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- PANDEMIC RESPONSE
- INFODEMIC AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
- SECURITY STRATEGIES

New Threats

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NEW WORLD OF PANDEMICS AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

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The latest pandemic has become a new challenge for the whole world, in which world leaders were forced to communicate in new conditions and amid disinformation and proliferation of fakes. They need to protect the population, defend their nations' security, stop the pandemic and infodemic, and keep calm. They appeal to their nations' beliefs, symbols, and traditions, and augment the number of public addresses and speeches, underscoring the need to be united and to accept restrictions, obey new rules, and adapt to the new world order. Basic state functions, such as external, political, and social security, have become evident.

On 3 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recorded 44 cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei, China. This day, actually, marked the pandemic spread of COVID-19. Then, on 11 May, WHO announced a global pandemic, which is one of the worst in recent human history. In July 2020, the global number of patients reached 14 million. Moreover, the virus hit global economy and stopped many industries all over the world, affecting small and large businesses, many enterprises, tourism, airlines, entertainment industries. The global pandemic has changed the principles of communications, primarily regarding security, health, mutual assistance, and locality. Many world leaders conduct crisis communications by trying to be honest, sincere, and socially responsible.

In our article, we analyse the crisis response of world leaders in this new reality, which is usually opposed by the people. Any crisis is a challenge, but it gives an opportunity to demonstrate diplomacy, strengthen society's

support, gain some political advantage, and transmit strategic narratives and messages. This year, especially, it is necessary to fill the information vacuum to avoid irresponsibility and clearly explain to people the true pandemic-related situation in specific countries and in the world.

China

The "Black Swan" of the coronavirus made a serious impact on technological industry, as a lot of industrial capacities are deployed in China. It affected the whole world, transporting people more into the cyber world than in the physical world.

On 31 December 2019, China reported to the WHO about a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan. A novel coronavirus was eventually identified. On 4 January 2020, the WHO reported on social media about this situation. In the first two weeks since the WHO's report, China's leaders failed to impose any restrictions or take

any measures. At the Politburo Standing Committee meeting on 7 January 2020, Chinese leader Xi Jinping did not indicate that he, or any other top leader, was alarmed by the reported outbreak in Wuhan.¹

Since 21 January 2020, China started to introduce preventive measures against the virus. The country's leader worked on its world image by stating China was responsible about the new challenge, acted promptly, and was ready for cooperation with other states to fight this crisis. On the same day, participants of the Politburo's extraordinary meeting defined the priority task to stop the virus and decided to close educational establishments in Wuhan, to stop transport, and to limit the number of employees.



The global pandemic has changed the principles of communications, primarily regarding security, health, mutual assistance, and locality

Already within a month after this, the Chinese leader spoke about serious effects on the Chinese economy and society because of COVID-19, but he was sure they would not last long.²

On 26 March 2020, during the G20 summit, China stated its readiness to share its experience in disease prevention and control with interested countries.³ On 18-19 May

2020, at the 73rd World Health Assembly, the first ever to be held virtually, a landmark resolution was adopted, bringing the world together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The resolution called for the intensification of efforts to control the pandemic. The Chinese leader reported that China took all necessary measures to fight the infection.

During the quarantine, China's population reportedly did not panic and supported the country's leadership. According to the Lancet Public Health survey, 74.5% of the population wore masks in January; in March this rate reached 98.8%, and the index of crowd avoidance was 61.3% and 85.1%, respectively. The internet is limited in China; thus, the survey was done based on Hong Kong information.

In analysing the Chinese leader's actions, the US experts can be split in two groups. The first group stands for the statement that China concealed data and facts about the virus and should be held fully responsible for the global pandemic. The second group states that the creeping government reaction was related to preventing panic. Meanwhile, Beijing needed some time for virus research. The US government supported the first group.

The USA

Today, the US role as a global leader influences the world policy and world economy. Moreover, this country is the key partner of Ukraine, considering the current political situation, so the

- 1 Minxin P, *How Has the Coronavirus Crisis Affected Xi's Power: A Preliminary Assessment*, "China Leadership Monitor", 01 June 2020 [https://www.prcleader.org/pei-1 access: 30 June 2020].
- 2 *Си Цзиньпин назвал коронавирус крупнейшей проблемой здравоохранения с момента основания КНР (Xi Jinping States Coronavirus Is the Most Serious Problem of the Health Care System since China Foundation)*, "DW", 23 February 2020 [http://surl.li/eswh access: 01 July 2020].
- 3 *Си Цзиньпин призвал лидеров G20 объединить усилия по разработке вакцины от коронавируса (Xi Jinping Calls G20 Leaders to Join Efforts in Coronavirus Vaccine Development)*, "IZ.ru", 26 March 2020 [https://iz.ru/991883/2020-03-26/si-tczipin-prizval-liderov-g20-obedinit-usilii-po-razrabotke-vaktciny-ot-koronavirusa access: 05 July 2020].

pandemic consequences in the USA also influence Ukraine. Below, we have analysed statements and actions of the US leaders.

On 22 January 2020, the first US patient was diagnosed with the novel coronavirus. President Trump said in an interview at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Switzerland) that the situation was under control with just one patient⁴. He seemed truly sure about only one patient and tried to reassure his nation in absence of any pretext for panic as the situation was under control. Later, many tourists from Asia and China particularly were diagnosed COVID-19 in the USA. Most of the world leaders in early 2020 were not ready for communications in case of a long-lasting pandemic and a constant change of the situation. President Trump was not an exception despite his communications expertise.



Most of the world leaders in early 2020 were not ready for communications in case of a long-lasting pandemic and a constant change of the situation. President Trump was not an exception

Thus, on 10 February 2020, during a rally in Manchester, New Hampshire, Donald Trump expressed his hope the pandemic would end soon and underscored his cooperation with China in fighting COVID-19: “Looks like by April the virus miraculously goes away. China, I spoke with president Xi and

they are working very, very hard. ... We only have 11 cases. But our trade agreement with China will defend our workers, protect our intellectual property, and substantially boost exports of American made goods”⁵ Following this statement, experts see some politicising of the coronavirus, including involving statements on new US-China war or US-Russia war. As we mentioned in the beginning of the article, the new global challenge significantly affected the political sphere too.

On 11 March 2020, Trump, in his remarks to the nation, stated:

*I want to speak with you about our nation’s unprecedented response to the coronavirus outbreak. ... Our team is the best anywhere in the world. At the very start of the outbreak, we instituted sweeping travel restrictions on China and put in place the first federally mandated quarantine in over 50 years. We declared a public health emergency and issued the highest level of travel. ... The European Union failed to take the same precautions and restrict travel from China and other hotspots. As a result, a large number of new clusters in the United States were seeded by travellers from Europe. ... I have decided to take several strong but necessary actions to protect the health and wellbeing of all Americans. We will be suspending all travel from Europe to the United States for the next 30 days.*⁶

In this statement, the president emphasised having the best team of American specialists, reassuring people and demonstrating a seemingly better US response to the pandemic than the European one. He

4 M. Calia, *Full Interview: President Trump Discusses Trade, Impeachment, Boeing and Elon Musk with CNBC in Davos*, “CNBC”, 22 January 2020 [<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/davos-2020-cnbc-full-interview-with-president-trump.html> access: 05 September 2020].

5 *Donald Trump New Hampshire Rally Transcript*, 10 February 2020 [<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-new-hampshire-rally-february-10-2020> access: 20 June 2020].

6 *Remarks by President Trump in Address to the Nation*, White House, 11 March 2020 [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-address-nation/> access: 20 June 2020].

appealed to people's emotions using words "unprecedented", "best team anywhere", and "strong actions". Such communication helps to unite people and makes it easier to face new challenges, making them more responsible and attentive to the situation, and helping them to understand collective responsibility for consequences.

On 16 March 2020, the US president changed his message and gave new guidelines for virus combat: "We're asking all of them to hold their gatherings to under 10 people, not just in bars and restaurants, but in homes. We really want people to be separated at this time, for which we do not have a vaccine or a therapeutic. ... These guidelines will only work if every American takes this together to heart and responds as one nation and one people to stop the spread of this virus".⁷

On 24 March 2020, the US reported 53,736 patients and 706 deaths. However, despite the increase in numbers, Trump said to *Fox News*: "Easter is a very special day. ... My first priority is always the health and the safety of the American people. We're working ... for the interests of our fantastic country." He selected Easter as the day he wanted businesses to reopen, saying he would like to see "packed churches all over our country".⁸ Within three days, the country reported 101,000 patients. Trump underscored his priority is safety and health of people, while inviting people to go to churches, despite

the quarantine limitations. In this case, his speech was for those people who held religious freedom rallies sending powerful messages.

With a significant and rapid growth of new cases, in the beginning of April, the president nevertheless announced that masks were just a recommendation and were voluntary. Even his administration was confused by this statement, and the US surgeon general acknowledged that the change in the position had stoked some uncertainty considering the daily increasing number of patients⁹.

Since then, the presidential rhetoric has been controversial. On 14 April 2020, the US reported 607,670 patients and 25,843 deaths, and Trump criticised the WHO for allegedly failing to respond to the pandemic and stopped funding it. In June, when the country's daily cases doubled to about 50,000, Trump reassured the nation that the pandemic was fading away: "The pandemic is getting under control".¹⁰ Trump's tweet of 6 July 2020 says: "The Mortality Rate for the China Virus in the US is just about the LOWEST IN THE WORLD! ... (and, our Economy is coming back strong!)".¹¹ Meanwhile, as of 13 July, the COVID-19 mortality rate was 4.1%, placing the USA at the top of the global rating list, so the above-mentioned statement was a manipulation.

- 7 Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing, White House, 16 March 2020 [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-3/ access: 20 June 2020].
- 8 A. Rupar, *The Fox News Moment That Revealed a Dangerously Confused President*, "Vox", 24 March 2020 [https://www.vox.com/2020/3/24/21192812/fox-news-virtual-town-hall-donald-trump-coronavirus access: 20 June 2020].
- 9 K. Liptak, *Trump Announces New Face Mask Recommendations after Heated Internal Debate*, "CNN", 04 April 2020 [https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/03/politics/trump-white-house-face-masks/index.html access: 05 September 2020].
- 10 C. Paz, *All the President's Lies About the Coronavirus*, "Atlantic", 13 July 2020 [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/07/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/ access: 20 July 2020].
- 11 D. Trump, *BREAKING NEWS: The Mortality Rate for the China Virus in the U.S....*, "Twitter", 6 July 2020 [https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1280209106826125313].

As the pandemic coincided with the presidential campaign in the US, which had been already very polarised, statements from the other candidates were expected. On 18 July 2020, presidential candidate Joe Biden tweeted: "Eleven. That's how many times we've broken the single-day record for new COVID-19 cases in the last month. This virus isn't going to 'just disappear' as President Trump wants. It's surging – and we need real leadership from this White House to slow its spread".¹² His key message was to demonstrate the necessity of the White House instructions instead of a statement of COVID-19 patients. Joe Biden implied the lack of number and quality of measures taken by President Trump to fight COVID-19. This situation could negatively affect Trump's image.

Considering the statements of the US top officials, such as Joe Biden and Donald Trump, we see drastic changes in the White House's attitude to the pandemic and its effects, as well as the candidates' use of COVID-19 as a tool in the election campaign when they blamed each other. Since January 2020, all Trump's statements have been about the overestimation of the pandemic's seriousness. Later in February, there were statements about US-Chinese cooperation in virus response and confidence of solving the problem by April. However, this mood disappeared in March, when Trump and his administration fully realised the responsibility before the nation and introduced some restrictions about working from home and limiting people's gatherings to small groups. At the same time, there was the strange suggestion to go to churches on Easter. In April, the statements' tonality changed again and Trump announced the suspension of cooperation with the WHO and started to criticise China for unwillingness to take responsibility for virus

spread. Amid the increase in the number of patients and mortality, the US president still neglected masks and allowed everyone to choose whether to wear them or not. In July, he claimed the situation was under control and the economy was recovering.

Thus, the pandemic and the crisis have been a platform for the election campaign, sometimes without the leaders' realising the true effects and problems of the outbreak. The attempt to stabilise and recover the economy results in undermining people's safety and national security and contributes to a growing number of patients and increased mortality.

Germany

The first case of the novel coronavirus in Germany was recorded on 27 January. European countries with the pandemic outbreak followed Asia's example of strict quarantine restrictions in March 2020.

Germany is one of the most active global actors. Since 1 July 2020, Germany has held the presidency of the EU Council, facing two challenges: first, containing the coronavirus crisis and working towards a European economic recovery, and second, initiating a lasting dynamic towards European solidarity and autonomy.

On 11 March 2020, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared in her statement that Germany was taking over the Council presidency at a time when the EU was facing "the greatest challenge in its history". According to her, the pandemic still revealed some fragility of the European project and showed the vulnerability of Europe. Merkel appealed for cohesion and solidarity in Europe as important elements of the response to the ongoing challenge: "But together ... we will

12 J. Biden, *Eleven. That's how many times...*, "Twitter", 17 July 2020 [<https://twitter.com/JoeBiden/status/128424398274714529>].

succeed in mastering this gigantic challenge. ... It is still important to remain disciplined in order to effectively combat the coronavirus pandemic".¹³

On 19 May 2020, Chancellor Merkel, together with the French president Emmanuel Macron, presented a Franco-German initiative, where it was said: "We must act – we must act European, so that we can get out of this crisis in good shape". Merkel added: "The corona pandemic is the most serious crisis the EU has ever faced in its history. The aim of the initiative is for Europe to emerge from this crisis strengthened, united and in solidarity. Europe must stand together."¹⁴

Domestically oriented statements of Merkel were also frequent. On 18 March 2020, Merkel addressed the citizens of Germany in a speech, saying: "It is serious. Since German reunification, no, since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge to our country that depends so much on our joint solidarity."¹⁵ On 1 April, the joint resolution of heads of government of the German states said: "Citizens are urged to keep contacts with other people outside the members of their own household to an absolute minimum, even during the Easter holidays, in accordance with the applicable rules". Merkel appealed to citizens to refrain from private travel and visits – including those by relatives.¹⁶

On 7 April 2020, new travel and entry rules were introduced in Germany. "We now have 'the world as a risk area', Chancellor

explained the decision."¹⁷ On 16 April, Merkel in her video statement spoke about the necessity to continue restrictions in the context of the absence of appropriate therapies and vaccines: "The pandemic can only be defeated with a strong and coordinated international response". She also underlined the important role of the WHO and other international health organisations.

Later, on 25 April 2020, a new international initiative appeared aimed at advancing the development of vaccines and drugs against the coronavirus. From the German side, a "substantial contribution" was announced.¹⁸ On 29 April, at the Petersberg Climate Dialogue, Merkel stated in regard to pandemics and climate protection: "The more we act together, the better we can avoid human suffering and economic disruption".¹⁹

During her meeting with the leaders of the federal states in Berlin on 17 June 2020, "the discussions focused on the further course of action to contain the corona pandemic and the package of measures to revive the economy. The Federal Government and the Bundesländer agreed that the minimum distance of 1.5 meters, wearing of a face mask in certain public areas, increased hygiene measures, and the instrument of contact restrictions should continue to apply. We must protect each other."²⁰

Merkel has always stressed the seriousness of COVID-19 and insisted on keeping the

13 *The Federal Government Informs about the Corona Crisis*, "Deutschland.de", August 2020 [https://www.deutschland.de/en/news/german-federal-government-informs-about-the-corona-crisis access: 05 August 2020].

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

restrictions, as well as focused on the unity of European efforts to handle COVID-19. She said that Germany, France, and the EU were facing economic challenges of a kind never seen before. Chancellor Merkel stressed the joint efforts of Germany and France in the economic reconstruction of Europe after the coronavirus pandemic. “We can only move forward together”, she said at a joint press conference with President Macron.²¹



Merkel has always stressed the seriousness of COVID-19 and insisted on keeping the restrictions, as well as focused on the unity of European efforts to handle COVID-19

A separate important communication line was one of the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas. In the first set of statements in early spring regarding the Germans abroad, for example, he said, “We will do everything we can to enable the thousands of German travellers who are stranded abroad to return to Germany in the next few days.”²²

The second one was about global cooperation. For example, on 5 June 2020, Maas stated before a videoconference with his counterparts from the region: “Germany wants to step up its efforts to help countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to cope with the corona pandemic”. He also spoke in favour of intensifying the partnership, calling for strong world trade relations with Latin America and support from multilateral institutions.

Germany was one of the first European countries where the virus was recorded.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Since January 2020, when Merkel reported the first cases, German leaders announced cooperation with world leaders in virus response and expressed confidence that the situation would change for the better. Merkel has not changed her statements since March and the administration encouraged the nation to work from home and avoid crowds. The pandemic demonstrated some economic readiness and political resilience of Germany, and Merkel’s statements proved her as the true world leader.

The Russian Federation

Russia introduced preventive quarantine restrictions in March. Since the very beginning, it was impossible to assess the real epidemiological situation there, as hospitals did not have tests and there were reports that a lot of severe pneumonia cases were recorded back in February. It is interesting that the pandemic came to Russia not from China but from Europe.

We have analysed the Russian president’s and other top officials’ statements on COVID-19 and their influence on the development of the political situation. In the first months of the pandemic, Russia reported a low increase of patients, stating that only foreign travellers brought COVID-19 to the country. In March, Russian top officials emphasised that the coronavirus was the problem of other countries. Putin also tried to shift responsibility to regions’ governors. In April and early May 2020, the growth in the number of patients became obvious. Since the first days of the pandemic’s outbreak, the Russian leader declared Russia’s readiness to find a coronavirus vaccine. Despite the reluctance to admit the start of the pandemic in the country, there were

some measures to support business and communicate with the society to keep the people informed. But at the same time, the political rating of the Russian president has drastically reduced.



Analysis of the first months of the COVID-19 response demonstrates that nations need to revise their communications strategies in terms of consistency, timeliness, and credibility

Thus, 4 June 2020, President Putin claimed stabilisation and improvement of the situation.²³ Following this statement, on 8 June 2020, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said: “As of 8 June, the patient number increase is 2% the sixth day in a row, Moscow has only 1% patient number increase, which was the first to face the problem in Russia, and the number increase through Russia is just 1%”.²⁴ Both top officials kept one line in communication, reporting a lower number of coronavirus patients and claiming the situation was improving in the region.

On 10 June 2020, Moscow was ready to ease the quarantine and its mayor Sergey Sobyenin said: “It is impossible

to overcome the coronavirus completely; meanwhile, I consider it is possible to return to normal life”.

Despite the situation, Putin announced a military parade on 24 June, constitutional amendments on 1 July, the “Immortal Regiment” march on 12 July.²⁵ Hesitancy of Vladimir Putin concerning the response to COVID-19 could be explained by his two key projects – the 75th anniversary of the victory in WWII and the planned amendments to the Constitution. He was not ready to admit the pandemic reality. The victory parade was critically important for Russian authorities, as this victory is the basis of the legitimacy of Putin’s regime. As we know from the latest Putin’s article in the *National Interest*²⁶, Putin was inspired by the Soviet foreign policy of 1939-1945, including for the annexation of Crimea and realisation of the post-Crimean ideas on restoration of Yalta-Potsdam world division in the 21st century. The constitutional amendments were also very important, as without them Putin would have to leave his post in 2024.

Conclusions

All world leaders called for their nations’ unity and solidarity in fighting against the virus. Some of them used these statements to strengthen their political positions; others were true leaders taking care of

23 *Путин заявил об улучшении ситуации с COVID-19 в России (Putin Stated About Improvement of COVID-19 Situation)*, “RBC”, 04 June 2020 [https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreeneews/5ed8ea249a7947973f63ab61 access: 10 June 2020].

24 *Мишустин заявил о стабилизации ситуации в России с коронавирусом (Mishustin Stated About Coronavirus Situation Stabilisation in Russia)*, “Interfax”, 08 June 2020 [https://tourism.interfax.ru/ru/news/articles/70638/ access: 10 June 2020].

25 *Собянин заявил о невозможности победить коронавирус полностью (Sobyenin Stated About Impossibility to Overcome Virus Completely)*, “Lenta.ru”, 10 June 2020 [https://lenta.ru/news/2020/06/10/unreal/ access: 10 June 2020].

26 *Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of the World War II*, “National Interest”, 18 June 2020 [https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982 access: 05 September 2020].

their people. In any case, this new challenge forced them to make more statements and take preventive measures to slow down the spread of the new global pandemic. Sometimes, they needed to call for unity in regions, the way Merkel and Macron appealed for the EU unity and strength in the name of the future.

Analysis of the first months of the COVID-19 response demonstrates that nations need to revise their communications strategies in terms of consistency, timeliness, and credibility. The problems became obvious for those countries where the integral information policy is absent and which have an imperfect strategic communications system. The world truly faces new challenges, revealing problems in the information sphere, and the international security system particularly failed to respond appropriately to these challenges.

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