almost 1% of the GDP.<sup>100</sup> The most significant restriction, however, was none other than the lockdown when Hungarians were ordered to stay at home and allowed to spend their money in person only at grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, pet shops, marketplaces, hairdressers, cleaners, and taxis. Credit card statistics collected by Budapest Bank show a spending drop in clothing by 71%, in restaurants by 75% (they can still do home delivery), in travelling by 86%, and in hotels and motels by

98 Mária Zita Petschnig, "Mit Csinált Felséged 3-Tól 5-Ig? Orbán Tudta, de Nem Tette [What Did Thine Majesty Do between 3 and 5? Orbán Knew, but Did Not Do]," *Élet És Irodalom* 64, no. 17 (April 24, 2020).

99 "Ezt kell tudni a boltok nyitvatartásáról [What needs to be known about the opening hours of shops]," *Infostart.hu*, March 20, 2020, <https://infostart.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/ezt-kell-tudni-a-boltok-nyitvatartasarol>.

100 Főző Zsolt, "Hatalmas kárt okozhat Magyarországnak, ha őszig elmaradnak a fesztiválok [It Can Be Disastrous if No Festivals Happen until Autumn]," *Portfolio.hu*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200429/hatalmas-kart-okozhat-magyarorszag-nak-ha-oszig-elmaradnak-a-fesztivalok-428958>.

98%.<sup>101</sup> The economic sentiment index of GKI Economic Research plummeted by an unprecedented extent of almost 30 points in April, whereas the business confidence index declined about 25 points and the consumer one, by nearly 40 points.<sup>102</sup> True, this may be affected not only by government restrictions but other sources of the crisis, particularly the temporary outage of international car factories<sup>103</sup> and the deterioration of foreign markets for products made in Hungary in general. GKI forecasts a 3–7% decline in Hungary's GDP for the year,<sup>104</sup> in line with the estimates of JP Morgan (minus 6.3%).<sup>105</sup>

On the one hand, a series of normative, fiscal, and monetary policy measures were implemented to mitigate the prevailing crisis. The first package was announced on March 18–23 March, and it contained mainly prompt responses for the most affected sectors: rent control for tourism, various cultural sectors, and sports; tax relief for taxi drivers, media providers, and 86 thousand small and medium-sized enterprises; and changing labor regulations to allow employers to alter work schedules anytime. Among its more general measures, the package also included the suspension of all evictions and foreclosures, prolonging child care allowances and child care benefits, and—most significantly—a loan moratorium, whereby all payment obligations related to loans paid out before March 18 to businesses or private individuals are suspended for the duration of the state of emergency. The second package, announced on April 6 and 16, involved measures focusing more on companies and sectors still operating during the lockdown, as well as job protection and creation. Such measures were: sup-

101 Dávid Molnár, "Ruhára a harmadát, étteremre a negyedét költjük annak, amit tavaly ilyenkor [We Spend One Third for Clothing and One Fourth for Restaurants, Compared to Last Year]," *24.hu*, April 24, 2020, <https://24.hu/elet-stilus/2020/04/24/koronavirus-bevasarlas-bankkartyas-fizetes-statisztika/>.

102 "GKI's Economic Sentiment Index Plummeted by an Unprecedented Extent in April," GKI Gazdaságkutató Zrt., April 26, 2020, <https://www.gki.hu/language/en/2020/04/26/the-gki-consumer-confidence-index-plummeted-in-april/>.

103 Gergely Brückner, "Mit jelent Magyarország gazdaságának az autógyárak leállása? [What does the outage of car factories mean for the Hungarian economy?]," *Index.hu*, March 20, 2020, [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/mit-jelent-magyarorszag-gazdasaganak\\_az-autogyarak-leallasa/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/mit-jelent-magyarorszag-gazdasaganak_az-autogyarak-leallasa/).

104 "Forecast for 2020: 3 or 7 Percent Decline," GKI Gazdaságkutató Zrt., March 23, 2020, <https://www.gki.hu/language/en/2020/03/23/forecast-for-2020-2/>.

105 "400 forintos euró, magasan ragadó költségvetési hiány: egy friss elemzés szerint csak jövőre jön a neheze Magyarországon [400 HUF/EUR, high deficit: a new analysis says the hard part comes next year]," *Portfolio.hu*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200416/400-forintos-euro-magasan-ragado-koltsegvetesi-hiany-egy-friss-elemzes-szerint-csak-jovore-jon-a-neheze-magyarorszagon-426208>.

port for investment in the amount of HUF 450 billion (ca. EUR 1.29 billion); subsidized loans for enterprises in the amount of HUF 2 trillion (ca. EUR 5.72 billion); social contribution tax cuts; imposition of a tax on small enterprises (*kiva*), a tax on tourism (100% relief until December 31), a tax on SZÉP cards, and VAT of new homes; and various reliefs and postponements in tax administration. The government extended healthcare entitlements to employees on unpaid leave and introduced a subsidized student loan for adult education. The package also included wage support, but only for part-time employees and for 70% of the time they work less now. Two symbolic measures taken were the one-time HUF 500 thousand (ca. EUR 1400) extra pay for every healthcare worker and the announcement of the future reintroduction of the so-called “13th month pension,” which was abolished after the 2008 financial crisis. In total, the two packages amounted to 18–22% of GDP, and they were financed from budgetary reallocation and moderate deficit spending (the deficit target increases from 1% to 2.7%).<sup>106</sup>

On the other hand, the crisis has been used as an excuse to implement several discretionary economic measures as well, targeting certain economic or political actors. These measures can be categorized into two groups. In the first group, there are measures which are levied to deprive actors of resources, such as the already mentioned parties and local governments, but also banks, multinational retail chains, and universities. While the government argues these measures are for “burden sharing,” the revenue they generate is negligible in comparison to the size of the packages: parties pay HUF 1.2 billion, the local governments 34 billion, retail chains 36 billion, and banks 55 billion (ca. EUR 3.4 million, 97.4 million, 103 million, and 157.3 million, respectively).<sup>107</sup> The restrictions for universities are also below HUF 10 billion (ca. EUR 28.3 million).<sup>108</sup> Thus, these withdrawals were less about generating revenues and more about political penalization. Indeed, these monies might not be

important for the state budget, but they are substantial for those who are compelled to pay. This is true for parties and local governments (see above) as well as for the other sectors and institutions, which had also been subject to special taxes and austerity measures earlier.<sup>109</sup>

The second group of discretionary measures involved acts of predation, that is, takeover of property (rights), moving them to the ownership orbit of the regime, or more precisely Orbán’s single-pyramid patronal network. The Hungarian regime had exhibited a predatory nature long before the crisis<sup>110</sup> but, as mentioned above, it can now carry out its activities at a more accelerated pace using the extra powers granted by the Coronavirus Act. The typology developed by Bálint Magyar for earlier predatory practices of the Hungarian regime is applicable here as well:<sup>111</sup>

- *competency nationalization*, i.e., central appropriation of municipal responsibilities. On April 18, the government issued a decree that enabled it to designate “special economic zones.” This means that areas which (1) the government has declared a priority investment; (2) have a total cost requirement of at least HUF 100 billion (ca. EUR 282 million); (3) have a significant impact on the economy of the county as a whole; and/or (4) are needed to avoid massive job losses or implement new investment or expansion may be taken over from local governments, meaning regulation and taxation competences can be nationalized and centralized to the Fidesz-dominated county governments. Until May 4, competency nationalization took place only in the already mentioned case of Göd and the Samsung factory, which comprises 20% of the city’s territory and one-third of its budget. Investigative journalists found that the Samsung factory may have been chosen by the regime to allow further development by bypassing the local government,<sup>112</sup> which is confirmed by the fact that the government ordered HUF 43 billion (ca. EUR 118.5 million)

106 Gergely Csiki, “Itt az Orbán-kormány teljes koronavírus-mentőcsomagja [Here is the whole COVID package of the Orbán government],” *Portfolio.hu*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20200417/itt-az-orban-kormany-teljes-koronavirus-mentocsmagja-bovult-a-lista-426566>.

107 “Különadókat vezet be a kormány, 1345 milliárd forint jut gazdaságvédelemre [The government introduces special taxes, 1345 billion forints are spent on protection of the economy],” *Index.hu*, April 4, 2020

108 Babos Attila, “Milliárdokat von el a kormány az egyetemektől, a PTE állami támogatása 3,6 milliárddal csökken [The government takes billions from universities, the state subsidy of PTE decreases by 3.6 billion],” *Szabad Pécs*, April 26, 2020, <https://szabadpecs.hu/2020/04/virusvalsag-milliardokat-von-el-a-kormany-az-egyetemektol-a-pte-allami-tamogatasa-36-milliarddal-csokken/>.

109 Károly Attila Soós, “Tributes Paid through Special Taxes: Populism and the Displacement of ‘Aliens,’” in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vásárhelyi (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017), 259–78; Mihály Andor, “Restoring Servility in the Educational Policy,” in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vásárhelyi (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017), 528–58.

110 Bálint Madlovics and Bálint Magyar, “Post-Communist Predation: Modelling Reiderstvo Practices in Contemporary Predatory States,” *Public Choice*, (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-019-00772-7>.

111 Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State*, 195–201.

112 Dezső András and Előd Fruzsina, “Pénz? Bosszú? Más oka lehet, hogy elvették Gödöt a Samsungot [Money? Revenge? There may be another reason for taking Samsung from Göd],” *Index.hu*, April 22, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/22/god\\_samsung\\_politika/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/22/god_samsung_politika/).

development support five days after it was taken over.<sup>113</sup>

- ordinary or re-nationalization with the possible aim of transit-nationalization. In the first step, the government—a few days after ordering the state of emergency—identified 140 “vital” companies that provide “critical infrastructure,” and ordered sending military groups to the companies to take over control “if necessary.”<sup>114</sup> The government did not make clear why certain companies were selected and at which point they would be taken over, but reserved discretion to bring the company under total state control at any time it sees fit. The presence of soldiers and the practically limitless rights they have<sup>115</sup> also provide opportunity for intelligence acquisition about the company, which is a crucial element in the stalking phase of predation.<sup>116</sup> The second step is the nationalization of the company, as happened in the case of Kartonpack which is a publicly traded box manufacturer with Hungarian and foreign investors in the city of Debrecen. While the government did not explain why this company was taken over and how the takeover was related to the epidemic, the state was enabled by decree to decide on nonemergency related cases as well, instead of the company’s general meeting.<sup>117</sup> The appointed commissioner has the right to terminate contracts and replace the leadership at any time—the latter happened immediately after the company was taken over.<sup>118</sup> The third, potential step would mean that not only was the sending of soldiers to the companies a prelude to nationalization but

the takeover itself was a prelude to a targeted re-privatization of the companies by clients in the patronal network. In this case, the steps fit into the process of transit-nationalization or taking the company into “temporary state care”, through a series of slower and more complex steps, as in previous predatory cases in Hungary.<sup>119</sup> This implies that actions taken on the pretext of the epidemic may have property consequences beyond the duration of the state of emergency. Such outcomes have been anticipated, in the context of the crisis and other governmental measures, by economic journalists<sup>120</sup> and consultants to foreign companies<sup>121</sup> as well.

## EU, PROPAGANDA, AND THE PEOPLE

Hungary has a special place among autocratic regimes as it is also a member of the European Union. Every EU country developed its own way to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, which is probably related to the inability of the EU to create joint action plans due to the vetoes of member states like Hungary and Poland.<sup>122</sup> However, the EU took several measures to facilitate the crisis management of members states, some of which have been used by Hungary, though others have not. An example of the former was the decision of the EU’s finance ministers to temporarily lift the 3% limit of the Stability and Growth Pact to expand economic room for maneuver. As mentioned above, Hungary has kept its deficit under 3% even under the pandemic, which has been a subject of criticism from Hungarian economists who have urged a stronger fiscal stimulus and social economic program.<sup>123</sup> On the

113 Sándor Czinkóczi, “Miután a Kormány Elvette a Gödi Önkormányzattól a Samsung-Gyár Területét, Milliárdokat Önt a Területre [After the Government Took the Samsung Factory from Göd Local Government, Pours Billions to the Area],” 444.hu, April 23, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/23/miutan-a-kormany-elvette-a-godi-onkormanyzattol-a-samsung-gyar-teruletet-milliardokat-ont-a-teruletre>.

114 “140 cég irányítását veheti át a honvédelem, ha szükséges [The military can take over the control of 140 companies, if necessary],” Index.hu, March 17, 2020, [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/17/140\\_ceg\\_iranyitasat\\_veheti\\_at\\_a\\_honvedelem\\_ha\\_szukseges/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/17/140_ceg_iranyitasat_veheti_at_a_honvedelem_ha_szukseges/).

115 Szalai Balázs, “Mi ez, hogy a katonák bemennek cégekhez? [Soldiers go to companies? What is this?],” Index.hu, March 20, 2020, [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/cegek\\_atveszik\\_iranyitas\\_katonak\\_honvedseg/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/03/20/cegek_atveszik_iranyitas_katonak_honvedseg/).

116 Stanislav Markus, *Property, Predation, and Protection: Piranha Capitalism in Russia and Ukraine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58.

117 Gergely Brückner, “Furcsa veszélyhelyzeti intézkedések: mire játszik az állam? [Strange emergency measures: what is the aim of the state?],” Index.hu, April 18, 2020, [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/18/mire\\_jatszik\\_az\\_allam\\_-\\_furcsa-veszelyhelyzeti\\_intezkedesek/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/18/mire_jatszik_az_allam_-_furcsa-veszelyhelyzeti_intezkedesek/).

118 “Állami felügyelet alá került a Kartonpack, le is cserélték gyorsan a vezetőket [Kartonpack is under state control, leadership was quickly replaced],” Index.hu, April 18, 2020, [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/18/koronavirus\\_magyarorszagon\\_kartonpack\\_kormanybiztos\\_igazgatotanacs\\_csere/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/18/koronavirus_magyarorszagon_kartonpack_kormanybiztos_igazgatotanacs_csere/).

119 Cf. Éva Várhegyi, “The Banks of the Mafia State,” in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vársárhelyi (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2017), 295–309.

120 Zoltán Jandó, “Kormányközeli Cégek Lehetnek a Nyertesei a Koronavírus Követő Felvásárlásoknak [Companies near the Government May Be the Winners of Post-COVID Acquisitions],” G7.hu, April 6, 2020, <https://g7.hu/vallalat/20200406/kormanykozei-cegek-lehetnek-a-nyertesei-a-koronavirus-koveto-felvasarlasoknak/>.

121 Péter Magyar, “Orbán Újabb Cégekét Próbálhat Megkaparintani - Erre Figyelmeztetik Tanácsadók a Nyugati Vállalatvezetőket [Orbán May Attempt to Take over New Companies, Consultants to Western CEOs Warn],” 444.hu, April 1, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/04/01/orban-ujabb-cegeket-probalhat-megkaparintani-erre-figyelmeztetik-tanacsadok-a-nyugati-vallalatvezeteket>.

122 Cf. Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, “Hungary’s Mafia State Fights for Impunity,” Project Syndicate (blog), June 18, 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hungary-mafia-state-viktor-orban-impunity-by-balint-magyar-and-balint-madlovics-2019-06>.

123 “Fifteen Hungarian Economists Speak out about Orbán’s Stimulus Package,” Hungarian Spectrum (blog), April 10, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/04/10/fifteen-hungarian-economists-speak-out-about-orbans-stimulus-package/>.

other hand, the EU initiated transfers of billions of euros to member and partner states. In the case of Hungary, the total investment related to released liquidity is EUR 5.603 billion.<sup>124</sup> As this sum does not come from a new fund but comes from that, member states will not have to reimburse the unused amounts that have been taken from regional or cohesion funds, and so government media and politicians have communicated that Hungary “receives no extra money from the EU.”<sup>125</sup>

Issues like responsibility for the pandemic or the origin of the virus have not been at the forefront of communication from the Orbán regime. Instead, propaganda has a domestic focus and uses the above-described narrative of populist nationalism, framing the government as tireless and outstanding in fighting the crisis, and everyone else as having either a neutral or negative effect on the government’s efforts. In reaction to EU criticisms of the Coronavirus Act, Orbán said that “EU fuss-makers” should not “preach about various legal, though exciting, theoretical issues. Because now there is a crisis, there is an epidemic, we need to save lives, and only afterwards will we discuss what needs to be discussed. And if they can’t help, because they can’t, then at least don’t obstruct the Hungarians in defending themselves.”<sup>126</sup> He made the same response when 13 members of the EPP, the party group of which Fidesz is a member in the European Parliament, called for the expulsion of the party due to violations of EU norms with the Act.<sup>127</sup> On May 4, Orbán published another open letter to the leaders of EPP parties, speaking about “unfounded, coordinated attacks against us” and a “disinformation campaign.” He added that “Unfortunately, not only our formal political opponents but also some EPP politicians have been actively involved in the dissemination of fake news.”<sup>128</sup> Secretary of State and international spokesman of the government,

124 “European Coordinated Response on Coronavirus: Q&A,” European Commission, accessed May 9, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_20\\_458](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_458).

125 “Stúdióban kapott össze Deutsch és Ujhelyi az uniós pénzeket [Deutsch and Ujhelyi Fought over EU Monies in the Studio],” interview by Egon Rónai, ATV, April 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8mrokZlHzY>.

126 “Orbán Megüzente Az EU-s Kekeckedőknek, Hogy Most Ne Okoskodjanak [Orbán Says EU Critics Not to Preach],” 444.hu, March 27, 2020, <https://444.hu/2020/03/27/orban-meguzente-az-eu-s-kekeckedoknek-hogy-most-ne-okoskodjanak>.

127 “Coronavirus & Expulsion: Orbán Sends Letter to EPP,” Hungary Today, April 3, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/coronavirus-expulsion-orban-sends-letter-to-epp/>.

128 “Orbán: Ez volt a legaljasabb és legcinikusabb támadás [Orbán: This was the Most Nefarious and Cynical Attack],” Index.hu, May 4, 2020, [https://index.hu/kulfold/2020/05/04/orban\\_viktor\\_level\\_epp\\_neppart/](https://index.hu/kulfold/2020/05/04/orban_viktor_level_epp_neppart/).

Zoltán Kovács has also made several such replies to foreign criticism of Hungary.<sup>129</sup> In a leading government daily, a journalist opined that the EU exercises a form of the “Brezhnev doctrine” which “mercilessly retaliates against any deviation from the official line,” and the reason for this is that “the globalist far-left considers every nation-state that is successful dangerous.”<sup>130</sup>

Government media has portrayed Hungarian crisis management as one of the most successful in the EU, while other countries often fail to take adequate measures.<sup>131</sup> Yet, in spite of the government campaigns, opinion polls show that the Hungarian population holds diverse views. On May 3, the parastatal pollster Nézőpont reported that 76% of the population was “completely” or “rather” satisfied with the government measures.<sup>132</sup> Among more critical institutes, Publicus Institute found that over 90% of Budapest-dwellers supported the mandatory wearing of masks but 75% believed there was a need for much more expansive diagnostic testing (the ratio is 42% among Fidesz voters).<sup>133</sup> According to the IDEA Institute, 58% of the population opined in March that healthcare did not receive enough support,<sup>134</sup> and Závecz Research found that, in April, 59% and 69% believed that protective equipment was not available in time for healthcare workers and the population, respectively. Závecz Research also examined the change of party preferences: from March to April, the support for the government among certain voters grew by 3–4 percentage points, to 53%. It is followed by left-liberal opposition party Democratic Coalition (DK) which has 15% support among certain voters, and the left-wing Hungarian Socialist Party and the (former extreme-) right-wing Jobbik

129 “Zoltan Kovacs (@zoltanspox) / Twitter,” Twitter, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zoltanspox>.

130 Dávid Megyeri, “Brezsnyev-doktrína Brüsszelből [Brezhnev Doctrine from Brussels],” Magyar Nemzet, April 16, 2020, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemen/bresznyev-doktrina-brusszelbol-8007923/>.

131 “Magyarország Kezelte Az Egyik Leghatékonyabban a Járványt Az EU-Ban [Hungary Was One of the Most Efficient in Crisis Management in the EU],” Origo.hu, April 28, 2020, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20200428-magyarorszagkezelte-az-egyik-leghatekonyabban-a-jarvanyt-az-euban.html>.

132 “Nézőpont: változatlanul nagy a bizalom a kormány válságkezelése iránt [Nézőpont: unchanged trust in the crisis management of the government],” Hírklikk.hu, accessed May 9, 2020, <http://hirklikk.hu/kozelet/nezopont-/363236>.

133 “Budapest: maszk, tesztelés, és politikai arcélek [Budapest: mask, testing, and political image],” Publicus Intézet (blog), May 4, 2020, <https://publicus.hu/blog/budapest-maszk-teszteles-es-politikai-arcelek/>.

134 “A Magyarok 58%-a Százaléka Szerint Az Egészségügy Nem Kap Elégséges Támogatást [58% of Hungarians Say Healthcare Does Not Receive Enough Support],” IDEA Intézet, March 26, 2020, <http://www.ideaintezet.hu/hu/hirek-aktualis/34/a-magyarok-58--a-szazaleka-szerint-az-egeszsegugy-nem-kap-elegeseges-tamogatast>.



which have 9–9% support.<sup>135</sup>

Finally, the Hungarian population generally complied with the ordered confinement restrictions. In the first weeks of the lockdown, only 700 people were fined for breaking the restrictions,<sup>136</sup> and government representatives also found that the contact number between people in some cities dropped by 70–90%.<sup>137</sup> Google's COVID-19 Community Mobility Report for Hungary shows a 42% drop in mobility trends for retail and recreation, accompanied by a 35% drop for transit stations and a 26% drop in workplaces.<sup>138</sup> These data start on March 21 (i.e., already before the lockdown), which suggests that Hungarians started to self-isolate already before the lockdown. This is further suggested by the fact that the Hungarian form of the hashtag #stayathome, #maradjotthon, started trending in social media two weeks before the lockdown was announced. People started using the hashtag in large numbers on March 11 (after the state of emergency was announced), it reached its peak on April 7, and it was used with decreasing intensity until May 4. In the last three months, the hashtag has mostly appeared on Facebook, with 83.52% of all shares. On the social media site, there have been 107,082 shares, 713,955 reactions, and 79,961 comments on posts using the Hungarian stay-at-home hashtag.<sup>139</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In sum, it can be said that, after some initial confusion, the Orbán regime managed to solidify its position, and found ways to use the crisis to its own advantage. Crisis exploitation is not particular to autocracies but can also happen under democratic conditions if there is a predominant view that the crisis had exogenous causes, and the government cogently and proactively communicates its crisis frames.<sup>140</sup> However, in the case of Hungary autocratic features like political patronalization, the government-dominated media landscape, and unlimited access to state resources enhanced the ability of PM Viktor Orbán to capitalize on the pandemic. In terms of action, mitigating the crisis appeared as an extra motive beyond the two basic drivers of the Hungarian regime: concentration of political power and accumulation of wealth for Orbán's single-pyramid patronal network.<sup>141</sup> Yet the basic motives have not disappeared either, and several measures that nominally are against the crisis also serve either or both of those fundamental goals.

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135 "Závecz: A Fidesz nőtt a koronavírus alatt, bár a többség nem elégedett [Závecz: Fidesz grew during COVID, but the majority is not satisfied]," Index.hu, April 22, 2020, [https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/22/a\\_fidesz\\_nott\\_a\\_koronavirus\\_alatt\\_bar\\_a\\_tobbseg\\_nem\\_elegedett/](https://index.hu/belfold/2020/04/22/a_fidesz_nott_a_koronavirus_alatt_bar_a_tobbseg_nem_elegedett/).

136 "Kijárási korlátozás: eddig 15 millió forint bírságot szabott ki a rendőrség [Lockdown: the police fined for 15 million forints in total]," Népszava, April 8, 2020, [https://nepszava.hu/3073873\\_kijarasi\\_korlatozas-eddig-15-millio-forint-birsagot-szabott-ki-a-rendorseg](https://nepszava.hu/3073873_kijarasi_korlatozas-eddig-15-millio-forint-birsagot-szabott-ki-a-rendorseg).

137 Bolcsó, "Új stratégia."

138 Google. "Hungary - Mobility Changes," COVID-19 Community Mobility Report, May 2, 2020, [https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-05-02\\_HU\\_Mobility\\_Report\\_en.pdf](https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-05-02_HU_Mobility_Report_en.pdf).

139 Data collected by SentiOne. I am grateful to Miklós Szabó for collecting the data for this chapter.

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140 Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, and Allan McConnell, "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests," *Journal of European Public Policy* 16, no. 1 (2009): 81–106.

141 For further discussion, see Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework* (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, Forthcoming).

# CONCLUSION

Over the decades, emergency situations—from earthquakes to pandemics and even extraterrestrial invasions—have given rise not only to bestselling novels but also to blockbuster Hollywood movies and computer games. According to their scripts, the entire human race should unite to give an immediate and coordinated response. But there is nothing in common with the real world. The case of COVID-19 has shown the lack of coordination between countries as well as within international bodies.<sup>1</sup> Even the G20 ‘extraordinary summit’ on COVID-19 held online on March 26, 2020 hasn’t resulted in significant actions. Quite the contrary, its final statement seems to be meaningless.<sup>2</sup> I would say, rather, that the coronavirus pandemic has produced additional splits in the world as the countries labeled free and democratic became deeply dissatisfied with how the autocratic nations dealt with the disaster.

First of all, it applies to China where the pandemic started. More and more countries these days support the version that the virus “escaped” from the Wuhan Institute of Virology—even most observers have never accused the Chinese of an attempt to produce an artificial or deliberately manipulated virus, the human factor might be the most probable explanation for such a disaster. Local scientists might have lost control over substances they studied like the Soviet engineers made a critical fault while operating the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl power station in April 1986. In both cases, the officials tried to cover up the real scope of the problem. But where the Soviets failed, the Chinese succeeded in depriving the world of the necessary information for a couple of months. As a result, many countries are calling for China to compensate for the damages incurred due to the global coronavirus pandemic. While these claims will not be met almost for sure, the very style of the dialogue suggests China may become a global pariah in the coming years as, for

example, the US administration orders a comprehensive plan aimed at relocating hundreds of American companies’ subsidiaries currently based in China, back to the United States. May this strategy be partially implemented, the actively praised US-China trade deal struck on January 15, 2020, will be dead by the end of the year with the dangerous trans-Pacific rift reemerging once again.

Russia also confirms its status of an uneasy partner, first of all, because it actively used its propaganda machine to promote a “conspiracy theory” picture of the pandemic. Thus it supported the Chinese accusation of the US in at least some involvement into the creation of the virus (many speakers on Russian television, even though they were just “experts” formally not affiliated with the government, pointed out that the US “produced” the virus for somehow strengthening its grip over the entire world). Also, the Russians (as well as the Iranians) tried their best to link their cooperation in fighting coronavirus in other parts of the world with lifting the sanctions imposed on Russia following its military intervention in Ukraine. Russian propaganda intentionally depicted the European Union as a nonviable political entity trying to mobilize individual EU nations for pro-Russian lobbying inside the EU. Russia’s solidarity with China is so strong and consistent that many Western analysts simply label both countries’ information campaigns as “Chinese-Russian propaganda.” Even though Russia hasn’t been formally accused of any wrongdoings during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of any positive developments has shown that the pandemic is not an excuse for bridging the gap between the West and Russia. The ongoing economic crisis verging on collapse might soon make Russia an even more uncomfortable partner for the West.

Belarus, being a small country that by itself is unable to change the overall picture of a worldwide pandemic has emerged once again as the most unpredictable regime in the whole of Europe continuously rejecting any recommendations issued by international bodies like the World Health Organization. In fact, Belarus is the most affected country in Eastern Europe even though the pandemic has not reached its heights. Just before the pandemic hit Europe, Belarus has regained its positive image since Russia made several attempts to “integrate” it through the creation of the Union state. Now the image of being Russia-skeptical is shattered, and the country once again looks as it is—as a pure dictatorship where people have neither voice nor rights, and the paramount leader is preparing to declare himself president for a sixth con-

1 In mid-April, for example, President Donald Trump ordered to withdraw the United States’ contributions to WHO, insisting the global body was manipulated by the Chinese. See: Andrew Restuccia, “U.S. to Cut Funding to World Health Organization Over Coronavirus Response,” *The Wall Street Journal* (website), accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-will-halt-funding-to-world-health-organization-over-coronavirus-response-11586905300>.

2 See: “Extraordinary G20 Leaders’ Summit Statement on COVID-19,” Group of 20 (official website), accessed May 10, 2020, [https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20\\_Extraordinary%20G20%20Leaders%E2%80%99%20Summit\\_Statement\\_EN%20\(3\).pdf](https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20_Extraordinary%20G20%20Leaders%E2%80%99%20Summit_Statement_EN%20(3).pdf).

secutive term in around three months from now.

To sum up, I would argue that the current pandemic has not brought more and less democratic nations closer to each other as all of them faced imminent and critical danger. If to compare the COVID-19 pandemic with the Chernobyl accident, we can see a significant difference between the events that followed them as the latter created a number of cooperation programs between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world greatly reducing overall Soviet discretion and distrust of the West. In today's case, the opposite is true: the authoritarian nations seem to be much less ready to cooperate, and the West responds accordingly. The reason seems clear: while in 1986 the Soviet leadership already bet on some kind of rapprochement with the Atlantic bloc, Moscow was more cooperative, and Chernobyl turned into a field of cooperation that lasted even after the USSR collapsed. On the contrary, these days the authoritarian regimes feel their power and strength, and even if they might be grossly overestimated, they try to rely on their own capabilities, reject any accusations of wrongdoings and blame others for homegrown problems. Therefore, the technetronic catastrophe or another manmade disaster can produce completely different consequences in autocracies depending on both their intentions vis-à-vis the wider world and their own the assessment of their power and capabilities—which might be the most obvious conclusion from the overview of autocratic countries' responses to the pandemic.

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Free Russia Foundation is an independent nonprofit organization with a 501 (c) 3 status registered in the U.S. in 2014.

The work of Free Russia Foundation is focused in three key mission areas:

1. Advancing the vision of a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Russia governed by the rule of law by educating the next generation of Russian leaders committed to these ideals;
2. Strengthening civil society in Russia and defending human rights activists persecuted by the Russian government; and
3. Supporting formulation of an effective and sustainable Russia policy in the United States and Europe by educating policy makers and informing public debate.

Free Russia Foundation is a non-partisan and non-lobbying organization and is not affiliated with any government organization or agency.

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