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## Transatlantic Democracy Digest

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### Life in the time of Coronavirus

#### TDWG Group Updates

**The Cable Podcast**– Please listen & share!

**Episode 38:** More about [Poland's Ghost Election](#) with Wojciech Przybylski in Warsaw and Emily Schultheis.

**Episode 37:** [Politics in the Pandemic](#) - David Kramer and Soner Cagaptay discuss how the coronavirus pandemic is impacting Russia and Turkey.

**May 20<sup>th</sup> at 2pm, TDWG Discussion on COVID-19, Disinformation, and Democracy:** Join us for a webinar discussion on Wednesday May 20<sup>th</sup> at 2:00pm on how COVID-19 has weakened our democratic immune systems to the spread of disinformation. To help us understand the current nature of the infodemic, the key actors, and some possible solutions, we are thrilled to have Ambassador Karen Kornbluh and Spencer P. Boyer, leading experts who have been analyzing different aspects of this insidious problem. *RSVP to [Karenkerschke@gmail.com](mailto:Karenkerschke@gmail.com).*

### Coronavirus and China

**Italian leaders have been reluctant to ask Italian factories and suppliers to restart operations;** European countries such as

Germany have been asking them to do so. For Italy, this is not only because of the coronavirus risks, but also because they have turned their attention to China. **The public debate in Italy has painted China as a benevolent actor, counterbalancing a malevolent Europe.** Recent polls have even shown that Italians view China as their top ally, France and Germany are seen as the top enemy ([European Council on Foreign Relations, May 5](#)).

An op-ed by the 27 EU ambassadors to China has turned into a **diplomatic nightmare**. Published in the China Daily, the op-ed celebrated the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EU-China diplomatic relations. It turns out that the text was changed by the editors, who were ordered by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to remove the mention of China as the origin of COVID-19. It is surprising that the EU ambassadors agreed to this censorship ([The American Interest, May 15](#)).

## EU and NATO

**Germans are debating whether to continue to retain American atomic bombs** as a deterrent to Russia. NATO secretary general Stoltenberg has argued that only by retaining these weapons, Germany will continue to have a seat at the table during strategic decision making between the allies. Debate has flared up in recent weeks about **Germany's nuclear role**, following the German Defense Ministry's recommendation to purchase 30 F-18s in order to be prepared to fly these weapons into enemy territory, as the current Tornado fighter jets are expected to reach the end of their useful life by 2030 ([Defense News, May 12](#)).

The U.S. is **set to leave the Open Skies Treaty (OST)**, according to sources close to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. European leaders and arms control activists believe that the treaty adds transparency and reduces the risk of an outbreak of war due to miscalculations. The treaty facilitates short-notice, unarmed overflights. A joint statement by a group of 16 retired military commanders and defense ministers, coordinated by the **European Leadership Network (ELN)**, calls for the U.S. to stay in the treaty ([The Guardian, May 12](#)).

## Hungary

Several Hungarian civil rights organizations have compiled a report of their statements submitted with **the European Commission's 2020 Annual Rule of Law Report**. Among other things, the report discusses the fact that the newly organized media authority can pose **a serious threat to the freedom of information** through the media. You can read the report [here](#).

Hungary has eased restrictions on stay at home orders in the majority of the country. Pest county and Budapest, however, remain in lockdown. This has led to **tensions between the government and the opposition mayor of Budapest**. Zoltán Kovács, the state secretary for international communication and relations, has been critical of the mayor's handling of the crisis ([Hungary Today, May 12](#)).

**Viktor Orbán's Facebook post has caused outrage in Croatia and Romania**. The post, which wished high school students good luck on their exams, shows a map depicting the **old Hungarian kingdom before WWI**. Orbán's map of Great Hungary included large parts of modern Serbia, Romania and Slovakia, as well as the northern half of Croatia – all lost under the Treaty of Trianon of 1920 following the collapse of the joint Austro-Hungarian state ([Balkan Insight, May 7](#)).

Police have **detained opposition politician Janos Csóka-Szűcs over a Facebook post**. He may face charges under a recent **amendment of the criminal law** that introduced jail terms of one to five years for the spread of falsehoods or misinformation that obstruct the efforts to fight the global pandemic ([Balkan Insight, May 13](#)).

**The Court of Justice of the EU ruled that Hungary's detention of asylum seekers in transit zones near the border is unlawful**. In November 2019 the European Court of Human Rights found that Hungary breached its human rights obligations by returning asylum-seekers to Serbia without considering the risk that they might be exposed to inhuman and degrading treatment upon arrival. The CJEU goes further than the ECtHR and finds that confinement in the Röszke transit zone without a

formal decision and due process safeguards amounts to **arbitrary detention** ([Amnesty International, May 14](#)).

This ruling shines light on a discussion within Hungary and Poland on the supremacy of EU law over national law. A recent ruling by Germany's constitutional court that a ECB bond buying program could be illegal has been utilized by the Polish and Hungarian governments to question whether the European Court of Justice can rule on judiciary reforms in Poland ([Politico, May 15](#)).

## Slovenia

Thousands of people participated in a **protest in Ljubljana**. They criticized the Prime Minister's **handling of the coronavirus pandemic** and lament that he is using the pandemic to **curb political freedoms**. They have alleged that Prime Minister Jansa is attempting to increase police powers, inciting hatred against migrants, and making personal attacks on journalists ([BBC, May 9](#)).

## Czech Republic

Czech Media has identified an **undercover Russian diplomat who allegedly entered the country with a suitcase containing ricin** as part of a plot to poison three Prague officials whose actions had angered the Kremlin. Andrei Konchakov rejected the allegations, stating that the suitcase contained only disinfectant and candy ([Radio Free Europe, May 11](#)).

## Poland

Poland held a **"ghost-election,"** in which no one voted but it was not technically cancelled. Just four days before the vote was to take place, the parliament made a compromise deal to deem the March 10 election invalid. Poland is now in limbo, waiting for a new election date and clarity about the voting rules ([ICWA, May 14](#)). Most recently, Poland's government has again proposed new rules for this year's presidential election. Its bill, which was introduced on May 11 would allow both in-person and postal voting, thereby superseding a bill passed previously that instituted postal-only voting. The proposal goes against the Health

Minister's recommendations that stated that in person voting is currently not safe ([Notes from Poland, May 12](#)).

Marcin Makowski, **professor of law at the University of Warsaw**, argues in an interview with *Notes from Poland* that Poland is in an unconstitutional situation after the election drama in the past weeks. Read the full interview [here](#).

Poland is ranked as **the worst country for LGBT people in the European Union**, according to IGLA Europe. The ranking takes into account both the legal environment and the social climate in the country. Some of the reasons for the low score include violence against activists at protests and hateful rhetoric by the government. This goes along with the recent declarations of "LGBT free zones" in Poland ([Notes from Poland, May 14](#)).

## Georgia

A day after Ukrainian president **Zelenskiy named Mikheil Saakashvili to head the the executive committee of Ukraine's National Reform Council, Georgia recalled their ambassador to Ukraine**. Saakashvili has a complicated history in Georgia. In January 2018, a Georgian court convicted him in absentia of covering up evidence in the case of the killing of a Georgian banker and sentenced him to three years in prison. In June 2018, another court convicted him of abuse of power and sentenced him to six years in prison. In 2015-2016, Saakashvili served as governor of Ukraine's Odesa region. When he resigned, he accused Zelenskiy's predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, his former ally, of corruption. Poroshenko, in turn, stripped Saakashvili of his Ukrainian citizenship ([Radio Free Europe, May 8](#)).

## Russia

**A fire broke out in an intensive care unit in a St. Petersburg hospital**, claiming five patient's lives, which poses another challenge to the government's response to the pandemic. According to initial findings, the fire may have been caused by a short circuit in a ventilator, state news agencies said. The Investigative Committee, Russia's top law enforcement body, said a criminal investigation had been opened. Additionally, Dmitry

Peskov, **President Vladimir Putin's longtime spokesperson, had been hospitalized with coronavirus** ([CNN, May 13](#)). Read more about how Russia became the newest coronavirus hotspot on [Foreign Policy](#).

Journalists at the Russian business newspaper Vedomosti have rebelled against their new management after the paper's editor was accused of **banning criticism of constitutional amendments backed by Vladimir Putin**. The journalists published a highly critical opinion piece on the paper's website and called for the editor to be replaced. The newspaper's media editor also wrote that the editor had banned the publication of polls by the independent pollster Levada because the Kremlin had opposed them ([The Guardian, April 24](#)).

## Kosovo

The Kosovo Specialist Prosecution in The Hague has been pressing ahead with work on **charges against former Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas** suspected of wartime and post-war crimes, despite the coronavirus outbreak. Meanwhile in Kosovo, where the court has never been popular because it is seen as an attack on the KLA's righteous struggle, frustration has continued to grow with what is seen as a biased institution that will only try ethnic Albanians while leaving many wartime crimes by Serbs unprosecuted ([Balkan Insight, May 12](#)).

## Moldova

Moldova's Constitutional Court has ruled that a **200 million-euro loan agreement with Russia is unconstitutional**. The government had hoped to use to loan to stem some of the economic consequences of the coronavirus outbreak ([Radio Free Europe, May 7](#)).

## Romania

The European Court of Human Rights ruled that Romania **violated Laura Codruta Koevesi's rights to a fair trial and freedom of expression**, when she was removed from Romania's top anti corruption prosecutorial job. The ECHR said in a

statement announcing Tuesday's ruling that Kovesi's removal "must have had a chilling effect on her and other prosecutors and judges in taking part in public debate on legislative reforms affecting the judiciary and judicial independence." She was also not given a chance to submit a claim against her dismissal ([Balkan Insight, May 5](#)).

## Belarus

Belarusian authorities have **stripped two Russian journalists of accreditation after they reported on the growing coronavirus outbreak in the country**. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka continues to downplay the coronavirus outbreak. Borders remain open and the country has continued their soccer league ([Radio Free Europe, May 7](#)).

Belarus will hold **presidential "elections" on August 9**. Lukashenka will run for a sixth presidential term. Opposition parties have criticized the plan to hold the election during the coronavirus outbreak, because it will make it difficult for opposition candidates to run an effective campaign ([Radio Free Europe, May 8](#)).

## Serbia

Several Serbian pro-government and right wing opposition politicians have started **hunger strikes**. The right-wing Dveri movement, led by Bosko Obradovic, is demanding that **elections scheduled for June 21 be postponed** until autumn due to the coronavirus pandemic and what he says will be an unfair playing field for the campaign. Meanwhile, supporters of Vucic and his party want prosecutors to investigate Obradovic over an incident on May 8 when Dveri members got into an altercation with the health minister as he entered parliament ([Radio Free Europe, May 12](#) and [Balkan Insight, May 11](#)).

## Albania

The Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor criticized the **failure of the Albanian government to meet the minimum food and housing**

**needs of migrants and asylum seekers** in the country. The government only provides 2.60 Euros per migrant per day, which is nowhere near enough. The centers are also understaffed and unhygienic, which could lead to severe coronavirus outbreaks. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities have closed reception centers to newcomers, which has left many stranded without a place to live ([Exit news, May 11](#)).

## Ukraine

Ukraine's **health care system is already overwhelmed**, despite relatively few cases of COVID-19. Medical workers are forced to wear homemade masks and protective equipment. The city of Chernivtsi is emerging as a coronavirus hotspot. Additionally, healthcare workers make up 20% of all coronavirus cases reported in Ukraine ([ABC news, May 11](#)).

Recent political developments in Ukraine are worrisome. First, Volodymyr Zelenskyy sacked most of his cabinet on March 4<sup>th</sup> and replaced the respected ministers with inexperienced ones. Then, he sacked his prosecutor general and replaced him with a political friend of his. Additionally, many of Ukraine's reformers have been fired and anti-corruption activists have been targeted. The Atlantic Council received a credible report that an investigation may be launched against Dr. Ulana Suprun, the acting minister of health who attempted to overhaul Ukraine's rickety healthcare system ([The Atlantic Council, May 11](#)).

## Worth Reading

[Why](#) Donald Trump's Commission on Unalienable Rights runs counter to the traditional understanding of human rights norms.

Dalibur Rohac [explains](#) why Transatlantic Relations are in bad shape.

Hungary is moving closer to Russia and China, Peter Kreko [argues](#) in his most recent analysis of Viktor Orban's political toolkit.



Is a New Kirkpatrick Doctrine the Answer? – Read Gary Schmitt’s newest [analysis](#) in the American Interest.

CNAS [on](#) understanding Chinese and Russian influence operations and how best to respond.

Read PEN’s [statement](#) on the danger to journalistic integrity and public diplomacy posed by the nominee to the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

## Coming Up

### May

20 – Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine: COVID-19 Disinformation in Eurasia

(Atlantic Council, 8:00 am [online](#))

20 – Global Civil Society and the Pandemic

(Carnegie, 10:00 am [online](#))

20 – Post-Pandemic Recovery: A new opening for US-EU trade & investment

(USEUROPE Alliance, 10:00 am [online](#))

20 – Democracy, Disinformation and the Transatlantic Alliance

(TDWG, 1:50-3:00 [online](#))

22 – Turning point? What the 2020 election might mean for the US-Europe relationship

(USEUROPE Alliance, 10:30 am [online](#))