

Andrei Tarasevich,
Andrei Yeliseyeu

DIGEST

of studies on COVID-19
and the implications for post-
Soviet countries

The digest summarises twenty six briefs, analytical reports, academic articles, and other types of studies concerning COVID-19 implications for post-Soviet countries, which were released between March 2020 and May 2021. The authors made a subjective selection of studies

among the large number of other high-quality publications on the topic. In case of specific interest, readers are invited to conduct their own further investigation of relevant publications not included in the present digest.

CONTENTS

PROJECTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC MODELING	3
STATE AND PUBLIC RESPONSE TO COVID-19	5
SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS	12
POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS	17

PROJECTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC MODELING

The Global Impact of COVID-19 and Strategies for Mitigation and Suppression

Institution

Imperial College
London, UK

Authors

Patrick GT Walker
et al.

Published

March 2020

Description

The authors provide summary statistics of the potential impact of mitigation and suppression strategies in all countries across the world. Based on patterns of contact, demography, household size, estimated hospital bed capacity, Intensive Care Unit capacity, and other parameters the authors considered the likely scale of four potential scenarios. Their assessments for post-Soviet countries in the best case scenario (maximum suppression measures) and worst case scenario (an unmitigated epidemic with no action taken) respectively are as follows:

Armenia: 900 and 18,000 deaths;
Azerbaijan: 3,200 and 43,600 deaths;
Belarus: 15,000 and 71,600 deaths;
Georgia: 1,400 and 28,000 deaths;
Kazakhstan: 6,200 and 84,000 deaths;
Kyrgyz Republic: 1,900 and 20,800 deaths;
Moldova: 600 and 24,000 deaths;
Russia: 50,700 and 1.04 million deaths;
Tajikistan: 1,900 and 23,000 deaths;
Turkmenistan: 1,500 and 19,300 deaths;
Ukraine: 12,200 and 329,000 deaths;
Uzbekistan: 6,400 and 109,000 deaths.

The Full Database of Countries with Potential COVID-19 Data Misreport based on Benford's Law

Source

medRxiv, a preprint

AuthorsAhmad Kilani,
Georgios P. Georgiou**Published**

December 2020

Description

This article presents a database which researchers and scholars can use for checking potential data misreports by 171 countries regarding their COVID-19 daily reported cases. The analysis employs three different tests (chi-square, Kuiper, and Mean Absolute Deviation) to determine if the data given by each country fit Benford's Law. Belarus and Tajikistan, along with Kuwait, East Timor, and Turkey are among the states with the highest ranking of nonconformity.

The World Mortality Dataset: Tracking excess mortality across countries during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source

medRxiv, a preprint

AuthorsAriel Karlinsky,
Dmitry Kobak**Published**

June 2021

Description

This article states that there has been no global, frequently-updated repository of the all-cause mortality data across countries. To fill this gap, the authors have collected weekly, monthly, or quarterly all-cause mortality data from 94 countries and territories, openly available as the regularly-updated World Mortality Dataset. They used this dataset to compute the excess mortality in each country during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dataset suggests that in several of the worst-affected countries (Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico) the excess mortality was over 50% greater than the expected annual mortality. It also concludes that while many countries have been reporting the COVID-19 deaths very accurately, some countries have been substantially underreporting their COVID-19 deaths (e.g. Nicaragua, Russia, Uzbekistan), sometimes by two orders of magnitude (Tajikistan).

STATE AND PUBLIC RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19: Making or Breaking Authoritarianism?

Institution

PONARS Eurasia

AuthorsMarlene Laruelle,
Madeline McCann**Published**

March 2020

Description

The authors classify the state responses of post-Soviet countries at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that three post-Soviet countries (Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) resorted to the denial model of governing the COVID-19 pandemic, where political leaders denied the significance of the virus and its potentially devastating impact on public health. They attribute Armenia and Georgia to the group of “early responders,” and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Russia to the “late responders” grouping. Finally, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are characterised as “laggards.” They also argue that the COVID-19 crisis will test the Russian state’s ability to present itself as a provider of security or accelerate the delegitimisation of Putin’s regime.

Central Asian Responses to COVID-19: Regime Legitimacy and [De]Securitization of the Health Crisis

Institution

PONARS Eurasia

AuthorsMariya Omelicheva,
Lawrence P. Markowitz**Published**

March 2020

Description

This policy memo discusses state narratives and responses to COVID-19 in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan during the initial stage of the epidemic.

It concludes that the securitisation of COVID-19 in these countries was inconsistent, constrained, and shaped by the underlying claims of regime legitimacy in each country. While the legitimisation challenges differ in each case – facing dual assertions of presidential power in Kazakhstan, preserving an image of technocratic reform in Uzbekistan, and succumbing to a leadership vacuum in Kyrgyzstan – they have made it difficult for Central Asia’s regimes to employ securitising discourses that have worked in the past.

The Kazakhstan Response to the Financial Impact of COVID-19

Institution

Almaty office
of Baker & McKenzie

Author

Gulnur
Bekmukhanbetova

Published

June 2020

Description

A discussion of government measures to support businesses amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the insolvency initiatives proposed by Kazakhstan’s president. The article argues that the pandemic and government restrictions have dramatically affected Kazakhstan’s economy. Given that the oil and gas industry has traditionally been its engine, the reduced global demand for oil and gas represent additional challenges for Kazakhstan.

The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine: Responses by the state, business and civil society

Institution

EAST Center

Authors

Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina,
Oleksii Kovalenko,
edited by Andrei Yeliseyeu

Published

October 2020

Description

This report analyses the differences in response to the COVID-19 outbreak by the state, business and civil society in three post-Soviet countries. Belarusian authorities’ irresponsible policies stemmed from Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s personal views on COVID-19. The Russian and Ukrainian authorities took the

pandemic more seriously and this met greater satisfaction among citizens. 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.

Azerbaijan's Social Policy Response to Covid-19: Swift Response, Modest Benefits

Institution

“Global Dynamics of Social Policy” research project, the University of Bremen

Author

Farid Guliyev

Published

October 2020

Description

This article reviews Azerbaijan’s social policy response to COVID-19 and argues that the existing social protection system needs to be improved by (1) increasing social benefits to provide socially vulnerable groups with sufficient income to meet their needs during and after the pandemic and (2) extending social coverage to additional segments of population, particularly informal and self-employed individuals and remittance-sending migrants. The author also points at an urgent need to improve reporting and accounting standards for data collection in Azerbaijan.

The Authoritarian Treatment of COVID-19: The Case of Tajikistan

Institution

The Central Asia Program (CAP) at George Washington University

Author

Hafiz Boboyorov

Published

November 2020

Description

A brief arguing that the authorities of Tajikistan have demonstrated their inability to effectively cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of state capacity to cope was one of the reasons for concealing the situation – and the article provides many examples. The state celebration of Nawruz in the stadium of Khujand city, drawing visitors from all over Tajikistan, was to demonstrate the power of the

country's ruler Emomali Rahmon over the pandemic. Reacting to growing public discontent over state handling of COVID-19, Rahmon dismissed the minister of health and established a public foundation where he, his family members, state officials and entrepreneurs donated to the fight against the pandemic. The state media heavily promoted a narrative of benevolence of Rahmon and his family.

Reforming healthcare in Uzbekistan: What role for the international community?

Institution

Central Asia Program, IERES,
George Washington University

Author

Sebastien Peyrouse

Published

December 2020

Description

This report discusses the underlying weaknesses in Uzbekistan's healthcare system that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light. It argues, evidenced by local reports and social media, that many ordinary Uzbek citizens question the implementation of the governments' declarations and initiatives, and doubt President Mirziyoyev's willingness to move beyond top-down decisions and open up to real dialogue with local stakeholders. It makes recommendations to the international community aimed at making Uzbekistan's healthcare system stronger and more efficient.

COVID-19 in Turkmenistan: No Data, No Health Rights

Source

Health and Human
Rights Journal

Author

Aynabat Yaylymova

Published

December 2020

Description

A review of Turkmenistan's poor preparedness to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the paper, despite the government's refusal to acknowledge that COVID-19 is present in the country, reports of cases circulate among friends, in social media, and by civil society organisations, and efforts are being made to track COVID deaths. It argues that the failure in communication and

management of the pandemic has brought the public's trust in the authorities to an all-time low, and that it remains up to civil society in Turkmenistan to continue undertaking the state's duties to inform and educate the public, and to hold the government and WHO to account for acting in ways that are resulting in preventable loss of human life in Turkmenistan.

Government communication and public resilience to propaganda during COVID-19 in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine

Institution

EAST Center

AuthorsEkaterina Pierson-Lyzhina,
Oleksii Kovalenko, Lela Saralidze;
edited by Andrei Yeliseyeu**Published**

January 2021

Description

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. It concludes that 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 report discusses the unreliability of official statistics in Belarus and Ukraine and comes to the conclusion that official reports in Belarus downplayed the death toll by 15–20 times. 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.

Georgia Case Study of COVID-19 Response: Right Decisions at the Right Time, Prioritizing the Right to Health

Source

Forbes Georgia

Author

Akaki Zoidze

Published

February 2021

Description

This publication assesses the state responses to COVID-19 in Georgia and finds them effective during the first two waves of the pandemic. Yet it warns the state agencies about the dangers of “overrelaxation” and lost vigilance when dealing with COVID-19. It speaks about the need for national health authorities to continue active risk communication and constantly remind the public of the fragility of the current achievements until wide-scale vaccination is carried out.

The different approaches of Christian confessions to COVID-19 in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine

Institution

EAST Center

Authors

Armen Grigoryan, Natallia Vasilevich, Oleksii Kovalenko, edited by Andrei Yeliseyev

Published

March 2021

Description

This report examines the differing approaches to COVID-19 by the largest Christian churches in Armenia, Belarus, and Ukraine during the first and second waves of the pandemic. It does so by assessing their relationships to, and communication with, state authorities and religious adherents. The Armenian Apostolic Church took a responsible attitude and complied with government-imposed COVID-19 related countermeasures, despite an uneasy relationship with Armenia’s current government. The Belarusian authorities’ politics of denial and their reluctance to adopt adequate countermeasures left local churches to decide on their own approaches. Eventually, the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus took a more proactive and coherent approach than the Orthodox Church to fighting the pandemic. In Ukraine, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church both sided with the state authorities and conveyed anti-coronavirus policies to the general public. However, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate was poorly committed to this mission.

COVID-19 in Russia: Should we expect a novel response to the novel coronavirus?

Source

Journal *Global Public Health*

Authors

Elizabeth J. King,
Victoria I. Dudina

Published

March 2021

Description

A scholarly article describing and explaining Russia's public health and social policy responses to COVID-19 – from early in the pandemic when the concern was the border with China, to later when there were confirmed cases in all regions of Russia itself. It analyses the COVID-19 response in the context of reflections on infectious disease control in the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. The following issues are explored: government control, contention with official statistics, (dis-)information, (mis-)trust, vulnerabilities of medical care workers, and Russia's policies to reinforce its role in global health during the pandemic, for example through vaccine development and foreign humanitarian aid.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Education and COVID-19 in the Republic of Moldova: Grasping the opportunity the learning crisis presents to build a more resilient education system

Institution

UN Coordinated Education Task
Force for COVID-19 in Moldova

Author

unavailable

Published

August 2020

Description

The report assesses the response by the Moldovan government, civil society and the development partners to the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sphere, and identifies gaps and challenges that remain to be addressed. It proposes recommendations aimed at limiting the negative consequences of the learning crisis and building back a better education system in Moldova. The authors argue that the new Education Sector Strategy 2021-2030, which was under development at the time the report was released, is an excellent opportunity to build a more resilient, nimble and efficient education system that can effectively respond to crises without disruption to learning.

COVID-19 crisis response in Eastern Partner countries

Institution

OECD

Author

unavailable

Published

October 2020

Description

A report considering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Eastern Partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine). It analyses the economic and social impacts, as well as

policy responses to contain the spread of the virus and help households and businesses weather the crisis. Finally, a menu of policy options is considered for supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in the short and medium terms, with a particular focus on digitalisation. The authors conclude that all EaP countries but Belarus experienced a significant economic downturn owing to enforced epidemiological measures. Yet from the financial standpoint (depreciation of national currency and decrease in gold and foreign currency reserves) Belarus has suffered the most among all six countries. The report expresses doubt as to the reliability of Belarus's official statistics on COVID-19 mortality and employment.

Linkages between Experiencing COVID-19 and Levels of Political Support in Russia

Institution

PONARS Eurasia

Authors

Margarita Zavadskaya,
Boris Sokolov

Published

November 2020

Description

This brief research paper discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the way Russian citizens feel about their government. It is based on the data from a representative online panel survey, "Values in Crisis," carried out by the Laboratory for Comparative Social Research at the Higher School of Economics (LCSR, HSE). The authors conclude that actual encounters with COVID-19 and the public healthcare system are negatively, although weakly, associated with four indicators. It finds that the fear of getting sick has a moderately positive correlation with assessments of the government's response to the crisis. Reported negative economic impacts do not seem to affect political trust and support. Over a third of Russians express a total lack of trust in any information concerning COVID-19; they constitute the most prominent protest group standing out from among the rest of the respondents.

Social and economic impact assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups and economic sectors in the Republic of Moldova

Institution	Author	Published
UNDP Moldova and PwC	unavailable	November 2020

Description

The report analyses the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the selected vulnerable groups (children and youth, poor households, vulnerable women, NEET youth, elders and older population, returning migrants, freelancers) and economic sectors in Moldova. It builds on the initial impact assessment, but presents deeper analysis and articulates the findings and recommendations in a more comprehensive and holistic view, using datasets that cover the period from May to October 2020. The report proposes a set of policy recommendations addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, which should enhance the mechanisms used by the state in order to combat the effects of the pandemic.

Impact study of COVID-19 on older people and caregivers in Armenia

Institution	Authors	Published
The International Red Cross	Olena Krylova, Lilit Gevorgyan	November 2020

Description

This study looks at the effects of COVID-19 on older people, professional caregivers and trained Red Cross volunteers in the context of general care provision in Armenia. It gives recommendations to the Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS) and other stakeholders for improving the COVID-19 response and care for older people and caregivers. Among other things, it argues that the lack of a common database of those in need, and no established mechanisms of emergency response coordination at the local level between local government, public bodies, and NGOs, has led to delays and uneven provision of assistance to older people. It proposes long-term and short-term recommendations to the authorities of Armenia, national and international institutions, local governments, NGOs and ARCS.

Assessment of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in Ukraine

Institution

United Nations Office in Ukraine

Author

unavailable

Published

December 2020

Description

This report represents a part of the United Nations response that aims to help the authorities of Ukraine respond to the COVID-19 crisis. It discusses the immediate and long-term effects of COVID-19 on public health and the population's well-being, reviews the state response, identifies possible gaps and suggests immediate measures and policy options for the future. The report was prepared based on primary data collected by the UN Country Team through about 60 field surveys investigating various areas of impact, triangulated with secondary data from various sources. The findings are organised around the five pillars of a UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19: (1) Health systems and services; (2) Social protection and basic services; (3) Economic response and recovery; (4) Macroeconomic response and multilateral cooperation; and (5) Social cohesion and community resilience.

COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan: Navigating a way out

Source

Journal of Global Health

Authors

Kenesh Dzushupov *et al.*

Published

January 2021

Description

This article briefly reviews the Kyrgyz state's preparedness and response to COVID-19. It concludes that as a country with a relatively strong healthcare system, Kyrgyzstan cushioned the impact of the pandemic to a large extent by initiating precautionary measures. However, case numbers showed a steady daily increase and, finally, the pandemic overwhelmed the healthcare system and disrupted other health services. The article assesses the negative long-term effects of the pandemic as unavoidable and calls for caution when applying or lifting restriction policies to avoid a sudden increase of cases and to balance policies against the negative effects of restrictions on the economy. It also stresses the need for the major donors and regional powers to give full support to Kyrgyzstan for strengthening its healthcare system.

The Impact of COVID-19 on trade and structural transformation in Armenia

Institution

UNECE

Author

unavailable

Published

January 2021

Description

A report tracing the way that non-tariff measures, governing trade in goods and adopted in the COVID-19 context, influenced end-to-end supply chains in Armenia. It is based on a survey of 370 micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) across the country. While recognising positive state measures, the report pays attention to capacity shortfalls which contributed to the disruption of supply-chain operations, with adverse consequences for their post-COVID-19 recovery and development prospects. It provides action-oriented recommendations for the Armenian state authorities' consideration, which include emergency support measures for improving the resilience of small and medium-sized businesses.

Study of the COVID-19 Impact on the Economy of Kazakhstan

Institution

The Asian Development Bank

Author

Zhanybek Aigazin

Published

February 2021

Description

This report analyses Kazakhstan's economy from the supply and demand side and the impact of COVID-19 on the economy. It concludes that the largest decline in growth rates occurred in exports and real GDP. In terms of aggregate supply, economic contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were observed in wholesale and retail trades, car and motorcycle repairs, mining, and transportation and warehousing. The manufacturing sector experienced substantial pressure because of the pandemic, although the industry's production value index remained positive. The article also proposes three scenarios to estimate the COVID-19 impact in 2020 and forecasts for 2021, based on an econometric model. In all three scenarios, the economy will grow in 2021 for different reasons.

POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic: Impact for the post-Soviet space and Russia's aspirations

Institution

Institute for Security Policy (ISP)

Author

Sergey Markedonov

Published

March 2020

Description

This brief paper provides a concise overview of state responses to COVID-19 in post-Soviet countries and discusses Russian foreign policy aspirations during the pandemic. It places great importance on the period of recovery from the pandemic, arguing that a slow and inconsistent approach by Moscow risks bringing disintegration pressures to Kremlin-led integration projects in the post-Soviet space. It considers it important for Russia to strengthen bilateral military cooperation with Armenia and Belarus as well as between the Central Asian countries jointly so as to prevent possible negative scenarios from Afghanistan. Russia's proactive approach after the pandemic ends could also encourage Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union.

"Vaccine diplomacy" targeted at Eastern Partnership countries

Institution

EAST Center

Author

Ekaterina Pierson-Lyzhina

Published

May 2021

Description

This research paper reviews "vaccine diplomacy" that major states targeted at EaP countries. It argues that the EU and US, instead of developing actual

“vaccine diplomacy”, focused on vaccinating their own populations first, before establishing a parity-based mechanism for vaccine distributions among poorer countries. As of May 2021, the majority of the states in the EaP received small quantities of vaccine through this mechanism (from a third to a fifth depending on the country), largely attributable to delays in production. China proactively engaged in “vaccine diplomacy”, making donations to most countries of the EaP and securing commercial deals with some of them. It had little media influence in these countries through which to spread disinformation. Russia has made more modest donations because of its limited production capacities, but it targeted the countries of the EaP with a large disinformation campaign aiming to discredit Western vaccines (as well as the Indian one) and vaccination programmes’ organisation and speed in Western countries.