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Government crisis communications during the COVID-19 pandemic: the case of Kazakhstan and Russia

Abstract. *Public awareness and communication with civil society in times of crisis, especially during the currently ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, has become of great importance to many governments, the media, the public and other crucial government stakeholders. Problems of disinformation along with the low levels of social trust towards state institutions have challenged many nation-state governments and brought them also at the same new opportunities and ways to solve their domestic problems. In this article, these particularly two issues are addressed by analyzing the decision-making process of states and in the context of top-down and bottom-up approaches. As a case study, official COVID-19 statistics and official factchecking web portals of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Russia were evaluated and considered. Social projects such as those of BizBirgemiz and MyVmeste were also taken analyzed and included in our comparative analysis in this paper. This article is divided into four parts. The first part concerns the introduction section. The second section introduces, describes and studies the case studies this paper will look at. In the third section, the discussion and analysis of the case studies follow. Last but not the least, the fourth section concludes our analysis with additional policy recommendations provided. Our analysis has shown that in almost all cases the top-down approach dominates for both countries of Russia and Kazakhstan, except for the so-called initiated social project MyVmeste, which followed rather a bottom-up-led path. Despite that, the paper shows us how crisis situations with the COVID-19 pandemic have become both catalysts for solving specific societal problems, such as disinformation issue and a source for detecting insufficient policy interventions, particularly in the cyber realm.*

Keywords: *crisis communication, factchecking, disinformation, COVID-19, top-down & bottom up approaches, BizBirgemiz, #MyVmeste*

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Introduction

Communication and information dissemination activities are crucial aspects in the process of building stronger ties between the public and government and a mechanism to solve issues of lack of trust. The idea that there is mutual understanding between the public and government assumes that a trust-based

relationship is upheld via different instruments of both top-down or bottom-up approaches. These can be government-led projects or civil society initiatives. The usage of media outlets is considered as one of the ways to communicate with the public and understand via a feedback loop the societal problems, level of political maturity, and societal views on government policies. The outbreak of COVID pandemic

around the world challenged the mutually trust-based relationship, particularly with the emergence of polarized disinformation contents, aggravated social schisms, and low social capital development perspectives. This paper aims to conduct a comparative discourse analysis between the Russian Federation (RF) and the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) by conducting an assessment on how they coped with two problems of disinformation and lack of social trust. The analysis will be based on the discussion from top-down and bottom-up approaches, where the strengths and weaknesses of their usages, as well as their differences and similarities will be discussed. In the case of Kazakhstan, there were analyzed such official websites as stopfake.kz, coronavirus2020.kz and ortcom.kz. While there were investigated two official platforms - coronafake.ru and stopcoronavirus.rf in Russia. Moreover, campaign funds in support of socially vulnerable groups during the pandemic such as BizBirgemiz [We are together] fund in Kazakhstan and MyWmeste [We are together] fund in Russia were included as a case study. Finally, practical recommendations were provided.

Case Studies

Stopfake.kz & coronafake.ru sites as anti-misinformation instruments

Both Russia and Kazakhstan have initiated their official information resources combating disinformation since the start of the pandemic situation. In the case of Kazakhstan, the *stopfake.kz* project has been initiated by the MISD (Ministry of Information and Social Development) to stop the spread of false information in the cyber realm, tackle the high level of misconceptions among the public and encouraging a critical reasoning mindset [1]. The Internet resource analyzes the level of truthfulness, its origin as well sources of information distributed within the social media, messenger outlets, or other communication channels. By October 21, 2020, 91 messages of fake news had been debunked ranging within 37 themes in medical spheres and scams [2]. The content of the websites provides both domestic

and international recent fake news on coronavirus aspects with infographics and videos. Besides, separate sections about dangers of fake accounts and cyber fraudulent activities. In the case of Russia, the official website *coronafake.ru* has been initiated by representatives of the Civic Chamber of RF [3]. The interesting fact is that the direct URL link to the site is located under a hyperlink in the government website *stopcoronavirus.rf*, which allows easily to locate it [4]. By November 2020, the content of the site contains 178 cases of debunked fake messages ranging from domestic to international spectrum. Additionally, citizens can also be informed about the legal consequences and penalties of spreading fake information. Interestingly common fake news about the rumor that vaccines with lethal infections were meant to be injected on a compulsory basis by doctors and the police were spreading throughout both Kazakhstan and Russia and disproved at the same time by both of their fact checking web portals.

Official coronavirus portals: a governmental based tracker for the public

Both states provide an official information-based web platform informing about the current epidemic situation with COVID-19. The *coronavirus2020.kz* site deals with the dissemination of official information about the situation of COVID-19 in Kazakhstan [5]. The website has been launched by the MISD in mid-March 2020 with the aim to counteract the flow of misinformation on coronavirus aspects in Kazakhstan and provide a portal to communicate with and inform citizens with recent, reliable, and official sources of data. This initiative has been laid out as a result of the meeting held by the President of RK with the State Commission on 23rd of March regarding the state of emergency in the country. There was highlighted importance to centralize the collection of information on the coronavirus situation and using all available digital resources to effectively inform the public [6]. The site contains infographics on the treatment of the virus, their possible symptoms, videos on briefings by the MISD, news section

on confirmed or debunked fake news and a hyperlink to *anti-corona.kz* portal which provides additional metrics data on the infection rates with a link to an online application system for an express test. Visitors of the site can view the website in both Russian and English as well as use its mobile app version. In the case for Russia, an official website named *stopcoronavirus.rf* has been launched by the government of RF. Similarly, the Russian website also provides the same as Kazakhstan updated statistics and metrical data analysis about COVID-

19 situations alongside sections of detailed information on symptoms, treatment, myths, and global news related to the virus. In contrast to its counterpart, it provides detailed information about government measures in support for various sectors of the economy, social spheres, businesses, and behavioral guidelines with official documents by government bodies. Interestingly, various redirectable icon links allow visitors to share content via different social media platforms such as VK, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and YouTube.

BizBirgemiz and MyWmeste campaign

By the initiative of the Elbasy Nursultan Nazarbayev, The *BizBirgemiz* fund has been launched and assisted by the Nur Otan party. The fund aimed to support the most vulnerable groups of the society during the coronavirus crisis. During the first wave of assistance campaign, around eleven thousand families were provided food baskets, medical masks, and antiseptic utilities. With the start of the second wave, socially vulnerable groups such as low-income families, persons with disabilities, orphans, war veterans and other social groups have received financial support. By mid-October, more than 650.000 families within 23 major cities and adjacent villages received support and raised in total 34 billion tenge (approx. 79 million dollars) [7].

In Russia, the *MyWmeste fund* was launched on March 16 within twelve regions by volunteer network organizations to help vulnerable social groups, such as elderly people, medics, and employees of social institutions. This initiative can

be classified as a bottom-up approach dissimilar to the case of Kazakhstan. By November 2020, the fund consisted of 120.000 volunteers and was supported by 9402 partners and raised a total of 1.81 billion rubles (approx. 23 million dollars) [8]. By now, the campaign has been mentioned about 261 thousand times in social media outlets and more than 19 thousand times in federal media [9].

Central Communications Service: Bridging the public, media and government bodies for information and strategic communication exchange

The state institution CCS (Central Communications Service) with its *ortcom.kz* official portal is a government-based non-profit organization performing information and communication activities in Kazakhstan that forms a single national interaction mechanism platform for the public, media, and government bodies. CCS works under the subdivision of Administration of the President. Its main objectives are to coordinate media policies, disseminate information on anti-crisis management aspects, provide effective recommendations with analytical support on information strategy in crisis situations and hold briefings and press conferences [10]. During the pandemic CCS coordinated information flow by regularly providing briefings with MISD of RK with live translations on national broadcasting outlets and social media. In the context of the RF, no single unified state institution exists, which could perform information and communication activities for the public, media, and government bodies. This should be taken into consideration.

Discussion and analysis

The analysis of case studies has shown that a top-down approach can be quite effective, as in the case of Kazakhstan and Russia with its *stopfake.kz* or *coronafake.ru* portals as official reference points allowing for the public to retrieve expert- and fact-based source of information. However, one must take into consideration that private websites, such as *fakecheck.ru* and *factcheck.kz*, will always exist in every circumstance. One of the main arguments to apply a top-down approach

is that it creates clear lines of authority and addresses existing problems through decision-makers as key stakeholders with limited extent of changes during the implementation process [11]. This way it can filter down the larger strategic goals from the top to lower-level administrative staff. Nevertheless, there is always a transfer risk of implementation issues. Sometimes, the *big picture* that authorities envision is not always understood by line managers when implementing a policy design [12]. Another argument for a top-down approach is oriented towards increasing the social capital via a collectivist society. In other words, a consolidated and unified society with shared values, identity and common societal problems will constitute eventually common goals. For instance, in the Kazakhstani case between CCS and MISD, the social capital that is nurtured is the formation of a single national interaction mechanism for the public, media and governmental bodies. This is especially significant and relevant in a post-soviet context, where the political processes mirror inherited fragments of the past. Hence, a central state institution would favor an effective, operative, and systematic communication with all stakeholders to deliver trustworthy information exchange and combat disinformation contents.

Contrary to a top-down approach, the example of MyWmeste initiative in Russia exemplified that through a bottom-up approach the society can consolidate both human and financial resources without initial government initiative. Crescenzi and Rodríguez-Pose (2011) argues that a bottom-up approach provides place awareness to local needs [13]. This way complex societal problems are solved more efficiently because local actors involved in the implementation and policy design processes know the nuances of the problem. Hence, they can adapt and improve the whole project to the real circumstances and not from a perspective of a policy maker [14,15]. Interestingly, another bottom-up initiated Experts Hub Kazakhstan program has been launched in Kazakhstan as of mid-November this year by the non-governmental organization communicative agency Red Point Kazakhstan. The program was created as a result of the emergence of massive disinformation flow during

the COVID-19 pandemic period [16]. It aims to train fifty national experts from scientific fields of medicine, healthcare, and biological studies on how to effectively interact within the social network realm and how to communicate clearly scientific ideas to the public. The program should positively impact the mutual trust-based bridge between experts, government, and the general public in the fight against disinformation.

The significance of information communication aspects can be highlighted by explaining the role of the society and state within the so-called well-known knowledge deficit model [17, 18]. According to the model, an information vacuum in the society generates public skepticism towards the expert community. This is exacerbated when alternative information sources with destructive tendencies dominate information outlets and people in a society base their trust on hoaxes due to the fear of the unknown [19]. However, the model explains that the issue is not that the public does not understand the expert, but rather due to lack or insufficient reliable expert-based information [20]. Thus, the more knowledge or information a public community obtains and digests, the more objectively a person can assess the factualness of an information. However, the assumption that simply providing open and reliable information does not guarantee that people will trust, accept and learn, since many factors such as personal beliefs or functionally constructed fears come into play. [21, 22]. Instead, the government should pro-actively try to build a public basis to teach and not blame the public. This is especially relevant during constant and regular informational wars in the cyber realm. Hence, being able to check factual from non-factual sources via official factchecking portals such as *stopfake.kz* or *coronafake.ru* are of immense importance for both public and government bodies to tackle problems of disinformation and lack of mutual trust.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper shows how crises with the COVID-19 pandemic have become both catalysts for solving specific societal problems, such as disinformation issues and a source

for detecting insufficient policy interventions, particularly in the cyber realm. Firstly, it was found out that both states had official fact checking websites targeting the disinformation problem and both created their own official portals regarding updated epidemic situational statistics with COVID-19. In terms of differences, Kazakhstan on the one hand established its unified central communications service, while in the context of Russia such state institution has not yet been created. In terms of campaigns, the Russian *MyWmeste* fund was initiated via a bottom-up approach, while its counterpart *BizBirgemiz* fund pertained purely top-down elements with the initiative taken by the ruling party. The paper also used the concept of knowledge-deficit model to explain the existing schism between the public mass and expert community to demonstrate the emergence of lack of trust towards government bodies and subsequent rise of disinformation content.

Finally, based on the discussion and analysis of case studies, the following suggestions are recommended:

- Adding icons or hyperlinks of official factchecking portals, into Kazakhstani official government-supported mass media outlets (*tengrinews.kz*, *zakon.kz* or *inform.kz*) as well as Russian mass media outlets are recommended.

- Since most disinformation content originates from social media outlets, it might be important to do a nationwide awareness campaigns (both nationwide and locally) to increase the level of digital and financial literacy. Another way to research on this issue is to fund research studies on studying the susceptibility rate for disinformation by specific groups of people or specific outlets.

- Both governments should keep consolidating the society's social responsibility and trust by pro-actively education starting from primary to high school level common understanding of problems and goals, is the only way to unite the public to fight against the disinformation problem. The next generation and the generation of those born after the 2000's should be targeted into this pro-active awareness campaign.

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Государственные кризисные коммуникации во время пандемии COVID-19: на примере Казахстана и России

Аннотация. Осведомленность общественности и общение с гражданским обществом во время кризиса, особенно во время продолжающейся в настоящее время пандемии COVID-19, приобрели большое значение для многих правительств, средств массовой информации, общественности и других важных государственных заинтересованных сторон. Проблемы дезинформации наряду с низким уровнем общественного доверия к государственным институтам бросили вызов правительствам многих национальных государств и открыли для них те же новые возможности и способы решения своих внутренних проблем. В данной статье эти две проблемы рассматриваются путем анализа процесса принятия решений в государствах и в контексте подходов «сверху вниз» и «снизу вверх». В качестве примера были оценены и рассмотрены официальная статистика COVID-19 и официальные веб-порталы по проверке фактов в Республике Казахстан и Республике Россия. Социальные проекты, такие как BizBirgemiz и MyVmeste, также были проанализированы и включены в наш сравнительный анализ в этой статье. Данная статья разделена на четыре части. Первая часть касается вводного раздела. Во втором разделе представлены, описаны и изучаются тематические исследования, которые будут рассмотрены в этом документе. В третьем разделе следует обсуждение и анализ тематических исследований. Четвертый раздел завершает наш анализ дополнительными рекомендациями по политике. Наш анализ показал, что почти во всех случаях подход «сверху вниз» доминирует как в России, так и в Казахстане, за исключением так называемого инициированного социального проекта MyVmeste, который шел скорее по пути «снизу вверх». Несмотря на это, в документе показано, как кризисные ситуации, связанные с пандемией COVID-19, стали одновременно катализаторами решения конкретных социальных проблем, таких как проблема дезинформации, и источником выявления недостаточного политического вмешательства, особенно в киберсфере.

Ключевые слова: кризис коммуникация, фактчекинг дезинформация, COVID-19, подходы сверху-вниз и снизу-вверх, BizBirgemiz; #МыВместе.

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Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы

Мемлекеттік басқару академиясы жанындағы Дипломатия институты, Нұр-Сұлтан, Қазақстан

**COVID-19 пандемиясы кезіндегі үкіметтік дағдарыстық коммуникация:
Қазақстан мен Ресей үлгісінде**

Аңдатпа. Дағдарыс кезеңінде, әсіресе қазіргі уақытта жалғасып жатқан COVID-19 пандемиясы кезінде халықтың хабардар болуы және азаматтық қоғаммен байланысы көптеген үкіметтер, бұқаралық ақпарат құралдары, қоғам және басқа да маңызды мемлекеттік мүдделі тараптар үшін маңызды болды. Дезинформация проблемалары мен мемлекеттік институттарға деген әлеуметтік сенімділіктің төмен деңгейі көптеген ұлттық үкіметтерге қарсы тұрды және оларды өздерінің ішкі мәселелерін шешудің жаңа мүмкіндіктері мен әдістеріне әкелді. Бұл мақалада осы екі мәселе мемлекеттердің шешім қабылдау процесін талдаумен және жоғарыдан төменге және төменнен тәсілдер тұрғысынан қарастырылады. Кейс-стади ретінде Қазақстан мен Ресейдің ресми COVID-19 статистикасы және ресми тексерістер веб-порталдары бағаланды және қарастырылды. БізBizgemiz және MyVmeste сияқты әлеуметтік жобалар да талданып, осы жұмыста салыстырмалы талдауымызға енгізілді. Бұл мақала төрт бөлікке бөлінген. Бірінші бөлім кіріспе бөліміне қатысты. Екінші бөлім осы мақалада қарастырылатын кейс-стадиді ұсынады, сипаттайды және зерттейді. Үшінші бөлімде кейстерді талқылау және талдау жалғасады. Төртінші бөлім талдауды берілген қосымша саясат ұсыныстарымен аяқтайды. Біздің талдау көрсеткендей, барлық жағдайда дерлік жоғарыдан төмен қарай бағыт Ресей мен Қазақстан үшін басым болады, тек MyVmeste бастамашысы деп аталатын әлеуметтік жобаны қоспағанда, төменнен жоғарыға қарай бағыт алған. Осыған қарамастан, газет бізге COVID-19 пандемиясымен дағдарыстық жағдайлардың қоғамдағы нақты проблемаларды шешудің катализаторы ретінде қалай айналғанын көрсетеді, мысалы, ақпараттың дезинформациясы және саясаттың жеткіліксіз араласуын анықтау көзі, әсіресе кибер саласындағы.

Түйінді сөздер: дағдарыстық коммуникация; фактчекингтік жалған ақпарат; COVID-19; жоғарыдан төменге және төменнен жоғары тәсілдер; BizBizgemiz; #Біз біргеміз

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