
From a State of Exception to Policy Legitimation: The Politics of COVID-19 in Russia, Belarus, and Georgia

PONARS Eurasia Commentary

June 2020

Giorgi Beridze, *University of Tartu/Tbilisi State University*

Alla Leukavets, *University of Tartu/Belarusian State University*

Andrey Makarychev, *University of Tartu*

One of the questions the current COVID-19 debate left understudied is how different governments publicly legitimize their crisis management policies. Among post-Soviet countries, this issue is of particular importance for political regimes that are preparing for elections (Belarus and Georgia) or a constitutional referendum (“people’s vote” in Russia) either during the pandemic or immediately after it. In this short policy series, we look at how political elites in these three countries transform and normalize their policies from “states of exception” (a situation of emergency) to public mobilization for supporting and legitimizing their anti-pandemic strategies.

We build our analysis upon two concepts—sovereignty and governance—that are key for understanding political dynamics on the national level. Our general assumption is that in most post-Soviet countries, there is a profound gap between the two in the sense that sovereignty is overwhelmingly understood as an issue of possessing the power to rule. At the same time, governance is reduced to the technical administration of the everyday routine. This gap, by and large, corresponds to the well-articulated conceptual distinction between political and managerial dimensions of power, and keeping the two as far from each other as possible appears to be one of the strategies used by different regimes, mostly by illiberal ones. The idea behind this separation is to fend off the bearers of sovereignty from the responsibility for possible managerial risks and failures, and thus to create a politically sterile space of utmost convenience and safety for sovereignty holders.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has undermined this comfort zone and reconnected sovereignty with governance, since in the context of the post-emergency developments, each instance of public legitimation of political authorities (through elections or plebiscite) inevitably becomes a form of a “people’s vote” on the effectiveness of crisis management. This is because the pandemic threat, perhaps temporarily, devalues the importance of ideological or institutional arguments and puts in the center of (bio)political agendas issues of health, care, and protection of human lives and bodies.

Part One: Russia

The domination of the pandemic in Russian public debates creates a risky environment for the July 1, 2020, plebiscite.

In Russia, with its century-long traditions of sacralization and mythologization of the supreme power, the differentiation between its sovereign holder and policy operatives was always essential. It is this distinction that explains the inherently ambiguous Kremlin relationship with United Russia, the government, the parliament, and the regional governors: all of them, being—in a wider sense—crucial elements of the proverbial “party of power.” Yet, they are still in one way or another distanced from the presidency as an incarnation of political sovereignty. This distance, of course, varies depending on the situation, but it was always a constitutive element of the technology of power. This explains multiple cases of legal prosecution of mayors and governors all across Russia or the over-saturation of the Duma with almost comic figures bereft of political experience. This latter grouping serves as an army of technical nominees (even if formally elected) and in cases of necessity as potential scapegoats for policy failures.

The constitutional reform initiated by the Russian president on January 15, 2020—that started as a sporadic series of amendments disconnected from each other yet ended up being a green light for more presidential terms for Vladimir Putin—serves as a perfect illustration of the logic of sovereign power. Its core element is a purely instrumental attitude to all other bodies whose utility is measured by their ability to sustain the supreme authority. The Duma, Constitutional Court, and regional legislatures have obviously given their formal support to the entire package of amendments that Putin himself signed into law in March 2020. With the legal part of the process being over in a matter of two months, the only element that remained pending was the so-called “people’s vote” on the matter. This is an extra-legal procedure that, nevertheless, became a key source for legitimizing Putin’s long-term plans. This ambiguity at the outset puzzled many commentators. Why did the Kremlin announce the plebiscite that ultimately turned into a headache for the regime due to the outbreak of the pandemic?

One of the possible answers to this question might be found in the very nature of Putin’s vision of sovereignty as reaching far beyond purely technical and even legal procedures. Putin’s sovereign power is a quasi-religious and deeply populist construct that regularly needs symbolic investments imitating the supreme ruler’s connection with the people. Russia’s 2020 Victory Day parade (rescheduled from the usual May 9 to June 24) and the “people’s approval” of the constitutional change were expected to be the two most essential elements of Putin’s power mythology.

Remarkably, it is this highly symbolic—and primarily political—dimension of sovereignty that became the most vulnerable, particularly since the COVID-19

reshuffled the whole political scenery. Today, it is the sphere of anti-crisis management with administrative skills and resources of the technical personnel that will be the decisive factor in the “people’s voting” scheduled for July 1, 2020. Due to the conflation of two major factors, the sociologically identifiable decrease of Putin’s popularity among Russian voters and the decrease of global energy prices, many Russian specialists are sure that the ability of the regime to legitimate its policies is decreasing, which will probably affect voting results.

Moreover, in the course of the COVID-19 crisis, Putin voluntarily divested himself from the central position in the political system. With his direct blessing, all major crisis-management powers were transferred: to the government of Mikhail Mishustin, to the head of the crisis management board led by Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin, and to regional governors. In the meantime, the group of people allowed to de-facto speak on behalf of the top leadership extended to such controversial speakers as press secretary of the anti-crisis board Alexandre Myasnikov, who happens to also be a high-profile media anchor.

The domination of the pandemic agenda in Russian public debates creates a risky environment for the July 1, 2020 plebiscite, which explains the attempts by pro-Kremlin groups to switch attention from the consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic to the old agenda of social conservatism with anti-LGBT and pro-family narratives at its center. Should this trend prevail, it would again bring Russia to the old-styled political symbolism, a tool that was many times used to divert citizens’ attention from the troubles of their everyday lives.

Part Two: Belarus

COVID-19 as a trigger of democratization?

We build our analysis upon two concepts—sovereignty and governance—that are key for understanding political dynamics on the national level. Our general assumption is that in most post-Soviet countries, there is a profound gap between the two in the sense that sovereignty is overwhelmingly understood as an issue of possessing the power to rule. At the same time, governance is reduced to the technical administration of the everyday routine. This gap, by and large, corresponds to the well-articulated conceptual distinction between political and managerial dimensions of power, and keeping the two as far from each other as possible appears to be one of the strategies used by different regimes, mostly by illiberal ones. The idea behind this separation is to fend off the bearers of sovereignty from the responsibility for possible managerial risks and failures, and thus to create a politically sterile space of utmost convenience and safety for sovereignty holders.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has undermined this comfort zone and reconnected sovereignty with governance, since in the context of the post-emergency developments, each instance of public legitimization of political authorities (through elections or plebiscite) inevitably becomes a form of a “people’s vote” on the effectiveness of crisis management. This is because the pandemic threat, perhaps temporarily, devalues the importance of ideological or institutional arguments and puts in the center of (bio)political agendas issues of health, care, and protection of human lives and bodies.

Belarus represents a special case in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Belarus did not introduce a nationwide quarantine and refused to close its borders. At the end of March, a two-week, self-quarantine requirement was announced for individuals coming to Belarus from abroad as well as those with a confirmed diagnosis or the status of first- or second-level contact. In addition, the Ministry of Education extended the spring holidays in schools by two weeks. Apart from these minimal selective measures, the government did not introduce a nationwide lock-down, and the majority of the population continued to go to work as usual, mostly without observing the necessary protective measures.

These crisis management strategies proved to be wrong and led to a quick increase in the number of COVID-19 diagnosed cases. The health system in Belarus is not fully reformed, and there is a great shortage of medical supplies. The official COVID-19 statistics in Belarus do not reflect reality. Since April, the number of diagnosed cases has been steadily growing. In June, the Belarus Ministry of Health reported 51,000 registered cases of the coronavirus. The current death toll in Belarus is near 300, but many other lethal cases have been, and are, being diagnosed as pneumonia.

Narratives

The government has applied several discursive strategies in order to legitimize their adopted anti-crisis measures, particularly in the view of the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for August 9, 2020.

First, the ruling regime justified its approach by emphasizing that a quarantine would negatively affect the Belarusian economy. This justification was mostly presented as a “false dilemma” to the general public. According to it, the government has to continue a business-as-usual approach or the economy will collapse and all will lose their jobs. Although this approach might have delayed the negative consequences of the pandemic, Belarus’s energy-dependent economy had already started to stagnate long before the onset of COVID-19 due to the conflicts between Minsk and Moscow as well as fluctuations in the global energy market.

Second, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his entourage ridiculed and shamed the necessity of adopting restrictive measures. They repeatedly emphasized that the coronavirus was just a “coronapsychosis” and that people should continue working and playing sports—and that certainly there were no viruses on athletic fields or ice-skating rinks. During an official meeting, Lukashenka proposed to kill the virus by drinking vodka and going to saunas.

The message sent to the general public was that wearing a mask is unnecessary and even shameful. This narrative was emphasized not only by Lukashenka himself but also by other officials, for example, by Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei who said that he feels embarrassed to wear a mask when shopping. The political setup and the way that public discourse is administered in Belarus is based on a strong power vertical with the president as the sole provider of the official narrative. All other actors stay in the shadows, including the Health Minister, Uladzimir Karanik, and appear in the media when needed to confirm statements made by Lukashenka.

Third, the government officially announced that Belarus is a strong and independent state that does not blindly follow the rest of the world and has its own way of dealing with the crisis. Lukashenka stated in several of his speeches that “it is better to die on our feet, than live on our knees.”

A manifestation of this bravado strategy can be exemplified with several public events that were not postponed due to the pandemic. For example, Lukashenka said that delaying the May 9 Victory Day parade was impossible and will be held as planned in order to honor the memory of those who fought against fascists and also not to make Belarus look weak in the eyes of other countries. In addition, at the end of April, a nationwide subbotnik (day of community service) was held reportedly involving about 2 million people. Belarus is also the only country in Europe whose football teams continued playing in spite of the pandemic. By holding these public events, the regime tried to reinforce the narrative that Belarus is a strong state and has its own way of dealing with crises.

Fourth, in order to mitigate the potential reputational costs of its chosen crisis management approach, the Belarusian regime, for quite a while, applied the so-called strategy of “branding by association” and emphasized in its public discourses the success of the “Swedish-Belarusian” model in fighting the pandemic. By putting itself on the same level with Sweden, Belarus presented itself as equally successful in dealing with a crisis akin to a highly developed European state.

The upcoming presidential election represents a certain critical juncture for the development of Belarus. Political and economic conflicts with Russia, unprecedented volatility on the energy markets, and the looming negative economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that the Belarusian regime needs to start thinking

about how to ensure its own survival. Popular discontent is growing and recent opinion polls demonstrate that around 62 percent see a considerable worsening in the economic development of their country.

Actions

In order to decrease the possibility of massive social protests and to prepare for the upcoming presidential elections, the government has been applying a number of strategies.

First of all, the election was not postponed in accordance with recommendations made by international institutions. By setting the election at the beginning of August, the authorities wanted to ensure that citizens would cast their votes still being on vacation mode before autumn starts when many families will have to face increased financial expenditures to send their children to school. Besides, holding elections in August decreases the possibility of international observers coming to Belarus and putting additional pressure on the regime to hold free and fair elections.

In addition, the authorities are trying to make sure that the most “active” opposition candidates will not be allowed to run. For example, Syarhei Tsikhanouski, Belarusian blogger, entrepreneur, and author of the popular YouTube channel “Country for Life,” has already been detained several times and his group for gathering signatures was not registered by the Central Electoral Commission. The government is currently applying the strategy of selective repressive measures in relation to the supporters of Tsikhanouski, including those who participate in pickets demanding his release or gather signatures in support of the candidacy of his wife, who took over Syarhei’s electoral campaign.

Tsihkanouski’s team organized a number of rallies around the country which are held under the slogan “Stop cockroach!”. The incumbent President Lukashenka is compared with a cockroach and a slipper, as a means of killing this insect, has become a symbol of the social protest movement in Belarus. The “Stop cockroach!” campaign has gained high popularity among the electorate. To express support, Belarusians bring old slippers and pile them up near picket areas. In response, the head of the Central Election Commission, Lydziya Yarmoshina, accused Tsikhanouski and his team of violating the legislation regulating the conduct of peaceful pickets and asked the Investigation Committee to bring him to justice.

However, the regime will exercise a certain amount of caution and will try to abstain from applying massive “hard” repressive strategies involving direct violence against the political opposition in order not to repeat the scenario of the 2010 presidential elections. The Belarusian government is aware that this can ruin the impression of “subtle” democratization that has been occurring after successful attempts by official

Minsk to act as a regional mediator and peacemaker from the time of the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Using hard repressive strategies can worsen Belarus's relations with the West and weaken its leverage over Russia. Therefore, Lukashenka and his entourage are trying to reframe the narrative behind the election campaign from "people against Lukashenka" to "Kremlin against Lukashenka." The idea is that all of the opponents of the regime automatically become traitors and Moscow agents who want to divide and weaken Belarus. This framing has already been applied toward Tsikhanouski as well as other contestants.

Furthermore, the government skews the playing field in favor of the incumbent by heavily dominating the media space. The official discourse presents Lukashenka as a winner in fighting the coronavirus and the only possible candidate able to save Belarus from the upcoming economic hardship. The political opposition is labelled as "losers" and "clowns" who will bring instability and weaken Belarus in the international arena.

Finally, the ruling regime has applied the strategy of reshuffling political elites before the August election. On June 3, Lukashenka dissolved the Council of Ministers. The new prime minister became Raman Galouchanka, who previously held the post of chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee. Such pre-election rotations of elites is a common practice in Belarus. One rationale behind this strategy is to signal to the electorate that the government is ready for "renewal," and the new ministerial composition will introduce changes to improve everyone's lives. A second possible explanation is that Lukashenka wanted to dismiss Prime Minister Syarhei Rumas for his close connections with one of the current candidates running in the presidential election, Viktar Babaryka, as both of them used to work at Belgazprombank. Reshuffling and selective purging of elites have been two of the most popular strategies of elite co-optation and control that Lukashenka and his entourage have exercised over the last twenty-five years to ensure that no alternative sources of power would appear to challenge the ruling regime.

Conclusion

Recent and current developments in Belarus show that public discontent with the regime is rapidly rising. Mismanagement by the government of the COVID-19 crisis has contributed to increasing people's support for the political opposition and led to the growth of protest movements in Belarus. Although it is premature to talk about any success of the "Slipper Revolution," external and internal developments suggest that the upcoming presidential elections will be a litmus test, demonstrating to what extent the country might be entering the stage of regime transitions.

Part Three: Georgia

A Success Story in Fighting Coronavirus?

Despite being ineffective in governing the country, Georgian Dream, the current ruling party, has so far managed to win every major election against the opposition.

Georgian Dream came to power in 2012 following years of protests against the former government of Mikhail Saakashvili and his party United National Movement (UNM). Saakashvili's party was criticized for its crackdowns on social movements, mismanagement of the prison system, and widespread elite corruption. Acting in response to this, the new government led by the Georgian Dream coalition and billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili took on reforms such as the liberalization of the prison system. Still, it did not manage to tackle economic problems such as enormous inflation and external debt, both of which have substantially increased over time.

During the recent 2018 presidential election, however, various social protests against the ruling party escalated. Although Georgian Dream narrowly escaped the defeat beating the opposition candidate Gogol Vashadze, its control was substantially weakened, and, since 2018, the government has struggled to maintain its hold on power.

In particular, summer 2019 featured an increased amount of social protests. One of them concerned a demonstration in the Pankisi Gorge in the north-east of Georgia, and another one took place on Tbilisi's central Rustaveli Avenue. The latter event was a protest against the visit of Sergey Gavrilov, a member of the Russian Duma, to the Georgian parliament. To appease the protesters, Georgian Dream proposed electoral reform, i.e., changing parliamentary elections to fully proportional, which, ultimately, was not realized due to insufficient support from the members of the parliament.

This reform was partly implemented by the end of 2019 as a result of further social protests and involvement from the West. According to the proposed changes, the upcoming 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia are going to be held based on a mixed system. Most of the seats will be distributed through a proportional voting system, whereas 30 seats will be distributed based on the majoritarian system, which was in force before the reform.

Popular support of opposition parties in Georgia is still not very high. According to recent opinion polls (NDI):

- 37% of respondents do not support any political party;
- 21% support the ruling party;
- 15% are in favor of the main opposition party, United National Movement;

- 4% support European Georgia;
- 3% support The Alliance of Patriots;
- 8% support other smaller parties;
- 6% refuse to answer; and
- 6% remain undecided.

The coronavirus pandemic can pose both challenges and opportunities for the ruling party. The government is aware of many existing risks, including the medical infrastructure problems, and, therefore, opted for harsh restrictive measures from the very beginning of the pandemic.

Since the first case of coronavirus infection in Georgia, the government announced special measures, shutting down borders with neighbors and controlling all the Georgian citizens returning from abroad. It also introduced various additional restrictions, including the prohibition of leaving houses after 9 pm. Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia created a crisis group, which includes several officials from the medical sphere, and he established a daily communication line with the population. He also refused to attend Easter services and, in spite of the criticism from the church, called on worshipers to stay at home.

As a result of these crisis management strategies, the death toll in Georgia remained low, and the country became a success story in fighting the coronavirus. Apparently, Georgia has the best “result” in Europe with, at time of writing, 12 people dying, 783 cases confirmed, and 605 recovered.

These numbers can contribute to increasing the popularity of the ruling party in advance of elections. However, the economic consequences of the crisis, including among other things its effect on the tourism industry that is vital for the economic performance of the country and the general income of the population, can still hurt the ruling party’s chances of staying in power.

To mitigate the economic consequences of the crisis and win the popular vote, the government applied several strategies. First, it offered financial assistance to those who have lost their jobs. Second, it negotiated agreements with the banks to postpone loan dues, targeting, in particular, the unemployed segment of the population. Finally, the leader of the ruling party Ivanishvili donated 100 Million Georgian Lari (\$30 Million) to the coronavirus anti-crisis foundation, which managed to collect 124 million Georgian Lari in total to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

As a result of these crisis management strategies, the popularity of the ruling party has increased, and, at the moment, it has the highest chances to win in the upcoming parliamentary elections. However, the economic consequences of the pandemic introduce a certain degree of uncertainty for the success of Georgian Dream. This

weakness can be exploited by the opposition parties which might ally to strengthen their chances to oppose the ruling party in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 poses a particularly strong challenge to regimes heavily investing in the symbolic and performative dimensions of national sovereignty, and keeping the issues of governance at some distance from the supreme leader. Both Vladimir Putin and Aliaksandr Lukashenka personify this model that became particularly vulnerable in times of pandemic. The two regimes, in Russia and Belarus, are symbolically competing with each other in the realm of memory politics, which partly explains Putin's decision to hold a military parade on June 24 after Lukashenka hosted a Victory Day ceremony on May 9. This was done in spite of the growing numbers of infected persons across the country, lucidly illustrating the gap between the imageries of power and sovereignty, on the one hand, and the practicalities of governance, on the other.

Against this backdrop, Georgia looks less concerned about sacralizing its national identity and more about investing in properly managing the state of emergency and opening the country as soon as possible for international tourism. It remains to be seen how these distinctions between the three countries will impact public voting.