

COVID-19



Government communication and public resilience to propaganda during COVID-19

in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine

Authors **Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina,**
Oleksii Kovalenko, Lela Saralidze

Scientific editor **Andrei Yeliseyeu**
Language editor **Paul Hansbury**



ABSTRACT

This report analyses the content and efficiency of official communication on COVID-19 related issues in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine. It also pays attention to pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives concerning COVID-19 in each of the three countries. The authorities in Belarus followed the worst Soviet-era policies by resorting to widespread censorship, propaganda, conspiracy theories and manipulation to downplay the risks of COVID-19 and distort perceptions of its consequences. The state communication in Ukraine was far better than in Belarus but suffered from inconsistency due to rivalry between central and regional authorities. The quality and consistency of Georgia's communication campaign about the risks posed by COVID-19, and the countermeasures adopted, were the strongest of the three states, though problems were encountered in areas populated by ethnic minorities. While some pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives were common for all three countries, a set of country-specific claims were propagated by Kremlin-friendly media outlets.

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I. State communication concerning COVID-19 in Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia

1

Belarus

At the very beginning of the outbreak in Belarus, the Belarusian Ministry of Health attempted to launch a decent communication campaign. In early March 2020 its Telegram channel declared that closing schools and suspending mass gatherings would be ordinary measures during pandemics. However, the Ministry, along with other state media, quickly adapted to amplify President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's position. 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.

In Belarus, therefore, state communication fell victim to Lukashenka's personal

views and public authorities became an important source of disinformation about COVID-19. The Belarusian state media consistently spread conspiracy theories and used a number of propaganda techniques to downplay the danger posed by the epidemic and portray Belarus in a better light than 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. These abruptly ended in late April and not a single press conference dedicated to COVID-19 was held during the second wave of the epidemic. No emergency statements or speeches related to the COVID-19 epidemic were made by state officials. Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not pay a single visit to hospitals during the first

wave of the epidemic and did a few only in late November and December 2020.

The 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 needed. The state propaganda often **underlined the fact** – which the country's healthcare system heavily relied on – that Belarus has a particularly high number of hospital beds per capita and a large network of sanitary epidemiological bodies inherited from the USSR.

The Ministry of Health did occasionally publish sound recommendations for the isolation of the elderly and vulnerable groups on its website and Telegram channel, but state TV and local newspaper reporting of these recommendations was insufficient and disorienting, particularly during the first wave of the epidemic. High-level officials did not wear medical masks at governmental meetings, which undermined messages about the importance of taking precautionary measures. A no-mask policy was observed during Lukashenka's annual address to the nation on 4 August 2020, which was held indoors and attended by over 2,000 state officials.

Furthermore, Lukashenka even disregarded safety measures during hospital visits and state media repeatedly **showed** him on COVID wards without a mask or gloves. Such behaviour sparked rumours on Telegram channels that the hospital visits, and Lukashenka's appearance in their "red zones" were staged.

The arrival of a WHO mission in the first half of April prompted the launch of an official state portal, [Stopcovid.belta.by](https://stopcovid.belta.by), though it contained little useful information. It republished official news, included some infographics concerning symptoms and extra-payments to medical personnel, and posted official – and unreliable – COVID-19 statistics. A page on the Belarusian Health Ministry website **featured** recommendations for the elderly about social distancing, advice for sick people, and gave details of a telephone hotline.

In his brief, based on content analysis of weekly news programmes on three state-owned TV channels (Belarus 1, ONT, and CTV) during the COVID-19 first wave, Andrei Yeliseyeu of the EAST Center **identified** the major manipulation techniques used by Belarusian state media. Among other things, the TV channels ridiculed COVID-19 and social distancing measures such as the ban on mass gatherings. In particular, one of CTV's March reports, dedicated to the Belarusian national football championship, described its continuation and the presence of football fans in stadiums as "our protest against the pandemic." They also claimed Belarus was the best prepared state globally to handle the epidemic and was fully compliant with the WHO's recommendations, and that world leaders ultimately realised they had overreacted and started following Lukashenka's "intelligent policies".

In an attempt to play down the threat posed by COVID-19, Belarusian state-owned TV channels reported that all deaths occurred in persons with multiple

chronic diseases. State media also consistently promoted a false dilemma about measures against COVID-19, presenting a complete lockdown as the only alternative to the insufficient and tardy state response in Belarus. Furthermore, state-owned TV channels claimed that COVID-19 was a special operation by external forces targeting the national economy of Belarus and other countries.

The Belarusian state media falsely compared state policies with those of Sweden. In fact, Sweden ran a far better information campaign and introduced stricter social distancing rules than Belarus, although not as strict as in many other European countries.

The state media in Belarus also praised US President Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for their anti-lockdown policies. State propaganda omitted any mention of international criticism and praised the uniqueness and effectiveness of the Belarusian approach against COVID-19. Lukashenka [said in late November 2020](#), “It is important that the whole world realises that we walked this path in the right way. We did it with dignity, the only in the world.” Belarus’s authorities ignored concerns raised by the WHO mission about insufficient social distancing measures. Instead, the state media [falsely presented](#) the WHO mission’s conclusions as praise for Belarus’s management of the pandemic.

The Belarusian state media did not question the state policies and cited solely those medical experts who praised these policies. For instance, Maria Zhurovich, Head of the Pulmonary Department at a Minsk hospital, [reassured](#) the public that the official numbers of COVID-19 patients were true, that panicking diminishes a patient’s chances for a [quick recovery](#), and that chronic diseases [aggravate](#) COVID-19 infection – all statements that official communication was heavily focused on.

At the same time, state media diligently avoided discussing the strong response among businesses and civil society initiatives such as BYCOVID-19¹, all of which were organised independently of state bodies (read more on this topic in the [EAST Center’s October 2020 report](#)). If their contributions were mentioned, then they were not attributed to members of the business community or civil society. 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.

In response to the aggravating epidemiological situation in autumn 2020, the state authorities stepped up communication about COVID-19 risks. In early November 2020 a number of regions introduced regimes mandating mask-wearing in public places, and these were extended to the whole country in subsequent weeks.

¹ Read more in: The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Responses by the state, business, and civil society, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-coronavirus-outbreak-BLR-RU-UKR.pdf>

State media informed that the measure was largely necessitated by citizens' overly relaxed and irresponsible behaviour until this point. In contrast to the earlier no-mask policy, in mid-November 2020 the Belarus 1 TV channel [showed an interview](#) with chief sanitary inspector Alyaksandr Tarasenko in which both he and the correspondent wore medical masks.

Those who died from COVID-19 were reported to have had "chronic diseases" and were very much "victim shamed". Lukashenko [said](#) of an early COVID-19 victim in Belarus: "How was it possible to live? [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 amplified insinuations that those who passed away due to COVID-19 infection would have inevitably died very soon anyway due to their other illnesses. During the second wave of the COVID-19 epidemic, Belarusian officials [blamed anti-Lukashenko protests](#) for spreading the infection and the population in general [for not observing precautionary measures fully](#).

The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, created by a number of Belarusian and foreign human rights organisations, wrote in its December 2020 [report](#) that: "The state bodies intentionally do not undertake any measures to protect detainees from coronavirus infection and to isolate and treat symptomatic cases. In the light of mass detentions and the absence of preventive measures, the places of detentions became the places of mass

COVID-19 infections." Furthermore, as extensive journalistic research by Reform.by [shows](#), based on a survey of over 500 people released from detention, the prison administrations often undertook various actions to deliberately infect as many prisoners with COVID-19 as possible, including by transferring persons with clear COVID-19 symptoms from one overcrowded ward to another, and subsequently denied them of medical help.

State communication on health-related issues was often mixed with political messaging. The Ministry of Health and high-level health officials repeatedly spoke against peaceful protests by Belarusian doctors in the aftermath of 9 August 2020 presidential election, which was marred with [widespread torture of protesters](#) by security bodies. The state media and officials intentionally [equated the participation](#) of doctors in solidarity chains with a refusal to provide medical care to patients and named such actions inhuman and criminal – despite doctors participating in these actions outside of their working hours.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, and amid Belarus-Russia squabbles over state responses to the epidemic, the authorities of Belarus repeatedly stressed their good political relationship with China. The Belarusian state media reported mutual humanitarian assistance with China and the Ministry of Health spoke of fruitful communication with Chinese doctors over treatment strategies. Lukashenko's power looked fragile in the aftermath of 9 August 2020

presidential election and he had to intensify political relations with the Kremlin. Belarusian state propaganda largely developed in lockstep with Russia's after the August election, and coronavirus-related mentions of Russia became more favourable. In one of its October weekly

news programmes, the Belarus 1TV channel claimed that Belarus certainly defeated COVID-19, celebrating the fact that Prime Minister Raman Halouchanka had been vaccinated with the Russian vaccine and hinting at an imminent rollout of a nationwide vaccination programme.

2

Georgia

Georgia's "Stay at home" slogan spearheaded a rather efficient and coherent campaign on the dangers of the coronavirus, although public communication in areas populated by ethnic minorities was troubled.

As part of the state of emergency between 16 March and 22 May 2020, the Georgian government temporarily closed all schools and universities, citing the need to protect the elderly. The government drew attention to the social structure of the typical Georgian family, where several generations often live in one household. As the number of infections surged during the epidemic's second wave in the autumn, mainly due to tourism and the parliamentary election campaign, the official message was changed to "Learn to live with Covid".

Print media, public and private TV channels actively solicited comment from

epidemiologists and doctors². At the same time, private TV channels criticised chief epidemiologists for taking part in governmental events during the parliamentary election and thereby ostensibly endorsing the political party Georgian Dream.

COVID-19-related information was also communicated through mobile operators who distributed text messages, one example read: "Stay at home and save your loved ones." Public transport carried announcements relaying governmental regulations regarding COVID-19 and urged the wearing of medical masks.

The Interagency Coordination Council (ICC), chaired by Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, held daily briefings from the start of the pandemic which were broadcast live. Unlike in Belarus, journalists were allowed to ask questions. While the epidemiological situation was largely taken

² They included: Tengiz Tsertsvadze, Director of the Infectious Diseases Hospital; Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of the National Center for Disease Control; Paata Imnadze, Scientific Director of the National Center for Disease Control; Marina Ezugbaya, Medical Director at the Tbilisi Infectious Diseases Hospital; Marina Endeladze, Head of the Isolation Ward of the Infectious Diseases Hospital; Levan Ratiani, Director of the First University Clinic, and others.

under control by the end of the first wave, the Georgian authorities, particularly Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia during his speech at the parliament's plenary session on 27 May, [frankly noted](#) the difficulty of predicting how the epidemic would develop in the autumn.

The official website for information, [Stopcov.ge](#), promoted a national hotline and recommendations by the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) and the WHO. It was made available in Georgian, English, Azeri, Armenian and Abkhaz languages, and later on in Ossetian too. Stopcov.ge contained statistics about the number of confirmed cases in Georgia in the previous 24 hours, a description of symptoms, instructions for persons with symptoms, and a FAQ section. The [NCDC website](#) also contained COVID-19 related information including guidance and recommendations for various segments and groups of the population, but this has only been available in Georgian and English. Another website [Covdata.ge](#) presents the data by the Johns Hopkins University and the official Georgian data.

In April–May 2020, research conducted by the European Regional Bureau of the World Health Organization in conjunction with the WHO Country Office in Georgia [found](#) that 76–84% of respondents believed that the Georgian government had taken adequate and timely measures for preventing COVID-19 and that 90% were aware of the symptoms and transmission routes of COVID-19, and following preventive measures.

The authorities of Georgia faced challenges to effectively communicate coronavirus-related information in ethnic-minority languages. Among others, this was the case with the Azeri-populated villages of Mushevani in the Bolnisi municipality and Shulaveri village in the Marneuli municipality. These areas showed resistance to respecting the strict quarantine from 23 March to 22 May, attributing their disregard for the quarantine to a lack of information and difficulties selling their agricultural products. Although the local authorities allocated vehicles to facilitate the transport of agricultural goods from Marneuli to Tbilisi and promised further support, the measures were insufficient and [resulted](#) in local farmers' unsold fresh produce being left to rot and waste.

The Georgian Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality prepared and [distributed up to 100,000 brochures in Azerbaijani and Armenian languages](#) to ethnic minorities in Kvemo-Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kakheti, densely populated villages far from municipal centres which have limited access to information via electronic channels. The state authorities also trained specialists to staff government hotlines providing services to Georgian citizens, including ethnic Azeri and Armenian communities, and on the procedures of obtaining special permits for travel during the lockdown period. In the city of Marneuli, located in the south of Georgia close to the border with Azerbaijan and Armenia, where many nationalities coexist and use Russian as a language of communication, as well as in Georgian

villages close to the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia where the internet is barely accessible, the communication campaign also encountered problems. In order to in-

crease access to information by ethnic minorities, the Georgian authorities provided translations of the live daily briefings on state TV in two minority languages.

3

Ukraine

According to the early April 2020 survey, “Measuring Worldwide COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs”, as many as 86% of Belarusians found their government’s reaction **insufficient** while only 34% of Ukrainians did so. The communication campaign by the Ukrainian authorities was, however, far from satisfactory because of its inconsistency during both the first and second waves of the epidemic.

The Ukrainian authorities attempted to cover up **the lack of medical supplies for acute care**, including insufficient quantities of personal protective equipment, and the very slow pace of the coronavirus testing. Moreover, Kyiv health officials and municipal leaders communicated conflicting information about the epidemic and countermeasures to it. For instance, Kharkiv and Odesa municipal authorities **did not comply** with the decision of the Presidential Administration to temporarily close grocery markets.

The conflicts between central and regional Ukrainian authorities over the response to COVID-19, which are described in more detail in the EAST Center’s **October 2020 report** “The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Responses

by the state, business, and civil society”, sparked miscommunication and mistrust among Ukrainians. While Chief Sanitary Doctor of Ukraine Viktor Liashko and Health Minister Maksym Stepanov affirmed the importance of an extension to the quarantine, many city mayors in Ukraine instead **spoke** of a return to normal life and the reopening of the economy.

This communication crisis between central and regional authorities took a new turn in November 2020 when the Ukrainian government introduced a nationwide ongoing **“weekend quarantine”**. The mayors of Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Mukachevo, Zhytomyr, Cherkasy, Mykolayiv, Ternopil and Odesa disobeyed the new regulations, explaining their resistance by the concern for local entrepreneurs.

Instead of providing consistent information on the risks posed by COVID-19 and state measures against it, many leading Ukrainian media **focused public attention** on the struggling economy. While some people were overwhelmed by the inconsistencies in the information flows, others got tired of the “infodemic”, an overabundance of information on COVID-19, some accurate

and some not, making it hard for many people to distinguish truth from falsehood.

According to the [Public Interest Research Lab's research](#), inconsistencies in the state authorities' communication about the health crisis aroused fears among Ukrainians for their health and for future socio-economic condition. This, in turn, converted into political distrust and critical attitudes towards the government and made Ukrainians more vulnerable to disinformation. [According to polls](#), by the end of 2020 almost 80% of Ukrainians did not trust the Ukrainian parliament and government officials.

The Ukrainian government created a number of websites and information channels about the health crisis. The website [Covid19.gov.ua](#) has featured information updates about COVID-19 and lockdown measures in Ukraine. Initially the website lacked a news section and updates concerning the spread of COVID-19 and data on testing, hospitalisation and patient recovery. Since the addition of such information, the website has become a major source of data for Ukrainian mainstream media outlets. The Ministry of Economic Development also created a [web-portal](#) with information about COVID-19 and the challenges for small and medium-sized businesses.

By the end of the first COVID-19 wave in Ukraine, there were reports of [fatigue](#) among the population caused by extensive coverage of the epidemic. The data of the Institute of Mass Information showed that the number of stories related to the health crisis in Ukrainian media

[decreased](#) from 58.5% in April to 27% in May. Moreover, many of these stories focused on the social and economic consequences of COVID-19 rather than on the crisis in the healthcare system. At the same time, public demand for basic knowledge about COVID-19 remained rather high throughout spring 2020.

The Ukrainian authorities often, although to a lesser extent than in Belarus, used the "all is under control" message, a common Soviet legacy. In late April the president's office [claimed](#) that regional hospitals had sufficient medical equipment and supplies. In fact, according to [monitoring](#) across the country by the Ukrainian NGO StateWatch, as of late March 2020 just 7% of hospitals confirmed they were sufficiently equipped with biohazard suits, nitrile gloves, and respirators.

The most striking shortages were in the conflict-stricken Donbas areas bordering the occupied territories. These areas are populated by many internally displaced people from the occupied territories and a large elderly population. During the first wave of the epidemic, just [two laboratories functioned which performed](#) 140 COVID-19 tests per day. The number of daily tests increased by 50–100 after a third laboratory was opened in May. By early June 2020 the backlog of blood samples awaiting analysis reached almost 4,000. Hence the number of confirmed cases in the Donetsk region was unrealistically low in comparison with other Ukrainian regions.

Since the Ukrainian government [used a significant portion of its COVID-19 Fund](#)

on large construction projects and road repairs, [not a single ventilator](#) had been bought with this money by late September 2020. According to Mariya Hrishyna from the [“Uniting against Covid-19” Initiative](#), as of late November, Ukrainian doctors continued experiencing a deficit in personal protective equipment, including gloves and medical face masks. The lack of protective gear in Ukraine resulted in very high morbidity among medical workers. As of 21 June 2020, 5,998 Ukrainian medical workers had [tested positive with COVID-19](#), which was 17% of all identified cases.

Ukrainian media professionals [concluded](#) in July that many Ukrainians still wondered why some businesses were open while others were ordered to shut down, and why in some public places customers were required to wear face masks

and not in others. The Ukrainian public was therefore not properly informed about the nature of such inconsistencies and the logic behind some anti-coronavirus measures.

The already-mentioned study of public opinion by the Public Interest Journalism Lab [found](#) that in April–May 2020 there was still a high demand for additional information about testing procedures and availability, and for clear and reliable information about the use of face masks and other protective measures. The report proposed specific [recommendations](#) to the media and state authorities for enhancing COVID-19 communication, which included the need for well-explained rationale behind the government’s actions, the use of original formats to present content, and the need to provide more local coverage.

II. Unreliable official statistics in Belarus and Ukraine

There are worldwide [difficulties](#) handling COVID-19 data and reports point towards severe undercounting of COVID-19 deaths in many countries. However, the reliability of official statistics in Belarus and Ukraine deserves particular attention. Available evidence suggests that undercounting in Belarus has been particularly severe due to intentional manipulation of statistics and consistent censorship. In Ukraine, the problems with COVID-19 data largely stem from poor testing capabilities.

Collective memory in Belarus and Ukraine is marked by the legacy of the non-transparent management of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Consequently, journalists and expert communities robustly challenged official statistics on COVID-19, especially data on the numbers of deaths. Around 64% of Belarusians and 60% of Ukrainians considered official statistics as factually untruthful, [according to the survey](#) “Measuring Worldwide

COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs”. The share of residents doubting official statistics in Belarus and Ukraine has likely increased in the months following the survey (late March – early April) in the wake of additional, reliable evidence of significant flaws in official statistics.

In Belarus, 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 showed a graph depicting daily identified COVID-19 cases in Belarus since the beginning of the epidemic, which only partly coincided with official reports. It [followed](#) an inadvertently disclosed document that showed the numbers 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 around between 900 and 984 for around two weeks in late October – early November 2020. Yet the [leaked document](#) showed that, on 30 October 2020, in the city of Minsk alone the number of newly identified COVID-19 cases³ reached 1,659. Therefore, depending on the capital's share of COVID-19 positive cases, the actual numbers of daily identified cases in Belarus as a whole around that time could be 4,000–9,000, or more. Furthermore, another artificial limit of 2,000 cases per day was apparently set by the Belarusian authorities in December 2020. An analysis of official statistics also suggests that limits for daily numbers of deaths from COVID-19 were also established at seven and ten as the maximums to be reported during the first and second wave, respectively.

The authorities of Belarus consistently avoided providing region-level data on COVID-19. A map containing very basic regional data was available at official website Stopcovid.belta.by at the very beginning of the epidemic, but it was removed in the first half of April 2020. By mid-April the website also stopped providing information of the number of patients in intensive-care units and the number of first-line contacts placed in obligatory isolation. The Belarusian authorities [did not respond to a call](#) for

transparency made by independent media outlets and the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

State local newspapers either censored any statistics pertaining to COVID-19 in respective localities or attributed the increase in pneumonia cases to other reasons. A telling example was an article published in April 2020 by a local newspaper in the Rasony district [under the title](#): “There is no coronavirus in Rasony but medics register an increased incidence of pneumonia.” During the first epidemic wave a number of local newspapers’ websites deleted previously-published articles containing statistics on the number of hospitalisations with pneumonia. Despite these enormous censoring efforts, it was still [possible to learn indirectly](#) from publications about a surge of morbidity across the regions. Most obviously, the news reported on the reprofiling of more and more local hospital units for the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

The state media in Belarus kept its silence on the sobering mortality statistics for Belarus which were published on the UN’s data portal. Official data in Belarus reported 398 deaths from coronavirus by July 2020, but it [follows from the analysis](#) of the mortality data provided to the UN that the most likely total number of excess deaths in April–June 2020 was around 6,730. Hence,

³ Minsk constitutes around 20% of Belarus’s total population. However, high-ranking Belarusian health officials stated around that time that almost a half of identified COVID-19 cases in the country fell in Minsk. It is hard to say how truthful that statement was given prevailing political considerations which sought to discredit large anti-government protests which were taking place in the capital city.

official reports in Belarus downplayed the death toll by 15–20 times. Instead of scrutinising unreliable national statistics and discussing the difficult epidemiological situation, Belarusian state propaganda [focused its news agenda](#) on alleged social and economic “chaos” in Ukraine and Western countries due to the epidemic.

State bodies did their best to conceal the mortality statistics. When independent media [wrote](#) about such statistics in the third-largest Belarusian city, Mahiliou, based on the records of the local civil registry, these reports were [deleted](#) from the website within a few hours. It followed from the information provided by the local civil registry that the number of deaths for January–November 2020 in Mahiliou was about 20% higher than the average number of deaths for the previous five years.

Unlike in Belarus, Ukrainian authorities did not attempt to conceal or lower the number of deaths from COVID-19.

However, particularly during the first four months of the health crisis, the number of COVID-19 incidents and deaths was unrealistically low, mainly because of the very low rates of coronavirus testing. By January 2021 Ukraine had performed 128,000 COVID-19 tests per million population, which is the second lowest rate in Europe after Albania. The numbers for Belarus and Georgia were 428,000 and 474,000, respectively.

In addition to the shortage of COVID-19 tests and laboratory equipment, Ukraine lacked an [accurate electronic database of registered deaths](#), which also put in question the reliability of official statistics reports. During the second wave, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [raised the issue of the reliability](#) of the statistics and demanded improvements. Minister of Health Maksym Stepanov reacted by justifying the low numbers, claiming that many people coped with the disease in self-isolation without reporting their illness to the state health authorities.

III.

Disinformation narratives in pro-Kremlin media and country responses to them

1

Common narratives

Pro-Kremlin media published a multitude of materials on COVID-19 for audiences in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine. These have argued that the European Union, the US, and the West as a whole are ineffectually coping with the pandemic and doomed to disintegration. One commentator for Sputnik [said](#): “The EU has in fact already collapsed because there is no leadership.” A popular pro-Kremlin propaganda outlet, [Ukraina.ru](#), echoed this message [saying](#) that: “The West is psychologically broken. It agrees with its defeat. The single powerful structure has broken apart.” Sputnik guests [claimed](#) that one of the reasons behind the EU’s failure to successfully counteract COVID-19 was Russophobia. Another regular Sputnik contributor [predicted](#) the disappearance of some European

countries due to the pandemic, while a [Ukraina.ru](#) commentator [made it clear](#) that Ukraine is on this list.

Pro-Kremlin sources in all three countries questioned solidarity within the EU and between the US and other Western countries. They also [promoted](#) the view that the virus was artificially created by the West to harm Russia and China, while asserting that Chinese and Russian policies for containing COVID-19 should serve as a model for the rest of the world.

Building on this assertion of Russia’s superiority compared to the West in fighting COVID-19, pro-Kremlin sources claimed that the authorities of Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine would fail without Russia’s assistance. The sources claimed that the US,

Italy, and Serbia all benefitted from Russia's assistance. Pro-Kremlin media also advocated the abolition of Western sanctions

against Russia and other countries, arguing that sanctions policies are hypocritical in the challenging climate of the pandemic.

2

Two-pronged propaganda assault on Belarusians

Belarusians found themselves bombarded by disinformation narratives and conspiracies about COVID-19 both from the state media and pro-Kremlin sources. As explained in the first section of this report, Belarusian TV channels and other state media ran a coordinated campaign which downplayed the risks posed by the novel coronavirus and showed Belarus in an artificially better light compared to other countries. The Belarusian state media and pro-Kremlin sources shared an apocalyptic assessment of COVID-19's consequences in Ukraine and Western countries, made allegations about the virus being man-made and about its use by powerful global forces in pursuit of their malevolent interests.

Belarusian state media websites repeatedly reposted content from controversial Russian online sources. In March 2020 the website of the Belarusian ONT TV channel [reposted](#) news from Medikforum.ru citing a Russian dietologist who claimed that baking soda is effective against COVID-19 and that the virus goes in hand with US-created bacteria "sintia". Following the [exposure](#) of the false news

by Belarusian independent media, ONT was quick to delete the article without providing further commentary.

In other cases, though, false and controversial coronavirus-related news stayed in place. For instance, in April Belta, the largest Belarusian state news agency, [posted a story](#) from Trendru.net citing an Italian professor who spoke against social distancing measures, doubted the benefits of medical masks and gloves, and ridiculed the development of an anti-coronavirus vaccine. The Belta article was [reposted](#) by one of the largest V Kontakte public pages where it attracted over 40,000 extra views.

A network of pro-Kremlin regional websites in Belarus published [a series of articles alleging](#) that the Belarusian opposition, social activists, independent mass media, and bloggers are 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 organise a genocide, and that the opposition intended to help NATO in an attack on Belarus that failed only because of the COVID-19 epidemic.

A number of pro-Kremlin websites, including [Teleskop](#), shared the article “Bell Ringing Against Coronavirus”, which allegedly contains “scientifically-based evidence” of the antiviral effect of synchronous bell ringing “on the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church.” They also published numerous articles praising the effectiveness of Russia’s approach in fighting COVID-19 in contrast to the response of the decaying West. Some publications alleged that Russians were mentally more resistant to COVID-19 than other peoples. For instance, Sputnik Belarus [broadcast](#) the opinion that “for Russians, coronavirus is like trying to scare them with cockroaches, as we have already been through so much.”

The website of the Coordination Council of the Belarusian Public Associations of Russian Compatriots, whose domain belongs to the Russian Embassy in Belarus, [published the poem](#) “Virus the Monster”, which states, inter alia:

*The Pechenegs (us) tormented,
But even Polovtsy relented.
No one could defeat us there,
The hardest path is in the air...*

In the preface to this “poem” it is stated that “our ancestors, Aryan Russians, were also creators of the great civilisations of antiquity”. It proceeded to imply that

the COVID-19 epidemic is not that dangerous as some may think.

Belarusian society proved rather resistant to this two-pronged propaganda assault. Due to inadequate government communication and state policies as a whole, public trust in the state authorities and the country’s ruler significantly eroded which ultimately led to their devastating delegitimation. During the first wave of COVID-19, and its aftermath, the popularity of independent media in Belarus surged, whereas trust in state media collapsed. Political developments around the presidential election campaign partly explained this, but the state’s inadequate policies in handling COVID-19 greatly contributed to the political mobilisation of Lukashenka’s opponents.

A September 2020 survey conducted by the British analytical company Sociolytics [found](#) that 54.3% of Belarusians preferred independent media, while only 29.4% mostly followed state media and the remaining 16.3% followed both equally. Furthermore, just 12% of respondents trusted Belarusian state TV channels and print media. In 2020 the popularity of Telegram as a means of communication and source of political information among Belarusians increased dramatically. The Sociolytics survey also established that around a third of Belarusians use Telegram daily. The largest Telegram channels targeting Belarusian audiences regularly posted coronavirus-related information, exposed statistical manipulations, criticised inadequate state policies, and warned their followers to observe precautionary measures.

3

Ukraine-specific disinformation: a variety of means

Pro-Kremlin sources [instrumentalized the COVID-19 pandemic](#) to continue sowing distrust and division within Ukrainian society. Disinformation was disseminated through Ukrainian pro-Russian TV channels, websites, social networks and by pro-Kremlin bloggers. The absence of coherent state communication on COVID-19 and the unreliability of official statistics made Ukrainians vulnerable to Kremlin-sponsored [disinformation campaigns on social media](#).

In the absence of reliable Ukraine-produced information on COVID-19 in the Russian language, many Russian-speaking Ukrainians turned to Kremlin-sponsored media as their primary information source. According to a [study](#) by the Public Interest Research Lab, many consumers lacked awareness of disinformation and trusted various conspiracy statements.

Pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk's Ukrainian TV network, which includes popular channels *112*, *ZIK* and *NewsOne*, [portrayed](#) governmental healthcare institutions as utterly incapable of dealing with the epidemic. These TV channels often depicted Ukraine as controlled by the US and the Soros Foundation. Pro-Russian blogger Anatoliy Shariy continued promoting a narrative about Ukraine as a "failed state" in the light of the COVID-19 epidemic,

blaming the Ukrainian authorities for the health crisis and Ukrainian migrants for returning from abroad.

Several Ukrainian digital debunking groups, founded long before the pandemic, were active – and seemingly more successful than the Ukrainian government – in debunking coronavirus-related disinformation and fakes. In early April, the Ukrainian authorities selected Medvedchuk-controlled TV channels to provide uninterrupted education and implement the nationwide project "All-Ukrainian School Online", which [potentially exposed](#) younger generations to the Kremlin's malign media influence.

Some disinformation messages targeting Ukrainians contained harmless advice, including recommendations [to drink excessive amounts of water, brew homemade tea](#), or abstain from [eating ice-cream](#). Others included modifications of old claims about Ukraine as a failed state, alleged huge impact of neo-Nazis on Ukrainian policies, existing secret virology laboratories which test viruses and chemicals on residents, and war crimes of the Ukrainian army. Some fake stories were adapted to the pandemic agenda like the [one about Ukrainian doctors](#) who refused to treat coronavirus-infected military personnel or another about patients getting shot by the Ukrainian army because of their sickness.

Some conspiracy theories targeting Ukraine echoed those aimed at Western democracies. In Ukraine, there was an equivalent of the “[Plandemic video](#)” that went viral in the US. The one targeting Ukraine claimed that American Rotary International, “associated with the Freemasons”, started the “[micro-chipping](#)” of Ukrainians. Pro-Kremlin websites also played the old card of social inequality in Ukraine, [claiming](#) that the Ukrainian authorities provided better protective equipment to state officials than to the medical personnel treating COVID-19 patients.

Facebook, the most popular social network in Ukraine, expanded its fact-checking operations. It [partnered](#) with the Ukrainian digital debunking groups StopFake and VoxCheck. They identified disinformation and provided Facebook with explanations why a given piece of information is inaccurate or misleading. Among post-Soviet states this kind of partnership has previously [existed only in the Baltic countries](#). It [turned out](#) that most fakes discovered by Ukrainian debunkers on Facebook were indeed related to COVID-19.

4

Georgia-specific disinformation: old wine in a new bottle

The Tbilisi-based Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research (Lugar Laboratory) was chosen as a target of unfounded accusations by the Russian authorities. The EUvsDisinfo database [contains over 30 cases](#) about the Lugar Lab since the beginning of the pandemic. This is not a new trend: the US-funded laboratory [was earlier groundlessly accused](#) of producing biological weapons for attacking Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and of conducting secret experiments on Georgians. In 2018 the Lugar Lab [also saw allegations](#) in the media close to the Kremlin about the production of the nerve-agent used in the Salisbury attack.

On 17 April 2020 Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova accused](#) the Lugar Lab and the US of extending the scope of experimental activities. Georgian pro-Russian media outlets, including Saqinform, GeWorld, and Sputnik Georgia, helped spread this disinformation. A month later the Russian Foreign Ministry [voiced concerns](#) about the laboratory’s compliance with the Convention on the Prohibition of Biological Weapons. The next day Georgia’s Foreign Ministry [reacted](#) by stating that the laboratory is part of the Georgian Public Health System and solely involved in detection, diagnostics, and prevention of infectious diseases. The Ministry also stressed that

the lab had hosted multiple visits by international experts and Russian journalists and that the Russian authorities declined an invitation to inspect it.

According to the [June 2020 Public attitudes poll](#) carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), only 4% thought the Lugar Lab contributed to the spread of COVID-19 whereas 66% gave it a positive assessment. Overall, the majority of the respondents showed resistance to major disinformation narratives about COVID-19.

Almost 30% of respondents think that a certain foreign country was intentionally spreading false information about COVID-19 in Georgia, the same survey showed. Among them 33% pointed at Russia, whereas 27% and 11% named, respectively, Armenia and China.

On 3 September 2020, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs [issued a statement](#) saying that a cyber-attack coming from a foreign state was carried out against the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social

Protection. The documentation of the Ministry's central office and its structural units, including the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health and the Richard Lugar Research Center, as well as the documents on the pandemic management were named as the cyber-attack's target. Some authentic documents obtained as a result of the cyber-attack were posted on a foreign website alongside falsified documents, which suggests that the goal of the cyber-attack was to intimidate the public and sow confusion and mistrust.

Unlike in Belarus, the pandemic did not significantly change patterns of media consumption in Georgia, the above-mentioned [June 2020 survey showed](#). Georgian TV channels remained the main source of information for receiving news about COVID-19 (83%), followed by social media (41%), and family, friends and colleagues (26%). Georgian radio stations, newspapers, and mobile applications such as Viber and WhatsApp turned out to be unpopular sources of information about COVID-19.

CONCLUSIONS

In Belarus, the communication campaign aimed at justifying the 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. As is typical for a personalist authoritarian regime, official messages were highly influenced by the personal views of the ruler, in this case Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

In order to prevent further erosion of Lukashenka's legitimacy, the Belarusian authorities decided to conceal the actual death toll and manipulate statistics. This was a catastrophic miscalculation both in terms of the severe consequences for public health and Lukashenka's popularity. Due to the accessibility and rising popularity of alternative sources of information, the Belarusian population was able to compare the state policies and their real impact in Belarus with the situation in other countries. As a result, due to inadequate and disastrous public communication, public trust in state bodies and Lukashenka's approval rating

were decisively undermined. Media consumption shifted from state media to independent, online and social media. Although the communication about the dangers posed by COVID-19 somewhat improved in Belarus during the second wave, heavy-handed statistical manipulations remained in place.

While surging numbers of newly-confirmed coronavirus cases in Ukraine show that the pandemic is far from over, discipline among Ukrainians in adhering to pandemic measures has fallen victim to political and business interests, conflicts and entanglements between the state and local authorities, and a lack of effective state communication strategies. The Ukrainian authorities led a better communication campaign than their Belarusian counterparts, but its consistency was highly challenged by a conflictual relationship between national and regional authorities.

During the second wave, leading Ukrainian media outlets largely shifted attention from reporting about the health crisis onto the economic consequences

of the epidemic. Making things worse, Ukraine has become a hotbed of disinformation about COVID-19 and conspiracy theories and fake news related to coronavirus. Russia has deployed a massive disinformation campaign related to COVID-19, finding the world health crisis a perfect pretext to continue sowing mistrust and social divisions in Ukrainian society. Pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives were mostly adapted versions of old Ukraine-specific claims, which have been consistently debunked by well-established media monitoring initiatives.

Georgia's proactive communication during the first wave of COVID-19 explains its success, in health terms, in coping with the pandemic to a large extent. The main vehicles of the government's message were private TV channels whose popularity slightly increased during the first wave of the pandemic as people displayed an interest in, and preoccupation with, the crisis. However, there were difficulties conveying necessary information to areas populated by ethnic minorities and the Tbilisi-based Lugar Laboratory was targeted with unfounded accusations by the Russian authorities and pro-Kremlin media.

About the Authors



Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina

holds a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from *Université libre de Bruxelles*. Her current research focuses on the Belarusian foreign policy. She is also a part-time teaching assistant at the *Université libre de Bruxelles*. Ekaterina is a member of the POSOC19 network (POuvoirs et SOciétés face la Crise du Covid-19), a French-speaking network of political and legal scientists studying COVID-19.



Oleksii Kovalenko

is a research fellow at the EAST Center. His current research interests are peace studies and conflict resolution with the focus on Eastern Europe, disinformation and propaganda, and other asymmetric nonlinear tools of interference.



Lela Saralidze

holds a PhD in History and works as a researcher at the Tbilisi-based non-governmental organisation Regionalism Research Institute. Lela is also a member of the POSOC19 network.

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