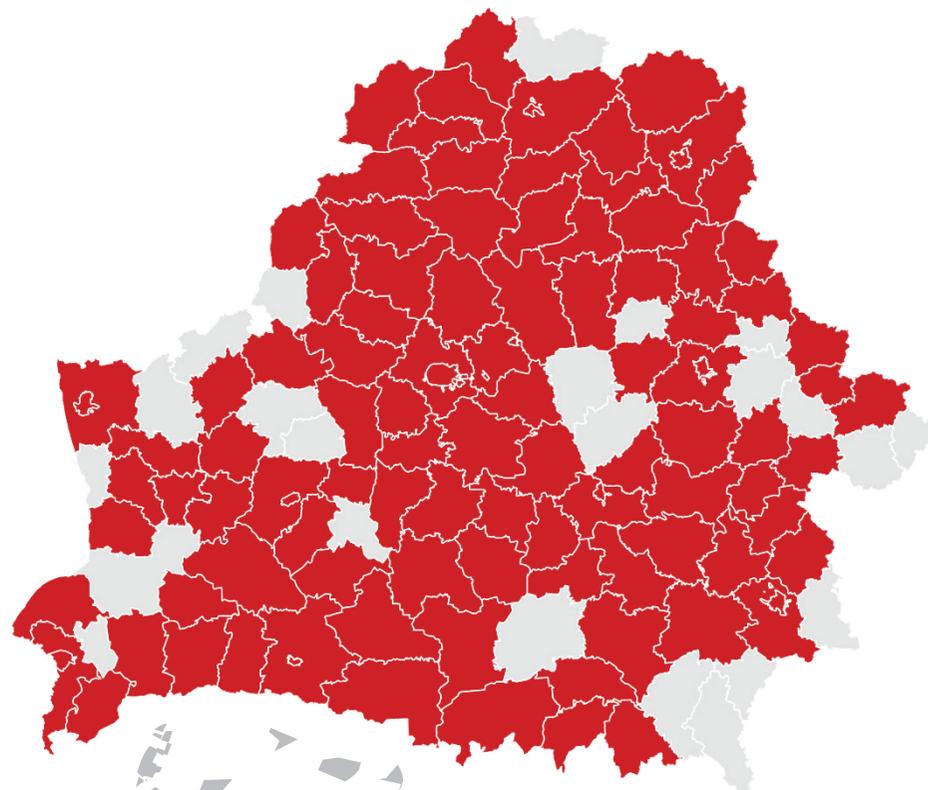


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Analysis
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70 Days

without a Lockdown

Belarus's Special Path in the Fight against CoViD-19

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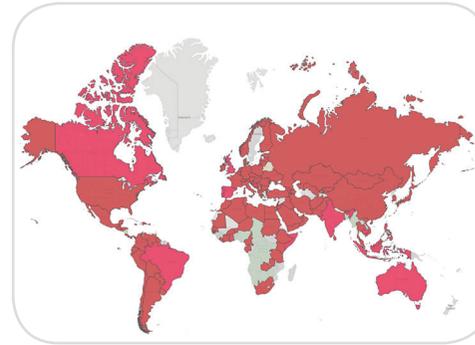
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Key points and predictions

Communication. For a quarter of a century, there has existed an informal epistemological hierarchy in Belarus: the president by definition possesses the best knowledge/understanding, others – by their proximity to the president. The necessity to adjust experts' conclusions to the (chaotic) expressions of the president disrupts the communication both within the government system and between government agencies and society.

Lukashenka. Belarus leader does not recognize the risks carried by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 to be serious. It would, however, be an exaggeration to see his joking statements about the virus ('I don't see it around here!') as an attempt to deny reality and challenge the commonly accepted fact that the virus is spreading in Belarus.

Health ministry apparently tries to act within the paradigm *more action – less talk*. However, this is the case where the 'less talk' approach undermines not only the image of the agency but also the chances to engage other spheres of society into the fight against the virus.

'Statistical anomaly': Why is, according to official statistics, the number of CoViD deaths in Belarus far lower than in most other countries? There is a real probability that these data are intentionally underreported; it does not seem, however, that the number

of underreported deaths is significantly high. Let us point to the following: (i) a relatively well developed medical infrastructure in Belarus; (ii) the practice of distinguishing between deaths *with* the virus and deaths *because of* the virus.

WHO recommendations. Belarus's noncompliance with some of the WHO recommendations will hardly have any negative consequences. The *raison d'être* of lockdown measures (which were part of those recommendations) is questioned by several experts; even within the WHO there is probably no consensus on this point.

Solidarity rather than lockdown. In the current situation, it is important to build horizontal social solidarity to overcome the consequences of the pandemic. Social distancing remains a valid ethical imperative. However, we do not recommend calling for a nationwide lockdown in Belarus as its ethical merits are far from evident.



On **11 March 2020**, the World Health Organization (WHO) affiliated with the United Nations Organization, announced the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus. In the aftermath, most of the world's countries introduced the so called lockdown measures to contain the spread of the infection and reduce the number of disease cases. Belarus is among few countries where containment measures have been very lax. What can we say about such an approach now that nearly **70 days** have passed since the state of a pandemic was declared?

Pre-history¹

On the eve of the European New Year, **31 December 2019**, Chinese authorities informed the WHO of 41 cases of atypical pneumonia. A week later scientists identified a new type of coronavirus, which was first called just so: *nCoV* ← *new Corona Virus*. Currently, a more complex term is commonly used: *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome related Corona Virus 2*, acronym: **SARS-CoV-2**. The infectious disease caused by the novel coronavirus has been labelled *Corona Virus Disease-2019*, acronym: **CoViD-19**. Another term for the virus: 'Chinese virus' – after the country of its origin – is not recommended for reasons of political correctness.

On **11 January**, the first death related to the newly discovered virus was recorded. Initial observations led scientists to the conclusion that the virus is able to cause pneumonia and respiratory failure and may lead to death. Given the potential danger of the novel coronavirus, which, by then, was actively spreading, on **30**

¹ See also the *Timeline of the pandemic table*.

January, the WHO announced Public Health Emergency of International Concern. This did not mean declaring a pandemic but signaled the unusual nature of the situation and implied that particular awareness was needed. At that stage, however the leadership of the WHO did not support such steps as border closures or other restrictions on the freedom of movement.

In February, the new virus rapidly spread in Italy and across the borders to most European countries. It was also spreading, with varying speed, on other continents. On 9 March, the Italian government introduced a harsh nationwide quarantine. On **11 March**, **the WHO announced a pandemic**, i.e. threat to human life and health on a global scale. In the second half of March and April, most of the world's countries introduced emergency measures to stop the pandemic and minimize its consequences. As of the time this paper is prepared, many countries are easing or lifting these measures, but the perspective of coming back to a normal life is still uncertain.

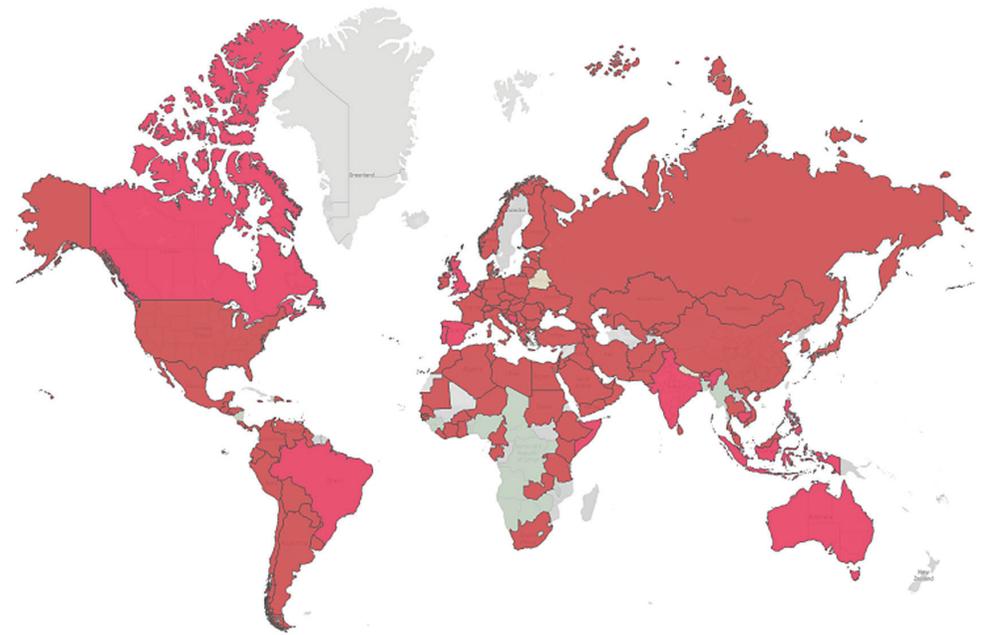
The first case of the novel coronavirus infection in Belarus was officially confirmed on **28 February**. According to the state statistics, in March and April a rapid growth of disease cases was taking place, but it slowed down in May. On **31 March**, the first death related to CoViD-19 was recorded in the country.



‘Lockdown’ and ‘no-lockdown’ countries

Across the English-speaking world, the term *lockdown* is commonly used as an umbrella term to describe administrative measures restricting the freedom of movement, assembly and many kinds of activities, with the intention to curb the spread of infection. Sometimes *quarantine* is used to refer to these restrictions. Both terms are informal; the more official term is ‘**containment measures**’.

During March-April 2020, literally all the countries and territories in the world, including Belarus, took those or other measures to contain the pandemic. The difference was only in their scope and strictness. So, the classification of the countries into those *with* a lockdown and those *without* it, often present in the media, can be somewhat problematic as it lacks a clear basis. Usually, *lockdown* or *quarantine* means the introduction of a curfew, the ban to leave one’s home except for strictly defined cases, switching many learning, work and business activities into a distant mode, and suspension of some activities. Such measures were indeed introduced in many countries, but their range, scope and strictness vary significantly.



As of May 24, the [Government Response Stringency Index](#) quantified Belarus’s strictness of containment measures with **13.89 out of 100 points**, which makes the country almost thrice more ‘liberal’ than Sweden (40.74), another European country with a ‘no-lockdown’ reputation. Nicaragua, according to the Index, has applied the loosest anti-epidemic measures and scored just 11.11 points. Five other conditionally no-lockdown countries: Burundi (22.22), Taiwan (22.22), Turkmenistan (27.78), Japan (28.7), and Niger (33.33).

For the sake of convenience, we shall use the media terms ‘quarantine’ and ‘lockdown’, bearing in mind the above reservations and clarifications.



Did Lukashenka lose touch with reality?

Belarusian officials with Lukashenka at the helm, already at the early stage of the novel coronavirus spread, took a skeptical stance towards the epidemiological threat. On 19 February, the weekly *Ekspertnaya sreda* (Experts' Wednesday) talk show, hosted by the state Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR) and Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA), was titled *Coronavirus: the Economy of Fear*. During the discussion it was repeatedly implied that there was more panic about the new virus than the real threat from it, that this panic was whipped up by the global and some of the local media and that, allegedly, it was in the interest of unknown forces. To counterbalance such trends, BISR emphatically [presented](#) the following information: 'WHO on coronavirus: in 80% cases the disease has mild forms and patients fully recover from it.' What to do about the rest 20% of the cases when disease has severe forms or ends in death was beyond the scope of considerations.

Belarusian authorities' skepticism about the danger of the virus finds its practical expression as well. On **May 9**, a full-fledged military parade was held in Minsk to celebrate the Victory Day – with no facemasks on, no social distancing and with many elderly people participating. The president himself, in the words of his press



PHOTO: Serge Serebro, Vitebsk Popular News

secretary **Natalya Eysmant**, does not take any significant personal safety precautions to reduce infection risks except for washing his hands more often.

'The president did not and will not self-isolate or socially distance or [takes any] other [measures]', said Eysmant during a press conference. 'He did not try on any facemasks or respirators. He does sports as he has always done. Yes, the Independence Palace's guests know they should wash their hands. They do so before they meet the president. We [the presidential staffers] do that as well, we do that more often than earlier. The president does, too.'

Lukashenka who has never minced his words and likes to use colloquialisms, in the context of the debates around the pandemic gave a full vent to his expressibility:



'There are no viruses around here. Do you see any of them flying around? I don't see them either,'

– he stated jokingly in an interview with a journalist after a hockey match on 28 March.

'We asked him because he turns 80 tomorrow (...) Why are you walking these streets and still going to work?'

– that is how the head of the state reacted to the first CoViD-19 related death in Belarus. In another instance, he loosely paraphrased a report on another death in the following way:

'How can you ever live having 135 kilos of body weight, an almost failing heart, having various pains here or there in your body?'

On 23 April, during a government meeting on social and economic issues, Lukashenka said:

'I don't want to repeat myself but would like to emphasize the main point: there is no single death in Belarus caused by coronavirus alone,'

and he added that each deceased person had a long list of underlying health issues.

Lukashenka's statements on coronavirus immediately spread across the news agencies and social media and many saw them

as signs of cynicism or his being out of touch with reality. 'Belarus leader has apparently got very excited and there is no one around him who could bring him back to reality,' [said Andrei Paratnikau](#), the founder of *Belarus Security Blog* in a comment for the website *Naviny.by*.

Assessing Lukashenka's attitude to the pandemic it is necessary to distinguish between two things: (a) perception of the risks the pandemic carries and (b) admitting that such risks exist. The president does not see the risks related to SARS-CoV-2 as serious – either for himself or for the citizens of Belarus. It would however be an exaggeration to perceive his joking statements ('I don't see it around here!') as an attempt to deny reality and challenge the commonly accepted fact that the virus is spreading in Belarus.

The statement *'There is no single death in Belarus caused by the coronavirus alone'* will not look that outlandish if we take into account that the SARS-CoV-2 infection rarely is the main factor of a patient's death. A more comprehensive study over this issue will be published later; for now suffice it to refer to report by the Italian National Institute of Health, which states that more than 99% people died with CoViD-19 had underlying health conditions.²

² ISS. [Report sulle caratteristiche dei pazienti deceduti positivi a COVID-19 in Italia in presente report é basato sui dati aggiornati al 17 marzo 2020.](#)



Health Ministry: when the *less talk* principle fails

The Ministry of Health, as a specialized agency, had to manoeuvre between Lukashenka's debunking stance and ethical pressure from the opposition, human rights organizations, and non-state media. In mid-March, about two weeks after the first case of infection with a new virus was detected in Belarus, the ministry [published](#) a document on the reorganization of clinics and hospitals given the likelihood of growth in patients with CoViD-19. Special isolation boxes for ambulance transport were purchased and **hospitals were repurposed**. The agency also passed a resolution on significant co-payments to physicians involved in the treatment of patients with CoViD-19; according to our insider information it has consistently adhered to this resolution.

Although the ministry has never called for nationwide quarantine in Belarus, it has actively [promoted](#) the ethics of **social distancing**. This has been done both in the form of recommendations for society as a whole and in the form of work with individual organizations (churches, educational institutions, businesses).

Communication with the public is the area that is most exposed to political and ideological influence, so little wonder that the agency failed to organize this communication properly.

Tut.by journalist Ulyana Babayed [told](#) about a queer reaction of the Health Ministry's representatives to the question about the current statistics on coronavirus. 'Our questions were often answered: What will it give you? Why do you need this information at all?', the journalist reported. Such a response to natural requests for information was perceived by many as evidence that the Ministry of Health, like all the state system, conceals the truth from the population and exposes people to the deadly infection. Some [drew](#) a parallel with the Soviet authorities' reaction to the Chernobyl disaster in 1986.

In early April, the ministry began to try to establish communication with the public. During that month, the agency held weekly briefings for journalists on the situation with the coronavirus pandemic. But the last briefing – on April 24 – took place in a truncated form: without a possibility of asking questions. In May briefings were not held at all. The main source of official information about the pandemic is the website ***stopcovid.belta.by***, launched in mid-April and updated daily. The ministry also publishes up-to-date information about CoViD-19 on the telegram channel '**Ofitsial'nyi Minzdrav'**.

Presumably, the Ministry of Health tends to operate within the paradigm *more action – less talk*. But this is the case when the *less talk* approach not only harms its image, but also reduces chances to engage different actors into the fight against the pandemic. The reaction to the effect *Why do you need this information?* is a serious tactical mistake, which for a large part of the public eclipsed positive efforts of the agency to overcome the pandemic in Belarus.



‘Statistical anomaly’

According to official statistics, the dynamics of ‘coronavirus’ deaths in Belarus remains very moderate. Since March 31, when the first CoViD-19 related death was reported, the increase in deaths averaged **3-4 per day** and – at least so far – has not exceeded 7 deaths (per day). Considering that death toll in Italy, Spain or the United States sometimes reached almost 2,000 fatalities per day, the Belarusian maximum looks very optimistic. Some commentators have dubbed this statistical phenomenon a ‘Belarusian anomaly’ and suspect the Health Ministry of significantly underreporting the number of deaths.

Comparative statistics, insider reports and the existence of ideological pressure make these suspicions quite reasonable. But we should also pay attention to the following. First, sanitary and epidemiological services have been preserved and function well in Belarus. Second, the country has a relatively good hospital infrastructure, which was appreciated in one of the previous WHO reports. A 2013 report states: ‘Belarus has among the highest number of hospital beds per capita in the WHO European Region – **11.3 per 1000 population** in 2011, which is well above the average for both the C[ommonwealth of] I[ndependent] S[tates] (8.3 per 1000 in 2011) and the EU (5.5 per 1000 in 2010).’ (*Boldface added.*)³

Third, it seems that Belarusian physicians try to distinguish three things:

³ Erica Richardson, Irina Malakhova, Irina Novik, Andrei Famenka. [Belarus Health system review. Health Systems in Transition](#). Vol. 15 No. 5 2013 P. 55.

(a) Death *with* SARS-CoV-2: one had the virus at the moment of death, but it is unlikely that the virus caused the death.

(b) Death *after having* SARS-CoV-2: one had contracted the virus, recovered from it, but died in the aftermath. There is no direct link between the virus and the death, but there can be indirect causation.

(c) death *because of* SARS-CoV-2: the disease provoked by the virus was the only or the main factor of death; the person would certainly have been alive but for the novel coronavirus.⁴

In many countries – due to the high demand for rapid information – such nuances are not reflected in statistics and all three types of cases often fall into one category: *died of CoViD-19*.⁵ In Belarus, instances (a) and (b) are probably not classified as ‘CoViD deaths’. Of course, this raises the question of how reliably Belarusian physicians draw these distinctions; but a similar question is also relevant to the statistics that do not take these nuances into account at all. Distortions (intentional or unintentional) may occur in both cases.

⁴ At the moment, we do not have direct information on the principles of diagnosis and classification within the Belarusian system. We conclude about application of this difference on the basis of indirect data, such as [statement](#) by Deputy Health Minister Alena Bohdan.

⁵ A discussion on the issue (in the context of the UK situation): Matt Discombe. [‘Systematic reviews’ to discover true cause of outbreak deaths](#). *HSJ*. 25 April 2020.



State-run media, Education Ministry, trade unions, municipalities

Other government agencies and pro-government organizations responded to the pandemic variously. The pro-government opinion-makers mostly supported the skeptical and debunking tone set by Lukashenka. Let us cite a few headlines for illustration: [‘Quarantine broke. In Ukraine, coffee shops have reopened without waiting for permission from the authorities’](#); [‘Not until the end of 2022 may the EU economy restore to the pre-crisis level’](#) (both from the Presidential Administration newspaper Belarus Segodnya); [‘Every third person infected with the coronavirus in the world has already recovered.’](#) (BelTA). The main message was: *the virus is not as dangerous as many people think, and lockdown is an irrational measure.*

The Ministry of Education has not developed a coherent approach to the organization of the educational process during the pandemic; its decisions were rather spontaneous. On the one hand, the agency [extended](#) the spring break for two weeks, on the other – it refused to introduce distance learning.



PHOTO: <https://1prof.by/>

‘Hardly can distance education replace the classroom teaching system,’ education minister **Ihar Karpenka** [told](#) reporters during a visit to Minsk’s 64th secondary school on May 1. The core issue, however, is not which form of education is the best in general, but which is more appropriate during a pandemic. If the minister believes that classroom teaching is completely justified (safe) even during a pandemic, then the question is what was the point of extending the holiday for half a month? But if it carries real risks to life and health, then why was it decided not to switch to distance learning, given that the epidemic in Belarus was on the rise? These questions have remained unanswered so far.



The pro-government **Federation of Trade Unions** of Belarus is one of those structures that perceived the pandemic as a real challenge and took steps to overcome its consequences. The federation cancelled the traditional rallies and marches on May 1 and announced the allocation of a significant budget – **5 million** Belarusian rubles (around \$2 mln) – for various needs related to coronavirus infection. In addition:

a) The (pro-government) trade unions promised to sponsor hot meals for the employees of some boarding houses, who were transferred to the shift mode of work.

b) At the expense of trade union funds more than 6,500 railway workers are to be insured against illnesses caused by the novel coronavirus.



c) More than 30 risk group workers employed in the *Vitok* enterprise⁶ were sent on paid leave.

d) All employees of the Minsk Heating System enterprise who are over 50 years old were offered to take a paid leave.

In late April, it also became known that trade unions would pay financial aid to the physicians who contracted SARS-CoV-2 as a result of treating CoViD patients. This applies, however, only to (pro-government) trade union members.

Some municipalities, though having very limited powers, introduced extraordinary measures to contain the infection spread. In mid-April, **Pinsk** city executive committee published an appeal to residents to refrain from visiting public places without urgent need. On May 26, **Ivye** district authorities ordered mandatory use of masks in public places. Besides, a restriction on the number of people gathered in one place was introduced.

In general, despite Lukashenka's skepticism, there is a prevailing belief within government and GONGO structures that the CoViD-19 pandemic is a serious challenge and that at least basic precautions must be maintained. This conviction was voiced, for example, by **Uladzimir Katovich**, a member of the Standing Committee of the Council of the Republic on Legislation and State Building. On May 19, in a special article for BelTA, he called for adherence to the basic rules of infection containment, in particular to keep a social distance, wear masks and wash hands regularly.

⁶A manufacturer and supplier of electricity distribution equipment.



Non-state segment: opposition, non-state media, NGOs, churches

The Belarusian opposition is very vociferous in its criticism of the Belarusian authorities' approach to the pandemic. Criticism takes various forms, from comments through appeals to accusations. For example, **Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu**, **Andrei Sannikau**, **Pavel Seviarynets**, **Mikalai Statkevich**, and film director **Yury Khashchavatski** called for 'people's quarantine' – so far until the end of May. The call was accompanied by accusations against the authorities of seeking to take away the right to life. 'If there are no fair elections in the country, it is very easy to take away the right to life, especially from vulnerable groups who trust the authorities,' Mikalai Statkevich [told](#) BelaPAN, commenting on the meaning of the action.

The [joint statement](#) of the World Association of Belarusians 'Fatherland' and the Union of Belarusian Writers was less sharp, but also critical. Apart from criticizing the authorities' 'non-action', the organizations called for the cancellation of the Victory Day parade (May 9); the authorities, as expected, turned a deaf ear to the appeal.

Leading non-state media in Belarus – the portal **Tut.by**, web newspaper **Nasha Niva**, websites **Belarusian Partisan**, **Naviny.by**, and **Radio Liberty** – also took a polemical position towards the

CoViD policy of the authorities. Various aspects were (are) criticized: (mis)information, statistics, interaction with international structures, socio-economic dimension, organization of the educational process, treatment of the infected, treatment of the dead and their families and, of course, Lukashenka's expressions about the coronavirus.

Two major churches in Belarus – Orthodox and Catholic – responded to the pandemic by ordering a number of measures aimed at ensuring social distancing. The leadership of both churches called on the faithful to refrain from visiting worship places, even during Easter – the greatest holiday in Christianity. The Catholic Church in Belarus cancelled the Lenten vigil and the prayer meeting of the youth, and postponed the main pilgrimage festivities in Budslau from July 2-3 to an indefinite later date. The rites of confirmation and the first communion were also postponed, and catechesis in many parishes was reorganized to a distance mode. The hierarchs of the Belarusian Orthodox Church strongly recommended not to visit cemeteries on the occasion of Radunitsa (commemoration of the deceased) and urged to keep social distance everywhere.

'Conscious non-compliance with medical prescriptions during the pandemic is a crime against our neighbours and God,' **Metropolitan Pavel**, the patriarchal exarch of Belarus, [said](#) on April 30. The head of the Catholic Church in Belarus **Tadevush Kandrusевич**, in response to the objection that non-participation in a liturgy due to fear of the virus could be a manifestation of weak faith in God's Providence, [replied](#) laconically, 'God protects us, but He gave us reason.'



Over the past two months, a number of grassroots initiatives have emerged to combat the pandemic. Since early April, **#BY_help_med** and **#CovidBy** have been raising funds for respirators for physicians. The Catholic charity **Caritas** has gone in a similar direction. In mid-April, with the support of the Catholic Church in Belarus, Caritas [launched](#) the action *Mercy does not go on quarantine!* It consisted primarily in collecting donations for purchasing equipment and medical devices for health care institutions treating CoViD patients.

In late April – early May, two expert projects were launched: [Covidonomics](#) and [CovidResearch](#), and an information-and-advocacy one: [Covidmonitor By](#). The first project was initiated by the BERO Research Centre and aimed to analyse the economic aspects of the pandemic. The second, within which this publication has been prepared, is implemented by BISS, and its main goal is to assess various strategies of dealing with the pandemic. The third one is a project of the human rights organization Human Constanta; within it, activists monitor reactions of the Belarusian authorities to the situation with the pandemic, paying special attention to how it affects human rights.

International community on ‘Belarusian liberalism’

The international community reacted to the Belarusian authorities’ approach with moderate criticism. In a [report](#) on the results of its delegation’s visit to Belarus on **April 8-11**, the **WHO** recommended to strengthen physical distance measures. In particular, it was recommended to cancel all mass events, organize distance learning for students and suspend non-essential activities of businesses and organizations. Lukashenka [noted](#) that ‘the measures proposed by the WHO must be closely considered, they cannot be ignored.’ But he added there was no need to take radical steps. ‘No emergency and redundancy,’ the president stressed.

The **European Union** also noticed the ‘special way’ of Belarus in dealing with the pandemic, but confined itself to a few scattered signals. On April 29, Deputy Director General of the European Commission’s European Neighborhood Policy Department **Katarína Mathernová** [remarked](#) during an online briefing:

[W]e have a country like Belarus, where they didn’t act as hastily [as in Georgia], and the infection spread quite rapidly. The exponential growth of the number of cases in Belarus indicates that the impact on Belarus will be very large.

Not much followed from these words, except for an implication that while considering financial assistance, priority may be given to



countries such as Georgia, which, by taking radical measures, have paid a high economic price.

The statement by the EU High Representative **Josep Borrell** was clearer. In an interview with Radio Liberty, he [noted](#) that Brussels expected that in return for financial assistance, official Minsk would listen to the WHO recommendations on combatting the coronavirus. Three weeks later, on May 19, the topic of financial aid was also [touched upon](#) by the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement **Olivér Várhelyi**. But this time there was no hint at linking assistance to the WHO recommendations. Instead, the European commissioner noted in a positive mode that during the pandemic ‘Belarus demonstrates a completely different approach to relations with the EU than earlier.’

Perhaps the most critical was the assessment of the human rights organization **Amnesty International**. In a [report](#) published on April 29, the organization denounced Belarusian authorities for belittling the threat posed by Covid-19, promoting folk cures and not introducing physical distancing measures.

When interpreting statements by the WHO and other international structures, the following should be taken into account.

1. Back in early February, WHO President **Tedros Adhanom Gebreyesus** was quite skeptical about measures such as closing borders and restricting freedom of movement. There is ‘no need for measures that unnecessarily interfere with international travel and trade in trying to halt the spread of a coronavirus,’ he [said](#) during

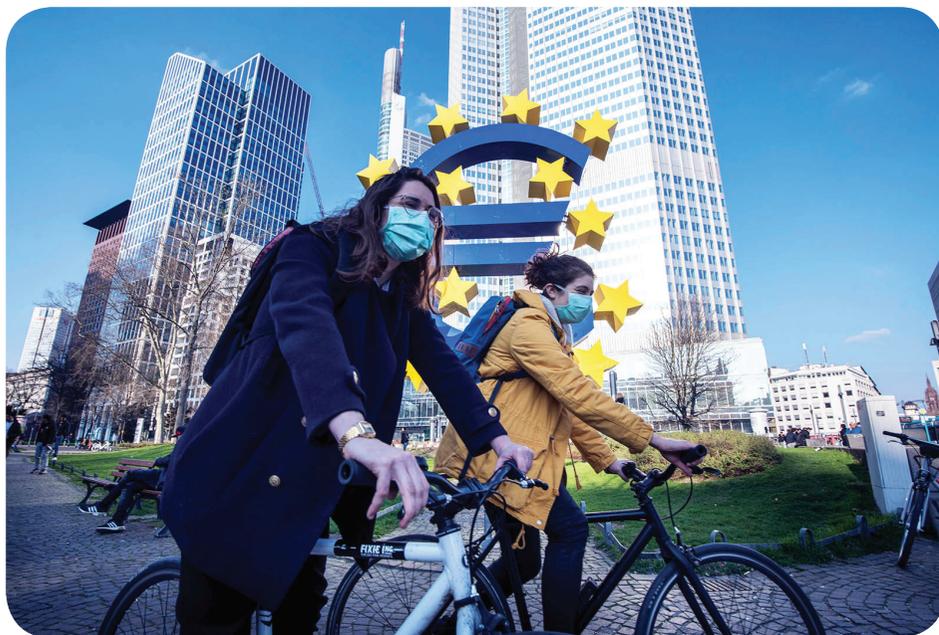


a press conference. In other words, the then position of the WHO resonated with the current position of the Belarusian authorities. In March, the position of the organization changed. One probable factor was political pressure from the United States and Japan.⁷ Another factor was the belief that the new virus (i) was very deadly (3.4% often mentioned as the fatality rate), but (ii) spread less effectively than, for example, the influenza virus.⁸ The combination of these two arguments – (i) and (ii) – led to the conclusion that lockdown measures were fairly justified.

⁷ Jeremy, McKay, Betsy. [The World Health Organization Draws Flak for Coronavirus Response](#). *The Wall Street Journal* (12 February 2020). Ahmet Furkan Mercan. [“Japan slams WHO head over spread of coronavirus.”](#) AA. March 28, 2020.

⁸ [WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 3 March 2020](#).





With further observations and studies being conducted, however, it became clear that the infection fatality rate of SARS-CoV-2 is much less than 3.4%⁹, whereas its transmission ability is very high. In mid-April [Johan Giesecke](#), an adviser to the Director-General of the WHO, strongly criticized nationwide lockdowns.¹⁰ Thus, the recommendations laid out in the WHO April report on Belarus hardly reflected consensus within the organization. This means that the failure to implement them will unlikely have any negative consequences for the Belarusian authorities.

⁹ A preliminary review of reports and studies on infection fatality rate can be found [here](#) (in Belarusian). A more comprehensive analysis is now under preparation and will be published later in Belarusian and English.

¹⁰ [Swedish expert: why lockdowns are the wrong policy](#). *Unherd*. Apr 17, 2020.

2. Any EU sanctions related to the lack of quarantine in Belarus are also very unlikely, except for the extension of restrictions on the entry of Belarusians by some countries. Lockdown measures are the subject of heated debates in Western European countries. Among the critics of such measures are prominent European scientists and experts, in particular **Frank Montgomery** (chairman of the World Medical Association), **Sucharit Bhakdi** (infectious disease doctor, microbiologist, professor at Johannes Gutenberg University), **Detlev Krüger** (professor, Director of the Institute of Medical Virology in 1989-2016), and the above-mentioned prof. **Johan Giesecke**. As EU politicians cannot be certain about whether lockdowns would not turn out a mistake of actionism after a while, it is unlikely that anyone would try to punish Belarus for not resorting to the same measure.

3. So far, international human rights organizations have been the most pronounced in their criticism of the Belarusian approach to the pandemic. But even this criticism may fade out over time. As the matter of fact, these organizations record much more human rights violations under lockdowns than in their absence. Besides, the former violations are more obvious and identifiable: labour exploitation of children, sexual abuse, domestic violence, impoverishment, unjustified arrests, etc.¹¹ Thus, as a more complete picture looms, the perception of no-lockdown policies will probably be changing.

¹¹ [“COVID-19 and Children’s Rights.”](#) *Human Rights Watch*. April 9, 2020.



Summary and conclusions

Summing up the conditional 70 days of the pandemic in Belarus, the following should be noted.

1. The **communication dysfunctionality** of the Belarusian state system has become especially visible during the pandemic. This is a system where for a quarter of a century an epistemological hierarchy has informally existed: the president possesses the best knowledge/understanding, others – according to the proximity to the president. In such a situation, medical officials in Belarus had to solve a much more difficult task than their counterparts in other countries. The latter had to solve a problem with two unknowns: *how dangerous is the new virus* and *how fast is it spreading?* Within the Belarusian system, a third unknown adds to the first two: *how to reconcile professional conclusions about the virus with (chaotic) statements of the president on it?*

The side effect of the epistemological hierarchy is the distortion of communication. This primarily affects communication within the state system: doublethink and doublespeech is commonly applied as a way of avoiding dissonance between facts and president's expressions. This also affects communication between state structures and society. A further consequence of this state of affairs is a

decrease in trust in government agencies.

2. Communication dysfunctionality, however, should not eclipse some **positive aspects** of the Belarusian approach to the pandemic. Preventing panic or trying to distinguish between deaths *with* SARS-CoV-2 and deaths *because of* the virus are univocally positive. Besides, according to an earlier WHO report, Belarus has a relatively good hospital infrastructure,¹² which is highly important during a pandemic. Although the Health Ministry has never called for a strict lockdown in Belarus, it has actively **promoted** the ethics of social distancing, both in the form of recommendations for society and in the form of work with individual subjects.

3. It is understandable that many actors in the non-governmental sector have taken a polemical position towards the authorities. Information gaps, jokes on painful topics on the part of the president, the skeptical and exposing tone of pro-government opinion-makers – all this lends itself to the impression of disrespect for the most fundamental values: human life and health.

However, critics of the Belarusian authorities sometimes underestimate the **cognitive aspect** of the pandemic. Contrary to the popular belief that lockdowns in other countries were introduced on the basis of solid knowledge, it is not entirely true. At the heart of such measures was rather a *suspicion* that the new virus *could* be very deadly. Studies conducted over the past two months show that the SARS-CoV-2 infection fatality rate is in the range of 0.3% -

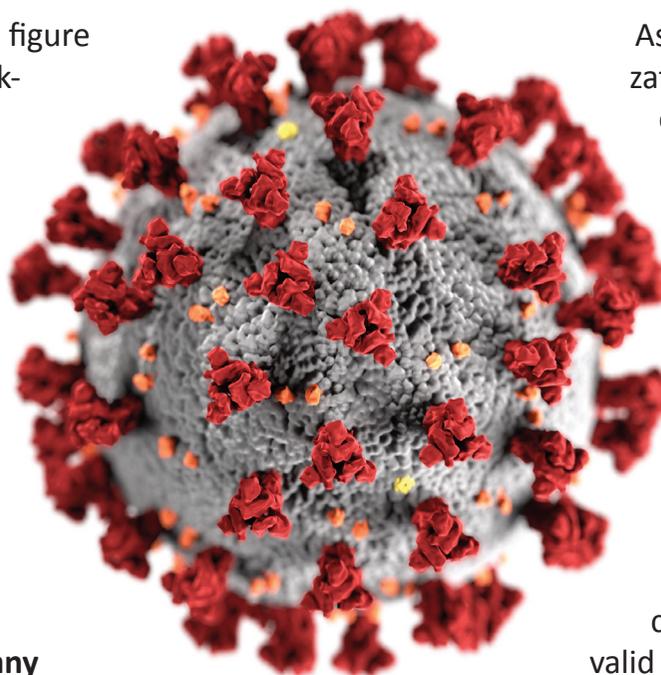
¹² Erica Richardson, Irina Malakhova, Irina Novik, Andrei Famenka. [Belarus Health system review](#). Health Systems in Transition. Vol. 15 No. 5 2013 P. 55.



0.7%¹³, which is much lower than 3.4% – the figure often invoked at the stage of introducing lockdowns in many countries.¹⁴

Governments had to take decisions about lockdowns very quickly. There was no time to weigh all the pros and cons, so hardly can we presume a ‘solid scientific basis’ for these decisions. It will take many months of analysis, research and discussion until we get a well-grounded answer to the question about how justified lockdown measures were.

4. Belarus’s **non-compliance with some WHO recommendations will unlikely have any consequences** either in terms of image or financial ones. Such recommendations as distance learning or suspending non-essential activities hardly reflect consensus within this organization. The growing reports of negative consequences of lockdowns further weaken the argumentative basis of these recommendations.



As of now, international human rights organizations have been the most pronounced critics of the Belarusian approach. But even this criticism may fade out over time, as human rights violations under lockdowns seem to be more evident and multiple than those resulting from no-lockdown policies.

5. At this stage, Belarusians are well-advised to focus on **horizontal solidarity**: building networks of local interaction between organizations and individuals aimed at helping either physicians or people at risk. Social distancing, as the main way of controlling the spread of infection, remains a valid ethical imperative. We do not recommend, however, calling for a nationwide lockdown in Belarus – unless such a call is preceded by a thorough risk analysis. So far, ethical merits of a hypothetical lockdown are far from evident.

¹³ A preliminary review of reports and studies on infection fatality rate can be found [here](#) (in Belarusian). A more comprehensive analysis is now under preparation and will be published later in Belarusian and English.

¹⁴ This figure was mentioned by the head of the WHO during a briefing on March 3 as the percentage of *reported* deaths. This is not the same as infection fatality rate. But in the media and speeches of politicians there was just a figure of ‘3.4%’, without explaining what exactly it means and what follows from it.



Appendix: timeline of the pandemic

Date	Event
Nov 17, 2019	Conditional date of the first human infection with SARS-CoV-2
Dec 31, 2019	Chinese authorities inform the WHO about 41 patients with atypical pneumonia
Jan 7, 2020	Chinese experts identify a new type of coronavirus. They first name it <i>nCoV</i> ; later the term <i>SARS-CoV-2</i> is generally adopted
Jan11, 2020	The first recorded death attributed to the newly discovered virus
Jan 27, 2020	The Novel Coronavirus Information Centre is launched, where, among other things, scientific research on the pandemic is regularly published in free access
Jan 30, 2020	The WHO declares Public Health Emergency of International Concern
The second half of Feb 2020	The rapid spread of the epidemic in Italy
February 28, 2020	The first case of novel coronavirus infection registered in Belarus
Beginning of March 2020	The rapid spread of the epidemic in Spain
March 9, 2020	Lockdown introduced throughout Italy
March 11, 2020	WHO announces CoViD-19 outbreak a pandemic
March 13, 2020	Emergency state introduced in the United States
March 13, 2020	Poland introduces general lockdown
March 16, 2020	Lithuania introduces general lockdown
March 18, 2020	German Chancellor Angela Merkel addresses the country's people with a special message explaining the need to restrict a number of civil liberties in order to overcome the pandemic
March 23, 2020	Lockdown introduced throughout Germany
March 28-31, 2020	Lockdown introduced in most regions of the Russian Federation
March 31, 2020	The first death related CoViD-19 registered in Belarus
Apr 14, 2020	WHO announces updated strategy for gradual transition to low or zero spread of the new virus
May 4, 2020	Italy begins a gradual process of exit from lockdown
Since May 11, 2020	A number of European countries are gradually lifting lockdown measures: France, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Austria, Greece, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia.

As of **June 1, 2020**, in Belarus, according to official statistics, there were: **43,403** cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection; **240** deaths related to the novel coronavirus; **18,776** recoveries. Case fatality rate: 0.55%, which is the same as in Iceland.



About the author

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About the BISS

Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) is an independent Belarusian think tank, founded in 2007 by a group of prominent scientists and public figures. Its main mission is to provide an integrated picture of socio-political processes in Belarus and assess them in a long-term (strategic) perspective. In its advocacy dimension, BISS promotes the values of an open society and critical thinking skills.

Website: <https://belinstitute.com/>

About the project

Aware of multiple ethical and sociopolitical challenges resulting by the rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2, at the beginning of May 2020 the BISS team launched research-and-policy project *Covid19. Optimal Solutions in a Situation of Uncertainty* (shortly: BISS CovidResearch).

The main goals of the project are the following: 1) analysis of various responses to the coronavirus pandemic; 2) assessment of short- and long-term risks entailed by particular responses; 3) making practical recommendations on how best to deal with the pandemic in Belarus; 4) building horizontal solidarity for dealing with the pandemic's consequences.

The main focus is on the situation in Belarus, but we also pay much attention to the global context.

Website: <http://covidresearch.by/eng>



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