



FROM TOP TO FLOP: WHY GEORGIA FAILED AT PANDEMIC RESILIENCE

Salome Kandelaki • Bidzina Lebanidze



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper unpacks the reasons behind Georgia's failure to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic effectively. It is argued that Georgia displayed low levels of both state and societal resilience which undermined its pandemic management capacity. At state level, limited resources, prioritization of socio-economic issues, political radicalization, and the domination of narrow party-political agendas among political actors resulted in disastrous epidemiological management of the pandemic. Societal resilience, on its part suffered from widespread vaccine hesitancy among a population influenced by low levels of public trust, polarized media, citizens' underdeveloped digital literacy skills as well as the ambiguous position of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Despite low levels of domestic preparedness, the international community managed to foster Georgia's resilience against the pandemic to a certain extent by providing a fair share of Covid-19 vaccines and supporting Georgia's economic recovery and social safety net from the negative effects of Covid-19.

Key words: Covid-19, Georgia, Vaccination, Resilience, Orthodox Church

INTRODUCTION

While the whole world is fighting Covid-19, the recent pandemic represents the biggest challenge for small developing states which lack institutional capacity, technological know-how and the economic and financial means to shield themselves against the worst effects of pandemics. What is more, Covid-19 multiplies the impact of existing risks and challenges such as socio-economic underdevelopment, bad governance, military conflicts and societal cleavages, as well as exclusion, polarization and radicalization. On the other hand, good epidemiological management of pandemics requires a high degree of both state and societal resilience and strong public-private partnerships. Focusing on the example of Georgia, this policy paper explores how a different constellation of state-level and societal factors can both mitigate and exacerbate the negative impacts of Covid-19. By measuring various aspects of Georgia's state and societal resilience we unpack the reasons behind the failure of Georgia's epidemiological management after a quite-promising start. While this policy paper is focused on the case study of Georgia, important lessons can be drawn for other small states which face similar risks and challenges.

Georgia represents an interesting case of how state and societal resilience can both succeed and fail against the Covid-19 pandemic. During the two years of Covid-19, the epidemiological management of the Black Sea country went from the best to the worst. Georgia started big: considering the country's limited capacities, its Covid-19 containment success was exemplary in Europe and worldwide. Quick and determined governmental intervention was the main reason behind the initial success. However, due to political and economic considerations the state authorities soon abandoned their restrictive policies, and suffered as a result from one of the biggest numbers of Covid-19 cases and deaths worldwide. On the other hand, Georgia has shown low societal resilience against the pandemic. The country was struck by widespread vaccine scepticism and key societal actors, including the influential Georgian Orthodox Church, failed to make any positive impact in the fight against Covid-19, including in the vaccination process. Both the ruling and opposition parties became preoccupied with political infighting and neglected the epidemiological management of Covid-19. Overall, the Georgian case illustrates that the state's quick and determined intervention is a necessary condition for successful epidemiological management of the pandemic. But it also shows the limits of an interventionist state when it is influenced by political and socio-economic dynamics. At later stages of the pandemic, the logic of governmental action followed not the epidemiological dynamics of pandemics but political reasoning and socio-economic populism.

STATE RESILIENCE AGAINST COVID-19

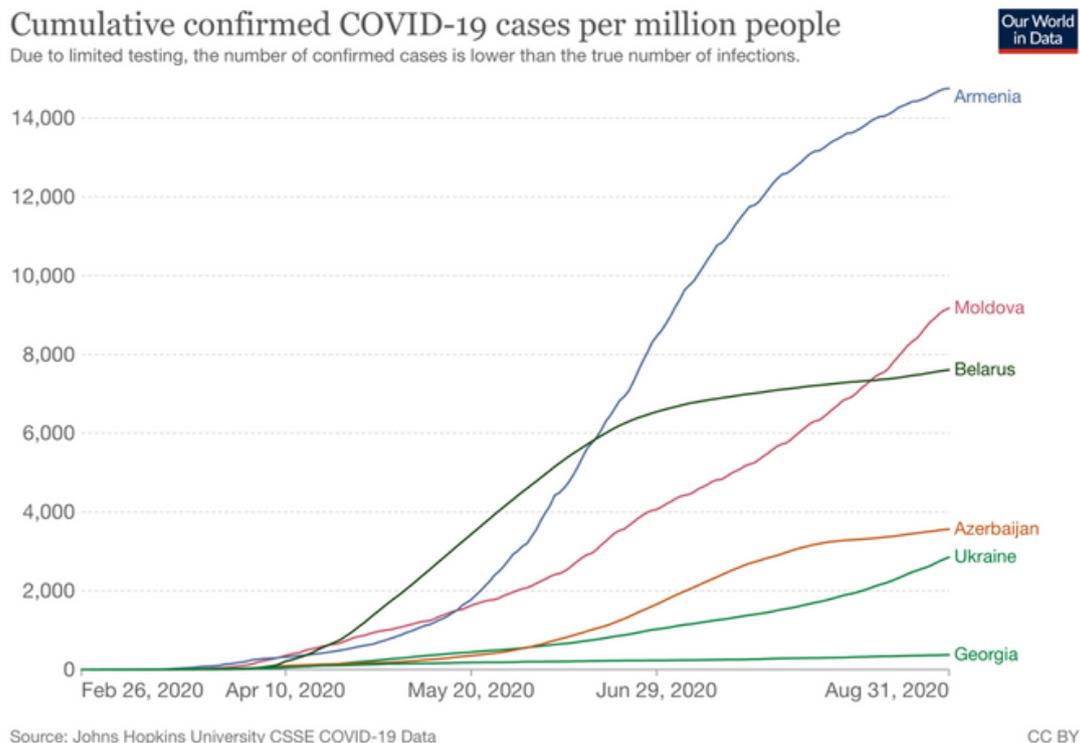
PHASE I: SUCCESS OF INTERVENTIONIST STATE

We can roughly divide Georgia's epidemiological management of Covid-19 into two phases. The first phase started when the first Covid-19 case was detected and lasted till September 2020. This was the period of time when the first wave of the pandemic hit the country and Georgia was hailed as a role model for its successful management (Washington Times 2020). The first phase was characterized by timely and strong governmental interventions. During the first wave, the government dealt with the pandemic mainly by lockdowns. The first state of emergency was declared on March 21, 2020, when the number of cases was around 43 (Imedinews 2020). Universal quarantines and curfews were imposed on March 31, 2020, which included restrictions on all types of public transport and educational facilities and the closure of open and closed markets.. In the first phase of the pandemic the timing of the government's intervention and quick mobilization of the available, although scarce, resources were the most important factors determining Georgia's success. From the suspension of flights to China to the introduction of lockdowns and curfews, Georgia was faster than the majority of countries in Europe and even in Asia (Lebanidze 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that during the first wave of the pandemic 73% of Georgian society assessed the government's measures positively (NDI 2020). The majority of the Georgian population believed that success in handling the crisis was due mostly to the correct steps taken by the government and doctors, while 17% of the Georgian population believed that success was achieved because of the genetics and religion of Georgians (NDI 2020).

Government's strong pandemics management succeeded in keeping Covid-19 case numbers at an exemplary low level compared to the rest of the region (figure 1). At the same time, some influential societal actors became spoilers of Georgia's pandemic resilience. The concern of one part of society was caused by the granting as an exception to the strict restrictions across the country for the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) when the liturgy was being held in churches. However, compliance with governmental regulations was already quite low and there were numerous instances of violation of curfews and quarantine regulations by Georgian citizens.

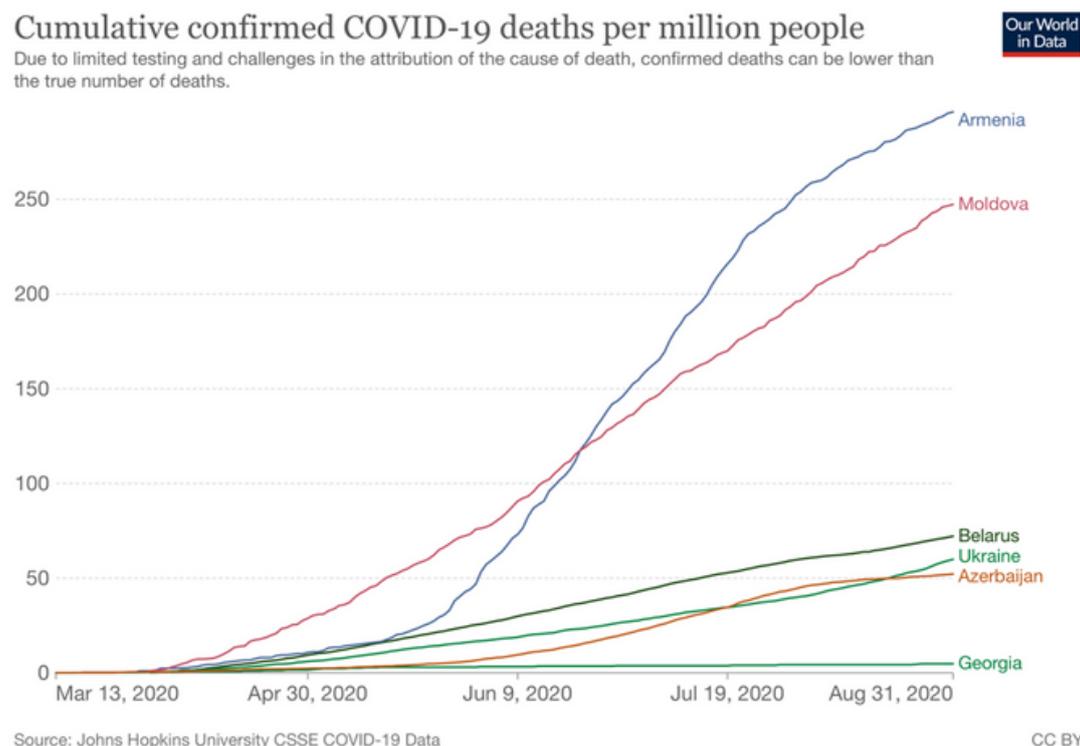
Nevertheless, strong state management was sufficient to boost Georgia's pandemic resilience during the first wave of Covid-19. By 31 August 2021 there were only 371 cases per million people detected in Georgia. At that time figures were ten times higher in neighboring Azerbaijan and almost 40 times higher in Armenia (figure 1). Georgia was similarly the frontrunner in avoiding excessive death rates (figure 2). By August 31, 2020 only 4.77 deaths per million people were registered in Georgia compared to 52.34 in Azerbaijan and 296.15 in Armenia (figure 2). To conclude, in the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, the state took the initiative in Georgia, and quickly and preemptively mobilized all available resources, and successfully managed to contain it at the minimum level.

Figure 1: Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 cases in the EaP countries during February-August 2020 (per million people)



Source: Our World in Data

Figure 2: Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 deaths in the EaP countries during March-August 2020 (per million people)



Source: Our World in Data

PHASE II: RETREAT OF THE STATE

While in the first phase of the pandemic Georgia's tackling of the epidemiological situation with Covid-19 was exemplary, in the second phase the country's performance deteriorated very quickly and it turned from being regional frontrunner to the worst performer. Already by the winter of 2020 Georgia overtook all EaP countries in terms of confirmed Covid-19 cases per million people (figure 3). By summer 2021 Georgia also became a champion in terms of confirmed Covid-19 deaths per million people (figure 3). The reasons behind this swift deterioration in performance are multifaceted, comprising of economic, political, and societal factors.

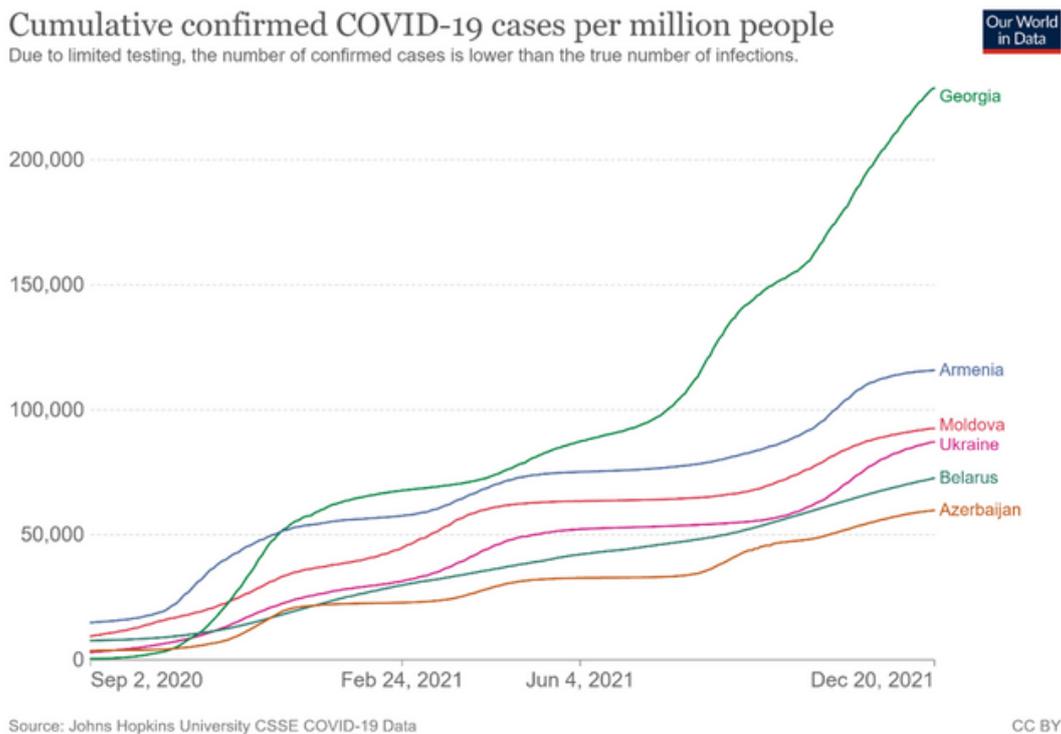
Firstly, the initial hard restrictions and lockdowns exposed Georgia's struggling economy to additional pressure. Even though the government had developed an anti-crisis economic plan, business was slowly losing ground. Because the Georgian economy is highly dependent on tourism, the government lifted the lockdown in the summer and left only minor restrictions, hoping that tourism would stabilize the economy (Stop.cov.ge 2021). The economic reasoning was, however, closely related to and dictated by party-political considerations. In Georgia, the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with two crucial elections and a permanent political crisis which significantly undermined Georgia's pandemic resilience. In autumn 2020 the regular parliamentary elections took place, and pre-election fever outpaced pandemic concerns both in the government and the opposition, which were fiercely competing against each other. In the period of the pre-election campaign from August 2020 the government started turning a blind eye to the growing number of cases: the first two months of the fall were entirely devoted to elections, and Covid-19 cases grew dramatically. The government did not impose any restrictions until the elections were over. The subsequent restrictions were introduced with a delay and it took several months to stabilize the situation.

The political crisis that followed the 2020 parliamentary elections and which has been ongoing since then has further exacerbated the negative impact of Covid-19. The crisis was accompanied by permanent boycotts, picketing and street rallies, which in an absence of vaccines and lack of Covid-19 tests, could have contributed further to the spread of the pandemic. Both the government and the opposition parties became carried away by their narrow political agendas and attention was shifted from management of the pandemic to political infighting. The political crisis continued throughout 2021 and peaked during the 2021 local elections in autumn. While the government continued introducing limited restrictions here and there, its strategy has been, since the fall of 2020 devoted mostly to mitigation of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. Epidemiological management on the other hand has been constantly neglected. As a result, by December 2021 Georgia had not only overtaken the whole EaP area both in terms of confirmed Covid-19 cases and deaths (figures 3 and 4), but it also became World No. 1 among leading countries in both categories. Barely any other country in the world has shown such a dramatic deterioration in Covid-19 management.

Like the ruling party, the political opposition in Georgia has not been hyperactive in the fight against the pandemic, including on information campaigns regarding vaccination and mitigation of anti-vax myths. There were some positive steps taken by some of the mainstream opposition political parties during the first lockdown, for instance, they distributed food and necessary products to socially disadvantaged people and created temporary call centers for their supporters to help them register for vaccination. Moreover, one of the opposition parties distributed face masks in the central parts of the cities (IPN 2020), but while doing so the regulations regarding keeping two-meter distance were violated. On the other hand, the libertarian political party – Girchi - has frequently acted as a resilience-spoiler in Georgia's responsiveness to Covid-19. The party has been trying to undermine governmental restrictions by searching for loopholes in the legislation and was against the curfew and organized gatherings, which ended up with fines for those gathering. (Girchi 2021). As was expected, the conservative and far right political movements have also opposed the vaccination process from the very beginning, exacerbating further the epidemiological situation.

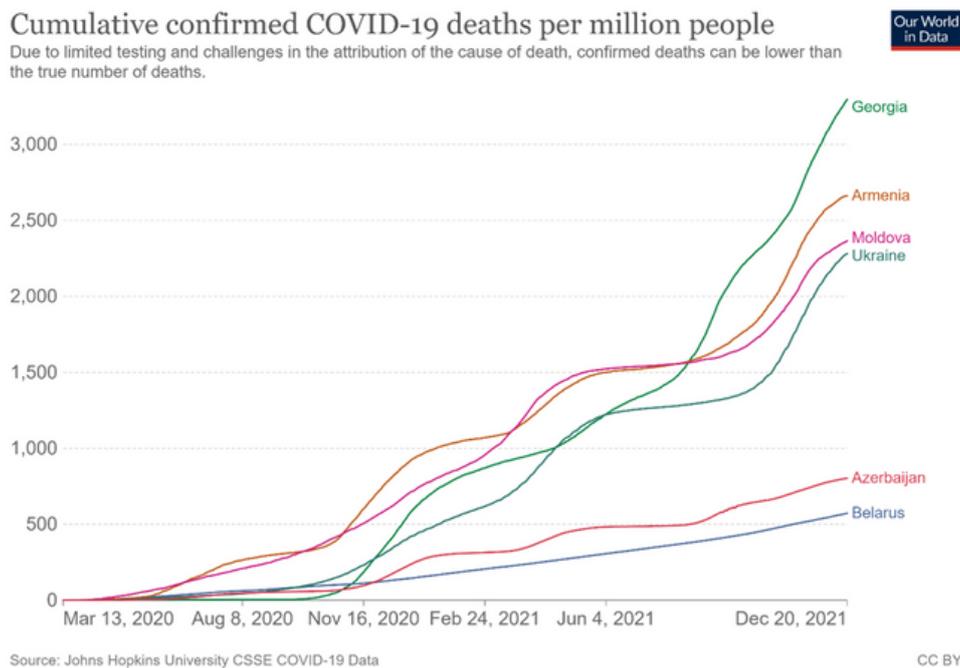
Overall, during the two years of the pandemic, the entire political elite of Georgia has been focused on the ongoing political crisis and less on the pandemic. Boycotts and frequent street rallies by the opposition parties and the subordination of epidemiological management to a political agenda and election campaigning by the government has undermined both Georgia’s state and societal resilience against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 3: Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 cases in the EaP countries during September 2020 - December 2021 (per million people)



Source: Our World in Data

Figure 4: Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 deaths in the EaP countries during March 2020 - December 2021 (per million people)



Source: Our World in Data

FAILURE OF VACCINATION PROCESS

The situation is similarly dramatic in another central aspect of epidemiological management: vaccination. Here Georgia lags beyond much of Europe. As of November 2021 only 27% of the population is fully vaccinated with two doses, which is not even close to the required rate necessary for significantly reducing the damage from Covid-19. While vaccination hesitancy is a complex issue and there are many societal, cultural, or otherwise factors involved, governments still bear primarily responsibility for an effective vaccination process.

The responsible state agencies in Georgia failed to conduct effective information campaigns about the immunization process and failed to provide timely incentives to society to get vaccinated. The vaccination process was further undermined by the tragic death of a 28-year-old nurse in the city of Akhaltsikhe which triggered massive cancellation of registrations for the AstraZeneca vaccine (Radio Free Europe 2021). The nurse died from an anaphylactic shock after receiving the first dose of AstraZeneca – revealing the poor conditions and lack of preparedness in Georgia's health sector for the vaccination process. This case further shattered already low public trust in Georgia's health sector and resulted in relocation of the immunization process to only fully-equipped multidisciplinary clinics, while in the smaller clinics vaccination was discontinued until the arrival of Chinese vaccines and later of Pfizer.

There have been few attempts by the government to incentivize the population to get immunized. Before the municipal election in 2021 the government introduced a 2.8 million GEL lottery to encourage citizens to get vaccinated. Implementation of this initiative started on September 13 and ends on December 31, in which vaccinated citizens get from 100 to 500 GEL prizes daily, 1,000, 1,500, 5,000, and 10,000 GEL weekly and on December 31, 100,000 GEL will be drawn as a final lottery prize (Agenda.ge 2021). However, surprisingly, this did not encourage people to get vaccinated - which is easily noticeable from the vaccination statistics. One explanation for the passivity of the population may be that they did not believe in the authenticity of this raffle. More successful was another initiative by the Georgian government, announced on November 8, 2021, that pensioners who got vaccinated before January 1, 2022, would receive 200 GEL as a bonus. During November 15-21, a total of 15,217 citizens over the age of 60 were vaccinated, which is 38.00% more than in the previous weeks (IPN 2021). The bonus incentive might have worked better because pensioners had a guarantee of receiving a bonus if vaccinated and it was not a matter of probability. Another attempt at immunization promotion was putting advertisements in the streets, which was ordered by the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC). They were, however, very soon removed and replaced with a negative political pre-election campaign against the opposition leaders. This was one example of how secondary the fight against the pandemic was compared to the political agenda of the ruling party.

MODERATE SOCIO-ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT

Next to epidemiological management, socio-economic strategy is also an important aspect of the fight against Covid-19. The actions by Georgian government in the second phase of the pandemic were largely dictated by socio-economic considerations coupled with political populism. For instance, in April 2020 the government introduced an Anti-Crisis Action Plan in four phases (IDFI 2020). However, these action plans mostly relate to mitigation of the socio-economic impact of Coronavirus and not to epidemiological management of the pandemic.

So far, the Government Anti-Crisis plan has four stages for 2020-2021, with key aspects as follows:

Stages of Anti-crisis plans	Protect the health and save the lives of citizens	Save the Georgian Economy	Caring for citizens	Total budget allocated
Stage I	Strengthening healthcare system 350 Million GEL	Supporting economy and entrepreneurs 2.11 Billion GEL:	Providing citizens with social support 1.035 Billion GEL:	<u>3,5 Billion GEL</u>
Stage II				
Stage III	X	X	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Covering utility bills 2. Families to receive one-time assistance of 200 GEL per child 3. 300 GEL assistance for self-employed people. 4. Students with a certain rating score to receive full tuition for one semester of 2020-2021 	<u>410 million GEL</u>
Stage IV	X	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Income and property tax concessions; 2. Interest subsidies for the bank loans of hotels 3. Microgrant program; 4. Credit-Guarantee Fund: 100 million GEL in 2021 and etc. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Utility subsidies; 2. 1,200-GEL assistance for individuals who have lost their employment; 3. 300-GEL one-off assistance: One-off compensation of 300 GEL, whose operation was suspended 4. 600-GEL assistance to the socially disadvantaged people and the people with disabilities 	<u>1,1 Billion GEL</u>

Source: Anti-crisis action plan of the Government of Georgia 2020-2021. Available at: <https://stopcov.ge/>

The table shows that the least amount was spent on strengthening the healthcare system, while most of the money was directed to social packages - which had a different explanation among political experts and politicians. Some observers considered that social aid provided by the Georgian government from the second half of 2020 was a political move to bribe voters before the parliamentary elections (TI 2021). But bribery or not, it is obvious that the government put much less effort into fighting to contain exponential growth of Covid-19 cases than on tackling the economic crisis. The first two phases of the anti-crisis plan of the Georgian government to some extent managed to reduce the negative socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. According to the NDI poll of March 2021, 50% of the respondents considered the governmental economic plan effective. At the same time, out of the interviewed respondents, 60% said that they did not receive any financial support from the government and out of the ones who did, 48% responded that the amount of the financial social package was enough, while the 52% responded that it was not enough at all (NDI 2021).

To conclude, overall, a combination of political and economic factors led to the retreat of the state in epidemiological management of the pandemic and to prioritization of socio-economic recovery, which led to devastating epidemiological results. But beyond the state authorities there have been also other actors involved in socio economic and epidemiological management of Covid-19. Below we unpack the impact of each of these actors.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE AGAINST COVID-19

Georgia's society and population have shown a low degree of preparedness and resilience against the Covid-19 pandemic. A major blow to Covid-19 management came through widespread vaccination scepticism and anti-vax sentiments. Despite the availability of Covid-19 vaccines Georgia still shows one of the lowest rate of vaccination Europe-wide. While numerous factors contributed to vaccination hesitancy, the key societal actors, first and foremost the Georgian Orthodox Church, failed to back the vaccination process. On the other hand, support from the international community was decisive in terms of management of both epidemiological and socio-economic aspects of the pandemic. Below we discuss impact of non-state and international actors on pandemic resilience in Georgia.

POPULATION

The Georgian population has so far shown a high degree of vaccine hesitancy as only 27% were vaccinated with two doses by December 2021.[1] Moreover, according to the 2021 public opinion polls, 47% of population said they would not get vaccinated and 11% said they did not know what to answer (NDI 2021). It's hard to isolate a single most important factor behind this public scepticism towards vaccination. One of the factors may be a lack of trust in government and public institutions, as the degree of vaccine scepticism among the opposition-minded electorate is much higher (48%) compared to the supporters of the ruling party (31%), according to the same survey (NDI 2021). The government shares its part of the blame for vaccine hesitancy, especially in the area of ensuring the conduct of a proper information campaign and countering anti-vax propaganda. The surveys show that 42% of citizens are not well informed about the vaccination process and 56% also lack information on vaccination registration (NDI 2021). In the absence of any strong pro-vax campaign many citizens have fallen victim to anti-vax propaganda and disinformation. According to the NDI survey, out of those who declined to get vaccinated, 47% said they did not "trust the quality of Covid-19 vaccine" – a claim that runs against scientific evidence, at least in regard to the Pfizer vaccine which has been widely available in Georgia since July 2021.

Next to vaccine hesitancy, compliance with Covid-19 regulations has been quite low among the Georgian population. By May 2021, due to the violation of the Covid-19 regulations approximately 245,000 citizens and 344 legal entities were fined, which amounted overall to 76 million Gel and Prime Minister of Georgia announced an amnesty due to the "difficult socio-economic situation" (Civil.ge 2021). However, many citizens were fined and had to pay a considerable amount of money, starting from 20 Gel and reaching 10 000 Gel in certain cases, because of violation of Covid regulations. During the state of emergency 8,737 acts of administrative violations were revealed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, for which 8,716 individuals and 21 legal entities were fined (Stop.cov.ge 2020). Public compliance has been constantly low also with another significant restriction – mask-wearing. As of September 2021, only 47% of population wore the masks, according to state authorities (Imedinews.ge 2021).

Lack of compliance with various regulations have also been accompanied by periodic anti-vax street demonstrations supported by opposition parties and various societal and religious groups (OC Media 2021). Overall, it seems that for the majority of Georgia's population Covid-19 remains a rather secondary issue, despite the country having one of the highest average rates of Covid-19 cases and deaths. In the July 2021

[1] Source: Our World in Data

survey, only 3% of surveyed respondents identified Covid-19 as “the most important national level issue” (NDI 2021). The top spots of national concern are occupied by jobs (41%), poverty (38%) and inflation (29%) (NDI 2021). While prioritization of socio-economic concerns by Georgian citizens is understandable, many Georgians also fail to comply with simple regulations which do not generate significant socio-economic costs – the low percentage wearing face masks is a case in point. The Georgian public seems to be lacking the high degree of discipline and mobilization capacity which is characteristic in societies in the Eastern Asian countries. Here Georgians display more similarities with Western societies, which is, however, not very helpful in the fight against the Covid-19. On the other hand, the Georgian population also displays one of the highest levels of vaccine scepticism among European countries. The combination of these two negative factors significantly undermines societal resilience against pandemics in Georgia.

MEDIA

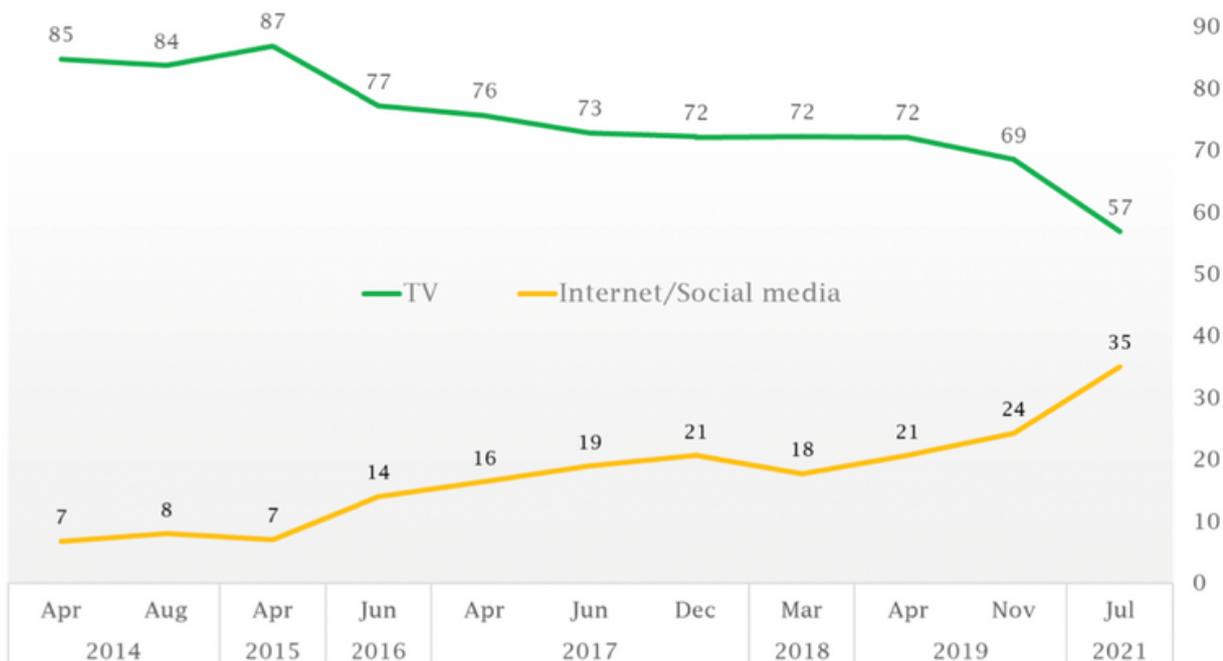
Polarization of the traditional media and the dramatic rise of social media may also have contributed to vaccine hesitancy in Georgia. The mainstream TV channels seem to be divided along party-political lines into strictly pro-government and pro-opposition camps. Both pro-government and pro-opposition media tend to subordinate their Covid-19 related coverage to political agendas, diverting public attention away from the fight against the pandemic to narrow party-political infighting. Next to the mainstream TV stations, there are a number of right-wing and illiberal TV outlets which have been deliberately promoting anti-vax myths. Some of the myths include claims that the vaccines are being tested in “Third World” countries, including Georgia, or that there is a plot planned by Bill Gates to reduce the world population by distributing impotency-invoking vaccines (EAP Fakes 2021).

Next to polarization and politicization of the traditional media Georgia recently witnessed a dramatic rise in social media consumption. The share of social media as the first source of information for Georgian citizens has increased fivefold since 2014 and reached 35% of the population by 2021 (see figure 5). If the current trend continues it could soon overtake traditional media as the main source of information for a majority of the population. Proliferation of smartphones was a game-changer in this regard. According to data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia 97,6% of citizens older than 15 years old have access to the internet via smartphones, and 95,3% reported that they used online media via their smartphones (Geostat 2021). At the same time, the digital literacy among Georgian population is still low and Georgian citizens are becoming more exposed to fake news and propaganda, which are spread easily and without controls, via social media (Akhvlediani 2021).

Figure 5: Dramatic rise of social media since 2014

Information sources

What are your main sources of information for receiving news about Georgian politics and current events? Please tell me, which is your first main source of information. (q29)



Source: NDI 2021. Public Attitudes in Georgia. Results of July 2021 Telephone Survey. Last accessed 20 December 2021 at: t.ly/kD6U

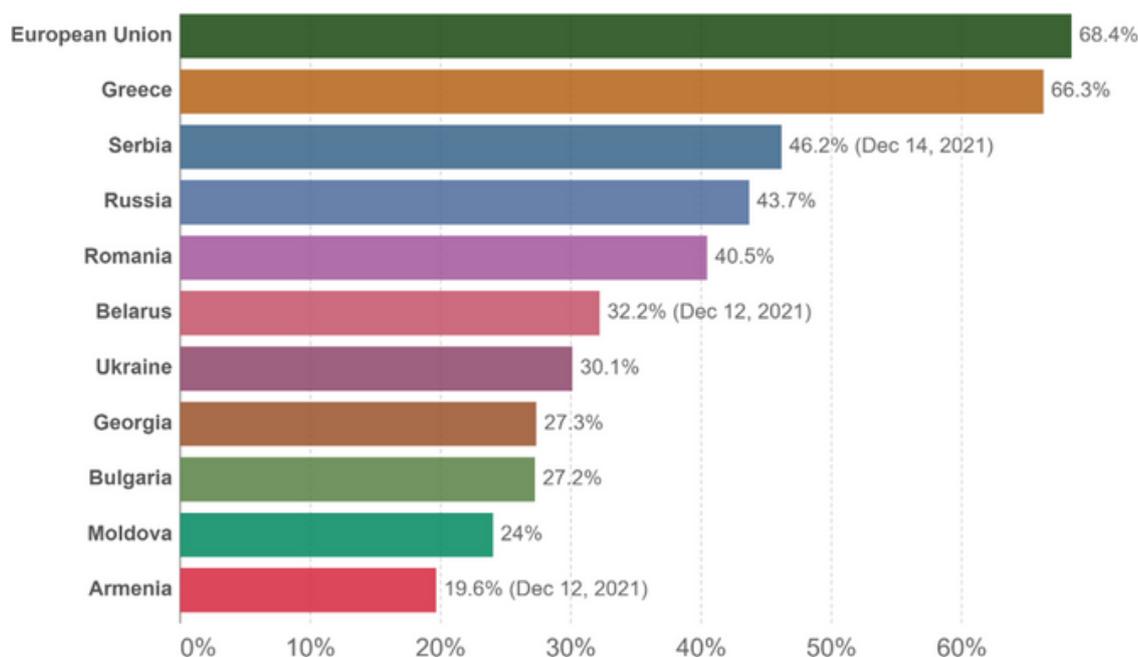
GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The power that the Orthodox Churches exercise and the influence of the patriarchates over societies is tremendous. Publicly stating the position of the church on various social and political issues has repeatedly influenced the formatting of public opinion in the past. Consequently, the role of the Orthodox Churches in combating pandemics and encouraging immunization should be of high importance. However, in most of the Orthodox states, the church remains passive in support of the immunization process and even acts as an instrument of conspiracy spreading (Balkaninsight 2021). Resistance towards vaccination in these countries is visible from the statistical figures regarding vaccination (below). It is noteworthy that among the top ten Orthodox states, Greece turned out to be an exception to the general low pace of immunization (figure 6).

Figure 6: Share of the population fully vaccinated against COVID-19 (The European Union in general and key Orthodox states)

Share of the population fully vaccinated against COVID-19, Dec 20, 2021

Total number of people who received all doses prescribed by the vaccination protocol, divided by the total population of the country.



Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data – Last updated 21 December 2021, 21:20 (London time)

Note: Alternative definitions of a full vaccination, e.g. having been infected with SARS-CoV-2 and having 1 dose of a 2-dose protocol, are ignored to maximize comparability between countries.

OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Source: Our World in Data

How could this tendency be explained? The leader of the Greek Orthodox church and at the same time spiritual leader to 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, is the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I who was often cited as a close ally of the West (Papazoglou 2021). In Greece, the government-imposed restrictions quite early, which was soon endorsed by Bartholomew I. Despite the strong anti-vaxxer movement in Greece, the church and the state acted mostly in harmony in support of the vaccination campaign. The church was even named as the main vaccine driver (Kitsantonis 2021). In contrast to this, the Russian Orthodox Church – probably one of the most influential actors in the Orthodox world – was at first in “harmony” with the state authorities and lately has become inconsistent in its rhetoric regarding the pandemic (Hovorun, 2021). The Churches of Moldova, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria are also not active in fighting the pandemic, and they are obsessed with conspiracy theories that vaccination is designed to control people. (Necsutu 2020) In some of the Orthodox Churches this opinion is not spread officially by Synods, but the rhetoric of the clergy is somewhat similar. Since most Orthodox Churches oppose secularism and modernization, as well as liberal values, the resistance towards immunization might be explained by the fear, in their understanding, of Western dominance (Coalson 2013). In addition, governments in such countries tend to have a positive relationship with the church and use a less imperative tone, even when the lives and health of the population are at stake.

In case of Georgia, the Patriarchate is officially against compulsory vaccination, which could have a negative impact on the immunization process (Agenda.ge 2021). Moreover, part of Georgian clergy openly engages in anti-vaxxer campaigning. For example, the clergy who are members of the so-called Orthodox Family Union spread anti-vaxxer video messages in the social media (Mythdetector 2021). Neither government, nor the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox church take any tangible measures to mitigate the spread of anti-immunization messages. It is noteworthy that the official position of the Synod is to distance itself from the activities of certain groups of clergy involved in the anti-vaxxer campaign. At the same time, the official position of the Georgian Orthodox Church regarding the immunization process remains vague.

EXTERNAL ACTORS

The international community has played a key role in boosting Georgia’s resilience during the pandemic. Georgia received decisive assistance in both areas of Covid-19 pandemics management: epidemiological and socio-economic. In terms of epidemiological management, not only Western partners but also China provided Georgia with a significant number of Covid-19 vaccines. But Western assistance goes beyond the provision of vaccines. Without the help of international partners, Georgia would not have been able to receive Covid tests, start the immunization process, equip clinics with infrastructure, and start the construction of field hospitals.

In support of the immunization process, Georgia started receiving vaccines from mid-March 2021. By December 2021, the country had received up to two million vaccines from COVAX (AstraZeneca and Pfizer), China (Sinovac and Sinopharm), USA (Pfizer) and number of EU countries (AstraZeneca and Pfizer). Yet, despite the availability of both Western and Chinese vaccines since autumn 2021, at the latest immunization has still been going at a slow pace and some of the packages of Pfizer even expired in the end of November 2021.

Table 1: Major vaccine deliveries to Georgia [7]

Date	Vaccine Manufacturer	Amount (in doses)	Provider
Acquisitions			
March 2021	AstraZeneca	43 200	COVAX ⁸
March 2021	Pfizer	29 250	COVAX ⁹
April 2021	Sinopharm	100 000	China ¹⁰
July 2021	Sinovac	500 000	China ¹¹
July 2021	Sinopharm	500 000	China ¹²

[7] Source: Author’s own compilation based on various sources.

[8] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. Georgia receives 43,200 additional doses of AstraZeneca vaccine. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/1922> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[9] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. 500k doses of Pfizer donated by US arrive in Georgia, registration starts at 12 p.m. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2089> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[10] Source: Civil.ge. 2021. Georgia Receives 100,000 Sinopharm COVID Vaccines. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/410534> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[11] Source: 1Tv.ge. 2021. Registration for Sinopharm jabs to kick off from July 3. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/registration-for-sinopharm-jabs-to-kick-off-from-july-3/> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[12] Source: 1Tv.ge. 2021. Registration for Sinopharm jabs to kick off from July 3. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/registration-for-sinopharm-jabs-to-kick-off-from-july-3/> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

July 2021	Sinovac	500 000	China ¹³
July 2021	Pfizer	1 000 000	USA ¹⁴
July 2021	AstraZeneca	43 200	Covax ¹⁵
Donations			
May 2021	Sinovac	100 000	China ¹⁶
July 2021	Pfizer	500 000	USA ¹⁷
July 2021	AstraZeneca	5 000	Austria ¹⁸
July 2021	AstraZeneca	15 000	Lithuania ¹⁹
August 2021	AstraZeneca	86 400	Belgium ²⁰
September 2021	Sinopharm	100 000	The Red Cross ²¹
October 2021	Pfizer	83 070	Latvia ²²
November 2021	Pfizer	468 000	Poland ²³
November 2021	Pfizer	50 310	Lithuania ²⁴

[13] Source: Civil.ge. 2021. Georgia Receives 500,000 Sinovac Doses. Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/433106> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[14] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. Million doses of Pfizer vaccines arriving in Georgia. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2006> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[15] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. Georgia receives 43,200 additional doses of AstraZeneca vaccine. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/1922> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

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[18] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. Georgia receives 5,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine gifted by Austria. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/1843> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

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[20] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. Belgium to donate doses of AstraZeneca vaccine to Georgia. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2219> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[21] Source: Agenda.ge. 2021. Red Cross to donate 100,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine to Georgia. Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/2575> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

[22] Source: 1Tv.ge. 2021. Latvia to gift Georgia 83,070 doses of Pfizer jab. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/latvia-to-gift-georgia-83-070-pfizer-vaccine-jabs/> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

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[24] Source: Delfi.en. 2021. Lithuania to donate another 50,000 vaccine doses to Georgia. Available at: <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/lithuania-to-donate-another-50-000-vaccine-doses-to-georgia.d?id=88702397> Last accessed: December 22, 2021.

Next to epidemiological assistance, the Western partners also played a key role in mitigation of socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 in Georgia. The EU was the first to provide financial assistance to Georgia and the EaP states during the emergence of the Covid-19 in 2020. In particular, Georgia did not lack EU attention and support of up to 427 million Euros was provided during the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis (GIP 2020). Overall, the support package provided by the EU and Team Europe to help Georgia deal with the COVID-19 pandemic has consisted of GEL 1.5 billion (EU Delegation to Georgia 2021). According to the EU, that is “one of the highest levels of EU assistance per capita to any country in the world and demonstrates the EU’s strong solidarity with Georgia at this time of unprecedented crisis”(EU Delegation to Georgia 2021).

By March 31, 2021, Georgia received €1.44 billion funds overall from abroad to implement anti-crisis measures (IDFI July, 2021). In 2021, the 6-month plan for Grants was fulfilled to the extent of 121.3%. The budget was supplied with more money than planned - amounting to GEL 44 million more – and in total it was GEL 249 million, out of which GEL 214 million was foreign grants (TI 2021).

CONCLUSION

In its Covid-19 management Georgia experienced a remarkable curve: from regionally the most successful to least successful country. The initial strong resilience against Covid-19 established by an interventionist state was very soon neutralized by low societal resilience and the retreat of the state from epidemiological management of the pandemic.

Several reasons contributed to this dramatic drop in resilience against the pandemic. Firstly, after its initial epidemiological success, the government decided to prioritize socio-economic policies over epidemiological management of the pandemic, as socio-economic costs were quickly aggregating in this tourism-dependent country. This shift resulted in the lifting of lockdowns without having any Plan B for epidemiological risk mitigation.

Secondly, during the pre-election period in 2020 and also in 2021, the attention of the state authorities, even the ones responsible for dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, was diverted to political issues and fighting for power. Political confrontation took such severe forms that both the ruling power and the opposition were completely cut off from dealing with the pandemic. Against this background, the public and the media shifted their focus to political polarization and the epidemiological management of Covid-19 was further deprioritized. In the light of this situation, the collapse and lack of preparedness of the healthcare system became even more apparent.

Thirdly, Georgian society and population have proven to be vulnerable to anti-vax disinformation and fake news, which has resulted in a slow roll-out for the immunization process. The ineffectiveness of the healthcare sector and unwillingness of influential societal actors, first and foremost the Georgian Orthodox Church, to back the vaccination process have further undermined the vaccination process and weakened the country’s resilience against pandemics.

To counter vaccine hesitancy and speed up the immunization process Georgia needs to follow the examples of more successful countries, such as the Baltic States, where appropriate restraint mechanisms have been introduced by governments through the active involvement of security institutions. Georgia, with its fragile economy, constant political crises and as the target of cyber-attacks, has been unprepared and weak when it comes to fighting the pandemic, which has claimed the lives of many innocent people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government and political parties:

- The Government of Georgia and media outlets should establish a strong media-state cooperation platform for the sake of national interest to jointly mitigate anti-vax disinformation and propaganda.
- Next to socio-economic management of the pandemic, the Government of Georgia should invest more resources and be more consistent in epidemiological management of Covid-19. Epidemiological management, including the initiative with green passports, should be based on respective expertise and less on the political agenda of the government.
- The Government of Georgia should mobilize volunteers within the municipalities of Georgia to enhance an information campaign in support of the immunization process, for instance by distributing brochures containing information about vaccination.
- The Government of Georgia should support the domestic production of high quality FFP2/KN95/N95 masks and distribute them among vulnerable parts of population at subsidized costs.
- The Government of Georgia should allow vaccination of citizens without prior registration in the platform considering the fact that 56% of the Georgian population does not know how to register for vaccination.
- Political parties in Georgia should hold regular meetings with their electorate about the significance of the vaccination process. With the help of invited healthcare experts they should explain to their electorate how vaccination works, how safe it is and why the immunization is important in fighting Covid-19.
- Drawing on the best practices from the Baltic States and other countries, political parties represented in parliament should initiate legislation to enhance cyber security mechanisms to contain the conspiracy theories about the Covid-19.

To the non-state actors (civil society, media, Orthodox church)

- Georgian traditional and social media outlets should take the responsibility to filter out fake news on their online platforms as is done in other states where the mitigation of the pandemic is relatively positive, underline positive examples of highly-vaccinated countries and dedicate more attention to hybrid threats, identification of fake news and the importance of speeding up the immunization process.
- The civil society organizations (CSO) in Georgia should create a platform for a discussion between the scientists, medics, and religious representatives on developing a common action plan aiming putting an end to conspiracy theories and to disarm anti-vax propaganda.
- The CSOs should establish help centers for the people who can't register themselves for vaccination as well as for green passports.
- The Georgian Orthodox Church should take on the social responsibility and right provided according to the Concordat to make a positive contribution to the fight against the pandemic. It should abandon its ambiguity and embrace the vaccination process as well as fight against unjustified conspiracy theories in the parishes.

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