



Responses
by the state, business
and civil society

THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The different responses to the first wave of COVID-19 in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine between March and June 2020 largely reflected the political regime, economic structure and social conditions in each country. The personalist authoritarian regime in Belarus partly explains the state's irresponsible policies, stemming from president Lukashenka's personal views on COVID-19. The Russian and Ukrainian authorities took the pandemic more seriously and this met greater satisfaction among citizens. In dealing with the pandemic, they solicited the help of the oligarchs. While – volunteers, as well as initiatives by civil and private business, – played an important role in all three countries, their role was crucial in Belarus where there was a denial of the crisis at the state level. In both Russia and Belarus, where national votes were held during the first wave of the pandemic, the epidemiological situation was used as an excuse for political restrictions and fraudulent vote counting.

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I. STATE RESPONSES

1

Contrasting state responses and Belarus's risky approach

During the first wave of the spread of the coronavirus, Russian and Ukrainian authorities limited international air travel and took measures similar to those in most EU member states. They mandated self-isolation of confirmed cases, encouraged social distancing, banned public events, either closed schools or encouraged them to move their activities online, and imposed lockdowns. Ukraine's strictest measures, which included the suspension of public transport, closure of schools, daycares and businesses, began in early March and lasted for over two months.

In contrast, Belarus's response was very weak. The state-owned media did not run a visible and coherent campaign concerning self-isolation, nor did it encourage social distancing. There were occasional official statements and advertisements promoting social distancing among the elderly, but these were overshadowed by the dominant narrative which downplayed the risks of coronavirus infection.

There was no nation-wide ban on public events in Belarus, and the top football and hockey leagues continued uninterrupted. School vacations were prolonged for two weeks in April, however the state authorities avoided mentioning the grave epidemiological situation as the actual reason.

In very rare cases local and regional authorities adopted some social distancing measures. On 30 March the Viciebsk city executive committee [published the most comprehensive set of measures](#) which included a ban on exhibitions, fairs and presentations indoors, closing entertainment venues by 11pm, and mandating the introduction of distance learning in universities. However, even this decision was only belatedly adopted after carefully censored information about the rapidly developing epidemic in Viciebsk became publicly available.

The Belarusian authorities' approach was to test suspected cases, trace their contacts and isolate the sick; a strategy which [quickly proved unsuccessful compared](#) to South Korea and Singapore's application of similar measures. A WHO expert mission, which visited Belarus on 8–11 April, concluded that the number of COVID-19 cases in Belarus was "growing rapidly" and [issued recommendations](#) to strengthen physical distancing measures, including postponing large gatherings. However, the state-owned media selectively reported the mission's findings and the state authorities largely ignored the recommendations. The website [Covid-monitor](#) provided a more detailed chronology of the statements, actions, and reactions by Belarusian state bodies and monthly reports for the period up to June 2020.

Minsk's approach towards the 9 May military parade, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the victory against Nazi Germany, was starkly different from that of Moscow and Kyiv. Despite calls by the WHO mission for a postponement of this event, as well

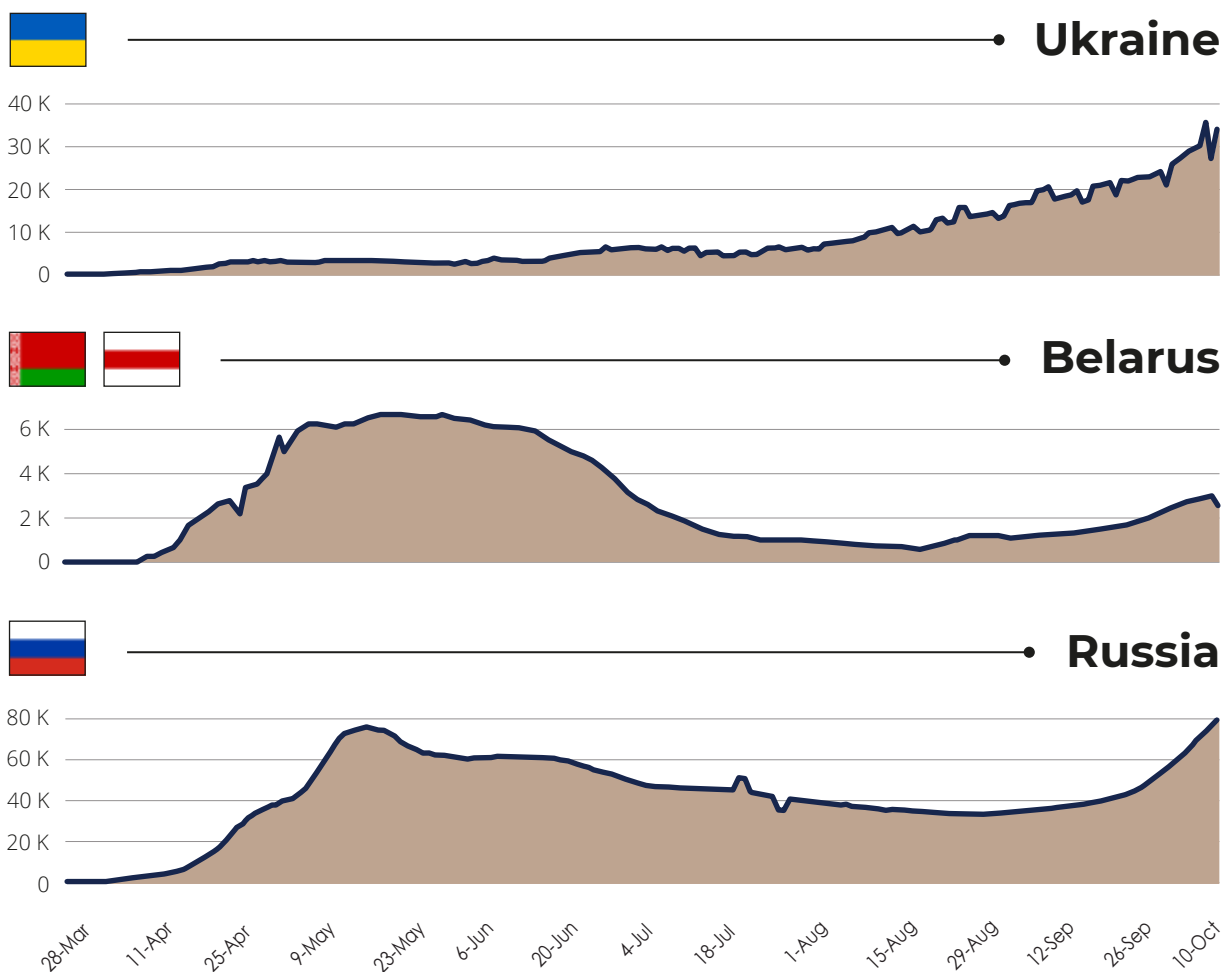
as EU High Representative [Joseph Borrel's statement](#) that allocation of coronavirus-related funds from Brussels will be linked to fulfilment of WHO recommendations, the parade was held as usual. Administrations of public universities and management of state-owned enterprises [reportedly forced](#) students and workers to fill the stands. However, aside from the packed stands, far fewer people attended than in previous years. In Ukraine, in place of the cancelled parade, President Volodymyr Zelensky [laid flowers](#) by the Eternal Flame in Kyiv and the regional authorities [congratulated veterans](#). Russia postponed its military parade to 24 June and limited the 9 May events to an airshow.

Belarus's state policies largely stemmed from Lukashenka's personal views on the coronavirus. In the early stage of the epidemic, the Ministry of Health favoured [distance learning](#) at schools and spoke about the [monitoring of mass gatherings](#) in its official Telegram channel. However, soon after Lukashenka's controversial statements on the virus the ministry changed its rhetoric. After Lukashenka publicly claimed that no one in Belarus had died from coronavirus, each ministry's post speaking about coronavirus-related deaths consistently claimed that all the deceased had "a number of chronic diseases". As a counter-argument to calls for a ban on mass public events, [the ministry pointedly asked](#), "Why are independent journalists and experts, who actively advocate cancelling mass events numbering more than 100 people, gathering at a reception of over 300 people organised by the embassy of a European country?"

Although the Belarusian Ministry of Health did not publish any mortality data for 2020 as of October, [the Ministry passed monthly mortality data](#) for January–June 2020 to the United National Organisations, which made them available at the [UNdata portal](#). It follows from the [analysis of this data](#) that the most likely total number of excess deaths in April–June 2020 made up around

6,730. Hence, the death toll due to the COVID-19 outbreak must have been grossly minimised in Belarus’s official reports which estimated 398 deaths from coronavirus in April–June 2020. The COVID-19 epidemic trends in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine differ, although questionable credibility of coronavirus-related official data, particularly for Belarus, should be borne in mind.

Graph 1. New weekly confirmed COVID-19 cases in late March – mid-October 2020



Source: Based on the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) data

Belarusian state-owned TV channels employed a range of propaganda tricks. They [repeatedly](#) ridiculed the coronavirus pandemic and countermeasures to it, portraying the former as a “special operation” by external forces. They asserted that Belarus enjoys a world-beating health care system to combat epidemics, alleging that the panic and psychosis around the pandemic is worse than the coronavirus disease itself, and claimed that world leaders acknowledged their erroneous policies and started following Lukashenka’s example. An online survey conducted in late March and early April across 58 countries found that [86% of Belarusians](#) considered the measures taken by the state authorities ineffective, second only to Turkey.

2.

Effect on leader approval ratings

Russia’s initial pandemic response was [fairly mild](#) and coincided with preparations for a referendum on constitutional amendments. The vote was expected to go ahead on 22 April and large-scale rehearsals of the 9 May military parade took place. Russia bolstered its response after Vladimir Putin, clad in an orange protective suit, [visited a Moscow’s hospital](#) on 23 March. He addressed the nation on the health situation the next day. Although Putin’s approval rating [dropped slightly during the pandemic](#), this was largely due to the controversial

vote on the constitutional amendments rather than dissatisfaction with the country’s management of the pandemic.

In Belarus, Lukashenka’s controversial and arrogant statements, which included victim-shaming and irresponsible coronavirus-related policies, must have contributed to the erosion of his approval rating. This was particularly painful in the run-up to the presidential election. Although no precise assessment can be made given the absence of independent sociology in Belarus, live streams by independent media showed many Belarusians voicing discontent about state coronavirus policies as they signed in support of oppositional presidential candidates. A representative poll of Minsk residents conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences throughout March and early April 2020 [showed](#) that Lukashenka’s trust rating then amounted to 24%.

In Ukraine, Zelensky’s popularity started falling before the pandemic’s emergence following the introduction of a number of unpopular decisions. These included opening up the Ukrainian land market and partial removal of a moratorium on the disposal of agricultural land, and a prisoner exchange with Russian proxies in eastern Ukraine. By the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in March, Zelensky’s [approval rating](#) fell below 50%; it had stood at 73% in September 2019.

Many Ukrainians subsequently attributed the severe social and economic impact

of COVID-19 to reshuffles in the Ministry of Health and the unpreparedness of state institutions. People were especially unhappy with Ukraine's long-serving Interior Minister Arsen Avakov whose public support rating dropped to just 12%. This drop in support occurred despite the ministry's [increased budgetary support during the pandemic](#), at a time when the state reduced the funding of several other ministries.

When it comes to sharing bad news concerning COVID-19, Putin has delegated this role to other state officials such as Moscow's mayor, Sergei Sobyanin, who was appointed the head of the coronavirus-related working group in the State Council. Lukashenka has shared the media space with Natallia Kachanova, the head of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, and Uladzimir Karanik, the Minister of Health. The Belarusian ruler has made no hospital visits, sending the mentioned deputies and other top officials instead. For the purposes of populist legitimisation, Lukashenka staged meetings with bureaucrats in which he [criticised them](#) for the lack of medical equipment.

Ukraine's president [visited](#) a number of hospitals treating COVID-19 patients located in different regions. In June, Zelensky [stated](#) that he had considered infecting himself with the coronavirus "to show Ukrainians how dangerous this disease is." He has shared the spotlight with the chief sanitary doctor, Viktor Liashko, and the Minister of Health Maksym Stepanov.

3.

Regional response in Belarus and Russia

The state authorities in Russia and Belarus gave regional and local authorities some discretion in handling the coronavirus situation. After 2 April in Russia the delegation of power to the regions was increasingly visible with each governor presenting a regional report to Putin in a series of online conferences. However, the distribution of financial resources remained centralised.

In Belarus, a number of districts adopted extra measures to counter the spread of the COVID-19, usually when hospital capacity was overwhelmed. For instance, the Belarusian district of Dokshytsy [temporarily closed schools](#) and the cities of Viciebsk and Hrodna restricted mass gatherings. Stricter measures, such as the obligatory wearing of masks in public indoor spaces, were introduced at later stages (typically late May/early June) in luye district (Hrodna region), Kirausk district and the city of Babruysk (Mahileu region), and in Braslau district (Viciebsk region). These additional measures were not accompanied by a coherent information campaign and no one strictly enforced them.

A stay-at-home regime was implemented in sixteen Russian administrative entities. The strictest regime was introduced in Moscow and the Moscow region from late March to early June. On 7 April,

the Minsk authorities [adopted](#) far softer countermeasures which included a requirement for companies to hold online meetings and seminars, the closure of library reading rooms, the separation of clients in restaurants, and the suspension of visits to nursing homes. Coronavirus-related information on city administration websites in Belarus was either absent or ill-presented.

Residents in Moscow and the Moscow region had to order permits online in order to leave home. These permits were linked to the electronic passes used on public transport: a resident without a valid permit would find that his/her usual electronic ticket did not work at the ticket barrier in Moscow Metro. All schools were closed and the only exams allowed were graduation exams. People older than 65 and other vulnerable groups were placed in obligatory isolation. The cafes and restaurants were closed except for home delivery orders. The few public places that remained open, such as banks, food stores and pharmacies, installed plexiglass windows and the staff were obliged to wear masks and gloves. The organisations were supposed to take regular temperature checks of employees and clients.

In Moscow the authorities allowed dog-walking but prohibited adults from outdoor walks with children. Permission to take outdoor walks was not restored until 1 June, but certain rules applied until 9 June. The public wide-

ly mocked these rules. For instance, apartment houses were divided into sections and the inhabitants had assigned days for walking, while sport activities were permitted before 9am and required the wearing of a mask. People who did not respect these measures received hefty fines. Moscow's lockdown rules were therefore similar to those implemented in France and Spain. In Russia, the relaxation of lockdown measures, as in EU countries, consisted of multiple phases.

4.

Regional disobedience in Ukraine

In Ukraine, the quarantine measures during the first four months of the epidemic were taken solely on [the national level](#), which is unusual for Ukraine. It was only at the end of [June](#) that the government handed over responsibility for supplementary measures to local authorities.

The situation spiralled out of control when certain local authorities openly disobeyed quarantine measures imposed by Kyiv. With the number of cases growing in Ukraine throughout March and April, regional leaders in Odesa, Cherkasy and Kharkiv decided not to follow nationwide measures hoping to gain in popularity among the local population. In early May, Odesa mayor Hennadiy Trukhanov, [despite national provisions](#), ordered preparations to begin for the tourist season.

Kharkiv's mayor, Hennadiy Kernes, [disobeyed](#) the Ukrainian government decree "On preventing the spread of COVID-19 coronavirus in Ukraine." This decree, adopted on 11 March, required all educational institutions and day-care centres to close. He also ignored the government's decision to shut down public transport "in the interest of Kharkiv's inhabitants".

Cherkasy mayor Anatolii Bondarenko, in turn, decided to reopen the local economy before the rest of the country. He eased quarantine restrictions for some entrepreneurs and, when the police initiated criminal proceedings against him for his actions, claimed that he was not afraid of law enforcement agencies. Zelensky reacted by calling Bondarenko a "criminal" and a "populist". Ukraine's interior minister, Arsen Avakov, promised serious consequences for Bondarenko's actions, however criminal investigation had not brought concrete results as of late September 2020.

The national government struggled to discipline these instances of blatant disobedience because the lockdown measures violated citizens' constitutional rights. Unless the government were to declare a nationwide state of emergency, which would override many of those constitutional rights, it had a weak case against the city mayors. The imminent local elections (October 2020) are widely believed [to be an additional factor](#) motivating some mayors' criticism of the unpopular lockdown measures.

5.

COVID-19 and the authoritarian agenda

In each of the three countries national votes took place during the pandemic. In Belarus the most active part of the political campaign leading to the 9 August presidential election took place during the first wave of COVID-19's spread. Irresponsible health policies at this time contributed to the erosion of Lukashenka's approval rating. The Ukrainian local elections took place on 25 October amid a quickly spreading second wave.

Russia scheduled its vote on constitutional amendments, including the proposed removal of term limits which would allow Putin to run again for two more six-year presidential terms, for 22 April. The ballot was deferred because of the pandemic, finally being held from 25 June to 1 July. Later on, from 11 to 13 September, that is in between the two waves of COVID-19, Russia held regional elections in 28 of its 85 federal subjects, as well as local elections in many Russian cities.

Belarus's authorities used the pandemic to justify their authoritarian practices. First, Belarus limited the presence of international election observers under the pretext of risks associated with COVID-19. In reality [the lack of a timely invitation](#) to ODIHR OSCE more than two months after the announcement of the election was unrelated to coronavirus, but the Central Election Commission (CEC) nonetheless

asserted that invitations to foreign election monitoring missions were not extended due to the inability to provide for everyone's safety in the pandemic situation.

Second, the CEC made domestic election observation all-but-impossible by limiting the number of observers at a polling station to five people on the main election day and just three people during the early voting period. Government-controlled observers normally had priority over independent observers, thereby making genuine election observation almost totally non-existent. Local and precinct election commissions, formed by local and regional authorities, included only a negligible number of opposition members: two of the 1,989 members of precinct election commissions were opposition party members.

Third, polling stations tried to prevent voters from photographing their ballots by installing curtain-free polling booths. This violated the secrecy of the voting. The formal explanation for this invoked epidemiological reasons, suggesting that removing curtains around ballot boxes minimised virus transmission risks. This way the authorities attempted to undermine the Holas (The voice) civic initiative which asked voters to upload photographs of ballots online. Instead, the authorities' measures facilitated a massive election fraud. Lukashenka was officially declared a winner with 80% of the votes, whereas an analysis by the Novaya Gazeta newspaper shows that excluding "anomalous" voting districts from the official tally would see Lukashenka's vote share drop to 43%.

Furthermore, the authorities 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 above mentioned restrictive measures went hand-in-hand with frequent disregard of epidemiological rules by election commission members as reported by independent observers and particularly so by law-enforcement agencies and penitentiary bodies – the latter placed over a hundred post-election protesters in a single prison cell.

In Russia many criticised the early lifting of restrictions. They argued that the purpose was to push ahead with the referendum on controversial constitutional amendments. By extending the vote over seven days, and regional elections over three days, the voting procedure became more susceptible to a fraudulent count. The early voting and the wide use of mobile ballot boxes made ballot stuffing easier and contributed to unprecedented election fraud. The authorities insist these measures aimed at preventing overcrowding and reduced the risk of spreading COVID-19.

It is noteworthy that Belarus and Russia, despite invoking COVID-19 in the ways described, provided approving observers to each other's elections. The CIS election mission chaired by Russian Sergey Lebedev praised Belarus's election, whereas Belarusian observers voiced no criticism of the national vote in Russia.

II. BUSINESS RESPONSES

1

Belarusian businesses initiating almost 300 projects

According to information collected by the [Covid Economics in Belarus project](#), by mid-July at least 220 Belarusian companies had gathered assistance of over US\$2 million. The majority of support initiatives were concentrated in the Minsk region (170), followed by the Viciebsk region (44) which has been the most affected region outside the capital. Roughly an equal number of initiatives were registered in the remaining four regions of the country.

This is not complete information on the financial assistance provided by businesses. For example, it was separately reported that by late May a charity account belonging to the Belarusian Ministry of Health [received](#) around US\$2.4 million from businesses and citizens; a quarter of donors were individuals. Additionally, Belarusian businesses transferred over US\$1.7 million to doctors either directly or through the #BYCOVID-19 project and other civic initiatives.

Around 150 projects initiated by companies representing the hospitality industry, retail and other economic sectors provided various *pro bono* services. These included the delivery of hot meals and beverages

to medical workers and the provision of washing machines and other goods to hospitals.

Over 100 projects concerned financial donations of various sizes. Whereas some donated through specialised NGOs, others coordinated via messenger services and provided assistance [to medical institutions directly](#). Both large businesses (e.g. banks, telecommunication companies or petrol station chains) and smaller ones ([e.g. amusement arcades](#)) [provided hospitals](#) with medical and protective equipment.

The IT, industrial and banking sectors were particularly generous. As of late July, EPAM made the largest contribution of financial aid, amounting to US\$275,000. Other major donors included the Coca-Cola Company (\$200,000), BPS Sberbank (\$150,000), SK hynix (\$150,000) and Belagroprombank (\$120,000). Vizion Games pledged US\$103,000, while Melsoft Games, Itransition, Easybrain and Currency.com each provided US\$100,000 in the fight against COVID-19.

A significant part of financial and *pro bono* support by Belarusian businesses was coordinated through authoritative NGOs, [particularly Imena foundation](#) and BYCOVID19 initiative. As the results of [one poll among](#) Belarusian NGOs (April 2020) showed, such partnership contributed to higher trust in business towards the civil society, which was traditionally low in Belarus prior to the epidemic.

2.

Russian SMEs reinforce support by large public and private companies

Russian companies donated funds to combat COVID-19 as well. RUSAL, Russian largest manufacturer of low-carbon aluminium, [financed](#) the construction of seven medical centres for EUR €36 million. Metalloinvest also donated around EUR €22 million for the construction of hospitals in a number of Russian regions. Russian oligarch and billionaire businessman Gennady Timchenko donated EUR €31.5 million in the form of medical goods for hospitals. Other large Russian public and private businesses such as Norilsk Nickel, Sberbank, USM Holdings and others, as well as a number of oligarchs including Vladimir Potanin, Mikhail Freedman, Oleg Deripaska and Alisher Usmanov also made donations for fighting COVID-19.

The Moscow-located Kommunarka hospital treating Covid-19 patients [received](#) twenty cars and a minibus from a car manufacturer. This and other hospitals also [received](#) free food deliveries and fuel. In addition to direct financial assistance, large, medium, and small businesses provided *pro bono* goods and services such as free lodging, transport, shoes, clothes and care products for doctors.

According to the [Social Media Index](#) produced by Russian company Medialogiya for the period between 16 March and 7 June, the National Media Group launched the most visible online initiative. The initiative was focused on supporting Russian SMEs during

the COVID-19 pandemic. Other significant initiatives included Sberbank's project constructing a mathematical model of COVID-19's spread and Mail.ru Group, Yandex and Tochka's assistance funds for SMEs. The same index showed that in the category of *pro bono services to medics*, the three most visible initiatives on the internet were organised by Burger King, Yandex and McDonalds.

3.

Ukrainian president Zelensky's reliance on large industrial groups

Instead of focusing on cooperation with civil society organisations and volunteer initiatives in combatting the coronavirus epidemic, Zelensky continued to rely heavily on the large financial and industrial groups as his predecessors did. The pandemic consequently increased his dependency on them. Since Ukraine's independence, these groups have been filling in the gaps in Ukraine's institutional capacities, providing financial and technical assistance in exchange for preferential treatment by the authorities. In this way they have also secured popular support for the political parties they sponsor.

When Ukraine introduced quarantine measures in March, President Zelensky summoned the wealthiest businessmen, trying to coordinate with them on the state's response to the pandemic. Those business leaders included the industrialist Rinat Akhmetov, former Privatbank owner Ihor Kolomoyskyi, pipeline business owner Viktor

Pinchuk and the owner of Ukraine's largest construction company Oleksandr Yaroslavskyi. Zelensky asked the oligarchs for financial aid worth US\$440-470 million. Moreover, he assigned them geographical areas of responsibility and asked them to organise anti-crisis centres in their allocated regions.

Political consequences aside, the strategy was relatively successful. Most of the businessmen responded with alacrity, delivering around US\$25 million in aid by the end of April. These funds helped procure testing kits, ventilators, personal protective equipment and disinfectants. Billionaire Rinat Akhmetov took responsibility for several regions, including the parts of Donbas controlled by Ukraine and also Zaporizhzhya, Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk regions. Viktor Pinchuk volunteered to be responsible for Dnipropetrovsk oblast where his assets are located. Ihor Kolomoyskyi was less eager to contribute to fighting the pandemic, wanting first to regain control over his bank. The chances of returning control over the country's largest lender Privatbank to its former owners, and, consequently, any willingness of Kolomoyskyi to contribute to fighting COVID-19 crisis, vanished in May 2020, when Ukrainian lawmakers passed an "anti-Kolomoyskyi law."

While other oligarchs did not demand immediate political bonuses in return for their help, the situation with Kolomoyskyi should alarm the Ukrainian authorities. Unconditional financial assistance from large financial and industrial groups is hardly possible in a country where the distribution of public resources has systemically benefited the wealthiest.

III. CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

1

Strong response by the Belarusian civil society

Belarus's state policies concerning the pandemic have run counter to the expectations of the public. An online survey conducted by SATIO in late March 2020 among residents aged 18–64 [showed](#) that 70% of Belarusian respondents favoured the suspension of mass events and 56% supported the temporary closing of educational institutions.

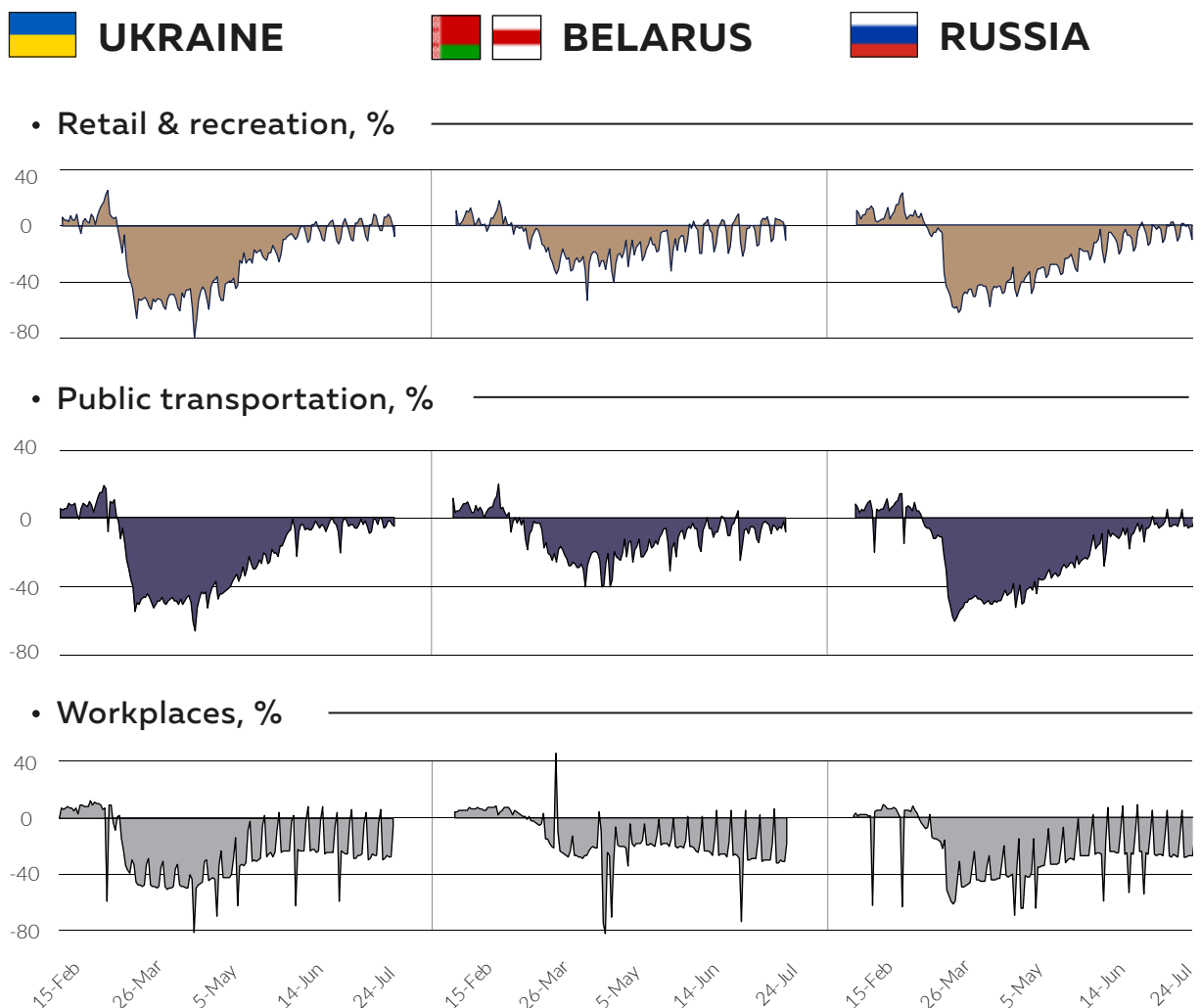
According to [SATIO's mid-April online survey](#), 74% deemed it necessary to suspend mass events, 71% wanted better state communication about COVID-19, and 52% wanted to see the closing of all education institutions among state countermeasures. The same poll established that 65% of respondents favoured more comprehensive social distancing measures, whereas 24% thought the development of herd immunity was the best approach. These surveys revealed that the public was mostly concerned with a possible collapse of the health system, declining salaries, and shortages of medication and personal protective equipment (PPE).

In response to very limited state policies, a large part of Belarusian society declared a so-called “people’s quarantine”. A number of civil initiatives and popular Telegram channels promoted social distancing measures. The Belarusian independent media widely covered

the issue and questioned the adequacy of state measures. The late March online poll found that Belarusians had begun doing their shopping and participating in public events less frequently, put travel plans on hold and started practising other social distancing measures. By early April, attendance at restaurants and shopping centres, the use of public transport and

mobility trends around workplaces declined by around 20–25% compared to January according to [Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports](#). Due to physical distancing interventions by the authorities of Russia and Ukraine, workplace contacts, the use of public transport, and attendance to retail and recreation in these two countries were reduced to a larger extent than in Belarus.

Graph 2. Mobility trends amid the first wave of coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine



Source: Based on the Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports, 2020

Within three months of the coronavirus emerging in Belarus, the BYCOVID-19 civic initiative assembled [around US\\$360,000](#), mostly through crowdfunding platforms MolaMola.by and Petitions.by, and delivered PPE to hundreds of hospitals across the country. BYCOVID-19 relied on specific requests from medical institutions rather than making unsolicited deliveries. Dozens of other, smaller crowdfunding initiatives were registered and managed to collect financial assistance for medical workers. The strong response by NGOs increased Belarusian residents' level of trust towards civil society, businesses' trust towards the NGOs as well as trust between NGOs, one [April poll showed](#).

In order to facilitate cooperation with the state authorities and public hospitals, BYCOVID-19 spokespersons Andrei Stryzhak and Andrei Trakchou abstained from criticising the authorities for inadequate coronavirus-related countermeasures. Although the state authorities largely tolerated BYCOVID-19's activities, occasional inadequate measures were reported despite the high importance of the civil initiative for public health. It was [reported](#), among other things, that the deputy chief doctor of Shumilina regional hospital was summoned to the prosecutor's office after she wrote about a deficit of PPE in a Telegram channel and put out a call for assistance.

Belarusian state-owned media did not report on civil society's response to the epidemic, wholly ignoring BYCOVID-19's

activities. Instead it focused on the sporadic assistance provided by GONGOs (i.e. government-organised "NGOs") like the Belarusian Women's Union, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions. Following the August presidential election and post-election crackdown, many key figures from BYCOVID-19 and similar initiatives were either repressed or temporarily left the country to escape repressions, which will likely weaken civil society efforts in combatting a second wave of the pandemic.

An online questionnaire conducted in May and June [showed that the pandemic had caused](#) many Belarusian NGOs to realise the importance of reorienting their activities. Belarus's civil society organisations noted an increased demand for educational and career support, legal advice and social services.

2.

Russia: volunteers doing their part

Russian society was more satisfied with the measures taken by its authorities than Belarusians. Levada's survey in late May, based on a representative sample of urban and rural residents across the country and conducted by computer-assisted telephone interviews, [showed](#) that 65% of respondents approved the anti-coronavirus measures taken by the president and government, whereas 63% completely

or partly approved the measures taken by regional authorities.

The public's assessment of Russia's health-care system was pessimistic though. An earlier Levada [survey \(March 2020\) revealed](#) that 52% of respondents were unhappy with the situation in Russian health-care and just 9% assessed it as good. [Media reports](#) about the deficit of PPE strengthened civil society's awareness about existing problems in the healthcare system and prompted NGOs and pro-government organisations to step in and help to deal with COVID-19.

A number of charity funds including "Pravmir" and "Sozidanie" [raised money](#) for PPE, while opposition-minded NGO "Open Russia" [focused](#) on assisting doctors. The latter's initiative received quite [a lot of criticism](#) on social media though, on account of the fact that aid was being solicited from ordinary people when the country has many oligarchs.

"[We are together](#)" – a civil campaign – recruited tens of thousands of volunteers in 85 Russian regions and partnered with small and large businesses. A smaller initiative, [Memedic](#), sent 700 volunteers to six hospitals in Moscow and one in Cherkessk. Their assistance [included](#) cleaning hospital grounds, compiling statistics about sick patients, and doing laundry and dry-cleaning for doctors and patients. Meanwhile, a volunteer network, "[Makers against COVID-19](#)", produced PPE for doctors and delivered them coffee machines and food.

3.

COVID-19 solidarity movement in Ukraine

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, many of the same people and organisations that volunteered at the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, began collaborating with businesses and local authorities to supply PPE to hospitals. Numerous fundraising initiatives appeared in Lviv, Kyiv, Odesa, Poltava, and other cities, in partnership with local NGOs. Being highly trusted by the population, volunteer organisations posted information on social media about donations received and expenditures.

Ihor Liski, a Ukrainian entrepreneur, and Maksym Bakhmatov, advisor to the mayor of Kyiv, created *The Kyiv Volunteer Headquarters* which [aimed](#) at coordinating donations for procuring PPE and other medical equipment for Kyiv hospitals. By the end of July, they had raised almost US\$50,000. The Kyiv Volunteer Headquarters also joined forces with businesses to purchase lung ventilators and surgical equipment.

By the end of June, Fabricator/FabLab, an innovation laboratory in Kyiv, had produced and [dispatched](#) over 30,000 face shields to hospitals across the country. Examples of regional initiatives included a [Volunteer's Union](#) in Dnipro, which provided information about the quarantine regulations and supplied medical equipment,

and an initiative in the Odesa region for the production of medical gowns made of laminated spunbond fabric. The Odesa region project was initiated by Anzhelika Derevtsova, owner of the Ukrainian fashion brand *I Want What I Can Do*. The charity fund *Starenki* helped vulnerable, isolated older people and provided social workers with protective gear across Kyiv, Lviv, and Dnipro.

Design engineer Andrii Pavlov launched the online service no-covid.org.ua to help doctors with free transport through a network of drivers in Kyiv. A similar initiative was started by a group of displaced people and Donbas war veterans in the Donetsk oblast. They provided transport for at least 400 people weekly to hospitals, including both medical personnel and patients.

The Ukrainian Volunteer Service stepped forward with a different approach, matching volunteers and people in need of assistance through the Pandemic Relief Centre. By late April, over 500 volunteers from across Ukraine signed up as the Centre's members. The Ukrainian Volunteer Service also created volunteer safety instructions and a public database of 80+ organisations and initiatives, to provide help to people and medical workers during the COVID-19 epidemic.

The advocacy and charitable non-profit organisation *Patients of Ukraine* also served as a coordination centre for businesses and private donors willing to contribute to the common cause. It raised around US\$550,000 for PPE and other medical equipment by June and made deliveries to the hospitals in most acute need.

CONCLUSIONS

The different responses to COVID-19 in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine have largely reflected the political regime, economic structure and social specifics in each country.

The Belarusian authorities continued to damage the image of a paternalistic state which cares about the needs of its population. The personalist authoritarian regime in Belarus very well explains the state's irresponsible policies, since the policies adopted stem from Lukashenka's personal views on COVID-19. In this situation, the highly-developed IT sector and dynamic civic initiatives were still able to make significant contributions in the fight against the pandemic by financing hospitals, supplying PPE and providing various *pro bono* services. The authorities widely used the COVID-19 pandemic to justify their authoritarian practices and enable massive vote-rigging in the presidential election. Inadequate measures by Belarusian state authorities and Lukashenka personally seriously undermined their legitimacy and largely contributed to unprecedented opposition political mobilisation both during and after the election.

In Russia, the oligarchs and large state-controlled companies played

a noticeable role in assisting the state authorities in dealing with the coronavirus. At the same time a number of large private companies, networks of volunteers and grassroots initiatives also did their part. Although sociological surveys showed that over a half of Russians approved of the measures taken by the central and regional state authorities, Vladimir Putin's approval rating eroded slightly during the first wave of COVID-19 infections. At the same time, the pandemic facilitated election fraud in Russia's constitutional referendum.

In Ukraine, the state authorities relied on the oligarchs to a great extent in dealing with the pandemic, though the voluntary sector, which developed considerably after 2014, made an important contribution as well. The imminent local elections in Ukraine contributed to episodes of disobedience by city mayors towards central government's lockdown orders. Despite these acts of disobedience, in general management of the response to COVID-19 in Ukraine was no less centralised than in Belarus and Russia where the state authorities gave regional and local authorities some discretion in dealing with the crisis.

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