

# Political Conflict and COVID-19: Evidence from the Machine Learning for Peace Dataset\*

Jeremy Springman      Erik Wibbels

*University of Pennsylvania*

DEVL@Penn

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, sparking a global wave of emergency measures designed to combat the virus’s spread. The onset of the pandemic and the perceived need for temporary but dramatic restrictions on fundamental liberties – such as the freedoms of movement and assembly – to preserve public health, shaped political conflict in the ensuing months in at least three ways. First, concerns about COVID impacted political mobilization, as many citizens chose to voluntarily avoid physical gatherings. Second, the crisis presented political incumbents with opportunities to use emergency measures, ostensibly designed as public health measures, to restrict modes of anti-government political mobilization. Finally, the emergency measures themselves became subjects of conflict, as intense opposition to restrictions mounted over time in some countries.

In this research memo, we investigate the impact of COVID-19 on political conflict using high-frequency data on government declarations of emergency, levels of civic activism, and government coercion in the months before and after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. We discuss a number of specific cases (Serbia, Albania, Belarus, Ukraine, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka) to tease out the sequencing of civic activism and government coercion after the onset of the pandemic. Our findings suggest that:

- Every country in our sample implemented dramatic measures that resembled a state of emergency in their restrictions of fundamental liberties. In most countries, these restrictions remained salient for several months.
- State of emergency measures substituted for other forms of government coercion after the onset of the pandemic, potentially resulting from citizens voluntary compliance with emergency restrictions. Most countries saw a sustained decline in government coercion, but levels generally returned to normal within one year.
- Most countries also saw a brief reduction in civic activity, but levels returned to normal within six months in most countries and within one year in nearly all. The return of civic activity was usually related to elections or government repression, while mobilization motivated by dissatisfaction with COVID response itself was relatively rare.

These findings have implications for our understanding of how crises affect political mobilization and conflict. Despite the direct impact of COVID on health risks associated with

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political mobilization and the pervasive increase in restrictions on activities central to civic activity, the return to ‘normal’ levels of civic action (defined as the level of activity in the six months prior to March 2020 for each country) was swift. This recovery is both surprising and encouraging, especially considering the continued use of COVID to justify repression of civic action by some governments.

## COVID, Civic Space and the Machine Learning for Peace Data

Over the last 20 years, a large literature aiming to document and explain ‘democratic backsliding’ has emerged. This body of research has emphasized various causes, ranging from electoral institutions (Reynolds, 2010) and political parties and party systems (Waldner and Lust, 2018; Seawright, 2012; Mainwaring, 1993) to the distribution of income (Boix et al., 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006) and polarization (Svolik, 2015; Nalepa, Vanberg, and Chiopris, 2018). Broad theories of democratic backsliding often point to moments of crisis as critical junctures during which incumbents rollback democratic norms or institutions. In this sense, the onset of COVID-19 gives researchers an opportunity to assess how a particularly dramatic crisis affected a critical pillar of democracy: civic space.

Political competition is the lifeblood of democracy, and the extent of competition is largely determined by how open or closed civic space is in any given country. The COVID pandemic offered aspiring autocrats a unique opportunity to extend backsliding by restricting civic space under the guise of public health. For example, Bethke and Wolff (2020) use data from ICNL’s COVID-19 CIVIC Freedom Tracker and V-Dem’s Pandemic Backsliding Project (PanDem) to show that governments around the world implemented restrictions on assembly, and in doing so, the majority of these countries violated democratic standards for an appropriate emergency response.

Here we assess the impact of COVID-19 on political conflict. Specifically, we investigate (1) the extent to which governments increased coercive behavior towards citizens in the months following COVID’s onset and (2) the extent to which the pandemic, and the emergency measures it lead to, was associated with reductions in civic action. To do so, we rely on the Machine Learning for Peace (MLP) project’s massive data that tracks reporting on civic space events around the world. To date, MLP has scraped and classified more than 70 million news articles from more than 100 international, regional, and domestic online news sources in 22 different languages into 19 different civic space ‘event’ categories for a sample of more than 40 countries. These “event data” provide a structured record of politically relevant occurrences, such as protests or declarations of state of emergency.<sup>1</sup>

To simplify our analysis, we group event categories according to two ‘themes’ that capture dimensions of political conflict believed to be most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 presents this thematic organization. Specifically, we focus on ‘Government Coercion’, which includes arrests, raids, the mobilization of security/police forces, and lethal and non-lethal violence. Anecdotes suggest that governments relied on these coercive measures to enforce COVID restrictions (and in some cases to repress political opponents). Second, we focus on ‘Civic Action’, which includes protests and civic activism, where the latter is defined as any non-protest collective action by civil society actors. Both genuine concerns

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<sup>1</sup>See our [Technical Report on the Production of Civic Space and RAI Event Count Data](#) for details.

Table 1: Civic Space event categories by theme.

Theme	Definition	Category
Government Coercion	Domestic deployment of force or coercion.	Arrests Security Force Mobilization Raids Lethal Violence Non-lethal Violence
Civic Action	Instances of collective action by citizens or civil society.	Protest Activism

about public health and opportunistic government restrictions had the potential to stifle civic action. To summarize the variation across these themes, we sum the share of news reporting on each themes’ component events.

We focus our analysis on the six months preceding March 2020 and the six months after the pandemic’s onset beginning in March 2020. This allows us to assess how the behavior of both governments and civil society responded to the pandemic’s onset. When informative, we also discuss how our findings change when expanding this window to a full year on either side of the onset, allowing us to observe longer-term impacts on civic space.

## Findings

We begin by assessing government responses using our ‘state of emergency’ measure, which captures the incidence of reporting on assorted government restrictions associated with COVID. Figure 1 shows the share of total published articles in each country reporting on events related to state of emergency in the six months before and after the onset of the COVID pandemic. According to this measure, every country in our sample implemented dramatic measures that resembled a state of emergency in the severity of their restrictions. In many countries, those restrictions remained salient for several months, and in several countries (as diverse as Colombia, Niger and Nicaragua), we see second-wave resurgences in reporting on these emergency measures in later months.

Figure 2 shows reporting on events related to Government Coercion. Interestingly, coercion appears inversely related to state of emergency, as levels of coercion plummet in most countries in March and remain low for several months. However, coercion returned to pre-pandemic levels within one year for most countries, with 25 of 40 countries experiencing similar levels of peak coercion relative to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 3 shows reporting on events related to Civic Action. Here, we see a similar pattern, with levels of civic action falling dramatically around March and April. However, the rebound in civic activity is quite consistent and rapid. Within six months, a majority of countries (24 of 40) experienced levels of civic action at least similar to the pre-pandemic period, and 18 of those actually experienced an increase in peak civic activism relative to pre-pandemic levels. This resurgence in civic action was particularly strong in Eastern Europe. From the sample of 40 countries, 12 saw spikes in civic action that exceeded the pre-pandemic peaks, of which five were in Eastern Europe (Albania, Belarus, Kosovo, Serbia, and Ukraine).

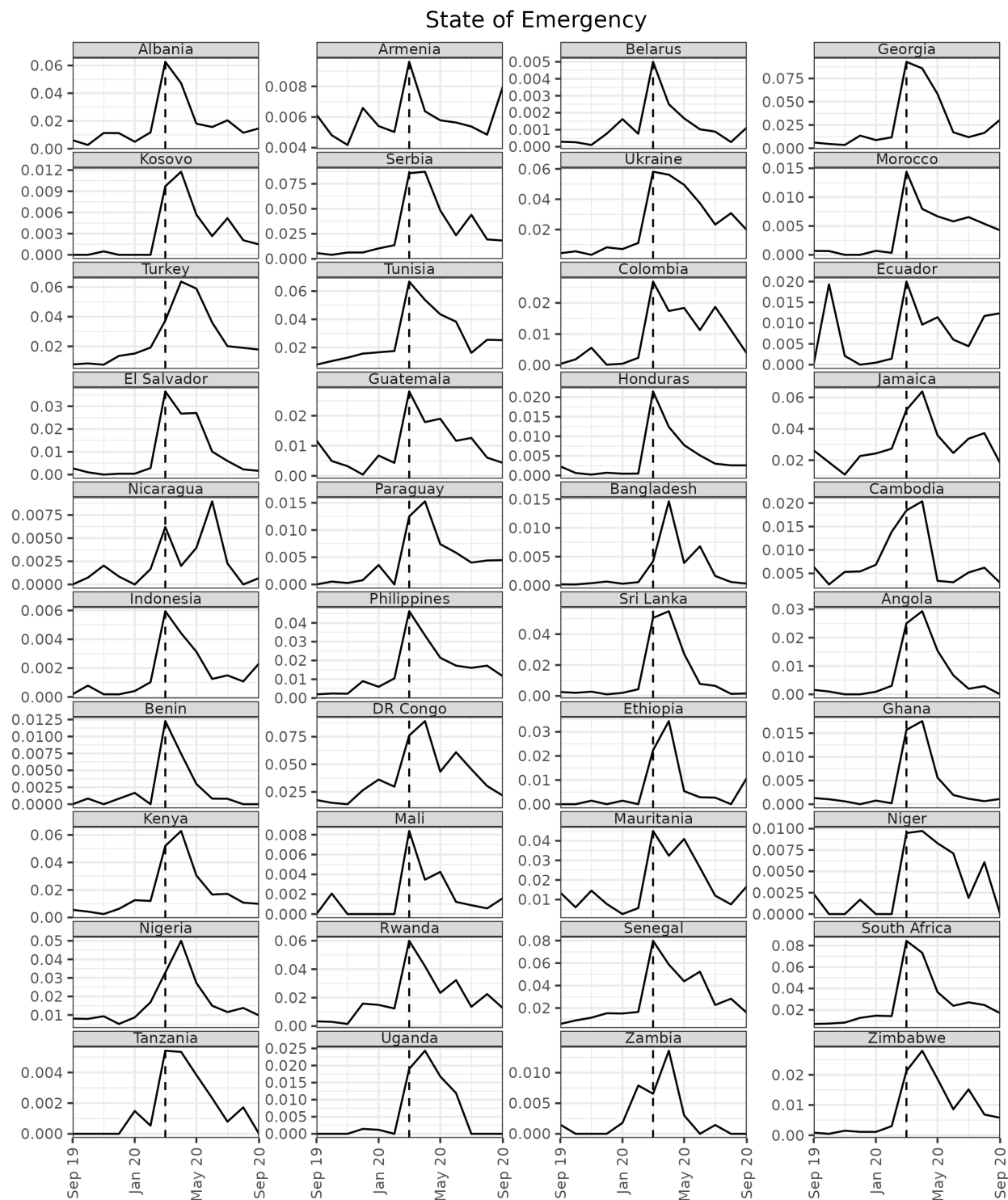


Figure 1: Reporting on events related to state of emergency between Sept-Feb (2019-2020) and Mar-Sept (2020).

The more pronounced resurgence in civic action relative to coercion raises the question of whether these two forms of political conflict were correlated. If state of emergency mea-

sures were meant to deter civic action, but a resurgence happened anyway, did governments

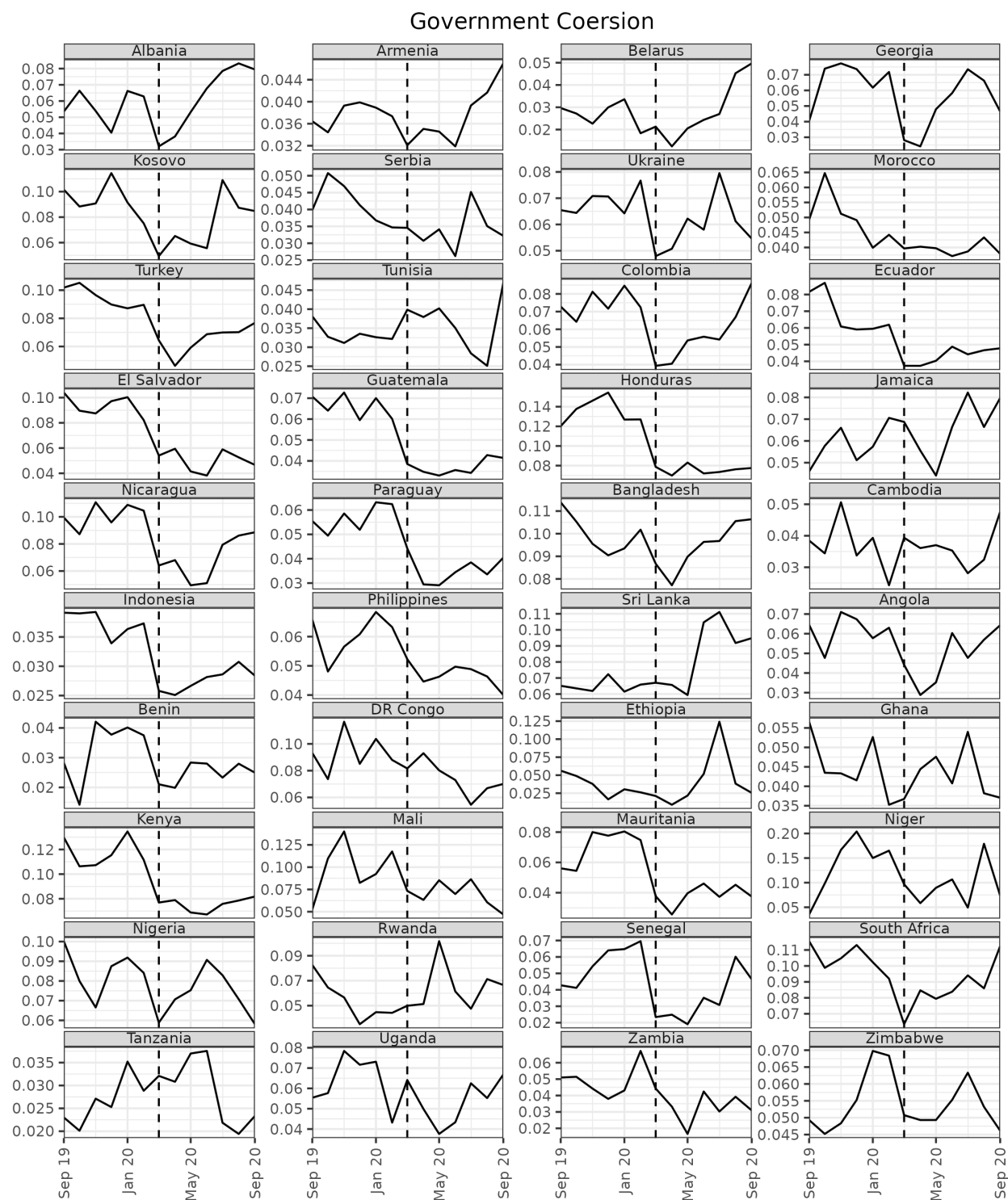


Figure 2: Reporting on events related to government coercion between the six-month period before and after the onset of the COVID pandemic in March 2020.

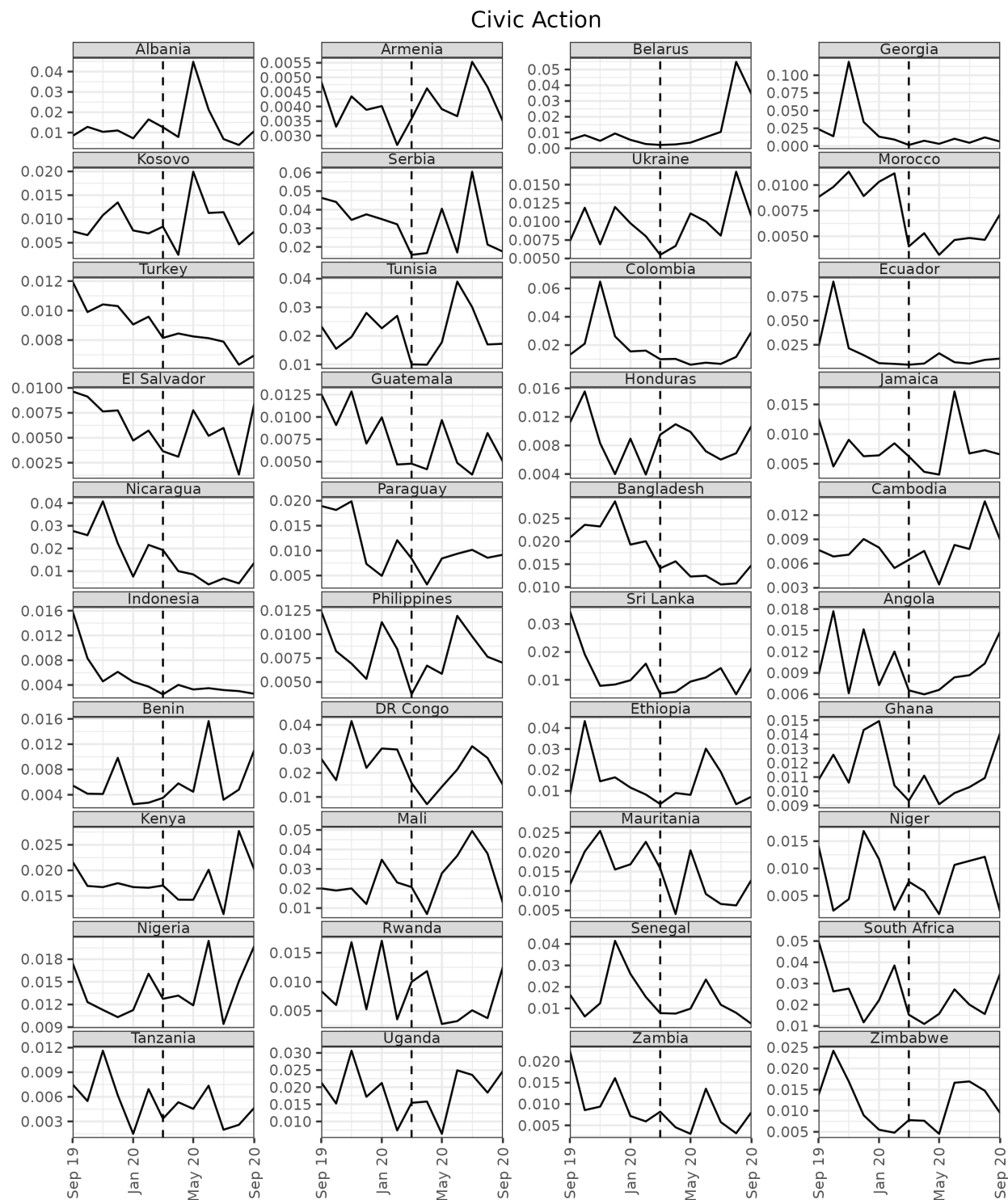


Figure 3: Reporting on events related to civic action between the six-month period before and after the onset of the COVID pandemic in March 2020.

respond with force? Or when governments relied heavily on coercion to enforce restrictions, did this spark civic action?

Change in Maximum Values of Government Coercion and Civic Action  
Between Sept-Feb (2019-2020) and Mar-Sept (2020)

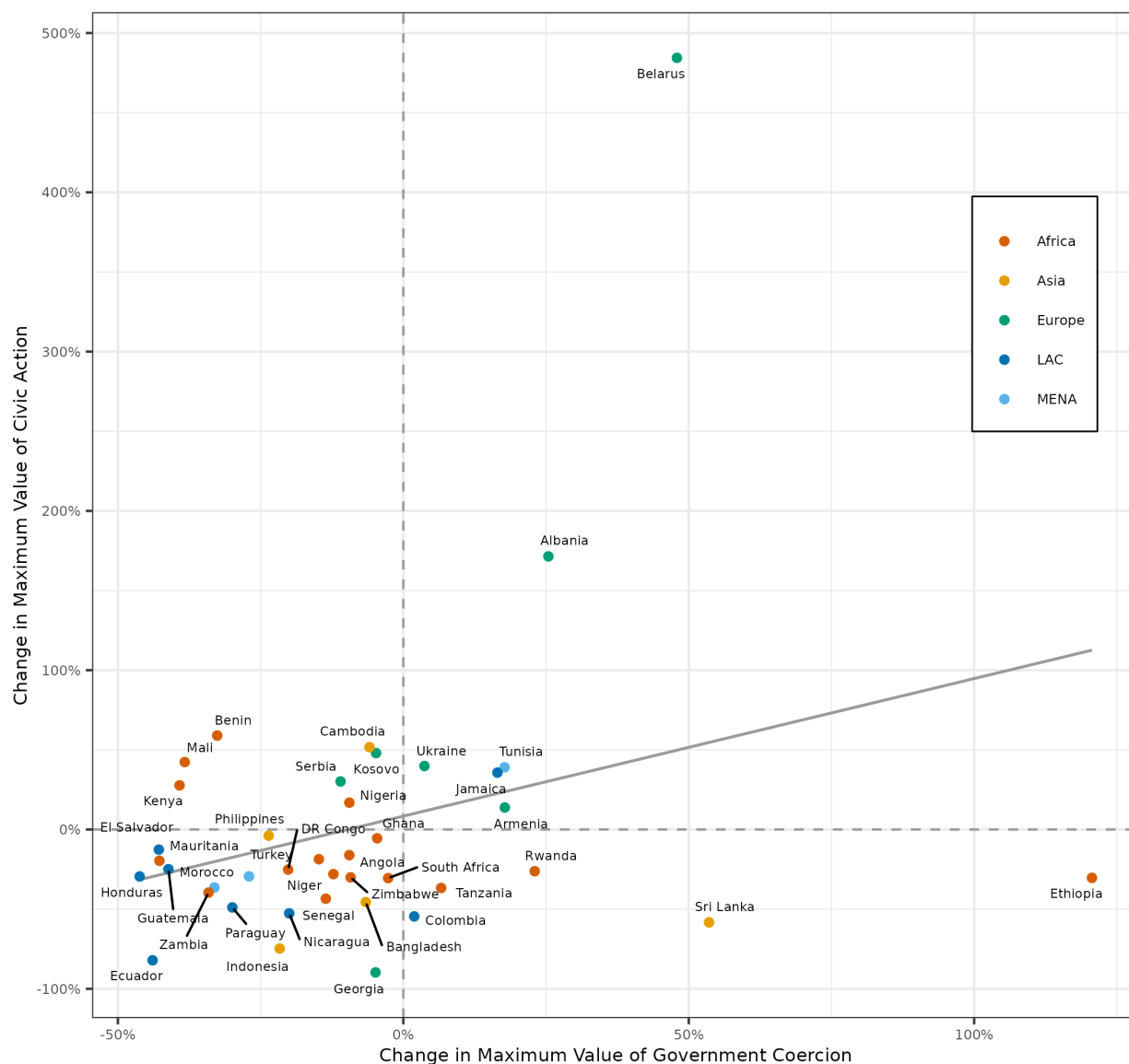


Figure 4: Change in reporting on events related to civic action and government coercion between the six-month period before and after the onset of the COVID pandemic in March 2020. The grey line estimates the linear relationship between the two event themes, which have a modest positive correlation of 0.3.

Surprisingly, the relationship between changes in the peak levels of coercion and civic action between the six months before and after onset is relatively weak at 0.3. Figure 4 plots this relationship visually. Looking at the bottom-left corner of the figure, we can see that most countries experienced declines in the maximum value of both measures. However, the largest increases in civic action were also associated with large increases in coercion. To explore the dynamics driving these political conflicts, we review the events in several

countries that exhibit extreme changes in either coercion or civic activity. We start with the extreme cases in Eastern Europe, where we see dramatic increases in both measures in Albania, Belarus, and Ukraine while we see increased civic action without increased coercion in Kosovo and Serbia.

In the first three cases, civic action was sparked by events ostensibly unrelated to COVID. Belarus experienced the largest anti-regime protests in the country's history, focused on the incumbent president's official victory in elections that were seen as deeply flawed.<sup>2</sup> These protests were met with massive repression that continued after protests dissipated. In Albania, protesters lead by opposition leaders clashed with police in May over the disputed demolition of a historic building.<sup>3</sup> In the following months, government coercion continued to increase as police used violence to enforce curfew measures, culminating in another wave of protests against police violence in December.<sup>4</sup> The picture was slightly different in Ukraine, where union protests transpired in August 2020 but were not met with repression.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the increase in coercion came several months later in July 2020 and captured troop mobilization around a ceasefire in Donbas and sporadic violence a few weeks later.<sup>6</sup>

In Kosovo, protests flared in May 2020 over the incumbent president's attempts to form new government without new elections; protests were organized to respect pandemic restrictions and were not met with government coercion (however, a surge in coercion did occur in July, although this was related to troop mobilization in response to increased tensions on the border with Serbia).<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, large protests in Serbia in July were considered the first major pandemic-related unrest in Europe and were also met with significant police violence. However, levels of coercion were very high in the pre-pandemic period as well, resulting in a modest decrease in post-onset period.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 4 also identifies two extreme cases of dramatic increases in government coercion without an increase in civic activism. In Ethiopia, July marked intense repression of protests around the assassination of an opposition figure; protests that were large and widespread, but significantly smaller than protests in October 2019.<sup>9</sup> In Sri Lanka, government coercion began to increase in June 2020 capturing reporting on police violence against quarantine violators and the announcement of a new task force targeting drug crimes.<sup>10</sup> Unpacking these cases, we see that civic action usually rebounded around issues ostensibly unrelated to the pandemic. In only one of five cases of increased civic action - Serbia - was the resurgence of mobilization focused on issues explicitly related to the pandemic. Similarly, we see that in some cases - Albania, Belarus, Ethiopia, and Serbia - governments responded with similar rebounds in coercion. However, in Kosovo and Ukraine, civic action returned

<sup>2</sup><https://www.npr.org/2020/08/16/903036245/one-week-after-election-belarus-sees-giant-protests-against-europe-s-last-dictat>

<sup>3</sup><https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/17/albania-premier-edi-rama-destroys-national-theatre/>

<sup>4</sup><https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/10/albanian-youngsters-battled-police-in-protest-over-police-killing-2/>

<sup>5</sup><https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2020/08/ukraine-protest-scheduled-in-kiiev-for-august-19>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.unian.info/war/truce-in-donbas-ukraine-reports-four-incidents-on-july-31-11097287.html>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.voanews.com/a/europe-protesters-kosovo-oppose-presidents-nominee-prime-minister/6190109.html>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/world/europe/serbia-protests-coronavirus.html>

<sup>9</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/ethiopias-week-of-unrest-sees-239-dead-3500-arrested/2020/07/08/8eb30952-c100-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html)

<sup>10</sup><https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/06/sri-lanka-police-abuses-surge-amid-covid-19-pandemic>



without coercion while in Sri Lanka, coercion rebounded without a return of civic action.

## Conclusions

The onset of COVID dramatically reduced political conflict in the earliest months of the pandemic, as restrictions on assembly and concerns about public health dampened civic activism and reduced governments' use of state coercion. In most countries, there was an immediate and sustained collapse in both civic action and government coercion. However, this dampening was short-lived, with the majority of countries seeing a return to normal or increased levels of civic action within six months. Surprisingly, the decline in coercion was both more widespread across countries and longer-lasting than the decline in civic action. In some cases, this was due to extremely high levels of coercion before the onset, but in others, governments tolerated the return of civic activity after its brief hiatus. Importantly, these findings suggest that the ability of governments to use crises as a means to discourage political mobilization and restrict civic space may be more limited than previously thought.

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## Appendix

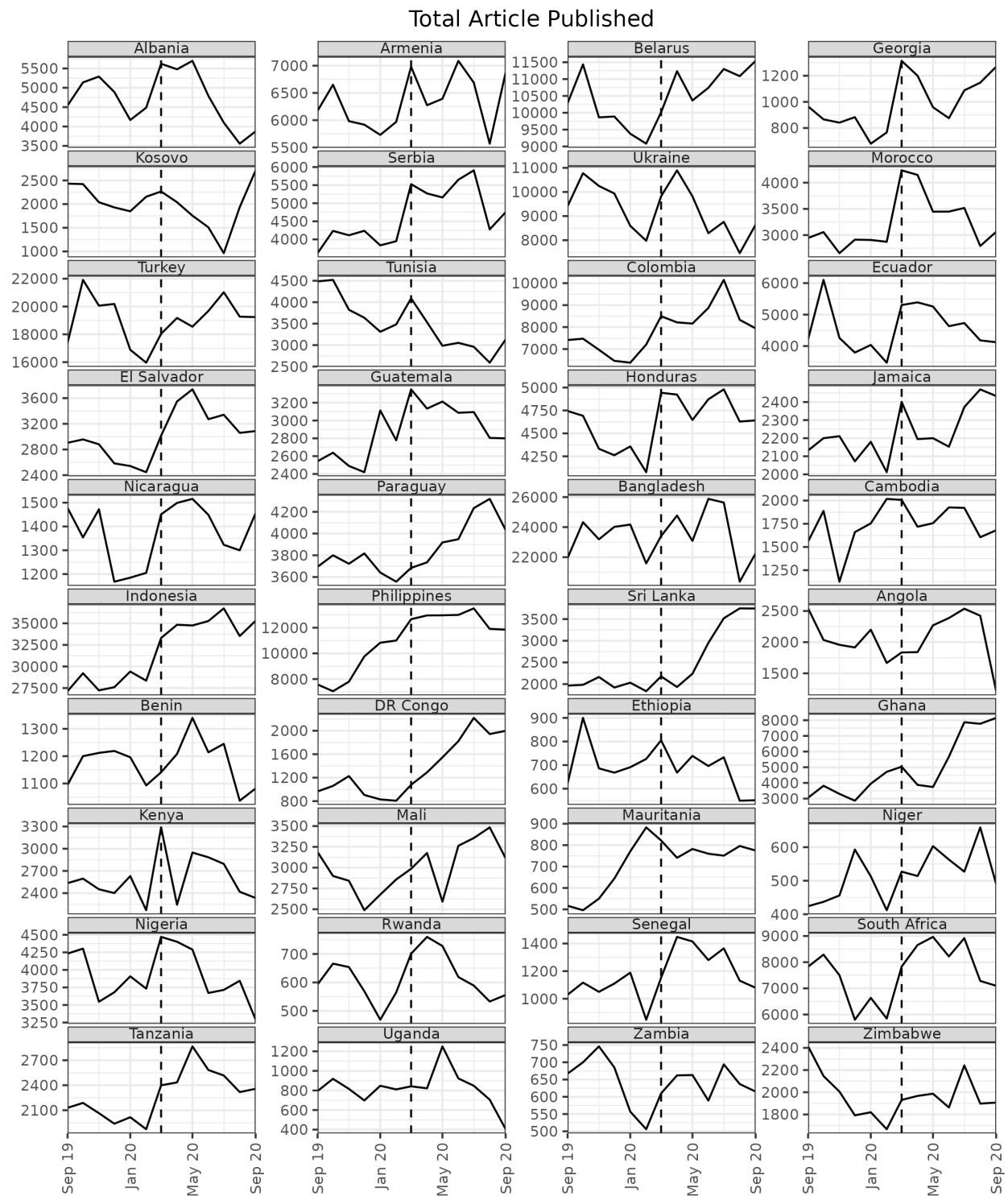


Figure 5: Total number of published articles.

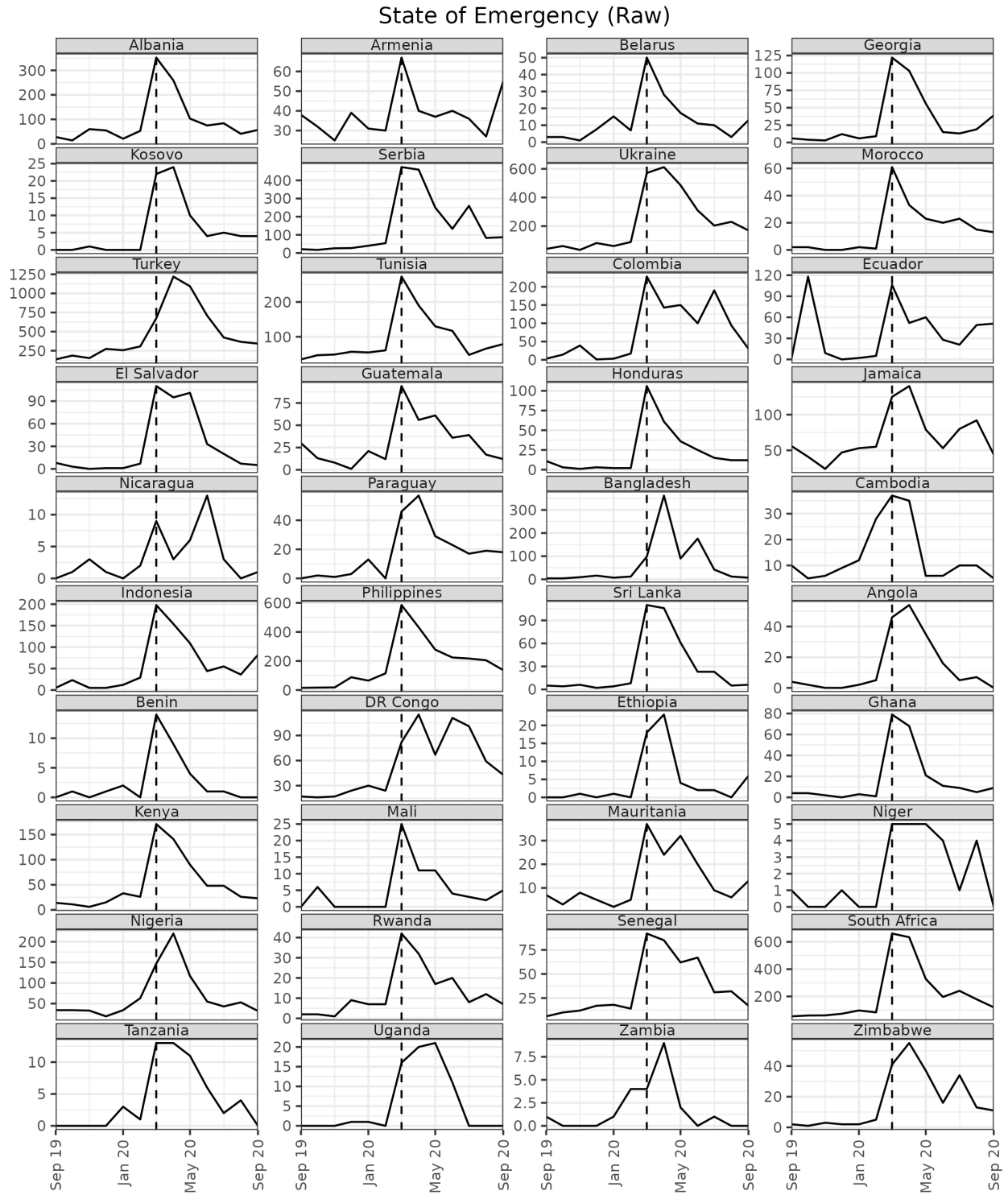


Figure 6: Number of published articles reporting on events related to state of emergency.

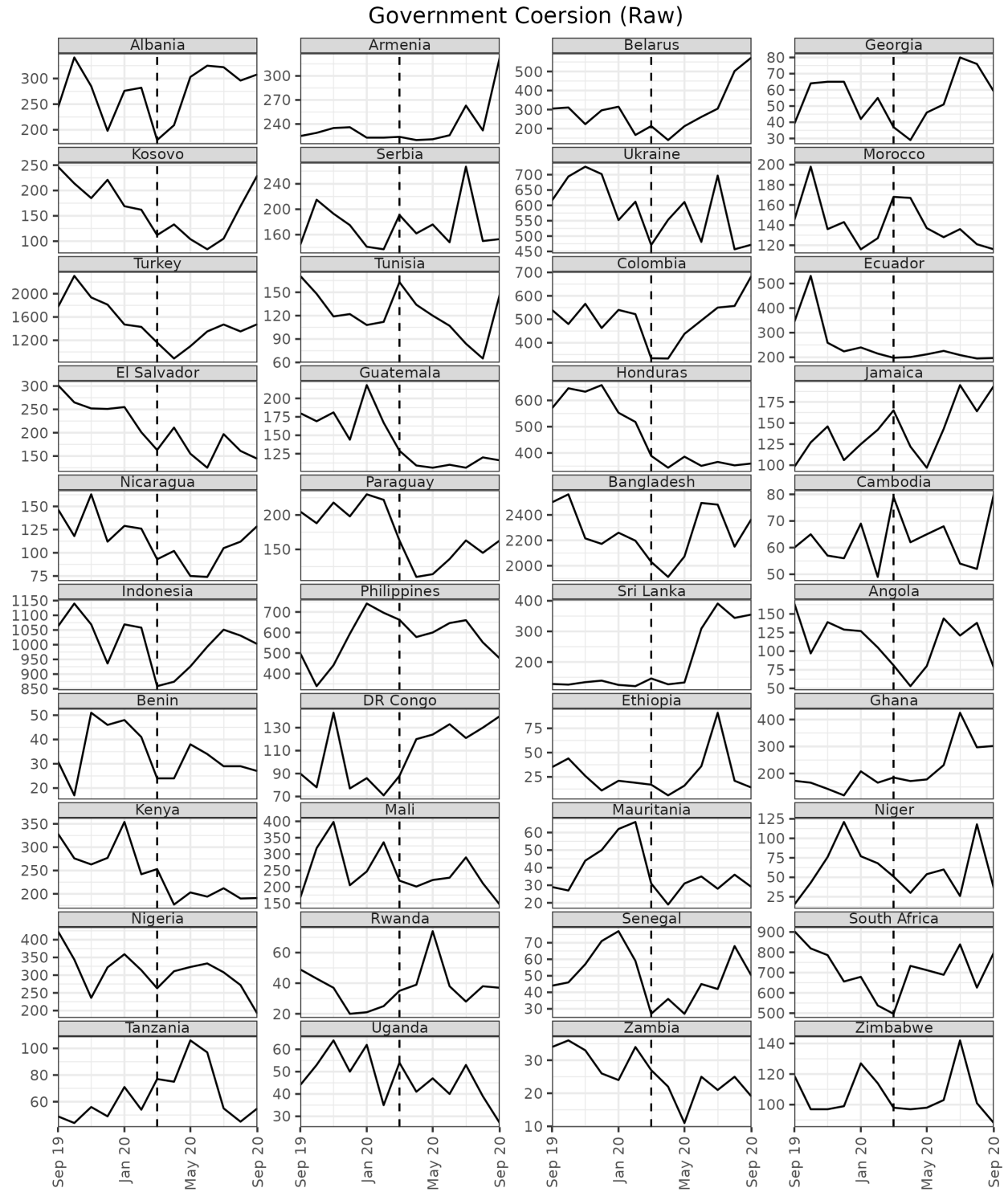


Figure 7: Number of published articles reporting on events related to government coercion.

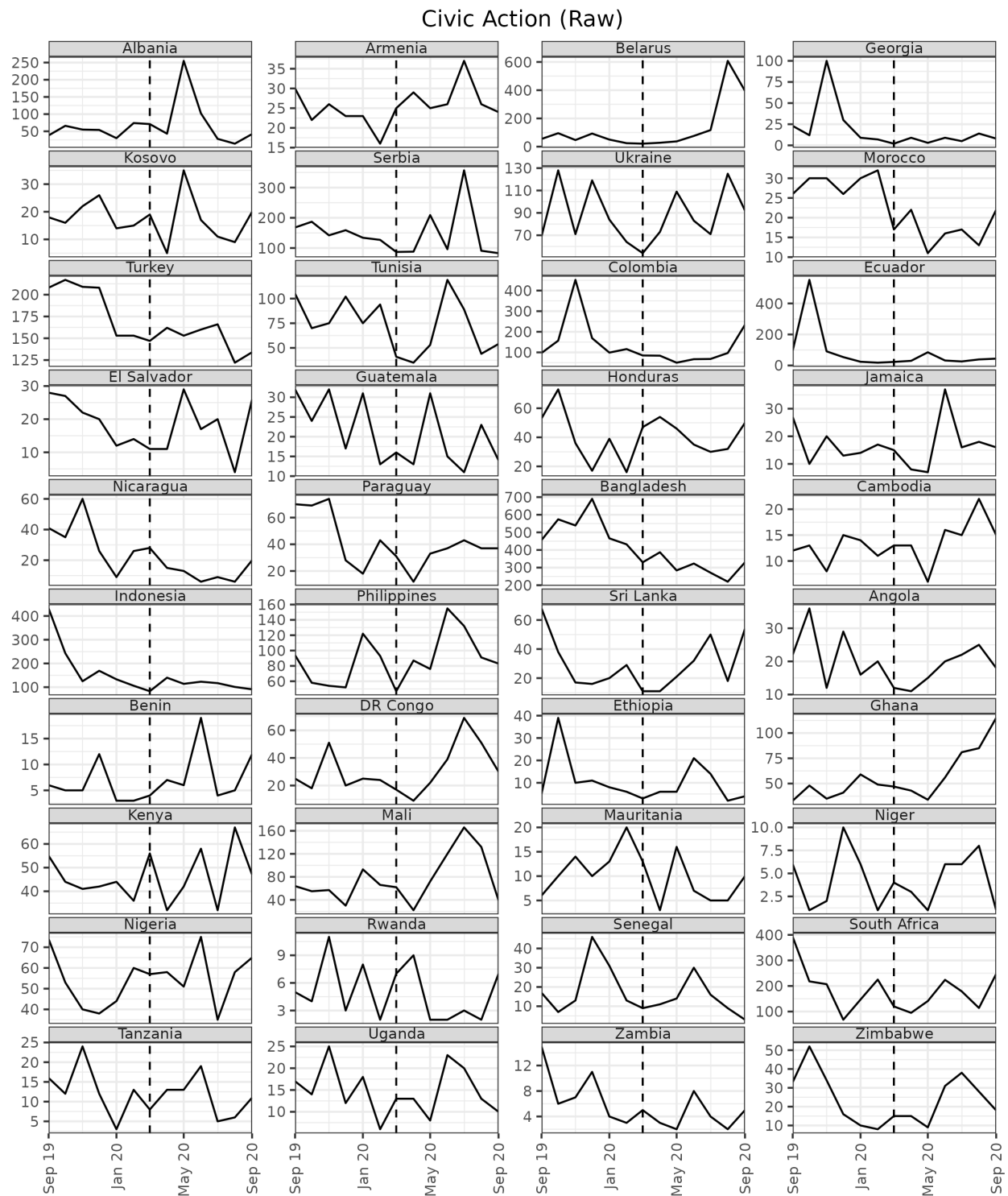


Figure 8: Number of published articles reporting on events related to civic action.