



IPC POLICY BRIEF

October 2020

NORMATIVE CHALLENGERS DURING A PANDEMIC: COVID-19 REPORTING IN TURKEY AND RUSSIA

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Introduction

The reporting of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) cases and related data is contested across the world, regardless of the country in question. There is a widespread consensus that both the number of cases and mortality rates are underreported in many countries due to the complexity of the virus, the symptoms of which overlap with a number of seemingly unrelated diseases, as well as low state capacity, leading to low levels of testing and insufficient reporting. The nature of underreporting in Turkey and Russia, however, is rather unrelated to these factors and thus requires further attention.

Ever since COVID-19 hit Turkey, the official numbers have been highly contested. This was not an unexpected development given the high rates of political polarization in Turkey that breed substantial mistrust in the government as well as the surprisingly low figures that the government has declared on a daily basis. Toward the end of the summer, the questioning of official figures increased, most notably after the opposition mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, declared that the official daily mortality rate for Ankara was roughly equal to the daily mortality rate for the entire country. After rising pressure, in the early days of September, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca explained to the public that the official figures that had been released since July 29 excluded the number of people who had tested positive for the virus but were showing no symptoms.¹ Koca further explained that all figures since that date referred only to “patients” and not “cases”—meaning that only those who exhibit symptoms of the coronavirus are included in the data.²

The revelation created a major debate in the country around the government’s management of COVID-19. Since the crisis began the official statistical figures have been used as the primary (and almost only) reference to measure the government’s effectiveness in managing the pandemic. Thus, this revelation turned the reporting on Turkey’s COVID numbers not only into a critique of the government’s pandemic response but also into a symbolic arena in the polarized political battle between the government and the opposition.³ Koca’s disclosure was hence treated as a testament to data manipulation and lack of transparency on the part

of the government. Shortly after Koca’s statement the hashtag #vaksayisikac (What is the number of cases?) was trending on Twitter across Turkey.⁴ Koca, in turn, attacked the opposition for spreading negative propaganda harming the national interest. The result was the securitization of the issue and further polarization of the debate on the COVID-19 data in Turkey.⁵ Despite declaring that the total number of those who were infected, regardless of their symptoms, would be shared with the public on October 15, no such information was made available at the time of writing.

A similar strategy of reporting was observed in Russia. In May 2020, the Russian health ministry announced that they would stop counting asymptomatic cases when reporting the number of daily new cases in Russia. The health ministry’s guidelines stated that if the virus is detected “alongside an absence of complaints,” then the infected person is considered a virus carrier, and such cases would not be included in COVID-19-related sickness and mortality statistics.⁶

Indeed, asymptomatic transmission has been an important debate among health authorities. While the World Health Organization (WHO) announced in May 2020 that the spread of the virus through asymptomatic cases was “very rare,” one day later the WHO walked back on this claim, stating that “scientists have not determined yet how frequently people with asymptomatic cases of Covid-19 pass the disease on to others.”⁷ In any case, according to our current scientific understanding of the virus, the majority of COVID-19 cases are believed to be asymptomatic.⁸ Even though the puzzle of asymptomatic cases and transmission remains unclear, almost all countries report asymptomatic COVID-19 cases in their daily case numbers based on WHO guidelines, which define a confirmed case as “a person with laboratory confirmation of COVID-19 infection, irrespective of clinical signs and symptoms.”⁹ Thus, reporting laboratory confirmation of COVID-19 infections, irrespective of clinical signs and symptoms, is now the norm by which different states are able to assess the severity of the outbreak in a given country and adjust their policies accordingly. Both Turkey and Russia seem to be in clear violation of this emerging norm.

Norm Compliance as Prestige

In a seminal article written in 1993, Martha Finnemore questioned the creation of science policy organizations around the 1960s in more than a hundred states as diverse as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, El Salvador, the Federal Republic of Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Lebanon, Mali, Pakistan, and Sweden.¹⁰ She argued that the driving force behind the adoption of science policies was the result of a behavioral norm and normative change. State policies and structures, she argued, have responded to intersubjective systemic factors, specifically to norms, defined in brief as collectively held ideas about behavior promulgated within the international system.¹¹

Research on international norm diffusion and state socialization was popularized within the field of international relations in the 1990s. The argument was that the existence of international norms explains how states with divergent interests establish similar policy objectives and procedures regardless of their national interest. This influential literature showed us that states comply with international norms because norm-conforming behavior produced both global praise and respected state status, whereas norm-breaking behavior generated disapproval or stigma.¹²

It was no coincidence that norm research flourished in the 1990s, the golden days of the liberal international order. The Cold War was over, and diverse states were seeking their place as prestigious players in global politics. As Ikenberry pointed out, as these actors entered into the international system with new visions and agendas, they slowly undermined the foundational support for the liberal order.¹³ Global politics also became entangled with more complex issues like terrorism and climate change. In the last decade, the world witnessed the rise of populist politics, which envisage a world of states seeking solely their own protection at the expense of others. The sources of international norms and governance as well as multilateralism were challenged by not only the new players of the international system but also the champions of it, such as the United States. The U.S. National Defense Strategy document clearly states that the nature of emerging competition was “increased

global disorder characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order.”¹⁴ This was the global context within which the world has faced one of the most severe pandemics of the last century.

Turkey and Russia as Norm Setters or Norm Challengers in COVID-19?

Although health policy largely falls under the jurisdiction of national governments and is thus regulated nationally, it was rapidly internationalized after the SARS & MERS crises of the early 2000s.¹⁵ The WHO announced International Health Regulations (IHR) in 2005, which provide an overarching legal framework that defines countries’ rights and obligations in handling public health events and emergencies that have the potential to cross borders.¹⁶ More recently, not reporting (or falsely reporting) COVID-19 cases has also become a major transgression since the world initially severely critiqued China’s policies on reporting cases, which only decided to include asymptomatic cases in its case toll after international criticism.¹⁷

This widespread international criticism, which ultimately led to a change in China’s reporting policy, suggests that case reporting is now gaining norm status in international society. Those who violate the norm are quickly put in quarantine lists as risky travel destinations and shunned by most other states that follow the WHO protocol. In this sense, Turkey and Russia, which both choose to publicly declare and defend their reporting policies in violation of the emerging norm, can be perceived as norm challengers.

This is not the first time that these two countries are challenging widely accepted international norms. In fact, both sides are well-known for contesting the West, and in particular Europe, on normative terms over a wide range of issues including democracy, rule of law, and sovereignty. Yet, most often, they not only limit themselves to the contestation of so-called European/Western norms but also position themselves as the “genuine” norm setters, with Europe and the West as the violators. This is, for instance, visible in the way in which Russia presents itself as the defender of the “sov-

ereignty” norm in its annexation of Crimea or in Turkey’s positioning as the champion of “humanitarian” norms in its stance in the Syrian conflict or, more recently, in Libya.

Here, too, both Turkey and Russia justify their reporting practices not just as a challenge to international norms but as the right thing to do—as an alternative scientific norm. Turkish Health Minister Koca stated that scientifically, “we should all know that not every case is a patient, because there are those who have tested positive but are showing no symptoms at all.”¹⁸ In fact, this is becoming a new practice for those states that are struggling with economic slowdown and political crisis. A relatively low number of cases gives the impression that the government in charge is effective in managing the health crisis and makes it easier to normalize economic activity, which is already suffering under the mismanagement of populist and/or authoritarian leaders. For instance, the Brazilian health ministry stopped releasing cumulative totals of deaths and cases in May, provoking uproar, only to resume reporting after a Supreme Court judge ordered the government to release the figures in defense of the right of citizens to obtain information.¹⁹

Conclusion: The Implications of Contestation for Public Health and Global Politics

The Brazilian case alluded to above shows how even minimal independence of institutions can be central to impeding the contestation of certain international norms at the domestic level. As seen in the cases of Turkey and Russia, governments are relatively free to engage in such contestation and establish alternative norms, with no institutional constraints on their domestic power. Yet, the lack of transparency and challenging established practices in the case of COVID-19 reporting creates major distrust in these governments, not just domestically but also among the global community. This is one major reason behind the application of strict travel restrictions by states such as the UK or Japan, which distrust the official figures in Turkey and Russia. Hence, while transparency and trust are key to achieving public compliance with the

necessary social distancing and sanitary measures to manage a pandemic at the scale of COVID-19, they also become core ingredients in developing a country’s status and prestige in relation to others at the global level.

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**Normative Challengers During a Pandemic:
COVID-19 Reporting in Turkey and Russia**

8 p.; 30 cm. - (Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative)

ISBN 978-625-7329-00-2

Cover Design and Page Layout: MYRA

1st Edition: 2020

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