

## Openness of State Archives in Post-Soviet Republics and Eastern Bloc States During the Coronavirus Pandemic



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The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), in partnership with international scholars, conducted a study within the framework of the “Evaluation of the Openness of State Archives in Post-Soviet Republics and Eastern Bloc States” project in 2019-2020. The study established the transparency ratings of the national archives of 18 countries, reached several interesting conclusions, and revealed characteristics specific to the state archives found in various [countries](#).

When the research project was beginning in June 2019, the pandemic was of course not considered as a factor. Nevertheless, the circumstances around not only the archives, but all aspects of life, have changed drastically in the entire world. Naturally, this could not have been reflected in the methodology and final ratings of the research project. Therefore, a new study was initiated within the framework of the project, the purpose of which was to discover what level of openness of the state archives was encountered by researchers during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in various countries, and how the state archives adapted to novel circumstances. Another question the project asks is whether the state archives elaborated a strategic action plan for similar situations in the future. For the purposes of this study, IDFI created a questionnaire that was filled out by international partners who have had research experience in the archives. Additionally, the study used various sources available on the internet.

The following countries were considered in the study: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Ukraine.

### Principal Conclusions

The circumstances arising due to the COVID-19 pandemic made the importance of proper functioning of the website of an archive and online communication with users especially clear, which the study also confirmed. In a time when people across the world were forced to remain in their homes and work remotely, the only remaining access points to materials in the archives for historians and researchers were the internet, the websites of the archives, and the fonds and electronic databases found therein. The archival inventories, catalogues and documents uploaded to the websites of archival institutions will play an ever-increasingly important role in the

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future development of research. The study led to several general discoveries:

- The openness rating of state archives revealed by IDFI's project directly correlates with the effective operation of the archives during the pandemic: the most open archives took into consideration the satisfaction of researchers and citizens with electronic services, and vice versa;
- The archives that had already begun the process of creating and developing digital databases offered much better service and work opportunities to the users than the archives where digital services had been developed poorly;
- The Ukrainian state archives functioned actively and with the most transparency during the pandemic: they published monthly overviews of the work at the state archives, mainly touching upon the creation of new electronic resources and digitalization of existing documents. Another active archive was that of Lithuania – 40% of the “Emergency Cultural Fund” established during the pandemic was allocated to digitalization projects, including digitalization of archival documents. The Latvian State Archive, despite remote operations, did not cease research projects of genealogical nature, when the analogous service was put on hold by the State Archive of Belarus, while the State Archive of Georgia made the decision to allow researchers in the reading hall with the exception of those studying genealogy. Hungary reduced funding for archives, while the majority of the archives in Kazakhstan did not respond to inquiries remotely.
- For the future, it is crucial to develop an action plan for tackling crises, as the proper functioning of the archives, retaining employees and other issues will be largely dependent on the existence and implementation of one.



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