

# The varied approaches of authoritarian post-Soviet countries to the coronavirus pandemic

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## INTRODUCTION

Autocrats often justify their unbridled power by claiming they are more effective than “weak” parliamentary democracies at coping with large-scale crises. The social contract they offer citizens usually implies surrendering civil liberties in exchange for greater safety and security. In 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic provided an exceptional opportunity to examine the assumption behind autocrats’ claims.

However, we see no universal approach to the healthcare crisis even among the post-Soviet authoritarian states. While most used the pandemic as a pretext to silence critical voices and limit public discontent, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan generally followed the preventive measures recommended by the World Health Organization. At the same time, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus, three personalist dictatorships, took striking and unique paths which largely reflected the leaders’ personalities and types of political regimes.

## ■ Turkmenistan's stubborn denialism

The notorious Central Asian dictatorship's approach to the pandemic has been a radical case of denial, comparable only to North Korea in its extent. Being isolated, sparsely populated, and remarkably impervious to outside influences, Turkmenistan managed to portray itself as a safe haven untouched by the crisis. However, numerous insider reports, indirect evidence, and inferred statistical data demonstrate the severity of the pandemic and its consequences for the country.

Turkmenistan treated the coronavirus pandemic as an external problem and quickly suspended all international flights before the end of March 2020. The same month, reports appeared of people experiencing symptoms typical of Covid-19 in various parts of the country. Although the authorities forbade hospitals from diagnosing coronavirus, at the same time they banned all mass commemorations and required bodies to be interred in sealed plastic sheets under police supervision. When satellite imagery revealed a surprising number of [new graves](#) in Turkmenistan, officials [demanded](#) that new graves had a flat design so as to be invisible from above. The obsessive denial of the problem, coupled with the absence of an organized civil society, freed the authorities' hands for bizarre and ultimately disastrous actions. From February through June they fined people for wearing masks and kept attendance at mass events obligatory for conscripts, students, and employees of state institutions.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, Turkmen officials [insisted](#) there were no cases of Covid-19 in the country 'due to the measures taken in advance.' Such a narrative disclosed the Achilles' heel of the president's cult of personality. Prior to becoming the head of state, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov was the health minister and oversaw a state program, "Saglyk" ("Health"), intended to modernize the healthcare system, which turned out to be unprepared for the emergency. Hence, officials chose the position of silence for the sake of the leader's reputation. As a result, citizens were blocked from accessing potentially life-saving knowledge about the measures they must take to protect themselves, or even that they were in any danger.

Early July 2020 marked a sharp turning point in Turkmenistan's coronavirus policy, also related to the president's cult of personality. After celebrating his birthday on 29 June 2020, the country's leadership finally allowed a World Health Organization mission to visit Ashgabat. From then on, masks [were mandatory](#) everywhere, even when driving a private car. All street markets and shopping malls were closed and temperature screening measures were introduced in cities. The government gave its rationale for such a U-turn as protection from

toxic dust supposedly from the Aral Sea and a risk of airborne viruses carried on air currents from abroad. In the local media, “harmful dust” has [turned](#) into a euphemism for Covid-19.

The inconsistent autarchic measures taken by the government from the onset of the pandemic have worsened the already vulnerable position of the Turkmenistan economy. 80% of imports, including food, come from Iran, and [80% of exports](#), mostly hydrocarbons, go to China. Closed borders with Iran, interrupted transport communication with China and Turkey, and a ban on foreign cash exchange bankrupted small businesses and shuttle traders and led food prices to skyrocket. Decreased global demand for hydrocarbons [has limited](#) the government’s ability to subsidize food prices and increase the availability of food for economically vulnerable groups.

Being an entrenched dictatorship of 30 years, Turkmenistan [continues to intimidate](#) and clamp down on dissent at home and abroad. The most notable recent case was the intimidation of an Istanbul-based activist, Dursoltan Taganova, who planned a rally against the Turkmenistan government’s flawed Covid-19 response. The country continues to deny having any cases of Covid-19 despite numerous reports and it reacts painfully to foreign doubts about its claims. Remarkably, the WHO and foreign diplomats have been [cautious](#) in choosing their words when talking about the situation in the country.

## ■ Tajikistan: Cover up keeps authoritarianism afloat

The dynastic authoritarian regime of Emomali Rahmon is less closed and thus slightly more vulnerable to external shocks than its Turkmen counterpart. The Tajik regime does seek a certain degree of public approval. Initially, in February and March 2020, the authorities in Tajikistan denied that Covid-19 had reached the country. In March crowds gathered to celebrate Nawruz, the Tajik New Year, in the Sughd Province. According to some reports, security officials intimidated physicians not to spread information about virus cases prior to [certain political measures](#). By the end of March 2020, Tajikistan closed its international borders and suspended food imports from China.

Tajik authorities officially confirmed the first Covid-19 cases on 30 April 2020, on the eve of WHO [experts’ visit](#). They made wearing masks obligatory and took some preventive actions, including the closure of schools and banning of large gatherings. However, no quarantine was introduced and bazaars were kept open. Despite formally admitting the spread of coronavirus in Tajikistan, state

authorities continued to conceal the real situation. The statistics of cases and deaths provided by the government “look like they were lifted from a textbook on how to deal with a pandemic,” [experts say](#). However, in dealing with the crisis, Tajikistan relied heavily on financial, technical, and material aid from foreign countries and international organizations.

In 2020, the World Food Program [calculated](#) that around 47% of Tajiks were living on less than USD 1.33 per day, with a third of the population suffering from malnutrition. The poorest of the Central Asian nations, Tajikistan relies heavily on migrant remittances from Russia (up to one-third of the country’s GDP) and thus depends on the demand for migrant labor in Russia as well as on a relaxed border regime. As early as March 2020 remittance inflows [almost halved](#) compared with March 2019. Unlike Turkmenistan, Tajikistan has neither natural resources nor a repressive state apparatus sufficient to enable isolation. Its leaders consequently preferred to admit the problem and apply for international aid, while gambling on cover-up policies.

The cover up aimed to conceal the state’s ineffectiveness in fighting the disease while persuading the public that the government had control over the situation. It included silencing reports about the institutional failure in public health-care. Asia-Plus journalist Abdullo Ghurbati [was beaten](#) twice during the spring of 2020 after reporting on Tajikistan’s Covid-19 outbreak. In April 2020 Tajik authorities blocked a critical news website, Akhbor. On 4 July 2020, President Rahmon amended the Criminal Code [stipulating punishment](#) for distributing “untruthful” information in traditional and social media. By mid-January 2021 it was reported by the government that all cases had either recovered or died, leaving the country free of Covid-19. This signaled a return to the denial policy; from then until late June 2021 Tajikistan recorded only around 60 new cases and the total number of deaths allegedly remained at 90.

## ■ Belarus downplays the risks

The first Covid-19 cases were reported in Belarus in late February 2020. While the Ministry of Health initially sought to enact some preventive measures such as [distance learning](#) and [reduce mass gatherings](#), the country’s leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka chose a different approach which soon became the wider pattern: downplay the risks. He [made a series](#) of controversial statements ridiculing the threat of coronavirus and even blaming its victims. State agencies had to change tactics and even [health officials claimed](#) that the victims died from “a number

of chronic diseases.” Although some regional authorities adopted comprehensive preventive measures, the central government chose the devil-may-care strategy and largely ignored the WHO recommendations. What’s more, unlike its neighbors, Belarus held a full-scale military parade on 9 May 2020, marking Victory Day, in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic.

Belarus has one of the highest numbers of hospital beds per capita in Europe but this did not prevent mortality from growing sharply. According to the data passed by the Ministry of Health to the UN, excess mortality in April–June 2020 [outnumbered](#) the official coronavirus death toll by almost 17-to-1. The public could hardly ignore the discrepancy and Lukashenka’s personal attitude, which dictated state policy, ironically discredited his image as a paternalistic leader. According to a study by the Institute of Sociology of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Lukashenka’s [trust rating fell](#) to 24% among the capital’s residents in the first two months of the pandemic alone, a full month before the start of the presidential election campaign.

While the government downplayed the threat, [civil society and businesses took the lead](#). According to several surveys, citizens, especially in Minsk, favored various preventive measures and even [declared](#) a “people’s quarantine.” Several groups of activists and volunteers as well as NGOs participated in disseminating information about the virus and assisting medical workers. The most remarkable was the BYCOVID-19 initiative that crowdfunded the delivery of PPE to hospitals across the country. The state largely ignored civil initiatives until the post-election crackdown on protests, at which point these initiatives fell victim to political repression on the eve of the second wave of Covid-19.

Belarusian companies reinforced civic initiatives in fighting the coronavirus either through NGOs, including the BYCOVID-19 project, or by direct assistance to doctors and hospitals. They purchased medical and protective equipment, food, and sanitizers for example. [They gathered](#) over USD 2 million during the first wave. Particularly generous donations came from the IT and banking sectors. Remarkably, both sectors (1, 2, 3) were specifically damaged or attacked by the state during and following the presidential election campaign and the subsequent crackdown on mass protests.

From early June 2020, the Belarusian authorities started to weaponize the pandemic and use it as a pretext for undermining the growing seeds of democracy in Europe’s “last dictatorship.” They [failed to invite](#) ODIHR OSCE observers to the election citing the inability to provide for everyone’s safety in the pandemic situation. A similar excuse was given for limiting the number of Belarusian

observers and installing curtain-free polling booths that violated the principle of a secret ballot. Furthermore, during the post-election crackdown, Covid-19 became an excuse for denying arrested political prisoners access to their lawyers or receiving parcels from their relatives. These actions went along with the systematic disregard of epidemiological norms by state and security officials. The loudest manifestation of it was placing hundreds of protestors in cramped prison cells and [ignoring](#) their complaints and illness symptoms.

This politically motivated hypocrisy continued with the second wave of the virus in the autumn of 2020. Belarus had kept its borders defiantly open despite its neighbors locking down in spring, but in the second wave restrictions were imposed “to prevent the spread of infection.” On 1 November 2020 Belarus [closed its borders](#) with all neighbors but Russia. In December the [authorities expanded](#) the ban on border crossings to prevent Belarusians from leaving the country – in the midst of its oppression of any protest activity.

As of late July 2021, Belarus lagged behind all European countries except Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine in its rate of vaccinations. It [started providing the shots](#) in late December 2020 and early January 2021 for medical staff, while mass vaccination with Russian and Chinese vaccines began in April.

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## CONCLUSION

While Western governments and societies tried to find a balance between public health, economic risks, and civil liberties during the pandemic, the three post-Soviet states prioritised the political survival of their leaders above all other considerations. The statistics they provide cannot be trusted. When authoritarian institutional failure becomes evident, propaganda-inflated trust in the government starts eroding. With the grave inconsistencies in its actions, an autocratic government proves to be incompetent and fails its social contract. Perhaps, the thirst for transparency, accountability, and uncensored access to information will outweigh the demand for paternalistic stability in these societies.