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Editor's note

Dear readers,

This issue reviews some immediate results of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, possibly related to international transportation. We have also included materials related to our joint project with the Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (Romania) and the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, *Protecting Democratic Values by Tackling Pandemic-related Disinformation*.

Needless to say, we are very much looking to possible cooperation with many of you. Your suggestions are much appreciated.

Armen Grigoryan



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Armenia and the transportation connectivity

Geopolitics of the South Caucasus

Tomáš Baranec of *Strategic Analysis* (Slovakia) interviewed CPS vice president Armen Grigoryan

Tomáš Baranec/Strategic Analysis (TB): In the USSR period, a reliable network of railways was built in the South Caucasus, which, however, ignored the individual federal republics' boundaries and instead reflected geographical and economic needs of the state. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this network has been broken in several places and as a whole, largely disrupted. What was the impact on Armenia and its citizens?

Armen Grigoryan (AG): In the Soviet era, the railway was meant primarily to serve the needs of the military and the industry. Certainly, it had been designed with consideration of the complicated terrain – mountains, gorges, canyons, and so forth – but it had been supposed to serve the needs of a state under unitary political and military command. So, for example, Georgia's railway – including the Abkhazian section – had a rather limited capacity and was not normally used for cargo transportation between Armenia and Russia. As Azerbaijan's early attempts to impose a blockade on the railway connection with Armenia started in 1989, even before the break-up of the USSR, and the Kremlin, essentially, turned a blind eye, the logistics had to be changed so the Georgian route could be used as a substitution, but with the war in Abkhazia, it also stopped operating in 1992.

TB: Was there any use of this railway from Armenia to Georgia after that?

AG: Since then, the railway's role has been reduced to the transportation of cargo between Yerevan and Poti, Georgia, so ferry connections to Russia and, to a smaller extent, to Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine could be used. Low effectiveness and higher costs have been influencing the economy since then, with a number of negative effects including an energy crisis in the early 1990s, high unemployment, higher consumer costs and so forth.

TB: Which steps did Yerevan conduct in the last 30 years to facilitate these problems? To which degree were they successful?

AG: As a cease-fire was reached in 1994, Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrossian, attempted to pursue a policy aiming at peaceful resolution, including mutual concessions. In an essay published in September 1997, *War or Peace? Time to Get Serious*, he presented his vision, particularly implying that stable peace would also mean additional economic opportunities in a changing regional environment. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the planned pipelines connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey might pass via Armenia – and that was only one of the potential opportunities. However, then-prime minister Robert Kocharyan, jointly with the minister of interior and national security Serzh Sargsyan (both Karabakh native), managed to pursue the

minister of defence Vazgen Sargsyan to turn against 'defeatist' Ter-Petrossian, who resigned in early 1998. During the Kocharyan presidency (1998-2008), the negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution were going on, but there was a de facto policy aiming to preserve the status quo. As a result, the Meghri-Kapan section of the railway was fully dismantled. Apparently, that was ordered by Kocharyan himself who boasted that Armenia 'even under blockade, could develop successfully for 100 years'. In the Soviet period, that link, as a part of the route Yerevan-Nakhichevan-Kapan-Baku, going onwards to Russia, had also connected Nakhichevan with mainland Azerbaijan.

TB: What about Armenia's other important neighbour – Turkey. Ankara also closed its borders with Armenia in solidarity with Azerbaijan. Did Yerevan attempt to solve this issue separately?

AG: During the early period of Serzh Sargsyan presidency (2008-2018), there were suggestions that the transport connections with Turkey could be restored, based on the so-called 'football diplomacy' beginning in 2008, which was followed by the Armenian-Turkish protocols in 2009. Supposedly, that might, later on, reduce the tensions with Azerbaijan as well. However, as Azerbaijan pressured Turkey not to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and not to open the border, the protocols were ultimately declared null and void.

Later during the Sargsyan presidency, the Ijevan railway station in north-west of Armenia, where was the other railway link to Azerbaijan operating, was dismantled as well. When that happened, the Armenian railways were already operated by the Russian railway

operator under a concession agreement. There were also repeated promises to build a railway link between Armenia and Iran by successive cabinets during the Sargsyan presidency; however, there wasn't any success in finding potential investors. Besides, after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, and especially after ousting Mikheil Saakashvili from power in Georgia in 2013, Russian propaganda regularly exploited the narrative that an agreement with Georgia, allowing operation of the Abkhazian railway section, was imminent – such speculations used to create some hopes in Armenia, also in the government circles, but nothing happened as a result.

Since 2018, the Pashinyan cabinet also kept the habitual reliance on the limited operation of the railway to Poti, as well as automobile roads to Iran and Georgia.

TB: Many analysts and columnists, especially in Armenia, claim, that the recent agreement on renewing transport infrastructure between signatories of November 10 cease-fire is a significant victory for Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey rather than for Armenia. Some say that there is no particular need for a direct link between Armenia and Russia via Azerbaijan since both countries are already connected via Georgia and Verkhny Lars. Despite that, do you see some substantial potential of the given agreement for Yerevan?

AG: Cargo transportation by TIR trucks is considerably more expensive than by railway. Besides, Verkhny Lars is closed for a few months each winter, because of snowfall. There could supposedly be some economic potential, but neither the current cease-fire

agreement and its immediate outcomes, nor the ongoing talks provide any substantial guarantees for the Armenian side.

TB: How could be the railway connection between Armenia and Russia practically implemented?

AG: In the current situation, as Azerbaijan keeps holding a number of Armenian prisoners of war and the negotiations on that issue may have reached a dead-end, further trust-building or reconciliation does not currently seem to be a goal. The suggested availability of such a connection for Armenia seems, therefore, an issue of a more distant future. Meanwhile, Russia's 'persuasion capacity' may perhaps ensure transportation of Russian military cargo and supplements, but that would not mean any economic benefit for Armenia.

TB: According to the 9th clause of the trilateral declaration, all economic and transport links in the region will be restored, and The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in order to organize an unhindered movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions. However, the nature of such an Azerbaijani connection through Armenian territory remains unclear and undefined. Does it pose a danger for Armenian sovereignty? How could it be practically implemented?

AG: The trilateral declaration does not specify all the details, thus the interpretation becomes a matter of further negotiations. So, it is not clear who will do the policing and

ensure the road and infrastructure safety, and moreover, whether any similar level of safety will be provided for Armenians travelling via Azerbaijan.

At the same time, with speculations about an extraterritorial status for the Azerbaijani connection, on the one side, and some Armenian politicians' suggestions to allow a new Russian military base in the southern part of Armenia, or even to consider membership in the Russia-Belarus union, on the other side, the sovereignty issue has become an abundant source of rumours, as well as an opportunity for some people to seek Russian support for their domestic political ambitions.

TB: How might the agreement impact ordinary Armenians' lives in the best-case scenario, and what would be preconditions for such a scenario?

AG: The best-case scenario would involve a real restoration of all transport links, without a possible violation of sovereignty, and with an opportunity for the Armenian side to connect to Europe and the Middle East via Turkey, and to the Central and South-East Asia via Azerbaijan. That, together with trust-building and reconciliation, might create economic opportunities on a level unprecedented in the previous decades – and that, in turn, might stimulate further trust, and so on, in an upward spiral. However, the Armenian government currently has little capacity to negotiate assertively in order to reach such a solution, neither does it seem to be willing to pro-actively seek international support in this regard.

TB: Thank you very much for your insights!

AG: Thank you for having me!

*We continue publication of articles by participants of the project **Protecting Democratic Values by Tackling Pandemic-related Disinformation**. The project is implemented by the **Centre for Policy Studies** in cooperation with the **Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (Romania)** and the **Latvian Institute of International Affairs**, with support from the **Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation**, a project of the **German Marshall Fund**.*

*Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the **Black Sea Trust** or its partners.*

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Sergiy Gerasymchuk

COVID-19: Infodemic with no panacea?

The article supplements a report presented on 31 July 2020 at the [roundtable discussion COVID-19 Conspiracies as Component of Hybrid Threats in the EU and EaP](#).

In 2020, alongside with the spread of the novel coronavirus, new phenomena were highlighted in the global discourse: ‘coronacrisis’, associated with health related, economic and social consequences of the pandemic, and ‘infodemic’. The latter term **was used by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The WHO stressed that fake news spreads faster and easier than the virus. People driven by anxiety lost their trust in official sources, which often shared contradictory information, and switched to social media. The fake news, disinformation and misinformation fully benefited from lack of information and social media, which enabled fake news to go viral and made access to reliable information more difficult.

Actually, the problem of infodemic emerged long before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Originally, the term ‘infodemic’ was coined in 2003 by *The Washington Post*’s journalist David Rothkopf (in relation to the SARS

epidemic), who described it as ‘a few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumour’, which, amplified by technology, could lead to a disproportionate reaction.

Moreover, long before the novel coronavirus outbreak, UNESCO issued **warnings** about the impact that political, technological, economic, and social transformation had had in recent years on how people exchange information, referring to ‘contamination’ caused by some propelled misinformation campaigns, which posed a threat to fact-based journalism.

The situation only deteriorated in 2020. Because of the scale of the problem, the WHO even added a **‘mythbusters’** section to its online coronavirus advice pages. The WHO’s concerns are shared by the Red Cross. Francesco Rocca, the president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, **believes** that ‘to beat Covid-19, we also need to defeat the parallel pandemic of mistrust that has consistently hindered our collective response to this disease, and that could undermine our shared

ability to vaccinate against it'. The governments and institutions 'have to build trust in the communities' where misinformation has taken root.

Building up trust towards the governments turned to be a challenging task. In the early stages of the pandemic, the governments and international institutions were far from being efficient. Bureaucratic international organisations and unions were unable to react promptly, whereas in some cases (e.g. the EU) healthcare issues were out of their competence. Adjusting to the new realities was a challenge as well. The decisions, in particular when they had to be taken under consensus principles, were delayed. National egoisms prevailed over solidarity and it has taken numerous diplomatic and political efforts to find the solutions. The EU's proposed budget contains a coronavirus recovery package worth 750 billion euros. The package in its current form represents the largest package ever financed through the EU budget. However, following the primary agreement reached at the July 2020 summit between the Member States, the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission then held **11 trilateral political trilogues** in order to fine tune the final parameters of the deal.

Under such circumstances, the opponents of the national governments, including populist political forces and external players did their best to criticise the governments and institutions for their own benefit. Alongside with anxiety, anger and desperate need to label someone guilty for the uncertainties of the future, the society was stressed and depressed.

It is noteworthy that those who got their news from social media were more likely to believe falsehoods about COVID-19, and intimidating information **was spreading much faster** on social media than good news. One of the interesting **findings** by researchers was the fact that people shared false information about COVID-19 on social media because they simply failed to think about accuracy when making decisions about what to share with others. **The other reasons** for sharing

disinformation were disinformation's similarity to common beliefs or views (including those voiced and promoted by populists), a sense of urgency to help others, particularly the elderly or vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the belief that the information was accurate because other similar information and announcements had been shared online.

In some cases, misinformation narratives contained both accurate and inaccurate information, and that made the situation even more complicated. For **example**, accurate information about washing hands and social distancing measures was mixed with false details about the coronavirus or protection measures. Other misinformation messages were completely inaccurate, for example, false information about activities involving the armed forces, government measures other than the official guidance and stories about treatment which were not supported by experts.

When people were intimidated, they tried to seek information to reduce uncertainty. This could lead them to believing information that was false, since it helped to feel more informed anyway, and even to place blame about what was happening following hints provided by the conspiracy theories.

Besides, **according to the UNESCO**, some actors have capitalised on the pandemic by spreading disinformation for the purpose of advancing their own political or self-promotion agendas. People who created false news **were in some cases motivated** by the desire to get more visits to a website – known as 'click-bait', to get private information from users – for example, 'phishing scams', to counteract accurate information with false information, to cause panic, and to show popularity by how many people the message reaches.

False information spread by politicians, celebrities and other prominent public figures **accounted for 69%** of total engagement on social media. With 78.4 million followers on Twitter and a TV audience that sometimes surpassed 10 million viewers for his daily

briefings, the ex-president of the United States Donald Trump was one of the world's leading global influencers.

Now, when vaccination has started in many countries of the West, criminals may benefit from proposing fake early vaccines, promoting fake 'vaccine tourism', or offering access to a limited quantity of vaccines. Under this pretext, 'phishing scams' and other cyber-related crimes may be committed. The **Interpol** released a warning stating that organised crime networks might try to scam people into buying fraudulent COVID-19 vaccines.

According to the last year **research**, hackers heavily targeted remote workers and those quarantined. The new trend even included creation of multiple phishing websites peddling fake COVID-19 cryptocurrencies and crypto wallets that aim to siphon data for future phishing, targeted malware, or credential stealing, e.g. the sites prompted visitors to register to find out more information about a COVID coin that 'gains value as more people die and get infected'.

There are also state actors engaged in designing and implementing disinformation campaigns. In this regard, China has been quite active in the Western part of the world. However, Russia has also done its best to benefit from coronacrisis-related mess and propelled its own disinformation campaigns both at global and regional levels. Russia's top coronavirus fake news stories were about Western plots. The primary audience was the Russian one. The Kremlin tried to persuade its population that systemic crises that Russia faced had been caused by evil foreign forces. Russian media channels also contributed to the increase of the society's anxiety, since when a society is anxious and stressed its level of critical thinking decreases proportionally, whereas a society lacking critical approaches can easily be manipulated by authoritarian leadership. Moreover, the same tools were applied to the neighbouring countries in order to propel distrust towards the West and to promote the Russian model of leadership. That was aimed at utilising the coronacrisis for geopolitical purposes.

The following are only few of the narratives utilised by Russia within its disinformation campaign: **'Scientists: coronavirus is a weapon of biological warfare'**, **'Sergey Glaziev: coronavirus is an artificially created biological weapon'**, **'Coronavirus: a weapon that fell from the sky for the United States in its fight against China?'**, **'The plague gods: the geopolitics of epidemic and the bubbles of nothing'**.

Russian quasi-philosopher and promoter of the '*russskiy mir*' (Russian world) paradigm Alexander Dugin **wrote**: 'The Liberal is the carrier of the coronavirus, its apologist ... a little more time will pass, and liberals will be equated with lepers, infectious maniacs', and added that 'Soros should be lynched'.

Russia also manipulated COVID-19 related information for information attacks targeting NATO countries and the NATO as organisation. The Alliance **noticed** that state-controlled media, such as *Russia Today* (RT) and *Sputnik*, used news stories that contained both true and false elements, which bypassed people's natural filters for detecting disinformation. Through organisations including the 'troll factory' in St Petersburg – officially the Internet Research Agency – Russia used fake or automated accounts to spread information for amplifying stories on social media and blogs. In this regard, NATO was the subject of a numerous disinformation attacks: against the presence of NATO troops in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland; false claims that NATO continued to hold large-scale exercises with no regard for limiting the spread of the virus, etc. The US-led exercise DEFENDER-Europe 20, which deployed thousands of US-based troops to Europe, was also a consistent target of disinformation. While criticising the NATO exercise for potential spread of the virus, the Russian military held several exercises during the pandemic.

Fake news and disinformation spread by Russia appealed to emotions, triggered anxiety and anger.

The countries of the region **differ in their level of resilience** towards Russian disinformation campaigns and COVID-19 related propaganda. According to a recent study of the Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism', Romania, Ukraine and Georgia ranked

the highest in terms of resilience, society and governmental response, although still did not reach the top marks. Concurrently, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Moldova scored the lowest.

In order to increase the level of resilience, there is a set of recommendations elaborated by numerous fact checking organisations and initiatives.

First, the governments and fact-checkers should cooperate with social media platforms in order to debunk fake news and disinformation promptly. It feels that the platforms are willing to cooperate and have already made respective steps. Google announced that it would set up **a 24-hour incident-response team** to remove misinformation from search results and from YouTube, and that it would send users seeking information about the coronavirus to the WHO website and to other official health agencies. YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have also tried to remove posts promoting fake medicines for treating COVID-19.

In the case of Ukraine, the Ukrainian department at Facebook, supported by local analytical platforms VoxCheck and StopFake, launched a fact-checking campaign on 27 March 2020. **According to Facebook's public policy manager** in Ukraine, Kateryna Kruk, the platform would analyse posts on the site, mark 'manipulative' posts, and move them to the bottom of people's news feeds.

Second, not only fact-checkers but also regular users should pay more attention on how to spot and deal with misinformation and fake news. In this regard, the issue of most importance is validation of the sources of information.

There is a number of indicators which enable users to assess source's reputability and reliability. Vague sources, such as 'a friend of a friend' or 'scientists say' or 'social media report' without further details, should be alarming. An important note: even reputable media often use such sources, and in this regard, junk social media sources are quite often used to legitimise publications in regular media.

The quality of language is another indicator. Reputable media pay attention to spelling and grammar, whereas junk media or fake producers may often pay less attention to the quality of language and use automatic translation of the messages. If noticed, such indicators should ring alarm bells.

As it was mentioned before, fake news and disinformation appeal to emotions: anxiety and anger. Therefore, if the message causes your anger or joy, it should be also double checked, since the creators of fakes aim to trigger users' emotions in order to assure their messages will go viral. Most often, if the information is written entirely in capital letters or contains a lot of exclamation marks, its creators may have dubious intentions.

Finally, **judging from the Ukrainian experience** at the governmental level, coordination between institutions has to be assured. In particular, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Healthcare, and Ministry of Interior have to coordinate their activities to avoid contradictory statements and to ensure prompt and accurate informing delivery about the crisis-related developments. The government's decisions are to be made transparently in order to avoid anger and anxiety. As fake news produced by individual bloggers and anonymous sources are often legitimised via traditional media, it is necessary to elaborating a Code of Conduct for journalists to abolish such practice. Coalitions of media with the international bodies, social platforms and civil society institutions, and creation of 'clearing mechanisms' can also be a remedy to the problem.

Last but not least: the COVID-19 is changing. New strains and ways of transmission are being detected. The same is true with the infodemic – new tools and narratives may be used in future. Moreover, debunking fake news is costly and often inefficient – it's not a panacea. Therefore, additional actions on ensuring media literacy should be applied.

Sergiy Gerasymchuk is the Deputy Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism'.

Andrei Yeliseyeu, Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina

Belarus's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and propaganda assault on Belarusians

The article supplements a presentation by Andrei Yeliseyeu at the [roundtable discussion](#) on 29 September 2020, The Pandemic: Challenges Faced by Civil Society. It is based on excerpts from the reports [Responses by the state, business and civil society: The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine \(November 2020\)](#) and [Government communication and public resilience to propaganda during COVID-19 in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine \(January 2021\)](#), produced by the EAST Center.

Belarus's government response to the COVID-19 pandemic was very weak, particularly during the first wave in spring-summer 2020. The authorities in Belarus resorted to Soviet-era censorship, propaganda, conspiracy theories and manipulation in order to downplay the risks of COVID-19 and distort perceptions of its consequences. The state-owned media did not run a visible and coherent campaign concerning self-isolation, nor did they encourage social distancing. Belarusians found themselves bombarded by disinformation and conspiracies about COVID-19 both from the Belarusian state media and Kremlin-sponsored outlets.

Government and state media (mis)communication

In Belarus, state communication on COVID-19 fell victim to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's personal views. He repeatedly diminished the dangers of COVID-19, presented the illness as less dangerous than the 'psychosis' that it allegedly provoked, and proposed a number of false remedies including playing hockey, drinking vodka, eating greasy food, steaming in the sauna, and working in the countryside. State media and public authorities, therefore, became an important source of disinformation about COVID-19. Belarusian state media consistently spread conspiracy theories and used a number of propaganda techniques to downplay the danger posed by the pandemic

and to portray their response in a better light than that of other countries.

The communication campaign by state bodies and the Ministry of Health was very poor. The Ministry organised only a handful of press conferences in March and April. They ended in late April abruptly and not a single press conference dedicated to COVID-19 was held during the second wave of the pandemic. No emergency statements or speeches related to the COVID-19 were made by state officials.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not pay a single visit to hospitals treating COVID-19 patients, and during the second wave he made a few rather late in the end of November and in December 2020. Furthermore, Lukashenka even disregarded safety measures, **wearing** no mask or gloves during hospital visits. Such behaviour sparked rumours on Telegram channels that the hospital visits and Lukashenka's appearance in 'red zones' had been staged.

Belarusian authorities ignored concerns by the WHO mission raised during its visit to Minsk from 7 to 11 April 2020 about insufficient social distancing measures. Instead, the state media **distorted** the mission's conclusions as praise for Belarus's management of the pandemic. Despite calls by the WHO mission to postpone the 9 May military parade, as well as EU High Representative Josep Borrell's **statement** that

allocation of coronavirus-related funds from Brussels would be linked to the fulfilment of the WHO's recommendations, that major event was held in its usual format. Administrations of public universities and management of state-owned enterprises **reportedly forced** students and workers to fill the stands. However, aside from the packed stands, far fewer ordinary citizens attended the parade than in previous years.

Belarusian state media's main message during the first wave was that the authorities were keeping the situation under control and no emergency measures were necessary. The state propaganda often **underlined the fact** that Belarus has a particularly high number of hospital beds per capita and a large network of sanitary epidemiological bodies inherited from the USSR.

Belarusian **state-owned TV channels ridiculed** the COVID-19 and social distancing measures such as the ban on mass gatherings. In particular, one of CTV's March reports claimed that the pursuit of the Belarusian national football championship in the presence of football fans is a Belarusian 'protest against the pandemic'. State-sponsored outlets also affirmed that Belarus was the best prepared state to handle the pandemic globally, was fully compliant with the WHO's recommendations, and that world leaders ultimately realised they had overreacted and started following Lukashenka's 'intelligent policies'. Besides, they dismissed international criticism of Belarusian approach and praised its uniqueness and effectiveness. In late November 2020, Lukashenka **declared**: 'It is important that the whole world realises that we followed the right path. We did it with dignity, the only ones in the world'.

At the same time, the state media avoided mentioning the **strong response to Covid-19** by independent civil society initiatives such as BYCOVID-19 and private businesses that helped the doctors. State media, on the other hand, heavily promoted the anti-coronavirus activities of GONGOs such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the Belarusian

Association of Women and the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions.

A network of pro-Kremlin regional websites in Belarus published **a series of articles** alleging that the Belarusian opposition, social activists, independent media and bloggers were intentionally spreading COVID-19 on instructions from the West. Among other things, they claimed that the U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo handed over vials containing coronavirus to Belarusian activists on the orders of George Soros, that the Belarusian opposition had plans to infect millions of people and to organise a genocide, and that the opposition intended to help NATO attack Belarus but their plans failed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the first wave of the spread of the virus, some districts adopted additional measures to counter the spread of the COVID-19, usually when hospitals were running out of beds. For instance, the Belarusian district of Dokshytsy temporarily closed schools and the cities of Viciebsk and Hrodna restricted mass gatherings. These additional measures, however, were not accompanied by a coherent information campaign, nor were they strictly enforced.

In response to the aggravating epidemiological situation in autumn 2020, the state authorities stepped up their communication about the risks associated with COVID-19. In early November 2020 a number of regions introduced regimes mandating mask-wearing in public places, and those were extended to the whole country in subsequent weeks. State media informed that the measure was largely necessitated by citizens' overly relaxed and irresponsible behaviour until that point.

Those who died from COVID-19 were reported to have had 'chronic diseases' and were very much 'victim shamed'. Lukashenka **said** about one of the first victims in Belarus: 'How was it possible to live that way? [He weighed] 135 kilos. His heart was barely functioning, this and that was aching, a whole bunch of illnesses. The virus attacks weak people'. State media also diffused insinuations

that those who died from the coronavirus would have died anyway from their other illnesses. During the second wave of the spread of the virus, Belarusian officials **blamed anti-Lukashenka protests** for spreading the infection and the population in general **for not observing precautionary measures fully**.

COVID-19 as a pretext to justify authoritarian practices

Belarus's authorities used the pandemic to justify their authoritarian practices. Firstly, Belarus limited the presence of international election observers under the pretext of risks associated with COVID-19. Thus, **the lack of a timely invitation** more than two months after the announcement of the election resulted in the absence of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observers. While very few international observers – mostly from the CIS – were invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central Election Commission (CEC) nonetheless **issued** no invitations to foreign election commissions due to 'inability to ensure their safety in the context of the coronavirus pandemic'.

Secondly, the CEC made domestic election observation all-but-impossible by **limiting the number of observers** at a polling station to five people on the election day and to only three during early voting, and by giving priority to representatives of state-sponsored organisations. Out of 1,989 members of district election commissions, only two represented the opposition parties.

Thirdly, the authorities tried to prevent voters from photographing their ballots by installing **curtain-free polling booths**, claiming that this measure limited the risks of virus transmission. This measure was aimed at undermining the Holas (The voice) civic initiative which asked voters to upload photographs of ballots online to compensate for the ban on exit-polls. Instead, all these restrictions helped the authorities to massively falsify the election results. According to Holas, they **should be invalidated** because the count was fraudulent in every third polling station.

Since the presidential campaign, the authorities repeatedly **restricted** lawyers from access to political prisoners and banned or impeded relatives from sending parcels to those detained, nominally due to rules introduced to combat COVID-19. The abovementioned restrictive measures went hand in hand with frequent disregard of epidemiological rules by election commission members as reported by independent observers. During the post-election detentions of peaceful protesters, the penitentiary bodies **placed over a hundred detainees** in a single prison cell, totally disregarding the epidemiological situation.

The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus created by a number of Belarusian and foreign human rights organisations, **concluded in its December 2020 report** that Belarusian 'state bodies intentionally do not undertake any measures to protect detainees from the coronavirus infection and to isolate and treat people presenting symptoms. In the light of mass detentions and the absence of preventive measures, the detention centres became the places of mass COVID-19 infections'. Furthermore, an extensive journalistic research by *Reform.by* based on a survey of over 500 people released from detention **shows** that the administration of those facilities often deliberately infected detainees with COVID-19 by transferring persons with COVID-19 symptoms from one overcrowded cell to another, and subsequently refused to provide medical care.

Wide range of statistical manipulations

Available evidence suggests that Belarusian authorities severely undercounted the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. Concerning the latter, there was an artificial limit for a daily number of reported deaths from COVID-19: seven during the first wave of the spread of the virus and ten during the second.

State bodies tried to conceal the statistics, for instance, by refusing to provide data by region. The State Statistics Committee stopped publishing quarterly mortality reports in the spring 2020 and, as of late

January 2021, has not yet published the 2020 annual report. When in December 2020 independent news portal *tut.by* **republished** the mortality statistics in the third largest Belarusian city, Mahiliou, from the local civil registry, it was **deleted** from the latter's website within hours. Allegedly, the number of deaths in Mahiliou in January-November 2020 was 20% higher than during previous five years.

The state media also kept silence about Belarusian mortality statistics which was published on the UN's website. Belarusian authorities reported 398 coronavirus deaths by July 2020, but **the analysis of UN data** suggests that the actual total death toll from COVID-19 in Belarus in April-June was likely to be much higher, around 6,730. Hence, official reports in Belarus downplayed COVID-19 death toll as much as 15-20 times. Instead of scrutinising unreliable national statistics and discussing the difficult epidemiological situation, Belarusian state propaganda **focused its attention** on the alleged social and economic 'chaos' in Ukraine and Western countries amidst the pandemic.

Expert assumptions about the intentional underreporting of identified COVID-19 cases were confirmed by occasional leaks of alternative data. At one governmental meeting in early May 2020, Alyaksandr Lukashenka flashed a graph depicting confirmed COVID-19 cases in Belarus since the beginning of the epidemic, which only partly coincided with official reports. The inadvertently disclosed document **showed** the number of new daily COVID-19 cases exceeded 1,100 by late April, whereas in the public reports daily case numbers never went

over 1,000 during the first wave.

In a similar fashion, the numbers of newly identified cases oscillated between 900 and 984 for around two weeks in late October - early November 2020. Yet another **leaked document** showed that on 30 October 2020 in the city of Minsk alone the number of newly identified COVID-19 cases reached 1,659. Therefore, there could have been as much as 4,000-9,000 cases in the country. Analysis suggests that during the second wave of the pandemic Belarusian authorities established an artificial limit of 2,000 confirmed cases per day.

Local state-owned newspapers either censored the statistics pertaining to COVID-19 or classified them as pneumonia. A telling example is an article published in April 2020 by a local newspaper in the Rasony district **under the title** 'There is no coronavirus in Rasony but doctors register an increase in cases of pneumonia'. During the first wave, it was common for local public newspapers' websites to delete previously published articles with statistics on hospitalisations with pneumonia. Despite these enormous censoring efforts, it was still **possible to learn indirectly** about the real situation in the regions, for instance, from the news about re-profiling of local hospitals to take COVID-19 patients.

Summing up, in Belarus the communication campaign aimed at justifying the inadequate state policies rather than informing the population about the dangers posed by the virus. The information policy was contradictory, manipulative, and harmful for public health. Typically for a personalist authoritarian regime, the official messages were highly influenced by the personal views of the ruler, in Belarusian case Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

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