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The Eastern Partnership during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Perspective of the EU and the Partner Countries

Edited by
Beata Piskorska and Jakub Olchowski

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Theses:

- From the beginning of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 the EU member states jointly debated on how to cope with the socio-economic and health consequences of the pandemic. Among the animated discussions on solidarity within the Union, there was also a pressing issue of how the EU and its member states should support non-EU states in coping with the consequences of the pandemic.
- On the one hand, the European Union aspires to become a geopolitical power with ambitions to play a broad role in the global arena. On the other hand, there were signs of “coronanationalism”: the EU member states struggling with the hardships of the crisis questioned the possibility of providing external

European aid. This was coupled with the crisis concerning the adoption of the EU's long-term financial framework for 2021-2027, which posed a risk of significantly curbing support for aid measures.

- Nevertheless, from early 2020 the European Union began the process of implementing aid mechanisms. In late March 2020, the support package for member states was launched, additional funds were designed in the 2021-2027 budget: the so-called Reconstruction Fund. However, leaders of the EU member states realize that the pandemic is not taking place in a vacuum; consequently, a stance should be taken towards the third (non-EU) countries that are coping less successfully with the crisis: these include the Eastern Partnership countries.
- On the basis of the joint communication of the European Commission and EEAS of 18 March 2020 *Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience – An Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*¹, a discussion began on the future of the Eastern Partnership framework also in the context of the pandemic. It was emphasized how important it is that the Eastern Partnership should be a more strategic, ambitious, flexible and inclusive cooperation framework, allowing the participants collectively to face shared and global challenges in many fields, especially in today's unprecedented situation caused by the COVID-19 pan-

¹ *Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience – An Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*, A joint communication to the European Parliament, European Council, European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 18 March 2020. Join(2020) 7 final.

demic. In accordance with the strategy, the Council of the European Union suggested that financial support be increased for the EU's eastern and southern neighbours.

- The EU granted short- and medium-term economic and medical aid to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) governments as part of macro-financial support in order to reduce the negative effects of the pandemic on the economies of the EaP states and provided subsidies and favorable interest loans. The EU's assistance, in cooperation with the WHO, also covered the provision of medical equipment, including ventilators, medical masks and aprons for healthcare institutions. The EU's financial support also covered civil society organizations to help those most affected during the crisis. The European Union's economic support is insufficient regarding the needs of the countries in the region, nevertheless, it may reduce the adverse effects of the pandemic and enhance the EU's image as the largest aid provider.
- The fight against COVID-19, including the distribution of vaccines as a public good to Eastern Partnership countries, may become a geopolitical instrument in 2021. There are fears that the EU's hesitation over support for third countries may result in the risk of China and Russia using their vaccines as a tool to strengthen their influence in Africa, Eastern Europe or in the Balkans. The final decision rests with the EU's 27 member states because the contracted vaccines belong to them. This requires diplomacy and communication

as well as convincing EU citizens that it is in the common interest to protect neighbours.

- Moreover, an additional challenge facing the European Union is disinformation and widely circulated Russian-inspired conspiracy theories on COVID-19, including the narrative about Europe's inability to cope with the pandemic and support its neighbors in crisis. The question is, however, how the governments of Ukraine, Belarus or Georgia use the European support? What is its significance in political discourse, whether it is perceived as effective and well managed, and where the money actually goes? What should the EU and partner governments do trying to help recover from the COVID-19 crisis and the accompanying economic shock?



Beata Piskorska

Introduction

The aim of the report is to analyze the epidemic situation in selected Eastern Partnership countries – in Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia – at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2020), in particular its political, economic and social consequences. Furthermore, the report is intended to show how the governments of these countries and the European Union manage to counteract and combat the pandemic. The EU's adopted stance, as well as measures, is part of the ongoing several-year-long debate on the directions of development and the range of evolution of the Eastern Partnership initiative. The issue of the EU's role in containing the pandemic and its multifaceted effects will undoubtedly be included in the general decisions of the EU leaders regarding the future of this organization. It is therefore necessary to consider what the legacy of the coronavirus will be and how the recently made decisions will impact on the EU's position in the world?

As regards the epidemic situation in the neighboring countries, it was for the first time that three neighboring

European regions: Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the southern part of the Mediterranean reported relatively comparable changes. Initially, there were longer delays, but in May, June and July, infections and deaths significantly accelerated. The pandemic appears to have got out of control in all three regions. In the Eastern Partnership countries, especially in Moldova and Ukraine, alarming tendencies were revealed: a persistently high level of new infections. A similar peak of COVID-19 cases was reported in Belarus². Armenia and Azerbaijan also experienced a rapid increase in infections. Only Georgia was still an exceptional case of COVID-19 cases remaining at a very low level, which changed at the end of the year, however.

Challenges of coping with the crisis are accompanied by unsolved political tensions in the countries of the region, including widespread protests in Belarus against the presidential election rigged by Alexander Lukashenka in August 2020, street demonstrations in Georgia, as well as the ongoing war in Ukraine and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The pandemic exacerbates political tensions in the Partnership countries, with their civil societies increasingly demanding better functioning of political institutions, both to cope with the effects of the pandemic and improve democracy. The geopolitical sympathies of the public seem to be somewhat tilted in favor of the European Union because of its help in fighting the virus. An exception is Moldova, whose pro-Russian leaders are engaged in a disinformation policy on the EU's handling of the pandemic and its effects

² M. Emerson, *Special theme: A lot happened in August 2020*, "Eastern Partnership - COVID-19 Bulletin" No 10, September 5, 2020.

– the situation may however change on account of the presidential election victory by Mai Sandu, who is explicitly in favor of the pro-Western course.

The report is the result of the cooperation of the participants in the debate organized during the Cross-Border Cooperation Congress in Lublin on 7 October 2020 – *Eastern Partnership at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Will the European Union continue to be interested in the project?* – by the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin Institute of Political Science and Public Administration and the Association of Education and International Research ERIA and was attended by scholars from the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin and the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw. The present publication is the result of the project conducted in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Poland.



Daniel Szeligowski

COVID-19 in Eastern Partnership Countries: Ukraine

Epidemic Situation

Ukraine is one of the twenty most COVID-19 stricken countries in the world. According to the Johns Hopkins University statistics, in mid-January 2021 a total of 1.2 million COVID-19 infections and almost 22 thousand deaths (17th and 19th position in the world respectively) were reported in Ukraine. However, because the number of COVID-tests was one of the lowest in Europe, the actual scale of COVID cases was probably considerably higher. At the same time, country-wise infection intensity highly differed in particular regions. Most cases were reported in the most populous regions – Kyiv and Odessa, Kharkiv and Lviv oblasts. The fewest were recorded in Kirovgrad, Lugansk and Kherson oblasts. The official data does not include the Russian-occupied Crimean Peninsula and Russian-controlled areas of Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts. The information made public

by Crimea's occupation authorities and by the self-appointed authorities of two "republics" in Donbas regarding the number of COVID-19 cases should be regarded as unreliable.

The Response of the Authorities

Restrictions. The first restrictions to prevent the spread of the pandemic were introduced by the Ukrainian authorities in mid-March 2020, less than two weeks after the first COVID-19 case was recorded. Schools were closed and the functioning of border crossings was restricted, public events with over 200 participants were prohibited, furthermore, self-isolation was recommended. Barely several days later the state borders were closed to foreign nationals, as were restaurants/cafes/bars, shopping and entertainment centers, public gatherings with more than 10 people were banned, long-distance public transport was suspended and city transport was restricted. In late March, a state of emergency was declared enabling compulsory isolation of infected persons, and subsequent mandatory quarantine for people coming from abroad.

In mid-May, under public pressure, the authorities began to gradually lift restrictions. Outdoor areas of catering establishments were re-opened as were shopping centers. About two weeks later, a regional alternating quarantine regime was introduced that stipulated the lifting or tightening of restrictions within an oblast based on three criteria: the number of tests, the percentage and dynamics of an increase in infected cases and hospital bed occupancy. The oblasts were regularly surveyed by regional commissions for technogenic and ecological safety and emergency situa-

tions. In the regions that met the criteria, local government authorities could but did not have to permit the resumption of most business operations, albeit under tightened sanitary requirements. At the end of May the operation of most border crossings with Moldova and EU countries was resumed, and from mid-June foreign nationals were again allowed to enter the country. The ban on the entry of foreign citizens was re-imposed in late August for one month. After its expiry, people coming from high epidemic risk countries – the list being regularly updated by the local Ministry of Health – were obliged to undergo a two-week quarantine.

On account of a rapid increase in the number of infection cases in mid-November, the authorities again tightened restrictions by imposing for three weeks the so-called weekend lockdown – on Saturdays and Sundays most stores were closed, public transport and the operation of entertainment centers were restricted as was the number of participants in public gatherings. The restrictions were not imposed on weekdays because of the difficult economic situation and were subsequently not extended. In early January 2021, however, the authorities again suspended a large portion of business activity by re-imposing for two weeks most restrictions on the territory of the whole country that were in force at the beginning of the fight against the pandemic.

Anti-crisis package. At the turn of March and April 2020, the Ukrainian Parliament approved an economic anti-crisis package that would minimize the adverse effects of the pandemic. Temporary tax exemptions were introduced among others, the deadline for the payment of income tax was deferred, and tax thresholds were raised for individuals running one-man businesses. Enterprises could

take advantage of administrative facilitations and small and medium-sized businesses additionally use subsidies to remunerations of their employees and preferential credit. In mid-April 2020 the government set up a special fund to combat the coronavirus, worth 65 billion hryvnias (ca. PLN 9.6 billion), earmarked inter alia for welfare benefits and credits for entrepreneurs. However, less than 1% of these funds were spent during the first two months, and then the Parliament allowed the government to use them to build the road infrastructure. The money would be allocated for public works because of the rising unemployment but the decision was first of all motivated by President Volodymyr Zelensky's aspiration to implement his flagship project to modernize Ukrainian roads. According to the data of the Ukrainian Ministry of Finance, a total of 70% of the Fund's assets were spent by mid-December.

Vaccine. As of January 2021, the Ukrainian authorities failed to reach an agreement on the purchase of anti-COVID-19 vaccines with its leading world producers (Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca). That is why Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal requested the EU's help in getting the pharmaceuticals quicker. A request for supporting the Eastern Partnership countries to gain access to vaccines was also submitted to the European Commission by 12 EU member states. Ukraine would receive 8 million vaccines under the international COVAX program, coordinated by the World Health Organization. This is not enough, however, to vaccinate even 20% of the country's population. Since at the same time the Ukrainian authorities excluded the possibility of buying Russian-produced vaccines, they were compelled to purchase Chinese-made ones. In late December 2020,

on behalf of the Ukrainian authorities, the state enterprise Medychni Zakupivli signed a contract to buy 1.9 million vaccines from the Chinese manufacturer Sinovac Biotech. Two weeks later, a private firm LekKhim contracted to buy the next five million Chinese vaccines.

The Response of the European Union

In its fight against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ukraine received unprecedented financial support from the EU. Responding to the expected economic recession that would hit Ukraine in the aftermath of its imposed restrictions to combat the pandemic, already in April 2020 the European Commission offered this country a macro-financial assistance package worth 1.2 billion euros. Of the ten countries of the eastern and southern neighborhood that received the EU's support, Ukraine was granted the highest amount, almost half of the total funds (3 billion euros). The EU made the payment conditional on the Ukrainian authorities satisfying specific internal reform criteria and on the continuation of cooperation with the International Monetary Fund. Ukraine failed to fulfill these obligations; nevertheless, in December 2020 it received the first of the planned assistance tranches (600 million euros) on account of its difficult financial situation. Parallel with it, the EU offered Ukraine additional financial support – amounting to a total of 190 million – euros to fund immediate needs resulting from countering the effects of the pandemic. The funds were allocated to strengthen healthcare, subsidize small- and medium-sized enterprises and to protect people especially exposed to the risk of contracting the disease.

The financial assistance was complemented by material support provided to Ukraine – especially significant in the context of the collapse of its healthcare system contending for example with shortages of medical equipment. The World Health Organization used EU funds to buy over 100 ventilators for Ukrainian hospitals treating COVID-19 patients. In response to Ukraine's appeal, Slovakia and Poland, in turn, sent it inter alia personal protective equipment and disinfectants under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. In order to fight the pandemic in Ukraine, a portion of the EU's humanitarian aid was allotted for people suffering as a result of Russian aggression in Donbas, by providing additional equipment to selected hospitals and healthcare centers in the east of the country.

Political, Social and Economic Effects

The restrictions imposed by the Ukrainian government in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with an economic slowdown in Ukraine. As a result, in the second quarter of 2020 Ukraine's economy shrank by as much as over 11% p.a., the actual decline in economic activity being probably far greater on account of the large grey area estimated at 30–47% of GDP. Especially hit were the sectors depending on internal demand, which were directly impacted by the government restrictions (transport, trade, construction), but also industry, which felt the drop in the world prices of metallurgical raw materials. The population's incomes were, in addition, adversely affected by the decreased amount of money transfers from abroad by 6% per annum in the first half of 2020 caused mainly by restric-

tions imposed in the EU countries. The downturn resulted in a rapid rise in unemployment, which may have exceeded even 15% in the second quarter of 2020. Although the economic situation improved in the third quarter of 2020, the country failed to return to the path of economic growth – the GDP drop was 3.5% p.a.

The pandemic accelerated a fall in the ratings of President Zelenskyy and his ruling camp. Opinion polls carried out in December 2020 by the Sociological Group “Rating” (Reitynh) showed that over 60 percent of Ukrainians were dissatisfied with the President’s measures to fight the coronavirus, and over 70% – with the actions of the government. The authorities were especially blamed for the poor economic situation in the country. Almost 60% of those polled were inclined to admit that it resulted first of all from the government’s incompetence while only as few as ca. 25% pointed directly to the adverse influence of the pandemic. Largely chaotic actions of the Ukrainian government in combating the COVID-19 brought about, at the same time, numerous conflicts between the central and local-government authorities. Taking into account the local government elections scheduled for October 2020 the local authorities – often in opposition to the President and the present ruling camp – openly contested the government’s policy by refusing to introduce restrictions meant to prevent the pandemic (e.g. stop the functioning of mass transport), and sometimes by even making it easy for the local community to evade them.



Jakub Olchowski

COVID-19 in Eastern Partnership Countries: Belarus

Epidemic Situation

The first case of COVID-19 – an Iranian student – was recorded in Belarus on 27 February 2020. On 23 March, 81 cases were officially reported, and on 17 April – as many as 4779 (according to the data provided by the Ministry of Health). On 21 April, the WHO published recommendations for Belarus embracing the cancellation of all mass events and gatherings, the introduction of distance learning, rules of social distancing and quarantine for those who had contact with the infected, and restrictions on free movement of people, especially from higher risk groups. It was also recommended that society be informed “transparently regularly” about the situation, which may have suggested, and which was also voiced by Belarusian social organizations and opposition activists, that the authorities did not provide the society with reliable information. All WHO recommen-

dations were ignored which was actually one of the many elements that led to the subsequent events³. The pandemic situation in Belarus, which distinguishes it from all the European countries, directly contributed to an unprecedented political crisis in the history of the contemporary Belarusian state. COVID-19, in addition to the deteriorating economic condition and the increasingly complicated international situation, became a catalyst for political and social changes which, regardless of whether and how long Alexander Lukashenka will remain in power, exclude the return to the *status quo* before the August presidential election.

During the spring wave of the pandemic, the number of the sick rose quickly, with infection being diagnosed in ca. 800 people every day (at that time in Poland there were ca. 300-400 cases, in Ukraine – ca. 500). In late April 2020, in Belarus there were 11 thousand infected people, and 75 persons died. These calculations were based on the official data and it is difficult to estimate to what extent they were reliable; however, non-governmental organizations informed about overworked healthcare professionals and shortages of medical and personal protective equipment. In mid-September, the total number of those infected was 75 thousand, and in mid-December – somewhat over 160 thousand, of which 1300 people died, 140 thousand recovered, with 2000 new cases being reported daily.

Despite the passivity of the authorities, which did not undertake significant actions to fight the pandemic and

³ For more, see J. Olchowski, *Białoruś wobec COVID-19 – bezradność i bezczynność*, „Komentarze IES” 2020, no. 83 (180), <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/bialorus-wobec-covid-19-bezradnosc-i-bezczynnosc>.

despite many thousand-strong demonstrations continuing from summer, Belarus appears, however, to have directly suffered less than the neighboring countries: ca. 130 people died per million inhabitants, while in Ukraine it was 360, over 300 in Russia, and over 600 in Poland.

The Response of the Authorities

From the beginning the Belarusian authorities adopted a strategy for reassuring the society and belittling the danger. Practically no preventive measures were introduced: enterprises, schools, universities and shops were not closed, nor were sports competitions suspended. Quarantine was introduced for those returning from abroad, the borders remaining open, however. During the whole period of the pandemic, all activities to reduce its consequences (both in the economic and social or directly medical sphere) were essentially minimal.

As new cases appeared, it was recommended that safety measures be observed and that the elderly limit their contacts and stay at home if possible and refrain from visiting churches; in April, the school break was prolonged to three weeks. On 8 April, certain restrictions were also introduced although they were rather recommendations (e.g. that the distance between tables in restaurants should be at least 1.5 meters). President Lukashenka consistently ignored appeals from many sides to undertake action. As a result, the situation quickly got out of control. Nevertheless, Lukashenka repeated consistently that Belarus had chosen the right model and that restrictions were unnecessary, while the deaths resulted from concomitant diseases rather than from

the coronavirus. Quarantine and other preventive measures would therefore be introduced “should the need arise”. Similar rhetoric (and no actions) persisted practically until the presidential election in August, after which the issue of the pandemic receded into the background in Belarus in the face of current events.

The Response of the European Union

In the internal dimension, the situation of Belarus is traditionally determined by its position – between Russia and the West. However, while Belarus is important for Russia for many reasons (although there are many signs that Lukashenka is not), the Western countries and institutions, like the closest neighbors, are occupied with their own problems and do not notice the weight and importance of the events in Belarus, which has never been their priority after all. The COVID-19 pandemic additionally increased this attitude. Moreover, as has been said above, the sudden political crisis and social protests pushed the issue of the coronavirus into the background. This does not change the fact that the pandemic will impact not only the country’s economic condition and Lukashenka’s political future but also the general international situation of Belarus. A question mark hangs over the question of relations with Russia, which may itself be in a very difficult situation after the end of the pandemic and, consequently, may lose interest in Belarus. There may be a similar case with relations with the Western countries and institutions, which will be preoccupied with internal problems: both combating the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic and also, in the case of the EU, with tensions

and differences between the member states. Not without significance is also the fact that the Belarusians, unlike the Ukrainians in 2013/14, are not going to seek integration with the Western structures. The Western countries, as well as the EU, also realize that after the geopolitical defeat that Russia suffered in the case of Ukraine, it will under no circumstances accept Belarus's possible drift beyond the Russian zone of influence.

It should be also observed that on the one hand, Lukashenka is already inconvenient for Russia, and on the other hand he is falling into disfavor with the West by tightening his policy against any opposition. Nor did he ask the European Union for assistance, unlike e.g. Ukraine or the other Eastern Partnership countries. On the contrary, when the EU condemned the rigging of the presidential election in Belarus and declared its support for democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people, Lukashenka announced he would limit cooperation within the EaP.

Economic, Social and Political Effects

Lukashenka's nervous statements, when in spring he called the pandemic "panic and psychosis", are the effect of pressure resulting from his awareness that the introduction of restrictions in the already tottering economy will lead to its collapse. The President declared this openly and outright: "we can impose quarantine but what are going to eat?".

The Belarusian economy has long been in a difficult situation. This was largely caused by protracted oil negotiations with Russia, conducted in the shadow of the planned "integration" with Russia and of the Russian so-called tax maneu-

ver, which, according to forecasts, will have a far-reaching impact on the whole economy of Belarus. The cessation of export of petroleum products, consequent upon the negotiation impasse, is another blow to the Belarusian budget. Furthermore, in 2019 Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union stopped credit for Belarus, and the coronavirus pandemic-induced downturn in China's economy, with which Belarus developed intense cooperation, additionally complicated the situation.

As a result, there followed reductions of salaries in the public sector, a general slowdown of the economy is also predicted as are the lay-offs of employees in many sectors and an increase in the debt of many enterprises and households⁴.

Alexander Lukashenka's nervous reactions to the appearance of COVID-19 were caused not only by fears about the condition of the economy but also about his future. The President tried to shirk responsibility for the bad situation and put the blame on the government; also significant was his violent reaction to Russia closing the border with Belarus: Lukashenka regarded the de facto abolishment of the border in 1996 as his personal merit. These fears proved justified: in view of the country's economic and health situation and the deteriorating public feelings, the presidential elections in August turned out to be a turning point, which led to qualitative changes in the consciousness and attitudes of Belarusian society and will probably bring about

⁴ Cf. A. Szabaciuk, *Białorusko-rosyjska rozgrywka geostrategiczna z importem ropy naftowej w tle*, „Komментарze IEŚ” 2020, no. 99 (196), <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/bialorusko-rosyjska-rozgrywka-geostrategiczna-z-importem-ropy-naftowej-w-tle>.

the end of the Lukashenka era – the pandemic has played the role of a catalyst.

The performance and efficacy of the state, especially in a crisis situation, is also determined by the level of civic trust. The disastrous and anachronistic style of the government's communication with society showed the weakness of the authorities. The President's advice that people should have a sauna, drink vodka, work in the field and play hockey not only derided the state but also caused Belarusian citizens to finally lose confidence in the institution. Already in spring, the Belarusians did not trust the authorities, the level of society's frustration being seen in the social media: for example, on hearing alarming news about the shortages of equipment in hospitals, people organized collections to buy it. More and more people stayed at home, and put on masks when going out, almost everybody did so at their workplace (especially in large cities), many businesses (e.g. restaurants) were closed, which, incidentally, translated into the additional deterioration of the economic situation.

According to the opinion poll carried out by the SATIO agency already on 26-27 March (on a representative sample aged 18 to 64), 62% of respondents expected a deteriorated situation and adverse social and economic consequences, while only 11% expected the situation to improve. At the same time, without waiting for the decisions and recommendations of the authorities, the majority began to take various protective measures – only 18% of those polled maintained that nothing had changed in their behavior and habits. Over half of the respondents believed that it was necessary to prohibit the organization of mass events (70%), close down schools and universities (56%), as well as

introduce remote working where possible (53%) – only 8% thought that no restrictions were necessary⁵.

In the context of the effects of the pandemic, it is worth emphasizing that the thesis, popular in the early stage of the pandemic, that authoritarian states coped better with the coronavirus pandemic proved unjustified, as exemplified by Russia. The pandemic also revealed the weakness of the Belarusian authorities and their declining legitimacy (apart from the fact whether any optimum decision could have been taken in the current economic situation). The inactivity and helplessness of the authorities tarnished their image in society, with the image of Lukashenka himself having suffered first of all, which ultimately contributed to hundreds of thousands of Belarusians taking to the streets regardless of the coronavirus. Alexander Lukashenka's behavior also proved, which was noticeable long before the coronavirus appeared, that he was afraid of losing power more than anything else. He would probably be able to sacrifice the country's economy and the fate of society for his personal ambitions. It is therefore not surprising that in fear of losing power Lukashenka relies on the military and law enforcement services and dictatorial methods, and the pandemic was the impulse that triggered a whole sequence of events producing a revolutionary situation in Belarus.

⁵ *Исследование - как жители Беларуси реагируют на коронавирус?*, SATIO, <https://satio.by/novosti/issledovanie-kak-zhiteli-belarusi-reagirujut-na-koronavirus/>.



Agnieszka Legucka

COVID-19 in Eastern Partnership Countries: Georgia

Georgia managed to cope with the first wave of the pandemic. In comparison with other South Caucasus countries, it was an example of proper crisis management. However, during the second wave it began to contend with similar problems as in the rest of the region and the world. Under such circumstances, the inefficiency of the healthcare system (all these South Caucasus countries are in the second hundred range of the WHO ranking regarding resilience to biological hazards) became especially severe because Georgia was ahead of Armenia and Azerbaijan in the number of those infected. As a consequence of COVID-19 Georgia is facing serious economic, social and political problems. That is why Georgia is seeking external support, inter alia from the European Union.

Epidemic Situation

Georgia was the first country in the South Caucasus in which the COVID-19 infection was officially confirmed on 26 February 2020⁶. During the first month of the development of the pandemic the situation in Georgia was under control and the number of reported infections was not very large. The small number of infections was the effect of the imposed restrictions but also resulted from a small number of tests per million of inhabitants out of the three countries in the region (ca. 3 thousand in April 2020). The spread of the virus in Georgia formed largely a flat curve with barely a few bumps that reflected small infection outbreaks that were swiftly contained. The largest epidemic outbreak was reported in the towns of Bolnisi and Marneuli, inhabited by the Azeri minority not assimilated into the society⁷. By late May 2020, only 794 confirmed cases of infection and 12 deaths were reported in Georgia. That is why the end of the first wave was announced in June, and restrictions began to be lifted. A rapid surge began in late August when the number of new cases began to increase exponentially, jumping from low double-digit figures to ca. 150 cases per day by mid-September and as many as 5 thousand per day in December. At that time Georgia came to the fore among the countries with the highest percentage of infections per one inhabitant (as of December 2020)⁸.

⁶ A. Legieć, *Państwa Kaukazu Południowego wobec Covid-19*, "Biuletyn PISM," 28 April 2020, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Panstwa_Kaukazu_Poludniowego_wobec_COVID19.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2019-12-31..2020-11-24&country=IND~USA~GBR~CAN~DEU~JPN~GEO®ion=World&deathsMetric=true&interval=smoothed&perCapita=true&smoothing=7&pickerMetric=new_cases_per_million&pickerSort=desc.

The Response of the Government

Compared to neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia coped best during the first pandemic wave⁹. What was decisive was the swift response of the government, which suspended direct flights from China already in late December, and then imposed a quarantine on people returning from Italy (12 March). With the imposition of the state of emergency on 21 March, Georgia's all frontiers and all international airports were closed to regular passenger traffic. All shops, restaurants and hotels were closed and public transport, including private car traffic, was suspended. The authorities imposed a night-time curfew. Since many Georgians live with their parents and grandparents in a common household, there was a great social awareness of the need to respect the restrictions. From July, Georgia opened its borders, admitting tourists from Germany, France and three Baltic States without having them tested or quarantined. But the post-Soviet countries, whose citizens usually account for the majority of tourists in Georgia, remained closed¹⁰. Unfortunately, the second wave began to accelerate and found the Georgian state weakened by the spring lockdown. December 2020 brought another blockade in Georgia. In the last week of November, the government announced the closure of public gathering places, as well as temporary suspension of city transport. Shopping centers would be closed until mid-December, with a small interval for pre-Christmas shopping. The lockdown would last until

⁹ Giorgi Lomsadze, *Georgia gets rare plaudits for coronavirus response*, "Eurasianet," 20 March 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-gets-rare-plaudits-for-coronavirus-response>.

¹⁰ Giorgi Lomsadze, *Georgia experiences its first wave of Covid-19*, "Eurasianet," 18 September 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-experiences-its-first-wave-of-covid-19>.

January unless the epidemiological situation improved by that time¹¹. The Georgian authorities decided to include in the budget the pandemic-related expenditure, i.e. tests and vaccines and the quarantine-related expenses.

The Georgian authorities requested support from international partners already in early March 2020 in order to alleviate the medical, economic and social consequences of the crisis for the population. The government is preparing the funding of the reforms in close cooperation with the World Bank to increase the resilience of Georgian economy to the crisis. There are also plans to contribute funds to the support package for heavily crisis-affected population groups. These are informal workers, members of ethnic minorities and internally displaced persons.

The Response of the European Union

All the South Caucasus countries looked abroad for assistance in fighting the epidemic. The EU allocated ca. 960 million euros for short- and medium-term support for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, including the three Caucasian republics. Additionally, the European Commission offered 150 million euros for Georgia as part of macro-financial assistance¹². The EU's economic support is not sufficient compared with the needs of the countries in the region; it will however reduce the adverse effects of the pandemic on their economies and will strengthen the EU's

¹¹ Nina Kipiani, *Covid-19 Impacts on Georgia Real Estate*, 9 December 2020, <https://www.cushmanwakefield.com/en/insights/covid-19/covid-19-impacts-georgia-real-estate>.

¹² A. Legieć, *Państwa Kaukazu Południowego wobec Covid-19...*

image as the largest assistance provider. The EU and Team Europe mobilized ca. 1.5 billion lari (ca. 380 million euros) to help Georgia deal with the COVID-19 pandemic¹³. Almost 2/3 of this amount is grants, the remainder being favorable-interest loans. It is one of the highest levels of the EU's assistance per inhabitant in the world. This aid comprises almost one billion lari to help the Georgian government against the COVID-19 crisis, including the support for its anti-crisis economic plan and new programs for regional/rural development and agriculture.

The EU's assistance – in cooperation with the WHO – comprised almost two million items of medical equipment and accessories, including ventilators, medical masks and aprons for Georgian laboratories and healthcare centers. This also entailed training healthcare personnel by the WHO and access to expert knowledge on COVID-19. The EU's financial support also covered civic society organizations to help people most at risk during the crisis, including the disabled, domestic violence victims, the elderly, children and internally displaced persons.

An important point in the EU's support is to ensure Georgia's macroeconomic stability. Over 200 million lari (50 million euros) was disbursed to facilitate loans to enterprises and business consultancy (available mainly through local banks and key partners like EIB or EBRD). On 25 November 2020, the EU paid 100 million euros as part of macro-financial assistance (MFA) to Georgia to help its balance of

¹³ <https://eu4georgia.ge/together-against-covid-19/>.

payments and reduce its needs in budget financing¹⁴. Macro-financial assistance is intended to restore a stable internal financial situation as a complement to the financing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This support consists of 75 million euros from the new macro-financial assistance program announced in April 2020, aimed at reducing the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The remaining 25 million euros is the last payment as part of the previous macro-financial assistance approved in April 2018. 95 million euros from the total amount was granted as favorable-interest loans, the remaining 5 million euros – as a non-returnable subsidy.

Moreover, 15 million euros was allocated as specific local grants through the EU projects being implemented in the whole country in order to stimulate business activity in such fields as agriculture, tourism, development of entrepreneurship in the rural areas, and occupational training.

Economic, Social and Political Effects

Georgia is facing an economic slowdown (the World Bank estimated the GDP growth rate at 0.2% for Georgia at the end of 2020), which will compel it to adjust the working of its economy to the epidemic conditions. However, the government cannot afford anti-crisis programs appropriate for the needs. The economic crisis triggered by the COV-

¹⁴ *EU disburses €100 million in macro-financial assistance to Georgia, most of it as part of Covid-19 support*, 25 November 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/89328/eu-disburses-%E2%82%AC100-million-macro-financial-assistance-georgia-most-it-part-covid-19-support_en.

ID-19 pandemic will increase public dissatisfaction and risk of anti-government protests.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted on Georgia's economy and its consequences will probably worsen the longer the country will be under lockdown and under the state of emergency. The economy of this country is strongly dependent on the service sectors, which were hit the hardest, including tourism, which accounts for 20 percent of GDP¹⁵. Tourism, hotel industry and trade are paralyzed, and the office sector is plunging into chaos when lessees are trying to renegotiate the rental conditions. The capital markets experienced an expected slowdown. In March and April 2020 the number of both commercial and private real estate transactions rapidly plummeted. The effect on prices was immediate, and developers expect a 40-50 % decline in annual revenues. The service sector, agriculture and manufacturing industry also suffered in the aftermath of the crisis. Consequently, a deep recession and a swift rise in poverty were expected in 2020.

Georgia's government and the private sector implemented certain remedial measures¹⁶. The largest commercial banks set a grace period for loans connected with the hotel industry while the government is subsidizing incomes and defers VAT payments. Subsidies were granted to help the unemployed. The first anti-crisis package worth ca. 1 billion euros (ca. 6% of GDP) was designed by the Georgian govern-

¹⁵ *Georgia: The collapse of international tourism hits the Caucasus republic hard*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.kfw-entwicklungsbank.de/International-financing/KfW-Development-Bank/About-us/The-Corona-situation-in-our-external-offices/Georgia/>.

¹⁶ *Covid-19. The Case of Georgia*, 21 May 2020, <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2020/05/21/covid-19-georgia-case/>.

ment to ensure an increase in infrastructural investment, to provide financial support and tax exemptions for the tourist industry and the sector of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMSE), and to increase benefits packages. The authorities supervised the delivery of food and tried to prevent profiteering by freezing food prices¹⁷.

The political consequences of the epidemic in Georgia were connected with the process of election to the Georgian parliament. Initially, all political forces – the government and the Opposition – acted jointly in combating the pandemic. The number of gatherings held since 2019 and associated with changes inter alia in the electoral law was reduced. The problem was still the attitude of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which did not obey the restrictions and held services attended by the faithful. However, the election conducted in the conditions of the second pandemic wave (October and December 2020) produced a political crisis. The election campaign increased the spread of the disease as party conventions, election meetings and gatherings were held. The Georgian Dream party refused to re-impose strict containment measures even if virus transmission got out of control. At the same time, restrictions were not conducive to campaigning by the Opposition. The ruling Georgian Dream party won over 48.1% of votes with a turnout of 56%¹⁸. However, the Opposition declared the election undemocratic and refused to take seats in the Georgian Parliament. As

¹⁷ A. Legieć, *Państwa Kaukazu Południowego wobec Covid-19...*

¹⁸ W. Górecki, *Kryzys powyborczy in Georgia*, „Analizy OSW”, 3 November 2020, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-11-03/kryzys-powyborczy-w-gruzji>.

a result, people took to the streets and demanded that the election be repeated.

The social consequences can be just as severe. The economy remains the largest problem, and although initially the Georgians supported the restrictions in spring, the public opposed the new lockdown imposed at the end of 2020¹⁹. It will affect the living standards and compound poverty in the country. This may lead to increased discontent and protests.

¹⁹ G. Lomsadze, *Georgia's Covid outbreak grows from molehill to "Everest"*, 7 December 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-covid-outbreak-grows-from-molehill-to-everest>.



Beata Piskorska

The Assessment of the Role of the European Union in Combating COVID-19 in the Region and Its Effect on the Future of the Eastern Partnership

The Role of the European Union in the Fight against COVID-19 in the Region

The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and the unstable political situation in the Eastern Partnership countries brought about multilevel challenges to the European Union and to the EaP countries. While 2019 was devoted to the tenth anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, the year 2020 posed an essentially intriguing question: What will be the future of the Eastern Partnership initiative? Will the EU continue to be interested in the project, especially in the context of the pandemic and its consequences? We may perhaps receive

the answer to the question at the next Eastern Partnership summit in March 2021²⁰.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse effect first of all on the EU's locked-down member states and its neighboring countries. The readiness to provide different forms of support to Eastern Partnership countries shows that the region is still important to the European Union, which will continue to be interested in its political, economic and social situation in the coming years. The level and scope of support differ, however, depending on the Partnership country and the advanced stage of cooperation under the EaP program. On account of the COVID-19 crisis, more attention is now devoted to economic and sector cooperation than to political integration; the absence of concrete signals concerning the prospects of membership may give priority to the fields in question.

It is difficult to explicitly predict the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on the countries in the region and the development of the Eastern Partnership project. However, the ongoing discussion in the international environment on which political systems cope better with the pandemic – autocracies or democracies – also raises a similar question about the specificity of action by the Eastern Partnership countries, four of which are half-democracies and two complete autocracies (Azerbaijan and Belarus). It should be observed that the latter two coped evidently worse, their leaders having lost popular support, nevertheless, no change in the *status quo* is in sight. Of half-democracies, only Geor-

²⁰ P. Havlicek, *The Eastern Partnership enters a new decade*, "New Eastern Europe", 16 November 2020.

gia obtained satisfactory results. The others coped rather poorly.

With regard to anti-crisis measures in the Partnership countries, the COVID-19 pandemic induced most governments to impose restrictive measures. The economies of the Eastern Partnership countries suffered heavily as a result. Although measures were undertaken to alleviate the economic consequences, i.e. tax exemptions, unemployment benefits and income subsidies, their effects will be felt only in the medium and long run. Support efforts of the civil society targeted at weaker social groups such as low-income employees, women, and SMSE, are of crucial importance for the immediate response to the crisis.

Civil society organizations lead the way in activities aimed to alleviate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Eastern Partnership region. In the crisis, which put to the test the crisis management capabilities of EaP governments, it was these organizations that rose to the occasion by mobilizing to defend fundamental rights and freedoms and supporting weaker social groups and the economy. In response to the current situation, in the framework of the existing cooperation platform – the Civil Society Forum, the European Union invited member organizations from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to submit proposals for short-term projects, whose objective is to satisfy the needs of citizens and regions most at risk of COVID-19 pandemic and to bolster the capability of the civil society organizations to meet these needs²¹.

²¹ *EaP CSF call for Covid-19 project proposals, (Financial Support to Third Parties – FSTP),* <https://eap-csf.eu/covid-19-re-granting/?fbclid=IwAR1bBXuSaq1YrPlzFXW-ugMB9V->

Both unilaterally and in cooperation with other international organizations, mostly the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Union quickly provided support for the region in response to the crisis. As a solidarity measure, it granted two assistance packages targeted at the neighbors in need. Under the first rescue package launched by the European Commission in early April 2020, the region would receive 960 million euros. Its goal is to support the states in response to the public health crisis and the resulting humanitarian needs of individual countries, as well as to support their ability to cope with the pandemic and alleviate the direct economic consequences.

Having recognized the harmful impact of the ongoing crisis on the economic and financial stability of the neighboring countries, the EU, soon after the first package, allocated an additional 3 billion euros in macro-financial aid in the form of loans to help remedy the economic effects of the pandemic. The funds are to complement the IMF and World Bank assistance in enhancing economic stability. The European Commission also launched an emergency support package worth 65 million euros for immediate needs and up to one billion euros for the public health system and for short- and medium-term support for the socio-economic reconstruction of the region.

The communication of the European Commission and the European External Action Service of 18 March 2020 *Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience – An*

DixmAiPbyRzXwh_cYeCdxoH3SMzG8uuGc; *EaP CSF Covid-19 Briefing Paper: Lessening The Economic Impact Of The Covid-19 Crisis*, F. Nista, T. Marocchi, V. Rihackova Pachta, B. Bell, 29 July 2020.

*Eastern Partnership that delivers for all*²², began a discussion on the implications of the pandemic for the Eastern Partnership. Although the coronavirus is mentioned there only casually on account of the beginnings of a huge crisis in Europe at the time of the adoption of the document, at present, because the situation bears the features of a humanitarian crisis, it deserves a response by the whole Eastern Partnership. The EU's support – initially for deliveries of medical equipment, and then intensified cooperation concerning the capabilities to combat the pandemic, as well as macro-financial aid are the main lines of assistance to survive the coming deep recession in the neighboring countries. The communication emphasized the appeal for resilience in five strategic domains with the necessity of adding the sixth political objective as a result of dramatic events: the resilience of public health systems.

In order to alleviate the socio-economic effects of the crisis, in all the eastern neighbour countries the EU activities are conducted at several levels: first, responding to the most urgent needs in the framework of the regional Rapid Response Mechanism, such as support for schools in distance learning, including assistance for the healthcare sector (30 million euros). Second, cooperation with the WHO in supplying medical equipment and personal medical accessories such as ventilators, laboratory sets, masks, goggles, protective aprons and suits, as well as in training medical and laboratory personnel and in awareness-raising in the six

²² *Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. Reinforcing Resilience – An Eastern Partnership that delivers for all* A joint communication to the European Parliament, European Council, European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 18 March 2020. Join(2020) 7 final.

countries. Third, support for the most sensitive social groups (11.3 million euros), of which grants of up to 60 000 euros for civil society organizations to meet the most immediate needs such as support for local schools in distance learning are already available under the EU's regional Rapid Response Mechanism²³.

An additional instrument is the launching of the "Eastern Partnership Solidarity Program" addressed to the most affected population groups and local organizations. All these are aimed at lessening the socio-economic impact of the crisis, including in close cooperation with international financial institutions (MFI) and the funding institutions from EU membership states in order to ensure a coordinated European response as Team Europe. The agenda includes the following:

- A new support program worth 100 million euros, to assist SMSE, including self-employed and other persons, in easy access to credits and in developing their activities after the crisis.
- Over 200 million euros of the existing credit lines and grants for SMSE in local currencies as part of the EU4Business Initiative.
- 500 million euros available for EU neighbors through the main EU risk reduction instrument, the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), in order to swiftly ensure liquidity in the whole region²⁴.

²³ *The EU support its Eastern Partners throughout the Covid-19 pandemic*, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news_corner/news/eu-support-its-eastern-partners-throughout-covid-19-pandemic_en, 23. June 2020.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

The EU's enhanced approach (broken down between individual partner countries) amounted to 60 million euros for Belarus, 183 million euros for Georgia, and 201 million euros for Ukraine to meet immediate and short-term needs. Thanks to the EU cross-border cooperation projects linking communities in Belarus, Ukraine and Poland, medical rescue services such as ambulances and ventilators, are available in hospitals to help doctors in their fight against the coronavirus pandemic. The EU supports building the resilience of communities by helping persons in difficult conditions through the changeover to online learning, prevention of misinformation and enhancing cultural diversity and creativity on the Internet²⁵. Although the current macro-financial assistance provides for the allotment of funds, with the observance of the conditions of respect for democratic mechanisms, rule of law and human rights, the resources are in short supply and it has not been specified what is expected.

The Eastern Partnership countries will certainly need long-term assistance, however. The EU could take the opportunity and create more diverse conditions for promoting reforms in the regions. Otherwise, the absence of possibilities for developing further cooperation with the region might cause the EaP countries to request assistance from non-liberal regional powers such as China or Russia, which would take advantage of the crisis to strengthen political and economic ties in the region. For example, Russia would be ready to provide financial help to Moldova in the amount of 200 million euros. Similarly, China provided medical assis-

²⁵ *The EU support its Eastern Partners throughout...*

tance to Moldova and Ukraine. Turkey also presents itself as a country that offers substantial assistance to its neighbors. Such cases of help are then intensely exploited by these non-liberal actors, which further promotes the narrative that the EU is doing nothing to ensure significant assistance to those in need in the EU and outside of it²⁶.

Pandemic and the Future of Eastern Partnership

To sum up, it is very unlikely that the COVID-19 pandemic should limit cooperation between the EU and the Eastern Partnership region. On the contrary, as the economic effects of the crisis become increasingly acute, the role of the EU will be of crucial importance for ensuring economic stability across country borders. In view of the need to help the Partnership countries cope with the effects of the crisis, the EU can take this opportunity to further foster the rule of law and democratic standards in the region²⁷. It is more likely, however, that the initiative will be more oriented towards economic and sector cooperation, and adjusted to the specific needs of individuals²⁸.

Moreover, the EU set itself the objective of making anti-COVID-19 vaccines available “as a global public good” under the COVAX initiative to all those in need all over the world, not only to the EU inhabitants, and of promoting

²⁶ K. Shyrokykh, *The Eastern Partnership and Russia in the post-Covid world*, “New Eastern Europe”, 7 July 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/07/07/the-eastern-partnership-and-russia-in-the-post-covid-world/>.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

health also in the neighboring countries as well as in the low and medium-income ones. The EU plans to enable the purchase of 2.3 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 (or one quarter of all contracted vaccines in the world) and deliver them at preferential prices to the neighboring countries. This may be a new tool of the EU's foreign policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries, contributing a new quality in relations with Eastern Europe, and thus strengthen the EU's image and credibility in the Eastern Partnership countries. In the long term, this could complement the EU's initiative with a direction of activity involving a better response to the cross-border health hazard.

The current support by the European Union reflects its long-term involvement in Eastern Europe in accordance with the EU's Eastern Partnership policy in 2020, whose aim is to enhance resilience in the Eastern Partnership countries by providing well-directed measurable results for society²⁹. The EU has also an opportunity to become the key foreign partner – by lending a helping hand to its neighbors. Much will nevertheless depend on how the European Union will handle the pandemic and in what condition it will be after it has ultimately recovered from the crisis. There is a risk, however, that in the face of the present-day geopolitical challenges, the problems connected with its eastern neighbors may be overshadowed by such issues on the EU's agenda as the relations with China, the USA or Russia³⁰.

²⁹ *The EU support its Eastern Partners...*

³⁰ W. Konończuk, *Post-Covid Eastern Europe: Equation with many unknowns*, "New Eastern Europe", 7 July 2020.

