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## **How autocrats cope with the corona challenge**

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Daniel Weiss, University of Zurich

## **How autocrats cope with the corona challenge: Belarus vs. Russia**

Народ России ищет больного китайца чтобы чихнул в госдуме  
за большое вознаграждение  
The Russian people seeks to hire an infected Chinese to sneeze in the State Duma.  
High remuneration

Political strategies against the Covid-19 challenge vary according to two super-parameters: time and space. The most salient pattern of temporal variation consists in the transition from an initial denial of any threat to its full recognition. Within the second phase, however, one most often observes a stop-and-go tactic: after a more or less rigorous lockdown, most sectors of the economy are conceded more freedom (again to a varying extent), which eventually produces a comeback of the disease, thus triggering new restrictions including even a second partial lockdown. This is what currently occurs in most European countries, where a second wave of the disease makes itself felt. Elsewhere the first wave still continues to rage, to mention but the US, India, South Africa or most parts of Latin America. On the other hand, East Asian countries have either not gone through a first wave at all or left it long behind. And finally, there are governments like that of Tanzania which still deny the existence of any disease.

All this illustrates the interplay of the temporal and spatial factors. The spatial factor calls, however, for a specification: what is really at stake here is the political system together with the current constellation of political forces in the given country. This does not exclude that, as in the case of East Asia, several countries of the same region belong to the same cultural space and hence share a common stance towards the official policy against the disease. The same holds for West and Central Europe, but in the case of many other nations what matters is the individual political constellation. It seems to be a fair assumption that the polarity or rather the continuum between democratic and authoritarian systems plays a decisive role: the more restricted the balance of power, the fewer possibilities are available to air one's discomfort with or to publicly manifest one's open resistance against the political measures taken.

In view of these considerations, it seems tempting to compare the management of the Covid-19 crisis in two authoritarian states. They are both situated at Europe's Eastern frontier and neighbour with each other: Belarus and the Russian Federation. The Russian system of political checks and balances may be described as heavily disordered and still deteriorating,

whereas Belarus simply lacks any checks and balances, as the recent events after the-made up presidential election results have convincingly shown. Yet, during the first months leaders' responses to the pandemic challenge contrasted sharply: except Sweden, Belarus was the only European country that did not go through a lockdown, did not shut its borders nor set people on quarantine or self-isolation. Unlike Sweden, the Belarusian authorities did not even call for physical distancing and the avoidance of mass gatherings. Thanks to the maintenance of the economy, the government did not have to provide any funding for the social victims of the pandemic. By contrast, Russia introduced regionally limited lockdowns, temporarily shut its borders, closed entire economic sectors and offered financial aid for parts of the population most affected by the crisis.

#### Preliminary methodological remarks

The data on which this qualitative study is based stem from various internet sources: the official statements are taken from the Kremlin website, the Belarusian presidential press service, interviews and *youtube* excerpts, their reception in the population is reflected in comments from independent media, such as *Radio Svoboda* or the Russian service of *Deutsche Welle*, including numerous voices from social media reported in these sources. The size of the two data samples is not balanced, the main reason being that due to his overall sceptical stance (see below) the Belarusian leader devoted much less verbal activities to the pandemic than his Russian counterpart. More precisely, there is no speech by Lukashenko available within the period examined that would exclusively treat the coronavirus issue. The most extensive fragment may be found in his speech from August 4, 2020 before the presidential elections: the whole speech comprises 8762 words, out of which only 1006 words or 11,2% refer directly or indirectly to the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, Putin addressed the disease in five speeches from 25.3., 2.4., 28.4., 11.5. and 23.6.2020 (out of which the first and third will be examined here), whose length by far exceeded Lukashenko's statements: all in all, the number of words in them amounts to 13,970. Moreover, in the Russian case reliable feedback is available not only on the Internet but also through surveys of the independent agency Levada; in the case of Belarus, such surveys are simply lacking. All this makes the comparison aimed

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<sup>1</sup> [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/poslanie-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-24168/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/poslanie-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-24168/) accessed on 5.1.2021. In this address, Lukashenko uses the term *pandemija* 5 times and *epidemija* three times.

at here a cumbersome task. Nevertheless, such issues, as authorities (science, religion etc.) referred to, elements of conspiracy theories or different linguistic characteristics can be tackled even based on these unequal samples.

Given the comparative goal of this study, its theoretical approach is necessarily eclectic: it combines different elements of classical pragmatics, such as performatives, relevance theory and conversational implicatures, but also metaphors, quotations and rhetorical questions. Moreover, the linguistic outfit of the given excerpts will be characterized, including the use of modals, colloquial syntax, wordplays, populist accents, vulgarisms, etc. Where possible, the hierarchy of different arguments is also elucidated. This methodological mix was dictated by the linguistic diversity of the fragments analysed: above all, except for the aforementioned speech at the end of his election campaign, all excerpts from Lukashenko are spontaneous oral comments formulated in a marked colloquial register, whereas Putin always reads carefully prepared texts in elaborated formal language. This divergence does not lend itself to the application of a unified methodical approach. In addition, such an approach would not meet the need to capture other verbal characteristics of the two leaders, especially their preference for or absence of a 'close-to the-people' stance. Implicatures are also more interesting in the case of a politician inclined to conspiracy theories who often resorts to vague allusions than within a dry report based on as many facts as possible. As was to be expected, the complex relation between Russian and (standard) Belarusian did not come to the fore, since all public statements by Lukashenko are in Russian.

The first section will focus on the Belarusian leader A. Lukashenko, which also allows shedding some light on the situation in Russia since Lukashenko often refers to the Russian containment measures as an example not to be followed. The section seeks to capture the political and linguistic contrast between the many spontaneous oral comments in the beginning and the account of the own crisis management at the end of the period under analysis.

### **The Belarusian approach: ice hockey and tractors**

The different assessments of the crisis are reflected by divergent designations of the disease. Whereas Russia soon adopted the term pandemic (*pandemija*), A. Lukashenko referred to it as "that coronavirus psychosis" (*koronavirusnyj psixoz*), which will lead to a heavy increase of suicides. The declaration of the WHO that this is a pandemic "has no bearing on Belarus" since here people always had paid due attention to infectious diseases; moreover, "panic has always

been the worst epidemic.” For him, the term coronavirus is simply another name of the flu: “We all once had the flu, but now they coined a new name for it: the new coronavirus”. At the end of the period covered here he came, however, to accept the international term (see his speech from August 4 discussed below). He called for a struggle against other, seasonal infections which typically mark the end of winter and frightened him more: in the first two months of 2019 498 persons died from infections of the respiratory organs, and this year their number amounted only to 328 persons. Even the number of pneumonia cases was lower this year than it was last year<sup>2</sup>.

When taking part in an ice hockey match, Lukashenko addressed the interviewer: “Do you see here any viruses flying around? Neither do I. That’s the best antiviral medicine: sport on ice, like a frig.” Another efficient remedy is open-air work on a tractor, this will cure everybody<sup>3</sup>. Besides playing ice hockey and work on tractors, Lukashenko above all recommended a healthy lifestyle: People should wash their hands, have breakfast, lunch and dinner in time and go to the sauna (*banja*), moreover, they should drink vodka as a preventive medicine<sup>4</sup>:

(1) Я человек непьющий, но в последнее время в шутку говорю, что водкой надо не только руки мыть, но, наверное, и в день 40–50 грамм в пересчете на чистый спирт [ее выпивать], травить этот вирус. Но не на работе.

‘I do not drink alcohol, but these days I sometimes joke that one should not only wash one’s hands with vodka but during the day drink the equivalent of 40-50 grams of pure alcohol to eradicate the virus. But not at the workplace’

Sex is another drug that should be handled carefully:

(2) Не лезь, если ты мужик, к другой женщине. Ну потерпи месяц! Если ты где-то терся там в семье - останься в семье. Выйди на улицу, на велосипеде катайся, продышись хорошенько, чтобы легкие заработали как следует. Это же болезнь легких.

‘Stay away from other women if you are a male. Just be patient for one month! If you had sex in a family stay with this family. Go out on the street, go biking, breathe intensively to let the lungs work as needed. After all, it’s a lung disease’

This note is elaborated in the next fragment: “Nu a kogda ty sidiš’ doma, *opustiv ruki, sopli razvesiv*, nu kakoj ty budeš’ zdorovyj čelovek?” ‘If you stay home, put your hands down and weep [lit.: spread your snot], how can you be healthy?’

The refusal to shut down schools for quarantine is motivated in the following quote:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/03/2020/5e7341f29a7947acad3a3ece>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGCoOqDCZS0>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/05/6/7250708/>

(3) Не надо их на каникулы отпускать, чтобы они разъехались по деревням ... Они же очень хорошие разносчики этого вируса. *Поехал к дедушке-бабушке и привез им подарок.*

'They [sc. the children] should not be released for vacations, so they could spread over the countryside. They are very good spreaders of this virus. Just went to see the grandparents and brought them a present'

So far, Lukashenko's strategies may be summarized as follows: the pandemic is belittled ("just another name for the flu"), ridiculed ("psychosis"), and its harmful impact is downplayed since the main remedy is a healthy lifestyle. The hyper-strategy at work here is calming reassurance, combined with an appeal to a traditionalist common-sense ideology. An ironic note marks the risk attributed to children's infectious potential. Besides the tractor, the *banja* and the prominent role of vodka, there is no local flavor in these excerpts: all statements quoted could stem from corona sceptics in other countries.

Lukashenko never refers to medical science as an authority in his spontaneous comments. Instead, God is addressed as the instance responsible of a higher justice: "God has to protect Belarus from the corona virus, after all, we lost so many lives in the Second world war, which we honor as the Great Patriotic War" (the official Soviet term still in use here). Recently he interpreted the disease as God's punishment for people's outraging stance towards nature<sup>5</sup>. Another calming sub-strategy consisted of predicting the disappearance of the threat in the immediate future. In spring, Lukashenko set different deadlines for this event. On March 24, he saw Belarus on the metaphorical peak of the curve: "we came to the plateau and see that we are going down." His hope is directed to Easter: "If we keep up till orthodox Easter, we will survive ...I already pray to God that this peak will go down before Easter." On May 8, he states: "If we go on like this, also with God's help, we will forget about the coronavirus in a month." The responsible authorities supported this view: the health minister V. Karanik located the peak of infections at the end of April, the epidemiologist of the regional hospital of Minsk supposed that the peak would be hit by May 20. Lukashenko himself mentioned that some specialized hospitals for the treatment of Covid patients had already resumed their normal functions<sup>6</sup>.

The last calming strategy was the fabrication of fictive numbers. In May Lukashenko claimed that nobody had died in his country and that in terms of mortality "we are the best worldwide,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5ff462e69a7947553d874103>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/03/2020/5e7341f29a7947acad3a3ece>

nobody questions this.” The real, less encouraging picture will be illustrated at the end of this section. According to official sources, the first case of a Covid-19 related death was registered on March 30<sup>7</sup>. At any rate, this type of calming policy was probably the least effective since the population was facing the frightening reality every day.

Persuasive rhetoric was not limited to calming strategies. Another rationale involved the economic argument. To put it in Lukashenko’s words, “The most important thing for us is the economy. All this will pass, you already see in Europe that it is passing. But the economy will always exist because this is people’s life... It is very easy to introduce a quarantine or a curfew, but what will we eat? (*a žrat’ čto budem?*)<sup>8</sup>”. On May 29, he stated:

(4) мировой кризис отражается и на Беларуси. Хорошо, что мы так вывернулись, выкрутились в этой ситуации с пандемией, не остановили производство. Если бы остановились, мы бы никогда не запустили это производство. Это только в сказке могло случиться. ...

На богатом Западе уже дикая безработица, люди *кастрюлями барабанят*. Слава богу, что мы этого избежали, не закрылись.

‘the global crisis has its impact also on Belarus. It’s good we were so successful in coping with the pandemic and did not stop production. If we had stopped it, we would never have managed to relaunch it. This occurs only in fairy tales. In the wealthy West, unemployment is already raging, people *are banging pots and pans*. Thank God, we avoided all this and did not shut our borders’

Thus, the Belarusian leader buttressed his policy by a robust argument that is hotly debated in most countries: the economic disaster and ensuing social unrest produced by a rigorous containment of the viral disease can by far outweigh the positive results of this containment. Unlike in other countries, however, in Belarus the economic argument prevented any protective measures against the pandemic due to the president’s unlimited prerogatives. A supportive argument was the lack of financial and natural resources, the counterexample being provided by Russia<sup>9</sup>:

(5) Путин объявил неделю выходных! Но у них примерно 550 млрд. золотовалютных резервов и 120 млрд. фонд национального благосостояния. И потом, труба-то работает, нефть, газ качается, пусть дешевле в 2 раза, но качается! У нас это есть? У нас этого нет! / ... И нам выживать надо, вот как будто ты один в мире.

‘Putin has announced a week of holiday day-offs. But they have 550 billion in gold reserves and 120 billion in their welfare fund. And then, the pipeline is working, oil and

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<sup>7</sup> Pervaja smert’. <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=248987&lang=ru>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGCoOqDCZS0>. There seems to be no adequate English equivalent for *žrat’*, a vulgar word for ‘eat’.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2DqAi\\_w07](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2DqAi_w07)

gas are being pumped through, even if they are now two times cheaper than before, but they still flow! Do we have this? We don't have this! [...] And we have to survive as if you were alone in this world'

His main idea was that "nobody will give us anything from any funds" (*Nikto niotkuda nam ničego ne dast*). The conviction that the own country is isolated and cannot rely on anybody's solidarity, although not very comforting in itself, is also in line with Lukashenko's overall strategy to refer to other countries' crisis management only as negative examples that should not be followed. Nevertheless, this insistence on the Belarusian autonomy did not prevent Belarus from addressing the EU for financial aid in May: 60 Million € were assigned to this goal<sup>10</sup>.

All this allowed him to not allocate financial aid to anybody hit by the crisis: "There is no hurry, we don't have to distribute helicopter money. There are [enough] jobs." On May 29, he declared:

(6) Я не говорю, как некоторые: предвыборная кампания уже началась, так заявляют, что с вертолета будут деньги выбрасывать. У нас это не проходит, у нас люди умные, понимают, что с вертолета только листовки можно разбрасывать. Я вам этого не обещаю, как бы это популярно ни звучало.

'I don't say as others do: the electoral campaign has started, so they announce that they will drop money from helicopters. This does not work here, our people are smart, they understand that only flyers are dropped from helicopters. I do not promise you such things, however popular this might be'

The source of the indirect reported speech "they announce that they will drop..." is not clear: it is either a fictive quotation or a paraphrase of what other governments say, at any rate Lukashenko does not align with its content and tries to deconstruct the metaphor 'helicopter money'. Thus, it turns out that the different calming sub-strategies may simply have aimed at smoothing the superordinate strategy, which was to do nothing against the pandemic except handwashing. In this respect, Belarus was unique. Nevertheless, the denial of a lockdown cannot be condemned as completely irrational: it was based on a cost-benefit analysis which in the case of Belarus with its weak economy might arguably yield different results than in the more developed West European countries.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/ес-намерен-выделить-беларуси-60-млн-евро-на-борьбу-с-эпидемией-коронавируса>



His **denial** was boosted by a quotation from Donald Trump<sup>11</sup>: the latter had pronounced the state of emergency, which Lukashenko qualified as extreme shortsightedness<sup>12</sup>, but soon came to the conclusion: “If we will not immediately return to work ... more Americans will die from the loss of jobs than from the coronavirus.” Lukashenko, who said he liked this statement very much, then continued: “Now you understand why I didn’t shut down the factories... although a host of people recommended shutting the factories, the borders, set everybody on quarantine, to set everybody (*posadit’ vsej*).” This wording has an evil ring in Russian since *posadit’* also means ‘put in jail’. Lukashenko did not miss the occasion to elaborate the double sense: he takes the “cruel decision” that “*Sažat’ budem tol’ko kogda nužno*” ‘We will only *sažat’* when this is necessary’.

On April 13, Lukashenko alluded to the lockdown as a cage<sup>13</sup>. He did so by taking the metaphor literally, presenting a rooster in a cage (a present to him, as he said) but added that this rooster had to be released in the evening, “yet we want to put humans in a cage to watch them there – this won’t happen! (*ne polučitsja*)”. The transmission closes with the popular saying “*Lučše umeret’ stoja, čem žit’ na kolenjax*” ‘It’s better to die standing upright than to live on one’s knees’<sup>14</sup>, thus boosting the idea conveyed by the cage metaphor. Yet, this call for freedom, which seemingly brought him closer to the ideology of global corona deniers, remained an isolated event.

The Belarusian leader also complained the Russian decision to close its borders without a previous announcement<sup>15</sup>. To him, this was a violation of the Union treaty between the two states, and he considered it a rhetorical question who should close his borders against whom. He repeatedly quoted the proverb “*Druz’ja poznajutsja v bede*” (‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’) to ironically denounce the Russian demeanor. He also wondered how the Russian government intended to transfer its goods to the West, whose weight amounted to 110 million tons per year, if all its neighbors had already shut their borders. “Maybe, we should check whether the virus sits in the oil or gas pipeline?” he joked<sup>16</sup>. As many of his humoristic

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkuEfoQ6IZc>

<sup>12</sup> In Russian this involves a wordplay: *črezvyčajnoe položenie* (state of emergency) vs. *črezvyčajnaja nedal’novidnost’* (extreme shortsightedness).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGCoOqDCZSO>. For the use of metaphors as arguments, see Macagno 2020.

<sup>14</sup> For the manifold functions fulfilled by quotations, see Fetzer and Weiss 2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWiEZeO36F0>

<sup>16</sup> <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2885496.html>

remarks, this one is somewhere in between release humor and superiority humor (Attardo 2008).

Another rapprochement towards corona deniers involved conspiracy theories: at the beginning of his speech on March 23<sup>17</sup>, he asked two suggestive questions: “First: Is the coronavirus a human-made infection, or has it just incidentally appeared from the air? And second: Who needed this psychosis?” Then he stated: “Somebody declared this is a war – they needed to bring back the yellow vests from the streets” etc. Thus, by violating the quantity maxim (“somebody declared”), he triggered the conversational implicature that Macron used the crisis to get rid of another political problem. Relevance theory (Sperber, Wilson 1986) now sheds a new light on the preceding utterance: the allusion to Macron served to motivate the second question (“Who needed the psychosis”), which turns out to be a rhetorical question<sup>18</sup>. The speaker then went on to attack the “so-called opposition” in Belarus who wants to hype (*xajpanut’*) the psychosis on the internet for their own purpose. But on the whole, conspiracy theories were rather not a dominant thread in his crisis management.

As mentioned above, the most extensive comment on the pandemic was delivered on August 4 in Lukashenko’s scripted speech before the presidential elections<sup>19</sup>. This speech still showed a tendency to hyperbole and self-praise but was free from most verbal characteristics that were so numerous in his spontaneous comments. He no longer denied the existence of the disease: five times he calls it *pandemija* and three times *épidemija*. The main message was affirmative: “We have passed this exam and coped with the disaster. Who is not blind, sees this. Who does not see it, will always be blind.” He now acknowledged the significance of science and health care but remained faithful to his confidence that the Belarusian resignation from economic restrictions proved right. Despite his previous prediction (see example 3 above), vacations had been extended and homeschooling introduced, which turned out to be effective. He elaborated on this success story by boasting of the own production of masks, lung ventilators or protective coats and by pointing out that only half of the emergency cots had to be used and no sports stadiums or shopping centers had to be transformed into emergency hospitals. Moreover, unlike in Western countries, inhabitants of retirement homes were not sacrificed: “Did you see what happened in the West? Before the doctors arrived,

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<sup>17</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2DqAi\\_w07Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2DqAi_w07Q)

<sup>18</sup> For details about the multifunctional effects of rhetorical questions, see Ilie (1994).

<sup>19</sup> [http://president.gov.by/ru/news\\_ru/view/poslanie-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-24168/](http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/poslanie-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-24168/)

there was not a single person alive in the old peoples' homes." Here he also resorted to a possibly fictive quotation (Pascual 2014): "In our hospitals the patients were not sorted out as on the front line: «Who is younger and stronger will survive, we will treat them, save them. But this is an old man, he will go anyway»". All this was shaped as a military campaign with its General Staff, who delivered its reports twice a day to the President. Special thanks went to the Belarusian people, which showed a "dignified behavior".

The rest of this fragment was devoted to measures to be taken in the immediate future: to keep a calm attitude and trust the doctors and authorities, increase the production of homemade medicines, assign all funds received from international financial institutions to the regional medical centers, enhance the so-called mobile contact groups that took care of patients outside the hospitals, and last but not least to continue a healthy way of life with doing as much open-air sports as possible. Thus, Lukashenko had to revise many of his former assessments and take real protective measures but remained faithful to what he called the specific Belarusian way, i.e. the resignation from a lockdown. The fragment under scrutiny also lacks polemical accents, whereas in the remainder of his speech Lukashenko rudely attacked his political adversaries from the opposition.

Nevertheless, there were issues that raised serious doubts against the economic argument. First of all, unlike Russia and despite the recommendations of the WHO, Belarus celebrated the Victory Day on the usual date, i.e. on May 9, to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany. This meant not only additional costs but also an increased risk for thousands of participants of the parade, which people came to call the "death parade". The participants were compulsorily recruited among school directors, customs officers and other civil service and transferred to the capital by bus. Persons that already had survived the virus and were therefore deemed immune were also included. During the parade, people were not allowed to wear masks. The reasons for this decision to enforce the parade were controversially discussed in the independent media. Some supposed that Lukashenko wanted to enhance his popularity before the approaching elections, others surmised that he profited from the occasion to demonstrate his superiority over Putin, who had postponed the celebration (see below): like this, he could prove that he was tougher (*krutče*) than his Russian colleague, who was scared of the pandemic. In this machistic view, this would likewise enhance his chances

in the elections.<sup>20</sup> This is, however, rather a general pragmatic inference: I have not found an explicit statement that would engender such an implicature. As a matter of fact, Lukashenko used to make fun of Russia's stance, where all was shaken (*kolyxaetsja*) from the corona virus, whereas in his own country the situation was quiet. Initially, he had intended to participate in the Russian ceremony on the Red Square but was unsure whether it would take place, given that "this psychosis (in connection with the coronavirus) has sized the whole country. As for ourselves, we will not cancel anything, everything will take place as planned<sup>21</sup>."

The parade was not the only event that brought about an unnecessary risk for a broad spectrum of the population. On April 24, Lukashenko also organized a *subbotnik*, a relic of the Soviet past that denoted a compulsory cleanup of public spaces by the working masses on Saturdays; this time more than two million people were engaged in the event. All this clearly shows that the head of state did not in the least care about the welfare of his subjects when he considered other items on the political agenda more important. Finally, he got infected himself, as he communicated on July 27<sup>22</sup>, but had no symptoms and underwent no self-isolation. As his son Nikolaj declared later, he "was not an easy patient<sup>23</sup>." This message fitted ideally in the self-portrait of a tough guy he propagated before the presidential election. Unlike his political opponents, he also continued not to wear masks in public and recently announced that he would not get vaccinated<sup>24</sup>.

The real picture of the coronavirus spread is not easy to reconstruct. On May 21, the Health Ministry reported 191 casualties and an increase of about 900 new infections per day; at that time the country numbered 33 371 infections. Independent sources provide much higher numbers. P. Severinec, an oppositional politician, stated in the "Voice of America"<sup>25</sup> that Belarusian readers had found out that the official numbers were made up more than once, whereupon the ministry ceased to publish statistical data. When WHO representatives visited the country<sup>26</sup>, all curves rose up since the authorities revealed them the real picture, but when

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/belarus-covid-latest/5421524.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/05/6/7250708/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.dw.com/ru/лукашенко-утверждает-что-бессимптомно>

<sup>23</sup> <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10428215>

<sup>24</sup> <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/10357849>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/belarus-covid-latest/5421524.html>

<sup>26</sup> Their recommendations to prescribe strict social distancing, introduce homeschooling and to cancel mass events were not published by the Belarusian authorities: <https://www.dw.com/ru/освещение-пандемии-в-беларуси-о-чем-умалчивают-госсми-и-власти/a>

they left Belarus, the numbers came down drastically again. Hiding the mortality among doctors was more difficult: in Belarus it represented 10% of all cases, whereas the equivalent proportion in other countries was 0.2-0.6%. All in all, Severinec concluded that the true death toll in Belarus was 20 to 50 times higher than officially communicated. In social networks, doctors estimated that all official numbers had to be multiplied at least ten times<sup>27</sup>. Later the former director of the institute of cardiology A. Mroček, who was fired due to his taking sides with the mass protests, accused the health minister to hide corona deaths under the label “blood circulation diseases”<sup>28</sup>.

### **A striking contrast: Russia’s crisis management**

As mentioned at the beginning, Russia provides a striking contrast to the Belarusian picture. After a first period of belittling the danger, Russian authorities faced a serious growth of infections and took measures comparable to those in many western countries, including regional lockdowns, homeschooling, partial clearing of hospitals to gain more space for corona patients, the closing of national borders, etc. In addition, an emergency hospital for corona patients was built in Moscow.

This section sets out to contrast two speeches by Putin broadcasted on March 25 and April 28. In the time span between these two events, the crisis management had been regionalized with Putin assuming a different role than in the beginning; as will be seen, this had a direct impact on his verbal behavior. In his TV address to the nation on March 25<sup>29</sup>, Putin announced a range of social measures: the week from March 30 to April 5 would be off work but paid (this measure was later prolonged to April 30), families with children would be offered financial aid, private capital invested in foreign states would be charged a 14% tax, enterprises would be protected from bankruptcy, etc.

Compared with Lukashenko’s all too impressionistic and spontaneous utterances, Putin chose a completely different key. His speech was dry, unemotional, well-structured and abounded in factual information about the new political, social and economic measures that would be taken now against what he consistently calls *épidemija*. What strikes most is the frequency of the 1sg and of deontic markers. In the written version that comprises 1679 words, we find 41

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<sup>27</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/685456.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://news.tut.by/society/699608.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63061>

uses of verbs in the 1sg. Among them, 38 represent subjectless present forms almost always placed sentence-initially (sometimes preceded by a connective or an adverbial). Both their form and meaning reveal a typical performative function: 21 express directive speech acts, e.g. *poručaju* 'I request/entrust', *predlagaju* 'I propose', *prošu* 'I ask' (in this register, all three verbs function as approximate synonyms), or a mixed directive-declarative act: *ob"javljaju* 'I declare (the next week off work)'. 10 performative instances serve to enhance the discourse structure, e.g. *povtorju* 'I repeat', *podčerknu* 'I underline', *dobavlju* 'I add', *ostanovljus'* 'I will dwell on', *obraščaju vnanie*: 'I draw (your) attention', the remaining help organizing the dialog: *obraščajus'* 'I address', *blagodarju* 'thank you' or mental states: *ščitaju* 'I think'. Certain verbs appear in the perfective aspect, which marks their performative function. There are no politeness markers: for example, both *poručaju* and *prošu* may be directed to the same addressee; only once do we find a hedged performative *Hoču osobo obratit'sja* 'first of all I want to address' (physicians, paramedics, nurses, hospital and clinic workers, ambulances, our scientists). Forms of the 1pl with varying implicit reference (either the whole nation or the authorities) occur 9 times, they are placed in the beginning and at the end of the speech and partially refer to actions in the future.

Lexical deontic markers (exclusively of necessity) are attested 27 times. They sometimes interact argumentatively with directive performatives as in the following fragment:

7. Второе. *Надо* поддержать семьи с детьми. *Предлагаю* в ближайшие три месяца, начиная уже с апреля, выплачивать всем семьям, имеющим право на материнский капитал, дополнительно по пять тысяч рублей ежемесячно на каждого ребенка в возрасте до трёх лет включительно.

Second. Families with children *should* get support. *I propose* to pay in the next three months from April on an additional amount of 5000 Rubles to all families who have the right to a mother's allowance for every child ageing less than three years.

Here, the preceding sentence serves to motivate the subsequent performative *I propose*. The inverse setting, where the performative motivates the subsequent necessity, also occurs, hence performatives serve either as arguments or conclusions. The overall wording is calm and decided, it leaves no space for uncertainty:

8. *Obraščajus'* ko vsem graždanam strany. *Davajte* ne budem postupat', *polagajus'* na naše russkoe «avos'». Ne dumajte, kak u nas byvaet: «A, menja èto ne kosnetsja!» Eto možet kosnut'sja každygo.

'I am addressing all citizens of our country. Let us not act by relying on our Russian «avos'» (perhaps). Don't think as it often happens with us: "Ah, this will not affect me!" This may affect everybody'

The word *avos'* is indeed, also by Russian linguists (Šmelev 2002), considered one of the keywords of Russian culture, it stands for a careless, happy-go-lucky attitude towards the unforeseen twists of fate. Putin then adds the warning that Russia may experience the same fate as the Western countries. Thus, deontic necessity is paired with epistemic necessity, hence the frequent use of the bare indicative future as in "The state will support the business to solve this task" or "the following primordial measures will be taken".

The following excerpt from Putin's TV teleconference with the governors and mayors on April 28<sup>30</sup> illustrates quite a different tune. Against the background of the Russian incidence rate that had already exceeded many European countries, Putin's rhetoric became more dramatical<sup>31</sup>.

9. Мы сейчас перед новым, пожалуй, самым напряженным этапом борьбы с эпидемией. Риски заразиться выходят на верхнюю планку, угроза, смертельная опасность вируса сохраняются, и это может коснуться каждого. [...] От всех нас потребуются предельная собранность, дисциплина и мобилизация. Мы должны добиться, чтобы волна эпидемии схлынула, пошла наконец на спад.

We are now facing a new, maybe the tensest period of the fight against the epidemic. The risks of infection come to the fore, the threat and the lethal danger of the virus remain, and this may affect everybody. [...] We will all have to show an extreme concentration, discipline and mobilization. We should achieve a recession of the epidemic wave and its final collapse.

This is still the voice of reason: the danger is real, it has to be taken seriously and demands our total efforts. On the other hand, there are no simple solutions that would fit everywhere as all depends on the local conditions (in the meantime, Putin had delegated most competences to the regional level, i.e. governors and mayors):

10. Категорически нельзя принимать решения на эмоциях или под копирку. То, что оправданно, обоснованно в одних регионах, в других, напротив, может лишь навредить.

'We must not at all take our decisions driven by emotions or by the aid of carbon paper. What is justified and motivated in some regions may well be harmful in other regions'

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/society/28/04/2020/5ea7ed4c9a7947095ed087d5>

<sup>31</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63288>

Thus, the speaker argues for a decentralization policy, although expressed by a somewhat old-fashioned metaphor (carbon paper) that fits ill with the high-tech scenery of this videoconference.

What again strikes most in this rather short fragment is the prevalence of performative verbs: five times he uses *poručaju*, six times *povtorju*, once *prošu*, *obraščajus'*, *ščitaju važnym podčerknut'* 'I consider important to underline', *obraščaju vnimanie* and *znaju ... I dumaju* 'I know... and I think'. Once an agentless passive form is embedded in the governing performative: *Napomnju, čto regionam byla postavlena zadača k segodnjašnemu dnju, k 28 aprelja, razvernut'...* 'I remind [you] that the regions received the task to elaborate ... by today, April 28'; the implicature who gave this direction is easy to decipher.

This absolute dominance of the grammatical first person reflects quasi-iconically the omnipotence of the first person in the state. At the same time, it manifests the asymmetrical repartition of power in Putin's ill-reputed "directed democracy" (*upravljaemaja demokratija*). The consequences are palpable:

11. *Обращаюсь* и к руководителям регионов. Если у вас план по развёртыванию специализированных коек выполнен, это совсем не повод остановить работу, доложить и считать её завершённой. Пожалуйста, *используйте* каждую возможность, чтобы нарастить ресурсы и готовность здравоохранения в регионе, *не дожидаясь команды сверху*.

'I also address the leaders' of the regions. If your plan how to add specialized hospital beds is realized, this is no reason to stop your work, report on it and consider it done. Please, use every possibility of increasing the resources and the readiness of the health care system in your region and do not wait for an order from above'

This is the problem in a nutshell: the "vertical of power" (*vertikal' vlasti*, one of Putin's favorite metaphors) results in a passive stance of the inferiors, including the highest ranks (governors and mayors), who prefer to passively wait for further instructions instead of acting independently and creatively.

Most revealing is the response of the head of "Rosпотребнадзор" (Federal Service for Supervision of Consumers Protection), Anna Yu. Popova: in her speech, she explicitly refers to Putin's words no less than nine times. The first two times, she addresses him personally in the most official and respectful way, i.e. with first name and patronymic: cf. *o čem vy skazali, Vladimir Vladimirovič* 'what you said, V.V.', *vy uže skazali, Vladimir Vladimirovič* 'you already said, V.V.' Next, we find *Vy uže otmetili segodnja* 'you already mentioned today', *vy uže skazali*



*ob étom* 'you already said that'. Three times, the speaker relates herself affirmatively to the presidential wisdom:

12. Любое отклонение приведёт, как Вы уже совершенно справедливо сказали, к точке, откуда мы вышли, к возврату, к жёстким режимам.  
'Any deviation will, as you have already rightly remarked, lead to that point that we left, to the return, to a severe regime'
13. Поэтому я, безусловно, поддерживаю то, что Вы сказали об обязательном продлении нерабочих дней 'Therefore I absolutely endorse what you said about the obligatory extension of the days off work'
14. Вы дали нам такое поручение, и если позволите, я бы хотела сказать несколько слов о тех подходах, которые мы сегодня видим.  
'You gave us this direction, and if you allow, I would like to say a few words about those procedures which we see today'

The last example illustrates at the same time how the speaker marks her own position: she does so by always using the conditional 1sg, cf. *Ja by xotela otmetit'* 'I would like to remark', *Ja by xotela pokazat'* 'I would like to show', *Ja by predpoložila* 'I would suppose', *Ja by xotela ešče raz vernut'sja k tomu* 'I would like to come back on that'. In example 12, she also adds the politeness marker 'if you allow', thus showing her respect for the negative face of the addressee. The deferential, if not submissive attitude she exhibits here contrasts sharply with Putin's performative communication style ("I request", "I repeat"): it underlines the social subordination of the inferior to the boss, here enhanced by the gender disparity. Once she shifts to a strong commitment: *I my, bezuslovno, vpolnim vaše poručenie k 5 maju* 'and we will absolutely fulfil your direction before May 5', which fits neatly into Putin's list of orders. What follows now are the statements of accounts by selected provincial satraps: how did they fulfil the tasks formulated previously by the president? How the respondents were selected remains unclear: Moscow's mayor Sobjanin takes the lead, which is most natural, given the high number of infections and casualties in the mega-city, but the subsequent regions (*gubernii*) seem to have been chosen at random, or perhaps they are intended to punctually represent the whole gigantic territory of the Russian Federation: Murmansk (subpolar North), Sakhalin (Far East), Sevastopol' (Crimea), Irkutsk (Siberia), and Chuvashia (Volga region). The whole scene resembles a school lesson where the teacher calls the pupils to the table to report on their homework. The individual accounts abound with numbers (of tests, equipment, hospital cots, etc., but less so of hospital staff), the general line being that all conditions for successful treatment of Covid-19 patients are now met. This confirms the president's own conclusion:

15. Нам удалось затормозить распространение эпидемии. Это результат нашей общей работы, ответственности миллионов граждан страны, которые прислушались к рекомендациям врачей и специалистов, заботятся о своём здоровье и берегут близких, соблюдают предписания органов власти.

'We succeeded in decelerating the spread of the epidemic. This is the result of our common efforts, the sense of responsibility of millions of citizens of our country, who followed the recommendations by physicians and specialists, take care of their health, protect their next and comply with the provisions of the authorities'

References and personal addresses to the president are frequent: for example, all those present welcome his decision to extend the days off work, e.g. "we totally support your decision of maintaining the self-isolation until May 11" (Irkutsk). The general stance is that of (over)respectful politeness, cf. "Dear Vladimir Vladimirovič, allow me to say a few words, to report about the situation in the affected districts and the completion of the tasks you have defined" (Irkutsk). Some participants exhibit even a more deferential behavior than A. Popova: "Dear Vladimir Vladimirovič, our republic (Čuvašia) is grateful that you keep the situation under permanent control, take very important and necessary decisions in all domains: in the field of healthcare, and in the field of business support, in the field of support for people that endure a difficult life situation."

On the other hand, some participants also take the opportunity to express urgent requests for financial support to fill the gap in their regional budgets caused by the subsidies for the local economy. To these petitioners, Putin is less responsive.

All in all, what we observe in this exchange is a communicative style that fits ill with the modern high-tech surrounding. For a Western audience, it is reminiscent of an older, essentially authoritarian discourse characteristic of pre-democratic societies. Moreover, it looks like an internal accountability report turned public; the rationale behind this decision may have been the desire to demonstrate how impeccably the new crisis management after the decentralization works.

The last word goes to Putin himself, who sets out to deliver a lesson in humanism. One fragment reads as a direct answer to Lukashenko, but the anonymous wording with agentless passive verbs and the noun 'idea' without a possessor NP leave open who exactly is targeted (it could as well be Donald Trump):

16. И ещё об одном – нравственном, моральном выборе, который стоит перед нами сейчас. В мире в целом, а порой и у нас в России, звучит мысль, что в первую

очередь нужно думать об экономике, о материальном благополучии. И это, конечно, очень важно.

Но что, в этой связи, предлагается? Предлагается, по сути, идти вперёд, перешагивая через всё и через всех, ни на кого и ни на что не оглядываясь, по сути, не брать в расчёт риски, связанные с эпидемией, и просто как можно быстрее отменить все ограничения. А если кто-то может заболеть – мол, пусть болеет, останется инвалидом или даже умрёт, значит, такова его судьба. Словом, предлагается закон естественного отбора, где каждый – за себя.

‘And there is still another issue: the moral choice which we are facing now. In the whole world, but sometimes also in Russia, appears the idea that one should first of all consider the economy, the material welfare. And this is, of course, very important. But what do they propose in this case? They propose to go ahead, treading over everything and everybody, without considering the risks created by the epidemic, and simply cancel all restrictions as soon as possible. And if somebody falls ill, let them be ill, remain invalid or even die, such is their fate. In one word, what they propose is the law of natural selection, where everybody is responsible only for themselves’

The fragment introduced by *mol* (“let them be ill...”) is not to be interpreted as indirect reported speech but rather an ironic echo of a despicable attitude the speaker dissociates with (Wilson 2017). Putin’s conclusion is that those who propose to sacrifice people and leave them to the will of fate actually call for a return to wilderness and barbarism, which runs counter to the tradition of solidarity and mutual help inherited together with the orthodox religion (he also includes Islam, Buddhism and Judaism) from the beginnings of Russian statehood. He closes on a warm, comforting note:

17. Сохраним, сбережём людей. А всё остальное приложится. Мы всё обязательно поправим и наверстаем, одолеем этот коронавирус и со спокойным сердцем, все вместе поднимем экономику, укрепим благосостояние, обязательно поддержим тех, кто потерял работу, достаток, кому сейчас непросто, подставим плечо пострадавшим предприятиям, поможем им сохранить рабочие места, снова встать на ноги.

‘We will keep people safe. All other issues will be solved in the process. We will definitely repair and catch up on everything, we will overcome this coronavirus and will calmly and all together re-establish the economy, reinforce our welfare, we will definitely support those who lost their jobs, their income, those who now face difficulties, we will be the shoulder for the enterprises in need, we will help them to keep the jobs and get back on their feet’

No epistemic markers weaken the message which delivers a clear, unshakable commitment to save the country.

The rhetorical outfit of Putin’s speech is conventional. The use of body metaphors (Musolff 2016) serves different purposes: treading over everybody denounces the inhumane approach of the corona deniers, by contrast, lending one’s shoulder to enterprises and getting them

back on their feet includes economy in the humane treatment. The wave metaphor, which was activated in the beginning (example 9), is now rendered innocuous: *My zastavim ee otstupit'* 'We will make it recede'.

Thus, this videoconference displays three different communicative styles. In the first and third parts Putin addresses the whole nation, in the middle part the regional leaders. In terms of rhetoric, the already dramatic key chosen in the beginning is boosted in the sermon-like end with its appeal to humanism and its comforting promises, whereas the exchange with his subordinates rather resembles a piece of internal communication. In terms of Gorham's (2013) typology of Putin's "high-frequency speech profiles", the March address represents a mixture of the *Technocrat* and the *Delovoi* ("doer"), while the April teleconference is characteristic of the *Patriot* in the first and even more so the third part. The scene with the regional satraps does not fit in any profile since it represents a sample of internal communication among those in power that has intentionally turned public. The populist profile (*Muzhik*) is completely absent from Putin's Covid crisis communication; by contrast, it often marks his annual TV show "Prjamaja linija" (Direct line), a previously prepared question hour with the president answering questions from all parts of Russian (Gorham 2014: 138-156), where he often chooses a marked vulgar note. His oral delivery is unemotional and monotonous, it creates the impression that the crisis is under control.

More revealing is perhaps a comparison with crisis management in Soviet times, a good example being M. Gorbachev's TV address after the Černobyl' catastrophe (Weiss 2000: 243-44). In syntax and discourse semantics, it faithfully followed the overall pattern of the Soviet Newspeak (Weiss 2017), thus suggesting continuity: everything is under control, business as usual. This meant, in particular, an interplay of universal quantifier and deontic modality ("everybody has to fight the danger"). By contrast, in Putin's speeches quoted here we find an interaction of ego-oriented predicates, notably performatives and deontic expressions with the addressee as a presumptive agent. Thus, by contrast to the Soviet collectivist ideology, he stages himself as the individual omnipotent ruler.

For the Russian TV audience, all this represented an all too familiar type of discourse. The echo in the oppositional media was far from flattering: too many people were aware of the discrepancy between the official claims and the deplorable condition of the Russian health care system in reality and the social distress of people without financial aid. All in all, according

to surveys by the independent agency Levada Putin's rating amounted to 25% in May; it rose to 33% in September, when the first wave seemed to lay behind<sup>32</sup>.

The remaining most important issues on the political agenda were the Victory day to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary over Germany, which on May 9 was replaced by a military air parade and postponed to June 24, when the parade in Moscow took place without public access to the Red Square. Artillery salute and fireworks were broadcasted on TV. The referendum on 206 changes of the constitution, which included the prolongation of Putin's potential presidency by "nullifying" (*obnulenie*) his previous turns and thus theoretically allows him to rule until 2036, was organized on July 1, although even members of the electoral commission had refused to work due to the risk<sup>33</sup>, and accepted by an alleged 77.3% of all votes. Thus, both events that were intended to boost the president's glory were realized with considerable delay due to the Coronavirus disease.

Several prominent Russian politicians were infected by the virus, among them the prime-minister M. Mishustin (April 30), and Putin's spokesman D. Peskov (May 12), who both had to be hospitalized<sup>34</sup>. Mishustin's comments on his illness were not very informative: he had no idea where he could have caught the virus and expressed his gratitude to the doctors, adding that his own mother had been a nurse<sup>35</sup>. In his address to the patient, which was very impersonal and free of empathetic accents, Putin employed his example as a warning that the disease could hit everybody. Peskov informed the public more broadly on his emotional and physical reactions<sup>36</sup> and his frustration that all his measures of precaution had failed.

The efficiency of the measures taken in Russia seems doubtful. In the beginning, the regions were ill-prepared, in local hospitals equipment, for example test material or protecting gear, was lacking or remembered Soviet times, and the medical staff suffered from excessive workload and high infection rates. The lockdown was accompanied by highly repressive regulations with severe punishments for trespassers, people were helplessly confined to their

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/12/doverie-politikam-5/>

<sup>33</sup> The infection rate on that day was higher than in April, when Putin postponed it due to the spread of the pandemic (Radio Svoboda, July 1). A physician in Orel said: "May go and vote whoever wants, but there are no free cots left in our hospital."

<sup>34</sup> Lived-experience accounts by public figures would be a rewarding and innovative theme in corona times. At present there is no such study available, not even in such all-embracing compendia as Thompson (2011) or Demjén (2020), which cover a breadth of illness narratives.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/718636>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/society/26/05/2020/5ecd70bf9a79475da1109e91>

homes. Today, Russia still ranks fourth in terms of infections (after the US, India and Brazil). The implausibly low rate of mortality in the official statistics is due to a counting method that does not comply with WHO standards. However, the government fears the social consequences of a second rigorous lockdown and therefore now rather moves along the way Lukashenko has taken, as some observers state<sup>37</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

As has been shown, in the beginning the Belarusian and Russian leaders used opposite communicative strategies in their crisis management. Lukashenko was initially a corona dissident and science denialist and referred to the experience of other countries only in negative contexts; in particular, he criticized the WHO recommendations and the Russian policy. His authorities were folk wisdom and religion, although he finally came to accept the relevance of scientific findings. He quotes proverbs and Donald Trump. His decisive argument against a lockdown was the safety of the economy, although he was not ready to sacrifice other important issues on the political agenda. Under the pressure of the ongoing pandemic, he finally had to abandon his belittling attitude and to take similar protective measures as other leaders. Yet, official statistics continued to conceal the dramatic extent of the disaster. His down-to-earth and unprepared discourse showed marked populist accents, including plain vulgarisms. He frequently wrapped his arguments in rhetorical questions, metaphors and comparisons which he sometimes reinterpreted by visualizing their literal, cf. the rooster in the lockdown cage, or by ridiculing them, cf. the helicopter money. His sense of humor, combined with wordplays and irony, was not very sophisticated. In his oral unscripted delivery, he spoke with confidence and presented his views effectively by varying the pitch of his voice and segmenting his speech with didactic pauses. He also used a markedly colloquial syntax as in example 3, where the last sentence switches to subjectless sg verb forms illustrating the behavior of a fictive child (“just went to see...”), thus introducing an indefinite description with zero (pro)nominal marking.

By contrast, Putin was far from belittling the threat, which he called a lethal danger. He displayed an affirmative stance towards medical science, although he never referred to individual medical experts, and appealed to ethical standards deeply rooted in national history and religion. He frequently pointed to other countries’ experiences. Instead of Trump, he

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30890704.html>

quoted Pushkin. He sought to find an equilibrium between the safety of people and the protection of the economy and temporarily agreed to postpone the political events that were meant to boost his prestige. After an initial period of active interventions, he delegated most executive functions to the lower authorities.

He strictly stuck to formal language and in general preferred a categorical, ego-oriented speech characterized by a multitude of performatives and expressions of deontic necessity. Once, he also attempted to comfort people and create hope with commissive speech acts. On the whole, his speech was considerably less figurative than Lukashenko's counterpart. Moreover, he deliberately abstained from that populist language abundant with colloquialisms and vulgar expressions which was so dear to him on other occasions. Interestingly enough, unlike in previous speeches, he used no martial rhetoric; in particular, the war metaphor so characteristic of E. Macron and B. Johnson was completely absent. His previous predilection for the theme of the Russian national identity and patriotism did not make itself felt<sup>38</sup>.

To sum up, in the first half of 2020, both long-term autocrats already experienced a serious credibility gap. In the case of Lukashenko, who had ruled 26 years, this gap turned out to be sufficient to trigger the mass upheaval after the presidential elections. How much his coronavirus denial has contributed to this defeat cannot be assessed due to the lack of polls. At any rate, the pandemic issue was later pushed to the background due to the subsequent political unrest. Putin was much more cautious, his mixture of medical, social and economic remedies proved at the first glance successful politically and allowed him realizing his long-pursued aim to institutionally consolidate his power. At the end of the period examined here, both leaders delivered lengthy speeches in which they depicted their crisis management as success stories but did not present any figures related to incidence, hospitalization and death rates. No failures, drawbacks and erroneous assessments were part of these pictures, the only term occurring when referring to regional or temporary problems was "difficult(ies)". The statistical disinformation about the real losses made a reality check impossible but voices on the internet reporting catastrophic conditions in the health system outside the big cities continued to be alerting.

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<sup>38</sup> [https://www.znak.com/2020-08-](https://www.znak.com/2020-08-17/putin_i_koronavirus_chem_prezident_rf_v_pandemiyu_otlichaetsya_ot_liderov_drugih_stran)

[17/putin\\_i\\_koronavirus\\_chem\\_prezident\\_rf\\_v\\_pandemiyu\\_otlichaetsya\\_ot\\_liderov\\_drugih\\_stran](https://www.znak.com/2020-08-17/putin_i_koronavirus_chem_prezident_rf_v_pandemiyu_otlichaetsya_ot_liderov_drugih_stran)

The present study calls for further research which would cover the period following the caesura of the presidential elections in Belarus. It seems a fair assumption that the mismatch between the Belarusian and Russian datasets will even widen since the political protests against Lukashenko and the brutal reaction of the regime completely dominated the public discussion. The poisoning attack on Naval'nyj in Russia did not provoke a similar reaction in the broad public and the domestic media; this changed, however, drastically after the recent events in 2021. On the Covid-19 front line, the mass vaccinations, which started long before vaccinations in the West, provided a new impulse of optimism.

A completely different strand of research would be opened by systematic mining of Russian social networks, which would allow a better grasp of the reception of official policies from the bottom.

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