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Health of democracy in the CEE countries amid coronavirus epidemic

Expanded police powers, curfew, stay-at-home orders, travel bans, business closures, restrictions on freedom of assembly and movement – bring the worst of the collective memory of people who used to live under the dictatorships. Never in the western world since WWII the state power has been so intrusive in public life as now.

What is the proper balance between public health safety and personal liberties, and what are the threats to liberal democracy during the pandemic? Do autocracies mitigate the impact of the coronavirus better than democracies? Is democracy immune to the virus? As these questions emerge amid the global pandemic, debates will surely continue as the crisis progresses. However, one is already clear: Some Eastern European rulers are seeing the pandemic and the public health crisis as a perfect pretext to silence critical voices and consolidate their power.

Russia: The Tsar of never letting go

Over the past few weeks Russian hospitals have seen an influx of coronavirus patients. Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, is one of them. Even though the official numbers of cases and deaths were artificially low for weeks, Russian authorities acknowledged the severity of risk posed by the epidemic. And, in the time of this crisis, Russian ruler Vladimir Putin decided to make himself a president for life.

Framing it as the public's demand Putin backed a huge package of amendments to the constitution, allowing him to "reset" the number of presidential terms and to potentially stay in power until 2036. Although the Russian leader postponed the referendum on the constitutional amendments amid health concerns, there is little doubt he will come back to it once the opportunity arises.

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Putin's "eternal president" idea provoked discontent among Russian public. However, all attempts to rally against the constitutional amendments are doomed to fail due to the government's and police's enormous powers to prevent mass gatherings, powers that appear to be legitimate and justified by the coronavirus outbreak. Thus, the COVID-19 quarantine plays right into Putin's hands so far.

Countermeasures to the epidemic allow Russian authorities to prevent mass-scale protests as happened in 2012 or at least postpone them until the end of the pandemic. Even though the April, 22 nationwide vote on the constitutional amendments was postponed, the coronavirus epidemic and its consequences have already largely diverted the public's attention from other issues and will likely prevent opposition from mobilizing people before the eventual referendum takes place.

Russian opposition will face a daunting task to compete with a massive state-run propaganda machine and present to the population alternative views about the implications of the constitutional change for the country's future. According to the February opinion poll by Levada Center, Russian independent sociological research organization, over 40% of Russians either have not heard about constitutional amendments or do not understand them. Only one in ten Russians is critical about the amendments and is going to vote against them.

On the other hand, in a pessimistic epidemiological scenario with a high death toll and inability of the underfunded public health system to provide adequate care, Putin may find himself in a bad position. In addition to the economic downturn that the epidemic will cause, an oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia provoked a historical drop in oil prices. Oil and gas taxation accounts for half of the Russian federal budget revenue and almost a third of the consolidated budget. Some observers project the economic crisis in Russia to be deeper than in 1998 or in 1992 and compare with the situation in late USSR when the authorities' inability to reform the outdated economic system eventually led to the power change.

In case of political uncertainty Vladimir Putin can repeatedly postpone the nationwide vote until better times. At the end of the day, the Russian leader mastered the skill of masquerading domestic problems and diverting public attention to foreign policy issues in Ukraine, Georgia, Syria and elsewhere.

Ukraine's long-serving top cop

In Ukraine a long-serving Interior Minister Arsen Avakov is poised to accrue more power as no one else in the country. On April, 13 Ukrainian Parliament voted for a new draft law amending the state budget and providing Avakov's agency with more funding while cutting the funds for other ministries, judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies.

Avakov's influence extends way above and beyond the National Police. 60,000-strong military troops of the National Guard of Ukraine are also placed under the direct subordination of Avakov's ministry. Even though president Volodymyr Zelenskyy attempted to put these troops under the presidential supervision, the Ukrainian parliament took no further action to make this a law. Furthermore, Avakov managed to create the private security groups within the Interior Ministry.

Avakov was one of two ministers who remained in power after Zelenskyy's transition to presidency in 2019. Avakov's police failed to investigate a list of high-profile criminal cases, including the killing of Belarusian-Ukrainian journalist Pavlo Sheremet in 2016. Avakov is accused by the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine of protecting some senior officials presumably involved in corruption schemes.

As one of the least trusted Ukrainian officials with the public support scoring just 12%, Avakov might be looking for new opportunities to use lockdown measures to strengthen his personal power. And boosted budgetary support to his agency comes handy. Empowered with additional funding, Avakov will likely continue his stay in the office despite the widespread criticism, accusations of corruption and abuse of power.

Belarus and other post-Soviet autocracies

Seemingly being "better equipped" to handle the growing pandemic thanks to centralization of power, a machinery of coercion and mass surveillance tools, in reality, Belarus and other post-Soviet autocracies largely distanced themselves from duly mitigating the impact of the pandemic and resorted to denialism.

Authoritarian regimes in Belarus, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have all either denied or minimized the severity of the COVID-19 public

health crisis. While Tajikistan reports comparatively low numbers of coronavirus cases and Turkmenistan's authorities continue claiming the absence of coronavirus cases, the Belarusian ruler Alyaksandr Lukashenka offered rural work, steaming in sauna and shots of vodka as a cure.

In contrast to neighboring Turkey, Georgia, and Armenia, Azerbaijan's response to the coronavirus spread in terms of setting up screening of the border was delayed. However later Azerbaijan's authorities introduced the strictest stay-at-home regime in the region and started a crackdown on opposition and independent media. A dozen opposition activists have been arrested since the outbreak began. In his address to the nation which can be seen as an end of the notable liberalization over the last year or two, Ilham Aliyev explicitly called opposition a "fifth column" and "national traitors" who need to be isolated to prevent them from destroying the country.

The example of post-Soviet autocracies points out that, when it comes to complex and unprecedented challenges like the coronavirus pandemic, Singapore is an exception rather than a proof of "efficient" authoritarian states.

Orbán's "Until Death Do Us Part"

Hungarian ruler used the coronavirus outbreak for his own political benefits. The Hungarian parliament gave the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán the power to extend the state of emergency and to rule by decree indefinitely, for as long as the government considers it necessary, without parliamentary approval. Hence the opposition's demand to set the date for a one-man rule in the middle of the European Union was ignored.

Extending the state of emergency comes along with the changes to Hungary's criminal code. Harsh penalties and even prison terms of up to 5 years were introduced for "spreading false information about the epidemic," and of up to eight years for the actions "judged to have interfered with efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus." Orbán calls it a necessary step to provide the government with the resources "to organize Hungary's self-defense." He also stated that "everyone needs to step out of their comfort zone."

Opposition and human rights groups fear that the government may curtail press freedoms in the name of fighting the virus for a longer time. Lawmakers could only delay the approval for a

week, but the pro-governmental parties making up two-third of the Hungarian Parliament guaranteed the approval. The Amnesty International, Freedom House and other watchdog organizations have been worried about the state of Hungary's democracy for more than a decade now, pointing at consistent demolition of the democratic checks and balances and taking control over a large portion of the Hungarian media. This time legitimate questions about the proportionality, length and reasoning of the adopted regulations arise.

While most of the democratic leaders are trying to manage the public fear, others are exploiting this fear without asking for public consensus, using a broad variety of tools from hiding the reality and denying the crisis to using it for their own political goals and gains. Authoritarian regimes and authoritarian-like democracies only seem to better handle the growing pandemic using non-medical tools like surveillance and limiting liberties. In fact, democracies with transparency, openness and accountability to the public can do more to reduce the panic and maintain the trust to government institutions while taking necessary steps to contain the spread of the virus. After all, maybe, democracy grants immunity to that kind of "power virus" too.