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Responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

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ABSTRACT

Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are good comparators sharing a common Soviet past, similar cultures and religions, while in the COVID-19 crisis they have pursued quite different policies. Belarus has denied the pandemic and undertaken no measures. Russia played down the epidemic for a long time and then undertook half-hearted and incoherent measures. Ukraine feared the virus and carried out an early and strict quarantine in a centralized policy. While testing has been sparse until recently and death tolls remain uncertain, Belarus and Russia appear to have done poorly in terms of health, while Ukraine has so far done much better. It is too early to judge the economic outcomes.

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Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are suitable comparators because they share a common Soviet past, similar cultures and religions, while they often pursue quite different policies. This is also true of the COVID-19 crisis.

The similarities in preconditions are many. All three countries have rather unreformed Soviet health care systems. They are under-financed and under-equipped, with little personal protective equipment (PPE), few masks, ventilators, or tests. Therefore, they were quite vulnerable and likely to understate the number of infected and dead people more than an average European country. Yet, they have also advantages, namely many small hospitals, hospital beds, and physicians in relation to the population, so they run less risk of running out of hospital capacity than many Western countries that have rationalized their medical care more (Twigg 2020).

In all three countries, COVID-19 arrived late, giving them the opportunity to react early. In Russia, the first two cases were registered on February 15 and the first death on March 19. In Ukraine, the first case was detected on March 3, and the first death occurred on March 13. In Belarus, the first case was noted on February 28, and the first death on March 31 (Worldometer 2020).

These countries benefited from the Central Europeans having imposed early and very restrictive policies, which reduced the risk of infection from their

closest neighbors (Walker and Smith 2020). The early victims were largely travelers from Western Europe, who tended to be of two kinds. One group was tourists attending the famous ski resorts in the Alps, notably the Russian oligarchs' favorite hang-out Courchevel in France. All along, half of the recognized Russian cases have been in Moscow. Similarly, Kyiv has had the greatest concentration in Ukraine, and eight members of parliament were reported to have been infected. Another group of travelers was migrant workers, reflected in numerous infected people in Western Ukraine, many of whom came from Italy. With fewer migrants, travelers, and visitors, Belarus is more isolated.

In all three countries, political power is quite centralized. The capital can impose central top-down policies, if it so desires. All three closed their borders early on, limiting the risk of infected visitors. Russia closed its land border with China as early as January 30.

Yet, these three governments have pursued very different policies, and not in ways that you would easily predict. Belarus has denied the pandemic. The Kremlin tried to hide it for long, but then decentralized policy to the regions in an incoherent fashion. As a democracy, Ukraine has been quite transparent and the Cabinet of Ministers rather than the president has been handling the pandemic policy.

As this is being written in May 2020, it is still too early to predict the eventual health outcome or economic impact, so the focus of this paper is on policy-making and policies chosen. At this time, all GDP forecasts appear highly preliminary and are likely to be altered, so they are intentionally ignored.

Belarus president Lukashenko denied the COVID-19

In Belarus, the first case was noted on February 28, and the first death on March 31 (Worldometer 2020). To begin with, President Aleksandr Lukashenko outright denied the existence of the virus. Then he claimed that going to the *banya* (sauna), drinking vodka, and riding tractors through the fields would keep the virus away, which he said would not kill anyone. Lukashenko blamed other causes: "No one has died from Coronavirus, everyone is dying from chronic illnesses because all viruses strike those who are weak and have no immunity." He continued his denials even in early May, although Belarus then had a higher infection rate than most other East European countries (Khurshudyan 2020b).

Belarus has not undertaken any measures to combat the pandemic. Everything functions as usual. People go to work, shops, and sport events. It has become the only country in Europe where soccer matches and other sports are still being played. Restaurants and cafés remain open (Kramer 2020). On May 9, Lukashenko insisted on organizing a Victory Parade, which Putin had canceled in Moscow. He invited foreign leaders, but nobody came (Khurshudyan 2020b).

Yet, COVID-19 is not to be ignored. While the pandemic arrived late in Belarus because of the country's great isolation, it has entered and is steadily expanding.

Since the disease is officially denied and Belarus does not even try to test people, all statistics are bound to be understated. Yet, the Ministry of Healthcare does register and report the COVID-19 casualties and reports them to the World Health Organization. The number of infected and deceased has caught on late in the day and is rising fast (Worldometer 2020).

The population have not bought into the president's view. Many Belarusians are self-imposing quarantine and social distancing. Sport events, cafés, and restaurants are sparsely visited. Numerous people wear masks in public (Khurshudyan 2020b). Lukashenko, who is an authoritarian but skillful politician, has a habit of being stubborn until he all of a sudden turns around, which may happen at any time.

Ukraine took COVID-19 seriously from the outset

The Ukrainian government and society took COVID-19 seriously from the outset.¹ The big difference between Ukraine and Belarus and Russia is that Ukraine is a liberal society with free-wheeling media. The latter had dramatized COVID-19 long before the pandemic arrived in Ukraine. Ukrainians were scared and never joked about the pandemic, as they doubted that their government would be able to protect them. They were painfully aware that their health care system was obsolete and weak, that the government's financial resources were very limited and that tests were scarce. Therefore, the Ukrainian government chose to compensate with highly restrictive policies from the beginning. It was inspired by the Central Europeans, especially Poland, that were doing so at the same time.

In Ukraine, the first case was detected on March 3, and the first death occurred on March 13 (Worldometer 2020). The government reacted fast and firmly. As early as March 12, it introduced the quarantine. On March 16, President Volodymyr Zelensky did something unusual. He invited fifteen of the biggest businessmen in Ukraine and requested that each of them take the lead in one or two of Ukraine's regions in the fight against the coming pandemic. As Zelensky put it on television: "I told them frankly: 'This country has fed you for many years, now it's time for you to help it,'" He added. "We need money for medications. We need Hr 12–13 billion (\$450 million.) We need 500 ambulances for hospitals" (Talant 2020). In effect, the president told the big businessmen to take over the regional responsibility from the regional governors, who are appointed in Ukraine, which limits their authority, and they do not appear to have played much of a role. The businessmen seem to have taken their mandates seriously. They organized the regional health care and bought medical supplies at their own expense.

The president set the initial tone of great concern, advising Ukrainians to stay at home, and he used a face mask in public. The actual policy and its details, however, were formulated by the Cabinet of Ministers, led by Prime Minister

Denys Shmyhal, who was appointed on March 4. He was assisted by Minister for Economic Development and Trade Ihor Petrashko appointed on March 17, and Finance Minister Serhiy Marchenko, appointed on March 30. The same day a new Minister of Healthcare, Maksym Stepanov, was confirmed. The National Bank of Ukraine enjoyed more stability. The new Ukrainian government became a COVID-19 crisis government, while structural reforms received less attention. The Ukrainian government measures can be divided into four groups: containment measures handled by the Ministry for Economic Development and Trade, monetary policy, fiscal policy, and healthcare.

The containment measures, or quarantine, have come to dominate the Ukrainian COVID-19 policies. On March 12, the new government ordered a three-week nationwide quarantine. It closed all schools and universities and mass gatherings for more than 200 people were prohibited. schools and banning mass events. On March 17, the quarantine became much more rigorous. No gatherings of more than ten people were allowed. Restaurants, non-essential shops and all kinds of public venues were closed throughout the country. Only grocery stores, pharmacies, banks, and gas stations were allowed to stay open. Both domestic and international flights were canceled. Ukraine closed its borders to foreigners, though Ukrainians abroad were welcome home. The next day, all collective transportation – train, underground and buses – for more than ten people were stopped. Only minibuses for a maximum of ten people were still permitted.

The quarantine rules were gradually tightened. On March 25, the government declared a national emergency situation and the quarantine was extended to April 24 and then to May 11. People aged 60 or more were prohibited from going outside. No more than two people were allowed to be out together (Dragon Capital 2020, 3). However, from April 24, the quarantine restrictions were slowly softened in the face of increasing popular dissatisfaction. On May 4, the quarantine was prolonged until May 22, but the restrictions were further eased allowing many services to stay open (Shandra 2020b). On May 20, the quarantine was prolonged until June 22, but many services were opened up. Prime Minister Shmyhal indicated that it may last in a milder form until mid-July. The government pursued an increasingly flexible policy, promising to ease restrictions every ten days for regions that complied with certain criteria (Korniienko 2020).

Although Ukraine possessed limited currency reserves of 26 USD billion and faced substantial debt service, aspiring to another International Monetary Fund (IMF) program, the National Bank of Ukraine carried out substantial monetary easing. It cut the interest rate from 10% per annum to 8% per annum, which did not impact the exchange rate that stabilized. The NBU provided ample refinancing and advised commercial banks to postpone dividends, while allowing the restructuring of performing loans and suspending amortization payments. The government offered a new loan program for small enterprises and

expanded its issue of subsidized credits for small enterprises (Dragon Capital 2020, 3).

The government offered a substantial fiscal stimulus increasing the budget deficit by some 5.5 percent of GDP to 7.5% of GDP with the acceptance of the IMF (Sorokin 2020). Substantial resources were allocated to medical care. The fiscal benefits focused on people and small enterprises. Businesses forced to close by the authorities could demand the complete relief from rent payments. Individual entrepreneurs were exempted from social security contributions and land taxes. Tax and other government inspections were halted. Unemployment benefits were expanded and pensions were increased (Dragon Capital 2020, 3).

Until the end of April, no significant protests against the strict quarantine in Ukraine were noticeable. One exception was the famous Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, or the Caves Monastery, which belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate. The Metropolitan who headed the monastery refused to undertake any protective measures and soon at least 140 members of the monastery became infected and several died (Stern 2020). At the Orthodox Easter, the Moscow Patriarchate refused to obey the Ukrainian quarantine order and kept its churches open, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church obeyed the state rules. In Russia, by contrast, the Moscow Patriarchate kept its churches closed (Shandra 2020a). This appears like Russian hybrid warfare. It led to an uptick in infections in Ukraine after Easter,

On April 30, the city council in Cherkassy, a medium-sized city, decided to soften the quarantine rules at the request of small business owners. This initiative was led by the mayor of Cherkassy ("Otkroyut magaziny ... 2020). Initially, he received a rude put-down by the President's Office, but that led to more business protests in other parts of Ukraine, led by the mayors, who unlike the regional governors are democratically elected and enjoy a popular mandate. Shopkeepers complained about excessive quarantine measures but also about the central government violating the novel regional self-government. The government responded on May 4 by conceding to the protesters' demands, allowing many services, such as parks and outdoor cafés to open again, which dissipated the local protests (Shandra 2020b). The government talks about easing the quarantine gradually in five phases which are dependent on measures of the pandemic and not on fixed dates.

Ukraine's COVID-19 policy has been early and strict. The Cabinet of Ministers have managed the policy and it has concluded that with a poor health care system and limited financial resources, Ukraine needed to be more restrictive in its policies than other countries. The policy has been centralized and impressively consistent over time. In its choice of policies, the Ukrainian government has been greatly helped by the country's free media. In his press conference on 20 May 2020, one year after his inauguration, President Zelensky celebrated his government's handling of the pandemic. "So far, we are one of the best in the

world in terms of our response to coronavirus. Because we did everything on time” (Rudenko 2020).

Russia: out of balance

Overtly, the pandemic policies in Russia and Ukraine might appear similar, both being quite restrictive. However, there are important differences. First, the Kremlin denied the virus for a long time and then played down its possible impact, while the Ukrainian authorities took it seriously because of the free media in Ukraine. Second, President Vladimir Putin exercised a more prominent public role in the policymaking than president Zelensky, reflecting the more centralized political power in Russia. Third, while the Ukrainian cabinet of ministers formulated and implemented the policy, the Russian government played a surprisingly subordinate role. Fourth, whereas the Ukrainian regional governors had little or no say, the Russian regional governors were supposed to both formulate and implement policies. As a consequence, Russia’s policy on the pandemic has differed significantly from Ukraine’s.

At the beginning of 2020, Putin was focused on three topics. First, he wanted his government to spend more money on his national projects, to boost Russia’s investments and thus its economic growth. Second, he wanted to amend the Russian constitution through a plebiscite on April 22, and, third, he wanted to celebrate the Soviet victory in World War II with a major victory march with prominent foreign politicians on the Red Square on May 9. Eventually, none of this happened, and Putin’s original focus may explain why Russian government actions were so tardy.

Eventually, Putin became preoccupied with the COVID-19 crisis, but in a seemingly erratic fashion. To begin with, Russian official television talked down the presence of the virus in Russia and argued that it would not have any significant impact in Russia. It was treated as a problem in China, South Korea, and Italy. On March 21, Putin called the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and promised him medical assistance, which was sent promptly (Putin 2020c). Russia also sent medical assistance to Serbia and the United States. In Russia, the first two cases were registered on February 15 and the first death on March 19 (Worldometer 2020). Only on 25 March 1939 days after the first case and two weeks later than Ukraine, did Russia start anti-crisis measures.

After the COVID-19 had arrived in Russia, Putin changed tone and became gradually more concerned. On March 4, he held a first meeting with government members on COVID-19. Deputy Prime Minister for Social Affairs Tatyana Golikova reported that the COVID-19 situation in the world “is changing for the worse by the hour.” But Russia had only recorded three cases, two Chinese citizens and one Russian that had just returned from Italy. She proceeded to complain about “fake news in social media of a fairly large number of cases in the Russian Federation and of the official authorities’ policy of hiding this

information” (Putin 2020a). The Kremlin had closed the border to China on January 30 and prohibited the entry of Chinese visitors from February 20.

A major feature of the public discourse about the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia has been competing claims between the authorities and civil society about the number of cases. Early on, it was reported that Moscow suffered from an abnormal number of pneumonia deaths, which were naturally interpreted as COVID-19 cases (Embury-Dennis 2020). As early as February 5, Putin warned that pharmacies profiting from high prices of face masks would be closed down, showing that Russians were already hoarding masks awaiting a serious epidemic (“Pharmacies . . . 2020). The epidemic proliferated, but Moscow remained its predominant center.

In early March, the independent pollster Levada Center carried out a poll, in which only 16% of Russian respondents said they fully trusted the country’s official COVID-19 data (Khurshudyan 2020a). Independent Russian and foreign publicity discussed at length official attempts to hide information about outbreaks of COVID-19. In the regions of Komi, Bashkortostan, and Dagestan, local hospitals were flooded with COVID-19 victims, while the authorities tried to restrict information (Higgins 2020b). There has been a steady stream of particularly negative reports about hospitals that have been overrun with patients, ambulances that have been stuck in long lines outside hospitals for many hours, and nurses that have quit *en masse*, complaining about poor working conditions and little PPE (Ward 2020). Russian authorities even detained the leader of an independent doctors’ union, who claimed that the country’s low official numbers for COVID-19 infections were incorrect (Higgins 2020a).

Suddenly, on March 24, the Kremlin changed its tone and started taking the COVID-19 far more seriously. Putin visited a Moscow hospital for COVID-19 patients together with Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin (Putin 2020d). In a televised conversation, Sobyenin warned Putin that the number of actual cases is probably “significantly” higher because there had not been enough testing (Khurshudyan 2020a). That Putin allowed himself to be publicly contradicted by an official was highly uncommon but afterward he supported Sobyenin’s view. Putin shook hands with the chief physician, who later turned out to have COVID-19. For several days afterward, Putin continued to have meetings and shake hands without any mask until March 30. Yet, the alarm had finally rung, and soon Putin and the Russian top officials held video meetings. Putin appears not to have donned a mask on any occasion.

Then, Putin paid great attention to the pandemic and devoted several addresses to the nation to this theme. In his first address on March 25, he made clear the epidemic was serious. “Russia cannot insulate itself from this threat.” But the threat came from abroad. The global economy was set to shrink. He promised the population one week of paid holidays and a number of social benefits. He postponed the plebiscite on constitutional changes planned for April 22. However, he did not proclaim any restrictive measures and avoided the

word quarantine Putin 2020e). People perceived Putin's speech about one week of holiday as a real holiday and more than two million Muscovites took off to their dachas or the Black Sea.

On April 2, he promised paid holidays until the end of April. Instead of suggesting any specific measures, he stated that he gave regional governors additional authorities to handle the crisis, effectively bypassing the federal government (Putin 2020f). On April 16, Putin once again turned to the people but just to tell them that the Victory March on May 9 had been postponed (Putin 2020g). Finally, on April 28 Putin announced that the paid holidays would last until May 11. He also promised some more social benefits (Putin 2020h).

On May 11, Putin made a long speech, once again promising more social benefits. He announced a gradual easing of the quarantine. Starting "May 12, wherever possible, it is necessary to create conditions for resuming the operations of backbone industries, which include construction, industrial production, agriculture, communications, energy production and extraction of mineral resources." Yet, he avoided establishing any federal policy on quarantine, but left its lifting to the regional governors (Putin 2020j). Putin made another long speech on May 22 on the same matters, looking increasingly bored and dispirited. A steady feature of the many publicized Kremlin meetings on the COVID-19 pandemic has been that Sobyenin has softly disagreed with Putin, arguing that the number of victims was far greater and that the opening up of the economy had to proceed more slowly (Putin 2020k). Putin has rarely allowed himself to be presented so negatively in public.

Initially, Putin ordered his government to carry out the relevant matters without specifying them in detail. Just like Ukraine, Russia had a new government. On January 16, Putin replaced his old government with a largely new one under Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who had previously been head of the tax service and was seen as a forceful technocrat. Putin's long-term economic aid Andrei Belousov became First Deputy Prime Minister. They were no reformers and their task was to spend more government money on Putin's thirteen national projects, half of which was infrastructure. The minister of finance Anton Siluanov, who was demoted from first deputy prime minister, and the Chairwoman of the Central Bank of Russia, Elvira Nabiullina, lost standing, but remained in their posts.

At the end of February, as the political agenda switched from boosting infrastructure spending to crisis management, a COVID-19 response coordination council was set up under the government (Putin 2020b). Strangely, Mishustin and his government never got a handle on these issues. The government played no prominent role in the public policymaking, and Mishustin appears to have been reluctant to introduce strict measures (Foy and Seddon 2020). On April 30, Mishustin informed Putin in a video meeting that he had come down with COVID-19, and Putin appointed his first deputy Belousov as acting Prime Minister (Putin 2020i). Three weeks later, Mishustin returned to

work. Meanwhile many prominent Russians got infected, including three federal ministers, Putin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov, and Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov ("Coronavirus in Russia ... 2020).

On March 6, Russia launched an oil price war with Saudi Arabia, which became an additional distraction. It greatly aggravated Russia's financial crisis, as oil prices collapsed with the global demand for oil. The consequence of the lower oil price will be a significant decline in GDP on top of the COVID-19 fall. In September 2019, the Central Bank of Russia assessed that if the oil price would be 25 USD per barrel rather than 65 USD per barrel in 2020, Russia's GDP growth would be reduced by four percentage points (Bank of Russia 2019, 24).

Naturally, Putin was the leading force, but he was careful not to take responsibility for any restrictive actions. Instead, he uncharacteristically delegated many of the formal decisions to Russia's 85 regional governors. Putin stated, "Regional heads... will have to plan out a set of specific preventive measures that are the most rational for their regions" (Foy and Seddon 2020). The most important regional leader is Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, and he has come to play the public role expected by the prime minister, similar to New York governor Andrew Cuomo. Russia's regional governors are appointed by the president, and they are not used to take initiatives. On the contrary, they have been taught to obey the Kremlin. As a consequence, different regional governors did not coordinate their policies, which naturally became somewhat inconsistent.

Russia's first restrictive measures were to close the borders to foreigners, which came easily given Russia's strict visa regulations. Eventually, Russia's policies became quite restrictive, but they started late at the end of March and in a slapdash fashion. On Sunday March 29, Mayor Sobyenin introduced strict quarantine on Moscow City, which many perceived as a curfew, with only four hours' notice. Other governors played catch up. Russia's parliament did so as well, adopting a quarantine law the ensuing week. Putin distanced himself from lockdown measures that looked set to plunge the country into a sharp recession, throwing regional governors into the leadership vacuum (Foy and Seddon 2020). As political scientist Lilia Shevtsova put it, "The regions started to close their borders, which undermined the state's cohesion. The federal and regional authorities have been issuing contradictory orders. The state machine appears totally disoriented" (Shevtsova 2020).

Russia adopted two economic anti-crisis packages, on March 25 and April 15, respectively. They had a rather traditional composition of fiscal benefits, with a mixture of social benefits, increased unemployment benefits, credit subsidies for people, tax concessions for small and medium-sized enterprises, and corporate subsidies (Putin 2020e). The second anti-crisis package offered more of the same. Together these two packages amounted to about 2.6% of GDP. In comparison with the anti-crisis program of 2008–9, this was much smaller and not focused on the big systemic corporations. The Russian government is likely

to further reinforce its fiscal stimulus. In 2019, the federal government had a budget surplus of 1.8% of GDP and a public debt of only 13% of GDP, so Russia can afford to spend more. In early May, the ministry of finance planned for a budget deficit of only 4 percent of GDP. A range of liberal economists demanded a much more substantial fiscal stimulus of 6–10% of GDP and called for it to be more focused on support for the population and small firms.

The Central Bank of Russia cut its interest rate from 6% per annum to 5.5% per annum and further rate cuts are expected and provided multiple kinds of liquidity support. Russia maintains large international currency and gold reserves of 560 USD billion, which allows the country to have a floating exchange rate, which has dropped with the lower oil price (BOFIT 2020). It has also offered all kinds of credit support. Yet, it is clear that Putin favors to keep strong public finances and large currency reserves.

Although Putin repeatedly promised “everybody paid leave” for one and a half months, that was not true. A Levada Center poll showed that 44% worked as usual, 21% were working from home, 15% had been forced to leave their jobs and lost all or part of their wages. Only 8% of the labor force were actually on leave with full salaries (“Levada Center ... 2020). In reality, his promise of paid leave appears to have applied only to state employees deemed not essential.

Soon, physicians started complaining about major shortage of PPE and a large share of the infected were medical staff. They were particularly enraged that Russia exported PPE to Italy, Serbia, and the United States, when it did not have sufficient supplies for its own medical staff. Several provincial hospitals have become hearths of infection and been closed. Ominously, four physicians who have complained about the lack of PPE fell out of windows in Russian hospitals in late April and May. At least two died (Miller 2020). By May 30, some activists had composed a list of 311 medical staff who had died of COVID-19 (“Spisok Pamyati 2020). But Russia has so far not suffered from an overall shortage of hospital beds. According to Minister of Healthcare Mikhail Murashko, on May 3 only 40% of the hospital beds for patients with COVID-19 were occupied (“Koiki ... 2020). Yet, on May 13, he stated that at least 400 hospitals had been identified as hot spots of infection, many of which were closed (Dixon 2020). Positively, by mid-May Russia had developed a large testing capacity.

Many liberal observers have commentated that Putin appears to be out of balance. A common interpretation was that he delayed any crisis measures in the hope that he would be able to carry out his constitutional plebiscite on April 22 (Volkov 2020). In a crisis where his vertical of power could really be useful, he has refused to deploy it, delegating more power than usually to the regional governors. A “state accustomed to surviving by means of mobilization and militarism has suddenly demonstrated that it can’t function in an emergency situation” (Shevtsova 2020). A more prosaic observation is that he had no less than five phone calls with US President Donald Trump at the end of March,

when he formed his policy. The apparent topic was negotiations to cut oil production, but the similarities between their COVID-19 policies are striking: initial denial, disinterest, delayed policies, and delegation to regional governors of actual policy.

Putin has been forced on the defensive. He launched an oil price war with Saudi Arabia that Russia lost instantly. He has postponed his constitutional plebiscite to an unknown time in the future. He was compelled to cancel his great Victory Parade on May 9.

Conclusions

The most relevant measure of COVID-19 policy in these three countries should be the death rate. As of May 30, Russia recorded 31 deaths per 1 million people, Belarus 24, and Ukraine 16. All these levels are very low, ranking Russia no 51 in the world and Ukraine 74. However, since the disease arrived late in all these countries, the official numbers are still low and similar. While the death tolls tend to be understated everywhere, Russia has been particularly accused of officially rigging these statistics.

The number of cases per 1 million people diverge much more, Belarus 4,408 (rank no. 18), Russia 2,718 (rank no. 34), and Ukraine 530 (rank no. 83) (Worldometer 2020). Presumably, the latter figures tell us more about the success of the containment policies – bad in Belarus and Russia, and good in Ukraine. In all three countries, but especially in Belarus, the death rates in relation to the number of cases seem implausibly low in comparison with other countries and should probably be multiplied several times. The most likely reasons that actual COVID-19 deaths have been understated and that Belarus and Russia as latecomers have many more COVID-19 deaths coming. An alternative explanation is that the COVID-19 in these countries is less deadly than in Western Europe. In terms of absolute numbers of cases of infection, Russia ranks no. 2 in the world after the United States with 396,575 cases.

While having similar initial conditions, the three countries have pursued remarkably different policies. Belarus's President Aleksandr Lukashenko chose to first deny, then belittle, and finally ignore the pandemic, undertaking no measures whatsoever.

The Kremlin acknowledged the pandemic early on but presented it as a problem of other countries, while trying to censor information about cases in Russia. As a consequence, Russia was late at undertaking any policy measures, with the start being a national address by Putin on March 25. Russia imposed quarantine on March 29, but Putin did not deploy his vertical of power and the federal government played a surprisingly minor role. Instead he asked the regional governors to take command actual policies became inconsistent. The hallmark of the Russian policy has been suppression of bad news. While Russia possessed substantial financial resources, the Kremlin has held back and hoarded them.

The Ukrainian government imposed its COVID-19 quarantine policies early, on March 12. A major reason was that Ukraine has free media, and Ukrainians were scared by the new pandemic and called for rigorous measures, That is what the government offered. Strangely, Ukraine's COVID-19 policies have been stricter and more centralized than Russia's. So far that appears to have been a successful choice. With far more limited financial resources than Russia, Ukraine has spent comparatively more on anti-crisis measures. The financing has been focused on the people.

Note

1. The Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, are not discussed here as they are beyond the control of the Ukrainian government. Moreover, little.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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