

DEES on COVID-19: Introduction

Hello and thanks for tuning in. I'm Jessica Pisano, associate professor of Politics at the New School for Social Research and faculty advisor for the PhD research group Decolonizing Eastern European Studies. You can find information about our work at the website below.

I'd like to invite you to watch a series of video essays examining how states and societies in Eastern Europe have responded to, and thought about, the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the disease it causes in humans, COVID-19. In the next few minutes I'll provide a short introduction and guide to these essays.

At the New School for Social Research, PhD students and faculty do interdisciplinary, critical social research. We care about both theory and context. We think an important step in solving problems in the world is to develop the skills to think critically about them. Our PhD research group "Decolonizing Eastern European Studies" focuses on debates that transcend traditional area studies. We challenge dominant conceptual frameworks and engage with scholarship produced in the region and its languages. And for us, our objects of inquiry include production of knowledge about the region.

The video essays on this page critically examine state and societal responses to COVID-19 in Hungary, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Poland. Each essay draws on long-term, direct engagement with people in the region and with scholarship written in the languages of the region.

Our series begins with a pair of essays focusing on COVID-19 in Hungary and Romania, where state and societal actors have mobilized narratives of contagion focusing on migrants as foreign bodies in order to conceal administrative incompetence and failure to provide adequate personal protective equipment to medical workers. Orsolya Lehotai locates current state discourse about COVID-19 in Hungary in the Orbán government's longer-term effort to redirect attention away from state failures by blaming international migrants and refugees.

Next, in a captivating essay entitled "Hitler and White Asparagus: The Pandemic in Romania," Elisabeta Pop shows how some Romanians have awakened ideology and discourses associated with the Third Reich to blame Romani returnees and remittance workers for the arrival and spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Romania—even as the actual sources of the spread lay elsewhere.

In her essay on COVID-19 in Russia, Dina Shvetsov articulates a dilemma familiar to historians of other pandemics, noting that early in the crisis, Eastern European leaders faced a choice between preventing the spread of infection and preventing the spread of knowledge about the spread of infection. Shvetsov points out that in Russia, some state actors also tried to shift responsibility for administrative failures to social actors. But in contrast to the situations in Hungary and Romania, some located responsibility for the spread of the virus not with racialized or economically marginalized populations, but with privileged Russians who travel internationally.

Next, Malkhaz Toria examines relationships between church and state in Georgia through the lens of COVID-19. After describing the measures Georgia's national government put in place to control the spread of the virus, he analyzes exceptions to those measures granted to the Georgian Orthodox

Church. There, some parties saw religious services held during the pandemic as an overt challenge to the state.

In Ukraine, Masha Shynkarenko shows how initially confident and triumphalist discourse of the democratically-elected government of Volodymyr Zelensky diverged from realities of widespread PPE shortage, low wages, and infections among medical staff. Examining how the Zelensky government approached these challenges, she highlights tensions that arise when non-specialists undertake system reform.

Finally, Karolina Koziura shows how state responses to the pandemic have affected daily life in communities in the western borderlands of Poland. Even as state policies seemed to use the virus to resurrect and police pre-Schengen borders, people who live in Poland's borderlands communities instead challenged and protested the reinstatement of those borders.

We hope you enjoy these essays and we look forward to your comments!

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