EUROPE 27.03.2020

Belarus' unorthodox corona response

In Europe's 'last dictatorship', the government's strategy isn't just motivated by medical reasons

Read this article in Russian.

The measures adopted by the Belarusian government in response to the coronavirus pandemic were unexpected, to say the least. In what was formerly the most closed country in Europe, dubbed its 'last dictatorship', the borders, schools, universities, theatres and cafes all remain open. No moves have been made to ban public events and the national football championship was the only one in Europe to go ahead regardless of the spread of the virus. So what caused this sudden fit of liberalism from Alexander Lukashenko?

Firstly, it would be fair to say that the Belarusian government has not actually shied away from the problem and has adopted certain regulatory measures. Parents have been allowed to keep their children home from school. University lectures have been scheduled later in the day to avoid the crowds of students on public transport coinciding with those travelling to work.

From a medical perspective, the government has been focusing on targeted testing of people who have come into contact with someone infected with Covid-19, as well as people exhibiting symptoms who have recently returned from a country where the epidemic is more severe. Everyone who has been abroad is required to provide a signed written statement that they will self-isolate for a two-week period. In many hospitals, resources have been redirected and wards repurposed to care for people under quarantine. The government has begun to decontaminate public transport and roads.

Other than these measures, the Belarusian government has been relying on recommendations: do not travel abroad, do not visit elderly relatives, wash your hands frequently, do not go outside if you have symptoms of the virus, avoid public events. The country's national bank has advised other banks to offer loan repayment holidays and not to restrict foreign currency sales.

The Belarusian rationale

Compared with the majority of other European countries and even its own neighbours, the Belarusian reaction appears extremely restrained. The official government explanation for its response is that the epidemic is under control. If children are sent home from school, it is highly likely that they would be looked after by their grandparents, which would put the latter in danger. Children are not at high risk of serious illness from the virus, the Belarusian Ministry of Health has said, echoing statements already made by doctors from several other countries.

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Closing the borders would, according to Lukashenko, be a pointless move. The President believes that spot controls are a more effective measure and has pointed out that the number of infected individuals in the country is not growing exponentially. There are currently less than 100 people who have tested positive, and some of these have already recovered.

All of these arguments are not without their logic, and indeed Belarus is not the only country refusing to introduce mass restrictions. There is no global consensus on the effectiveness of strict quarantine. The epidemiological situations in the different countries vary too widely to be able to compare successes.

Economic suicide

That being said, it is also clear that the Belarusian government's chosen strategy was not driven by medical reasons alone. There are at least two other explanations for their tactics.

Firstly, lockdown — such a measure would not only be costly, it would be devastatingly so. Small businesses would be the first to go bankrupt. In Belarus, these companies are already experiencing a huge drop in demand and problems covering their rent and loan repayments, even without mass quarantine. If this were to be introduced, the country would be engulfed by a wave of bankruptcies and layoffs.

The Belarusian economy is extremely fragile. Due to the unresolved oil war with Russia, oil supplies to Belarus have been limited since the beginning of the year. The export of oil products, previously the primary source of foreign exchange inflow, was cut to a minimum, which adversely affected the country's GDP. The drop in oil prices triggered a

rise in the dollar exchange rate and a decline in the Russian rouble rate. This, in turn, meant the Belarusian rouble fell by 25 per cent at the start of the year.

Even without coronavirus, 2020 saw Belarus enter a recession and record a drop in real household income. The global economic slowdown and the fall in demand on the markets in Belarus's neighbouring countries means the situation will get considerably worse. The government would have had to make budget cuts and take out new loans to pay back the old ones in any case. Now all these problems are far more serious.

It appears that Lukashenko has decided that halting the economy would pretty much suicidal when it is not 100 per cent certain that mass quarantine would even help. Considering the fact that the country's next presidential elections are due this summer and Lukashenko plans to run for another term, the risks are however clearly more than just economic.

The government's communications strategy

There is also another reason the authorities opted for this strategy. One rooted in political psychology. Judging by his many statements on Covid-19, it seems that Lukashenko is convinced that the danger of this new virus has been artificially inflated by the media. 'The world has gone insane because of this coronavirus [...] But for us, this is neither fundamental nor frightening. We have survived viruses like this and we will survive this on', he declared on 16 March, recalling how many bird and swine flu outbreaks the country had calmly endured. The president repeatedly stated that the panic and what he called the 'coronavirus psychosis' were more dangerous than the virus itself. Yet, on 21 March, Lukashenko authorised the head of the KGB to crack down on those spreading rumours about the first deaths caused by the virus.

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So it appears as though the Belarusian government's entire communication tactics have been aimed at appeasing the population. The news broadcast on state-controlled television pays far less attention to coronavirus than the non-state media. The official Belarusian young people's union (BRSM) has been publishing caricatures making fun of the 'panickers'. At one point, even the Ministry of Health began to produce summary reports breaking down the number of infected into

specific groups: those with symptoms, those without symptoms and those who had already recovered. Critical bloggers and journalists suspected that this was the ministry's way of not drawing attention to the total number of people actually infected. But in the end, the media can do the maths.

It is difficult to gauge society's reaction to this government tactic as there have been no polls on the subject yet. On the one hand, the Belarusian people do not place a great deal of trust in the Belarusian authorities. They often regard the government as having inherited the worst of Soviet traditions when it comes to non-transparency. What's more, in light of the collective trauma of Chernobyl, it is widely believed that the government is hiding the truth about the pandemic, or it could well start to do so.

Lukashenko's dangerous game

Many civil society actors have heavily criticised the authorities for not closing the schools as a quarantine measure. Student activists have announced plans to boycott universities. The protest leaders have called on the opposition to urge a nationwide quarantine. A petition calling for the closure of educational establishments was signed by more than 16,000 people, which, by Belarusian standards, is no mean feat, but is not exactly a resounding success either.

By all accounts, most people are not totally sure what the best government response would actually be. But they can see that the Belarusian authorities have taken a different approach to the rest of the world. This means that as long as the situation in terms of the number of people infected, the low number of deaths and the available hospital beds remains comparatively good, the government's tactics will not spark any kind of major protest.

However, this is where Lukashenko is taking a big risk. If he manages not to destroy the economy and successfully prevent the spread of the virus, many people will be forced to admit that he was right, particularly against a backdrop of economic collapse and thousands of victims in other countries. But, if the situation in Belarus also gets out of control, popular opinion will place the blame on the government and, in all likelihood, the president himself as the main advocate of this unusual way of combating the virus. The people's outrage about this failure would go that much deeper and would thus be far more dangerous for the government than simple discontent about the economy.