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DGAP POLICY BRIEF

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Coronavirus in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood

Why Brussels Needs to Scale Up Its Support

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While the magnitude of the current pandemic is still unknown, Eastern Europe might be facing a major regional catastrophe. The six countries of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) have dysfunctional health-care systems and lack resources and protective equipment for their doctors and hospitals. The European Commission's offer of immediate assistance is good news. However, much more will be needed to help the EU's eastern partners fight the coronavirus and mitigate the socioeconomic impact of this crisis.

— The EU's eastern neighbors need support in developing and implementing coherent epidemic strategies. This should be the EU's priority for the region.

— Brussels needs to monitor EaP governments so that they do not misuse their extended powers for antidemocratic measures. Preserving the fragile tenets of democracy during and after this crisis is an important challenge for the EU, especially if it wishes to affirm its legitimacy as a geopolitical player in its neighborhood in the long term.

— The EU should coordinate its assistance with the WHO and international financial institutions to mitigate the impacts of the restrictions already imposed. It should guide EaP countries in developing sustainable national action plans for economic recovery.

— The EU needs to use the EaP Summit in June 2020 to amend its new strategy, coordinate crisis management efforts across the region, and increase European solidarity with the partner countries.

Content

The countries of the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – are underprepared to face the approaching peak of the Covid-19 pandemic and will likely be severely affected. Against the background of chronically weak institutions and health-care systems, political crises, upcoming elections, and installed states of emergency in four of the six states, many things can go wrong. While the EU does not have the capacity to focus solely on Eastern Europe amid current developments, two things that all EaP countries have in common should raise alarm in Brussels: the lack of a coherent national response to the evolving pandemic and the absence of management or financial capacity to address the likely economic slump in its aftermath. To prevent and curtail a major regional catastrophe across its eastern neighborhood, the EU – mostly acting through the European Commission as its executive branch – should assist these states as they each muddle through their own corona crises.

ILL-EQUIPPED TO FACE THE ESCALATING CRISIS

As of April 6, 2020, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine reported the highest total number of Covid-19 cases in the six partner countries of the EaP while Georgia reported the lowest (see Figure 1). Although the numbers throughout the EU's eastern neighborhood are generally still low compared to its member states, the magnitude of infections is not yet known. Testing in the region is scarce. In addition, evidence shows that not all governments are reporting all cases in a transparent manner. Experts say that Ukraine and Moldova, two states directly on the EU's external border, are one to two weeks away from their health-care systems facing the full brunt of the current pandemic – the scale of which is also still unknown.

Public health-care systems across the region are mostly dysfunctional and outdated. Since the 1990s, medical reform has never been properly prioritized. Hospitals, which are chronically poorly funded and managed, are now ill-equipped and not prepared to face the coronavirus crisis. There are serious shortages of basic protective equipment such as gloves and masks, as well as ventilators and oxygen. Armenia, a country with 3 million inhabitants, has 334 ventilators, only 15 of which are specifically reserved for Covid-19 patients.[1] Georgia, with a population of 3.7 million, has 40 ready for use.[2] Ukraine, much larger with 41.8 million inhabitants, has 620 in its hospitals for infectious diseases.[3] In comparison, Germany, whose population is nearly twice that of Ukraine, has a total of 25,000 ventilators.[4] Most countries are in a process of acquiring more.

Public hospitals in the EU's eastern neighborhood are traditionally short-staffed; doctors and nurses are underpaid and overworked under normal circumstances. Due to poor working conditions without appropriate protective medical equipment, it is health-care workers who are getting infected in some countries during the current pandemic and transmitting the virus. In Moldova, an extreme example, every third case of infection with Covid-19 is medical staff. Under anonymity, medical employees say that the rate of infection among them is very likely much higher.[5]

Of the six EaP countries, Ukraine is the most vulnerable to emerging outbreaks, according to the Global Health Security Index.[6] In addition to its sizable population, Ukraine has the highest volume of international and domestic travelers within its borders: 4.4 million. A significant share of its population also resides abroad. Nearly 270,000 people in March returned to Ukraine from EU countries – many without respecting the quarantine that was technically in

1 EVN Report, "Covid-19: Updates from Armenia," March 13, 2020: <https://www.evnreport.com/raw-unfiltered/covid-19-updates-from-armenia> (accessed April 1, 2020).

2 Nino Tarkhnishvili, "How Prepared Is Georgian Health-care System for COVID-19 Pandemic?", *civil.ge*, March 13, 2020: <https://civil.ge/archives/342281> (accessed April 1, 2020).

3 TCH, "Coronavirus in Ukraine: Will There Be Enough Artificial Ventilators in the Event of a Large-Scale Epidemic" [in Ukrainian], March 14, 2020: <https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/koronavirus-v-ukrayini-chi-vistachit-aparativ-shtuchnogo-dihannya-u-razi-masshtabnoyi-epidemiyi-1508055.html> (accessed April 1, 2020).

4 Jörg Blech, "A Dearth of Nurses. COVID-19 Highlights Staff Shortages at German Hospitals," *Spiegel International*, March 13, 2020: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/covid-19-highlights-staff-shortages-at-german-hospitals-a-dc13b683-3884-4683-b9c0-68e0084a1f70> (accessed April 1, 2020).

5 Daniela Cutu, "240 Medical Employees from Moldova, Tested Positive for COVID-19" [in Romanian], TV8, April 5, 2020: < https://tv8.md/2020/04/05/240-de-angajati-medicali-din-moldova-testati-pozitiv-la-covid-19/> (accessed April 5, 2020).

6 Global Health Security Index, "Covid-19: Identifying the Most Vulnerable Countries Using the GHS Index and Global Flight Data," March 13, 2020: <https://www.ghsindex.org/news/covid-19-identifying-the-most-vulnerable-countries-using-the-ghs-index-and-global-flight-data/> (accessed April 1, 2020).

effect due to unclear rules and guidelines upon immediate entry.[7] The announcement by Ukrainian authorities that the country's borders would be closed on March 27 resulted in seasonal and temporary workers lining up to cross into the country from Poland. Moldova had a similar experience with nearly 45,000 people returning since mid-March, many of them from Italy.[8]
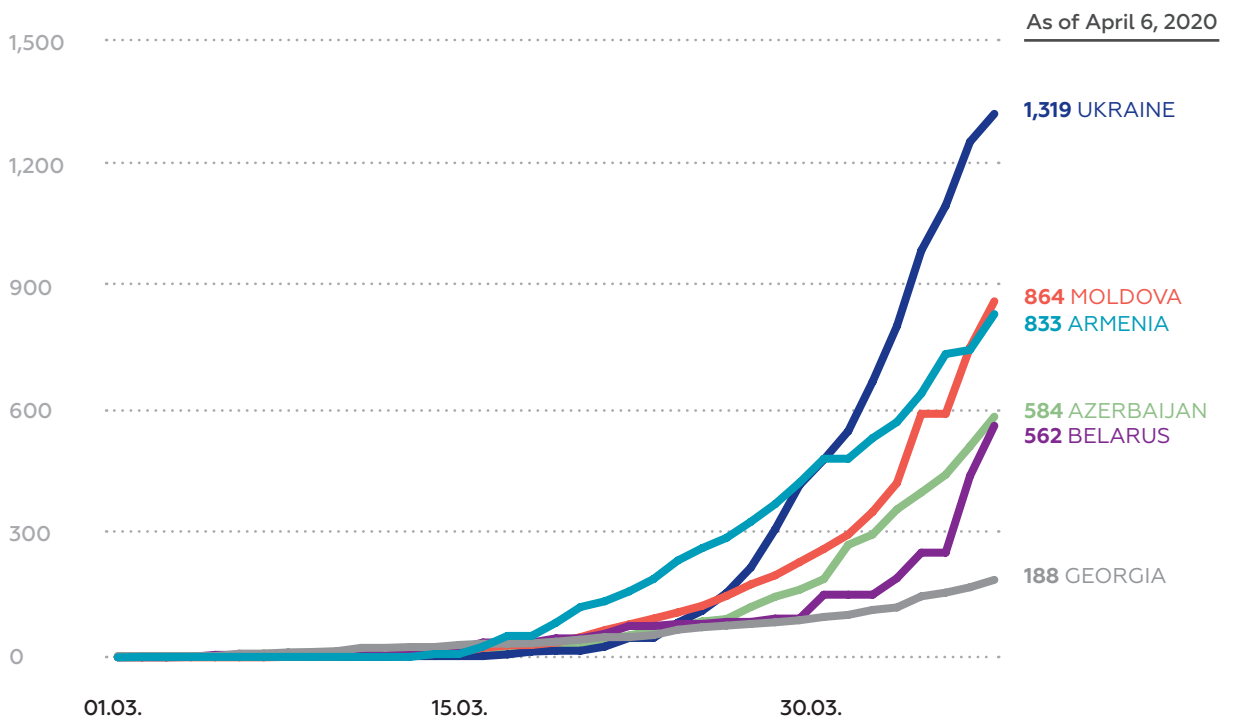
VARYING INITIAL RESPONSES

Responses by the governments of the six EaP countries to the early warning signs of the approaching pandemic differed widely but were equally dramatic (see active restrictions in Figure 2). While Georgia decided to immediately introduce drastic measures and is generally considered to have been able to keep its number of coronavirus cases low as a result, the remaining five countries reacted much more slowly. Moreover, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine

declared national states of emergency in the last two weeks. Azerbaijan considers introducing it as well if the situation gets worse.[9]

Crisis management throughout the region is seriously undermined by a lack of action plans, poor coordination across different government agencies, and the scarcity of professionals in related ministries and national crisis units. In Moldova, for example, not a single doctor can be found on its current Commission for Exceptional Situations. Georgia is a laudable exception; the government there put three health professionals in the driver's seat of its national response to the crisis.

In some EaP countries, political turmoil is also a factor. While Ukraine underwent a recent government reshuffle, the country saw three health ministers in one month. Previously, in September 2019, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy had made the unpopular decision to dismiss the country's longest-serving health minister, Ulyana Suprun, while she was

FIGURE 1: COVID-19 CASES IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

As of April 6, 2020

1,319 UKRAINE
864 MOLDOVA
833 ARMENIA
584 AZERBAIJAN
562 BELARUS
188 GEORGIA

Source: World Health Organisation, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-2019) Situation Reports, March 1-April 5, 2020: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports> (accessed April 6, 2020).

7 "Dubilet Told How Many Ukrainians Returned Home During the Coronavirus" [in Ukrainian], Слово і діло, April 4, 2020: <https://www.slovoidilo.ua/2020/04/02/novyna/suspilstvo/dubilet-rozpoviv-skilky-ukrayinciv-povernulosya-dodomu-koronavirusu> (accessed April 5, 2020).
8 Author's compilation of border police data regarding border crossings (www.border.gov.md) based on the number of entries into the country during from March 16 to April 5, 2020.
9 "Cabinet Doesn't Rule Out Declaring State of Emergency in Azerbaijan," Azeri Daily, April 2, 2020: <https://azeridaily.com/news/55078> (accessed April 5, 2020).

undertaking comprehensive measures to overhaul the dysfunctional health-care system. Moldova also saw two health ministers in less than six months, the latest of whom has a law degree.

Authoritarian Responses

In Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev has used the pandemic as an opportunity to threaten to crack down on the country's political opposition, describing it as a "dangerous fifth column." Aliyev used his annual address on Nowruz, the holiday marking the beginning of spring, to state that, if a state of emergency needs to be installed, "the isolation of representatives of the fifth column will become a historical necessity."[10] Days later several opposition activists were arrested.

Like other authoritarian leaders across the globe, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko downplayed the risks of the coronavirus, recommending that his country's citizens drink vodka and visit saunas to protect their health. At the same time, he ordered state security services to investigate anyone who falsely reports a death related to Covid-19. In both Belarus and Azerbaijan, media supportive of the government also systematically downplay the dangers that the coronavirus poses.

On March 18, President Lukashenko was taken by worrying surprise when Russia decided unilaterally to close its border with Belarus for six weeks as a "proactive step" to counteract the pandemic's spread – despite the treaty establishing their Union State that both countries signed in 1999.[11] On March 31, sporting venues, schools, and restaurants in Belarus still remained open, although citizens had started wearing masks.[12] While remaining defiant, Lukashenko is now taking precautionary measures such as implementing targeted testing and ordering increased production of ventilators.

In other countries in the region, controversial measures have also been adopted or attempted. In Armenia, for instance, the government started collecting and tracking personal data via a smartphone app or, alternatively, a "travel sheet" that citizens are required to fill in every time they leave their homes.[13] In Moldova, civil society managed to reverse a government attempt to restrict media freedom on reporting related to Covid-19.

INTERNATIONAL HEALTH ASSISTANCE AMIDST GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

Alongside other international donors, Russia, the United States, China, and the European Union have all stepped in to help the region to various degrees and with differing quality of support. Russia supplied Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Moldova with tests for diagnosing Covid-19. It has also sent testing kits and other medical equipment to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and plans to send them to the region of Transnistria as well.[14] China supplied Ukraine and Moldova with medical and personal equipment. As part of its latest installment to Ukraine, China delivered 300,000 respiratory masks, 35,000 protective suits, and 1.8 million medical masks.[15] The United States authorized humanitarian assistance to most of the countries in the region: $1.1 million for Armenia, $1.7 million for Azerbaijan, $1.1 million for Georgia, $1.2 million for Moldova, and $1.2 million for Ukraine.[16]

While Russia and China loudly and visibly compete for an international leadership role in providing support around the pandemic, the EU is quietly delivering its assistance without much fanfare. The EU reallocated €140 million to address the most immediate needs, supporting the supply of medical and

10 Joshua Kucera, "Azerbaijan's President Suggests Coronavirus May Require a Crackdown on Opposition," Eurasianet, March 19, 2020: <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijans-president-suggests-coronavirus-may-require-a-crackdown-on-opposition> (accessed April 1, 2020).

11 Robyn Dixon, "No Lockdown Here: Belarus' Strongman Rejects Coronavirus Risks. He Suggests Saunas and Vodka," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/no-lockdown-here-belaruss-strongman-rejects-coronavirus-risks-he-suggests-saunas-and-vodka/2020 /03/27/7aab812/?arc404=true> (accessed April 1, 2020).

12 Ray Fulon, "Belarus Lives it up as Neighbours Lock Down Over Covid-19," *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, March 30, 2020: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lives-it-up-as-neighbors-lock-down-over-covid-19/30518084.html> (accessed April 1, 2020).
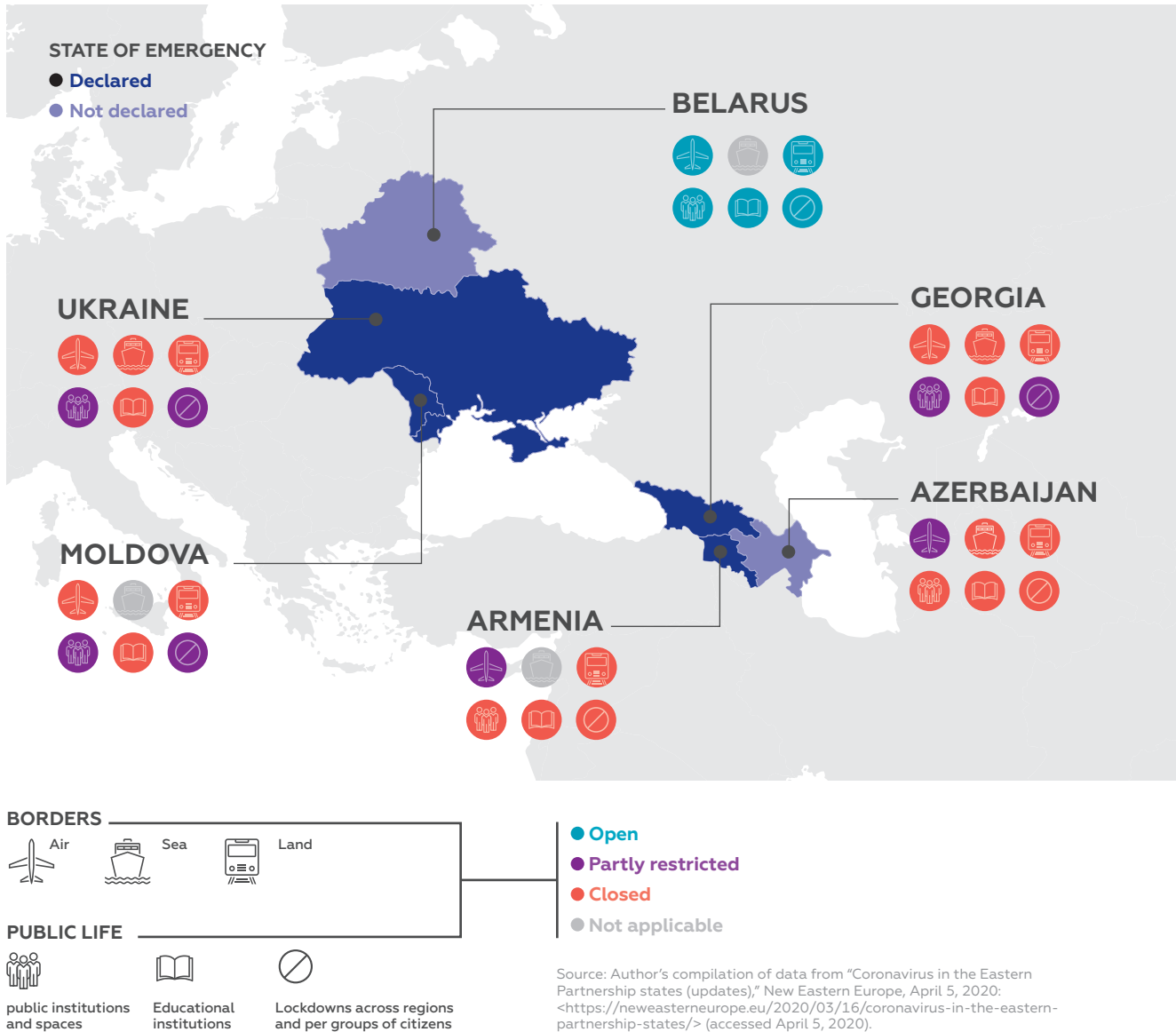
13 "A Citizen Must Have a Certificate, Even if He Goes to the Nearest Store - the Deputy Chief of Police" [in Russian], *Armen press*, March 28, 2020: <https://armenpress.am/rus/news/1010386.html> (accessed April 1, 2020).

14 Linda Grau, "Rosian Vasiloi: Why Doesn't Chisinau Handle the Situation in the Transnistrian Region, Even though It Provides All the Necessary Support?" [in Romanian], *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, March 29, 2020: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/rosian-vasiloi-de-ce-chi%C8%99in%C4%83ul-nu-gestioneaz%C4%83-situa%C8%9Bia-din-regiunea-transnistrean%C4%83-de%C8%99i-acord%C4%83-tot-sprijinul-necesar-/30515869.html?fbclid=IwAR0r OETxRX0ZW6ItoxFtRygWpZp20V-nyocHB2M_WpoIpMSYYMlRaOi3CJQ> (accessed April 1, 2020).

15 Pavlo Podufalov, "A Cargo Plane Delivers More Medical Supplies from China," *Kyiv Post*, March 29, 2020: <https://www.kyivpost.com/multimedia/photo/a-cargo-plane-delivers-more-medical-supplies-from-china> (accessed April 1, 2020).

16 US Department of State, "The United States Is Leading the Humanitarian and Health Assistance Response to COVID-19," March 27, 2020: <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-is-leading-the-humanitarian-and-health-assistance-response-to-covid-19/> (accessed April 1, 2020).

FIGURE 2: EAP MEASURES AGAINST COVID-19 AS OF 6 APRIL, 2020

STATE OF EMERGENCY
● Declared
● Not declared

BELARUS

UKRAINE

GEORGIA

MOLDOVA

AZERBAIJAN

ARMENIA

BORDERS
Air   Sea   Land

● Open
● Partly restricted
● Closed
● Not applicable

PUBLIC LIFE

public institutions and spaces   Educational institutions   Lockdowns across regions and per groups of citizens

Source: Author's compilation of data from "Coronavirus in the Eastern Partnership states (updates)," New Eastern Europe, April 5, 2020: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/03/16/coronavirus-in-the-eastern-partnership-states/> (accessed April 5, 2020).

personal equipment such as ventilators, laboratory kits, masks, and safety suits. This money will also be used to bolster national health administrations by helping them to train medical and laboratory staff, as well as implement measures to raise awareness among the wider population. The World Health Organization (WHO) has received €30 million of this amount as contribution to respond to the health crisis in the region. In addition, the EU will redirect the use of existing instruments worth up to €700 million to help mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 crisis in the countries of the EaP by supporting their real economies, including small and me-

dium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The European Commission has also made more than €11.3 million in small grants available to civil society organizations.

Notwithstanding the mobilization of these significant resources for the region despite its own shortages and dramatic challenges during the pandemic, the EU still seems to be a step behind its competitors – primarily Russia and China – in showcasing its support. Due to a complex decision-making process within the EU, it took a while for Brussels to respond. Improving the EU's communication strategy on the ground is key in this regard.

A MAJOR SOCIOECONOMIC CATASTROPHE AHEAD

While the positive effects of humanitarian measures to address the pandemic are gradually kicking in, EaP countries are already under significant economic pressure from the partial shutdown of four out of six of their economies (for now). According to a research study, 57 percent of Ukrainians have savings for no more than four weeks. An additional 20 percent only have enough savings for another month after that.[17] Twenty-five percent of employers in the country say they are already being forced to consider layoffs or decreasing salaries.[18] If the current quarantine is extended to mid-May, as alluded to recently by Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, Ukraine is headed for a major economic disaster.[19] According to some estimates, 500,000 to 700,000 Ukrainians have already been laid off as a result of the pandemic, and this number could increase five times over the next several weeks.[20] Armenia and Georgia are also likely to face rising unemployment rates and severe contraction of their GDPs. Such developments may cause major social unrest.

A chance to reset the rusty social contract and focus on genuine institution-building

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On top of the already simmering political pressure within countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, many migrants have returned home after major layoffs in other European countries, where they had been residing. Of Moldova's population of 3.5 million, nearly one million Moldovans currently live abroad; one sixth of the country's GDP for 2018 consisted of personal remittances that they sent back home.[21] Of the Moldovans abroad, approximately 300 to 350 thousand are seasonal workers with short-term contracts. Seventy thousand of them are in the precarious situation of being laid off immediately.[22] Many have already returned home, and more are still trying. The critical mass of citizens that once chose to voice its criticism of domestic conditions by leaving has returned partially, and they will demand respect and economic opportunities from the state. More immediately, citizens will demand health systems that can protect them.

SOCIAL IMPACT, DEMOCRACY, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EU SUPPORT

At first glance, the six EaP countries may seem more prepared to face this crisis than they actually are. After all, the early 1990s were the "best" survival training they could get. In fact, people still live in survival mode in many parts of the post-Soviet space. This pandemic, however, is likely to shake these societies to their core, especially as there is very little trust in government institutions – a key ingredient for a society to hold together in times of crisis. The consequences of institutions that lack credibility and sometimes even professionals to lead them, including those in the health-care sector, can be profound and beyond what anyone could imagine.

Strong institutions that society can rely on, particularly during crises, denote an important difference between developed and developing countries. Under current circumstances, no flights are available to take political leaders from the region to hospitals in Western countries for first-class treatment. While those leaders could hoard resources from national health-care systems, such as ventilators, for them-

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17 Denis Trubetskoy, "Coronavirus-Blog Osteuropa: Das Corona-Virus macht alle Ukrainer gleich," MDR aktuell (blog), March 30, 2020: <https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/osteuropa/ostblogger/corona-blog-osteuropa-100.html?fbclid=IwAR1iBlKDCERthAGaTusvLM9Kb1G9nv9AbugCyG3GSoZiqfKEo5tfH1Tl5xw> (accessed April 1, 2020).

18 Online conversation with Valerij Pekar (entrepreneur and co-founder of the civil platform "The New Country"), "Ukraine: Economic Impact of Corona," Center for Liberal Modernity, April 1, 2020.

19 Daryna Antoniuk, "Avakov Favors Extending Ukraine's Quarantine until May 12," Kyiv Post, March 30, 2020: <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/avakov-favors-extending-ukraines-quarantine-until-may-12.html> (accessed April 1, 2020).

20 Melinda Haring, "How Will the Poorest Country in Europe Deal with the Coronavirus?", The National Interest, March 30,2020: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-will-poorest-country-europe-deal-coronavirus-138927> (accessed April 1, 2020).

21 The World Bank, "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP) – Moldova," 2019: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=MD> (accessed April 1, 2020).

22 Institutul de Politici şi Reforme Europene (IPRE), "Impact of COVID-19 on the Republic of Moldova: What Short- and Medi-um-Term Interventions are Needed to Minimize the Effects?", March 26, 2020:n <http://ipre.md/2020/03/26/impactul-covid-19-asupra-republicii-moldova-ce-interventii-pe-termen-scurt-si-mediu-sunt-necesare-pentru-a-minimiza-efectele/?fbclid=IwAR24YJ3kqAOY9UzgZhtm53nd0pYLGMz8Nsitr86IP29J6tXjk1z4X9sjtHI> (accessed April 1, 2020).

selves or bribe a team of doctors to take care of them first if necessary, governing elites and ordinary citizens are now generally in the same boat. These circumstances provide the chance for two equally likely outcomes in the region: first, the chance to reset the rusty social contract and focus on genuine institution-building, and, second, the opportunity for authoritarianism to thrive. The EU, unlike Russia or China, is able to ensure that the latter is not the case.

What's more, in the four states that have declared a state of emergency, democratic checks and balances may easily be ignored. Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are rather fragile democracies. In those countries, with information spaces vulnerable to propaganda and disinformation, there is a significant risk that the temporary restrictions on freedom in exchange for health security could become permanent.[22] In this context, Moldova and Georgia are headed for national elections this autumn; informal campaigning has already started, and there is a heightened risk for unfair results. Belarus is also preparing for presidential elections this summer. In Ukraine, against the background of a political crisis and government reshuffle in early March, there are mounting concerns over an opaque deal coming together between Kyiv and Moscow on the conflict settlement in the Donbas region, as well as possible local elections in autumn. The potential for misuse of power in times of crisis is high – with long-term consequences for the stability of the region.

The EU has already proven that it can swiftly mobilize support for its neighbors with immediate humanitarian aid. But as a geopolitical force in the making, it could make the difference in the outcomes of each of these concrete political situations, as well as for the future of these countries in a post-coronavirus world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

None of the six EaP countries has a coherent nationwide epidemic strategy and, more importantly in the long term, none has a sustainable action plan for economic recovery in an epidemic's wake. While it is yet too early to make full-fledged recommendations, particularly when the EU itself is in crisis management mode, Brussels should:

1. Support EaP governments in developing and implementing coherent nationwide epidemic strategies. The EU should also advocate for immediate action to protect the region's most vulnerable social groups, including the elderly, seasonal workers, returning migrants and small entrepreneurs.

2. Closely monitor that governments do not misuse their extended powers for antidemocratic measures by cooperating with international and national watchdog organizations. Preserving the fragile tenets of democracy at its eastern borders during this crisis will be an important long-term challenge for the EU, also in terms of its role and legitimacy as a geopolitical player in its neighborhood.

3. Coordinate with the World Health Organization and international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank to provide health and financial assistance in its eastern neighborhood – including immediate liquidity and simplified credit lines – to mitigate the economic impact of the restrictions already imposed and ensure that the assistance reaches target audiences in each country.

4. Guide the partner countries in developing sustainable national action plans for economic recovery in the short and medium term once the pandemic is over.

5. Improve its communication strategy regarding the support alloted for the region.

6. Use the Eastern Partnership Summit in June to coordinate crisis management efforts throughout the region and increase solidarity with the partner countries. While the European Commission has invested effort in the last five months to put together a strategy for the EaP beyond 2020, it needs to be revised or amended to address economic and security challenges in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

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