

# COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CENTRAL ASIA

CRISIS MANAGEMENT,  
ECONOMIC IMPACT, AND SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATIONS

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**COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CENTRAL ASIA**  
**Crisis Management, Economic Impact, and**  
**Social Transformations**

**Marlene Laruelle, editor**

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*COVID-19 Pandemic and Central Asia* sheds new light on the consequences of the pandemic on Central Asian countries by giving voice to diverse experts around the world. Chapters focus on the social, political, economic, and geopolitical impacts of COVID-19 and its dramatic effects on the region. The pandemic has exposed major flaws in healthcare and economic systems around the world, and Central Asia is no exception. The region's countries have been hit by a plunge in oil prices and lower demand for their export commodities; local labor markets and migrants' opportunities abroad have been disrupted, and prospects for investment and tourism have been reduced. Public health and educational networks lack the resources to extend into rural areas, and authorities are using digital tools to increase control over the population. At the same time, increasing tensions between the U.S. and China may jeopardize the hopes of Central Asians for the region to serve as a transit hub amidst a prosperous Eurasia.

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# Contents

## **PART I. A COVID-19 WORLD? PANDEMIC AND THE REGIONAL BALANCE**

Chapter 1. Post-COVID-19: Can Central Asia be Central to Eurasian Integration? <i>Marsha McCraw Olive</i>	7
Chapter 2. Beijing Binds: COVID-19 and the China-Central Asia Relationship <i>Raffaello Pantucci</i>	23
Chapter 3. Post-COVID-19 Central Asia and the Sino-American Geopolitical Competition <i>Furqan Khan</i>	31
Chapter 4. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and OSCE: Organizational Efforts vs COVID-19 in Central Asia <i>Matthew Neapole</i>	39

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## **PART II. CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND POLITICAL REGIMES**

Chapter 5. Responses to COVID-19 and the Strengthening of Authoritarian Governance in Central Asia <i>Edward Lemon and Oleg Antonov</i>	51
Chapter 6. COVID-19 in Kazakhstan: Economic Consequences and Policy Implications <i>Zhandos Ybrayev</i>	61
Chapter 7. Post-COVID-19 Regime Stability in Uzbekistan <i>Bekzod Zakirov</i>	77
Chapter 8. Uzbekistan and COVID-19: A Communication Perspective <i>Davide Cancarini</i>	85
Chapter 9. The Authoritarian Treatment of COVID-19: The Case of Tajikistan <i>Hafiz Boboyorov</i>	91
Chapter 10. Informing the Public about the Dangers of a Pandemic. Early COVID-19 Coverage by News Organizations in Kazakhstan <i>Bakhtiyar Nurumov, Gulnur Berkenova, Eric Freedman, and Galiya Ibrayeva</i>	99

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## **PART III. THE MULTIFACETED SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19**

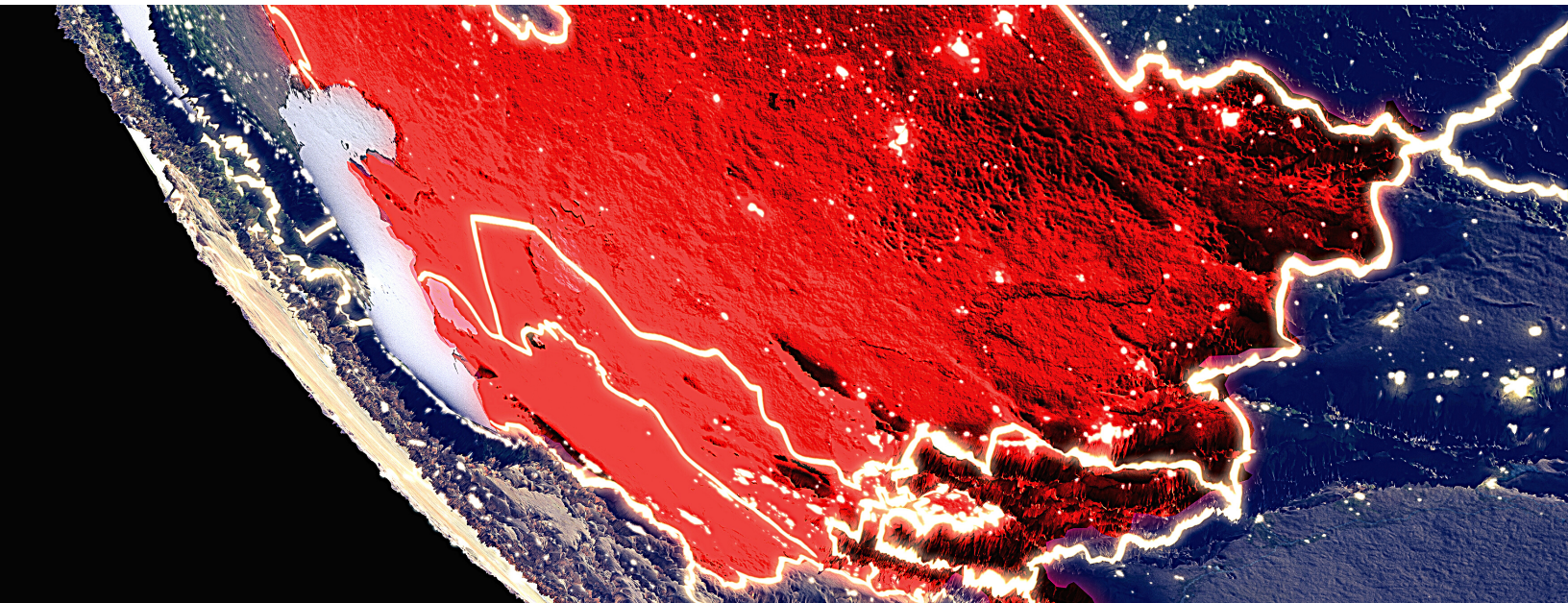
Chapter 11. COVID-19 Outbreak in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Has the Time Come for Social Innovations? <i>Bakhrom Radjabov</i>	115
Chapter 12. Kyrgyzstan: The Socioeconomic Consequences of the COVID-19 Crisis <i>Julien Bruley and Ilias Mamadiiarov</i>	127

Chapter 13. Identity-Based Discrimination in Kazakhstan: Migrant Workers in Pandemic Times <i>Preeti Sahu</i>	143
Chapter 14. Migration and COVID-19: Challenges and Policy Responses in Kyrgyzstan <i>Irina Kuznetsova, Roman Mogilevskii, Asel Murzakulova, Aigoul Abdoubaetova, Alexander Wolters, and John Round</i>	149
Chapter 15. Women Face-to-Face with Domestic Abuse during COVID-19 Lockdown: The Case of Kyrgyzstan <i>Asylai Akisheva</i>	159

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# POST-COVID-19: CAN CENTRAL ASIA BE CENTRAL TO EURASIAN INTEGRATION?

By Marsha McGraw Olive



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**September 11, 2020**

In April 2020, cabbages rotted on the roadside as trucks, delayed by closed borders, dumped their freight on the road from Kazakhstan into the Kyrgyz Republic. Aside from being a human health crisis, a major casualty of COVID-19 was broken trade ties across neighboring countries, including in Central Asia.

This paper takes account of the trade and transit fragmentation induced by the global pandemic and its potential impact on Central Asia's economic integration in Eurasia. It begins with the logic of Eurasian integration as elucidated by Kent E. Calder[1] and conditions for it to proceed after the pandemic. It then assesses why the five countries of Central Asia (CA5 = Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) figured only modestly in the landscape of an emerging Super Continent between the European and Chinese growth poles prior to the pandemic, and why a high cost of COVID-19 has been to set that pace back further. Finally, it addresses geopolitical constraints on Central Asian connectivity.



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The paper argues that the future lies more in the hands of Central Asian governments than in external powers. COVID-19 could leave lasting scars without serious measures to reduce regional barriers to trade, transit and investment. Uzbekistan holds the key to whether Central Asia will become central to European-Eurasian economic integration. Aside from being the most diversified regional economy, which demonstrated the most enlightened leadership during the pandemic, it is the pivot state in a fulcrum region where great power interests collide.

## The Logic of Eurasian Integration

Until 2020, evidence of an emerging Super Continent between the growth poles of Europe and China was compelling. As Calder argues, the contours took shape after several critical developments. EU enlargement and the collapse of the Soviet Union opened Eurasia for overland transit while Chinese financial stimulus in response to the Global Financial Crisis raised China's importance in global aggregate demand and as an investor of European assets, particularly in former Warsaw Pact countries. The Ukraine crisis of 2014 then helped cement Russia's pivot to China. A once slumbering Super Continent awoke to its privileged geographical coherence, stimulated by energy trade, the Logistics Revolution, and transport financing by BRI and international financial institutions. At one-third of the distance by sea, companies increasingly reaped the benefits of the land bridge for shipment of a range of products. As distanced collapsed, potential for the reconfiguration of Eurasia's role in world affairs grew. The logic of Eurasian integration was measurable in the three-fold increase in Chinese freight transport<sup>2</sup> in cross-continental trade over the past decade and the [reduction of travel time](#) from Xi'an, China to Hamburg, Germany, a 9,400-kilometer journey, to 10-12 days.

COVID-19 cut through that logic like a lightning bolt. The economic drivers of Eurasian integration all suffered setbacks, triggering political tensions. In the Europe and Central Asia region, the World Bank forecasts that exports will decline by 11.8% and imports by 10.7% in 2020.<sup>3</sup> By force majeure, [China cut gas imports](#) from Central Asia in March 2020 by an estimated 20-25% and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were asked to share the reduction proportionally. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) comprised of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyz Republic and Armenia and many other countries in Eurasia such as Ukraine and India suspended exports of food staples and vital medical supplies.<sup>4</sup> [Labor migrants](#), a critical component in integration, suffered the sharpest decline of income in recent history and became stranded in destination countries. Notwithstanding the logistical revolution, delays mounted due to epidemiological tests and uncoordinated border closings. Financing for unexpected health expenditures by international financial institutions received priority attention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kent E. Calder, *Super Continent: The Logic of Eurasian Integration*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2020), *Freight transport (indicator)*. doi: 10.1787/708eda32-en (Accessed on 04 September 2020)

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, June 2020, Table 2.2.1

<sup>4</sup> On food and medical supplies, see World Bank, *COVID-19 Trade Policy Database: Food and Medical Products*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/brief/coronavirus-covid-19-trade-policy-database-food-and-medical-products>.

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Eurasian Development Bank, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank all provided emergency lending, including on soft terms for low-income countries.



Notwithstanding these pandemic-induced shocks -- an extreme case of a “critical uncertainty”<sup>6</sup> – the logic of European-Eurasian economic integration will continue in the long term. First, the geographic advantage of the Eurasian route remains for several products, and the pandemic diverted shipments by air and sea to land. Second, after the recessionary impacts of the COVID-19 recede, energy will continue as a driver of continental trade dynamics. Third, in pursuit of national interest, several countries and the EAEU instituted trade facilitation measures, eased tariffs, and exempted vital imports from customs duties.<sup>7</sup> As discussed below, continuation of such efforts would contribute significantly to European-Eurasian integration.

A consensus appears to be emerging in [news analyses](#) and among experts such as former World Bank president [Robert Zoellick](#)<sup>8</sup> that globalization would be reshaped but not replaced by the pandemic. A primary reason is that China, Russia and the EU sought to retain and expand foreign markets even as they shored up domestic industries. In this context, despite some delays, the strategic logic of BRI will strengthen, according to the Director of Global Geopolitical Analysis, [Arne Elias Corneliusen](#). Development of Western China, to equalize income levels, will also remain a strong domestic and national security priority for China.<sup>9</sup>

## Economic factors influencing integration

While the *logic* of integration remains strong, two major economic factors that will influence the *pace* of Eurasian integration are the availability of capital for infrastructure investment and decisions by firms to choose rail rather than sea for long-distance trade. Geopolitical uncertainties, also significant, are discussed below.

Based on previous experience, the global recession is likely to reduce investment, break trade linkages, and weaken supply chains.<sup>10</sup> OECD estimates that global FDI flows may fall by 30% in 2020 and investors will have lower appetite for emerging market risks.<sup>11</sup> In March 2020, investors pulled a record US\$83 billion from emerging markets.<sup>12</sup> It is unlikely that China will play the same fiscal stimulus role as it did after the Global Financial Crisis, given domestic needs in China.

Competition for scarce capital will put a higher premium on prioritizing hard infrastructure investments. Decisions are likely to be political as much as economic. Currently there are three routes that traverse Eurasia on an East-West trajectory between China and Europe: northern (through Russia and Belarus), central (through Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus) and southern (through Kazakhstan to the Caspian). From an operator’s perspective, the northern route by rail is most desirable due to fewer number of countries involved, leading to a reduction in delays at border crossing points and complexity from multimodal transshipment from train to ship to truck.<sup>13</sup> The northern route also benefits from rail electrification and a two-track line. The southern route

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<sup>6</sup> Calder 2019, Chapter 9

<sup>7</sup> Responses by country are available at <https://www.tfafacility.org/covid19-trade-facilitation>. For the EAEU, see the report to the World Customs Organization by Kazakhstan.

<sup>8</sup> His remarks were delivered at the CAMCA (Central Asia, Mongolia, Caucasus) Regional Forum in Almaty in June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Hutson, pp. 18-19; Calder p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, Global Economic Prospects, June 2020, Chapter 3

<sup>11</sup> OECD, COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia, June 4, 2020, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Wall Street Journal, June 20-21, 2020.

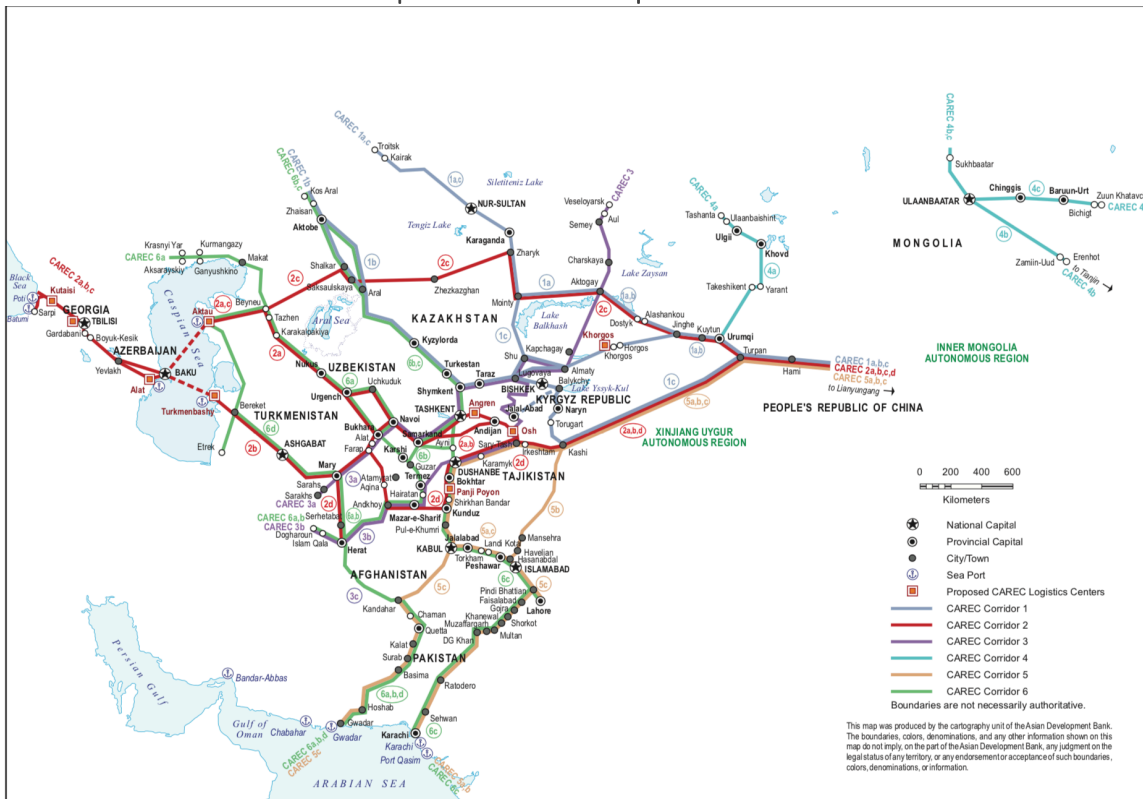
<sup>13</sup> CAREC, Corridor Performance Monitoring and Measurement Annual Report 2019, p. 32. This calculation may be affected by political upheaval in Belarus.

to Turkey and Southern Europe via the Caspian entails ferry crossings at either Aktau (Kazakhstan) or Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) and logistical challenges to cross the rugged terrain of Eastern Turkey.<sup>14</sup>

Investment choices will influence the path-dependence of development. The alternative is to upgrade infrastructure through Russia only, or through Western China through Kazakhstan. The investment decision will depend on demand from manufacturers to ship via rail or road. Thus, infrastructure and manufacturing investments will become co-dependent. Nathan Hutson argues there will not be sufficient demand for both routes, pitting manufacturing firms in Russia against those in Central Asia. Which path will prevail? The outcome will determine investment in warehousing, transport links, and urban agglomeration.<sup>15</sup> There is a political as well as economic dimension: the choice pits winners against losers.<sup>16</sup>

With a superhighway and rail corridor on the Western European-Chinese route, Kazakhstan would appear to be the king of connectivity, holding the most strategic location. The rest of CA5 is crisscrossed by 26 of the 36 incomplete Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) rail and road corridors, both east-west from China to Europe and north-south from Russia to Iran (Map 1).

Map 1. Six CAREC Transport Corridors



Source: Asian Development Bank in Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) 2020, p. 2

<sup>14</sup> Nathan Hutson, The Development Implications of China’s Belt and Road Initiative for Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, Ph.Diss, University of Southern California, Department of Urban Planning and Development, 2019, p.37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 79

<sup>16</sup> Estimates of economic impacts on winners and losers in Central Asia can be found in World Bank, Belt and Road Economics: Opportunities and Risks of Transport Corridors. Washington, DC., 2019.

However, Kazakhstan’s position as a strategic rail line benefits from Chinese container train subsidies. These contributed to the 20% annual growth in rail cargo by container from 2016-2019, or 11% of all freight traffic. Subsidies diverted sea shipments to land as many local governments falsified cargo contents in order to qualify for rail freight subsidies. The Chinese Ministry of Finance will phase the subsidies out in 2022, creating uncertainty over demand for the route.<sup>17</sup> It is not clear if the market would revert to patterns of the past or continue growing albeit at a slower pace,<sup>18</sup> also due to lower global growth post-pandemic.

In addition, the efficiency of transport by rail depends on two-way trade. If high-value goods are not time urgent and only travel in one direction, there is less incentive to ship over land rather than by sea. For example, daily express trains between Duisburg carrying items such as luxury automobiles, wine, and e-commerce parcels from Europe to Chongqing (China) are now possible due to the increase of eastward traffic to China, thus reducing overall rail rates and cost of transit.<sup>19</sup> Interruption of trade flows on a balanced, two-way circuit will have the opposite effect, raising transport costs through reduced cargo freight and shipment frequency. The disruption of supply chains by COVID-19 could put the economics of this trade route under a cloud.

Thus, while the potential for a Super Continent remains valid over the longer term due to geographic coherence, resource endowments, and market complementarities, the pace is contingent on demand by economic actors and investment decisions by governments. The question here is whether the CA5, the geographical “pivot” of Eurasia, can participate in the future as a manufacturing hub rather than a transit zone. I argue that it can. To do so, Central Asian states need to address the home-grown policies that thwart economic diversification.

## Connectivity of Central Asia

### Trade and Investment Before COVID-19

Until the late Gorbachev period, the Sino-Soviet split separated Central Asia from centuries-long cultural and trade ties with Western China. What could have become a thriving region based on kinship, natural endowments and trade became a frozen landscape of underdevelopment. Decades of disconnect contributed both to China’s decision to opt for a maritime rather than an overland trade route and to high freight transportation costs to reach Central Asia. “In many ways, China’s BRI outreach is an attempt to exorcise the ghosts of the Sino-Soviet split...”<sup>20</sup>

Before the COVID-19 crisis, Central Asian leaders faced an existential choice: either make serious efforts to join global value chains linked to Europe or remain dependent on Chinese and Russian markets. Despite its proximity to the world’s most dynamic markets, and expansion to new partners such as Turkey, integration of Central Asian countries into global value chains (GVCs) was limited. Russia and China figure in the top five trading partners for all of the Central Asian states (Table 1).

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<sup>17</sup> CAREC 2020, p. 39

<sup>18</sup> Hutson 2019, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Carec 2020, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Hutson 2019, pp. 10-12. On the maritime option, see p. 24.

Table 1.

**Central Asia: Top 5 Trade Partners by Value, 2018**

Percent share in parentheses

Country	Export	Import
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Italy (19.2) China (10.3) Netherlands (10.1) Russia (8.6) France (6.2)	Russia (39.3) China (16.0) Germany (4.9) Italy (4.4) USA (3.80)
<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	UK (36.5) Russia (19.4) Kazakhstan (14.7) Uzbekistan (8.64) Turkey (5.7)	China (36.7) Russia (28.6) Kazakhstan (11.4) Turkey (5.5) Uzbekistan (3.4)
<b>Tajikistan</b>	China (18.0) Turkey (17.5) Russia (14.6) Switzerland (13.6) Uzbekistan (10.0)	Russia (43.3) Kazakhstan (10.0) China (8.7) Uzbekistan (6.0) Iran (3.8)
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	China (80.0) Afghanistan (3.7) Turkey (2.6) Uzbekistan (2.3) Georgia (1.7)	Turkey (21.0) China (14.3) Russia (13.0) Germany (7.7) France (4.2)
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Unspecified (29.6) China (19.4) Russia (15.0) Kazakhstan (11.2) Turkey (7.9)	China (20.4) Russia (19.5) Korea, Rep (11.2) Kazakhstan (8.9) Turkey (6.3)

Sources:

World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) (KZ, KGZ, UZB)

IMF Direction of Trade Statistics (TJ and TRKM)

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KAZ/Year/2018/Summary><https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KGZ/Year/2018/Summary><https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/UZB/Year/2018/Summary><https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ECS/Year/2018/Summary><https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712>

One reason for limited economic integration is a narrow trade basket. Exports are predominantly bulk primary commodities rather than time-sensitive, high-value manufactures, reflecting national asset endowments in metals, minerals and labor (Table 2). A second is high transit cost. Due to complex topography, long distances, low economic density and fragmented trade regimes, it cost 80--150% of the value of goods traded to reach internal markets in 2014, compared to 20% in the EU.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, Central Asia: Development through Trade. Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Europe and Central Asia Region, 2014, p. 39.

Table 2.

<b>Composition of Exports by Product Category, 2018</b>				
	Percent			
	Raw Materials	Intermediary Goods	Consumer Goods	Capital Goods
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	71.11	19.36	8.52	0.99
<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	22.42	46.72	23.45	7.01
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	10.46	57.45	28.74	1.17
<b>ECA</b>	8.87	22.92	36.92	28.05

<b>Composition of Imports by Product Category, 2018</b>				
	Percent			
	Raw Materials	Intermediary Goods	Consumer Goods	Capital Goods
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	6.58	21.43	37.20	34.71
<b>Kyrgyz Republic</b>	3.95	21.31	56.91	17.72
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	6.67	27.60	20.64	44.95
<b>ECA</b>	10.99	22.70	35.80	28.05

ECA=Europe and Central Asia

Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KAZ/Year/2018/Summary>

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KGZ/Year/2018/Summary>

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/UZB/Year/2018/Summary>

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ECS/Year/2018/Summary>

Even prior to the COVID-19 crisis, complex procedures and arbitrary border crossing delays made shippers think twice before using Central Asian routes. Predictability is important for operators. For example, both the time and cost to transit Kazakh borders by road rose in 2019 primarily due to unannounced anti-smuggling procedures in March-April as Kazakh officials inspected vehicles for Chinese goods at the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border crossing point of Karasu. Delays of 34.4 hours were clocked compared to a 0.3 hour wait in 2018, while shippers complained of paying fees of \$500 or \$1,000 per truck to secure release of goods. As a result, crossing fees rose on average from US\$16 to US\$101. The issue was resolved through negotiations on April 8, but Kazakhstan's performance declined significantly on CAREC trade facilitation monitoring indicators<sup>22</sup>. This case is also noteworthy as it occurred on an internal border of the EAEU.

Karasu is not the only example of rent-seeking behavior on routes through Central Asia. CAREC monitors unofficial payments annually. In 2019, these broke down according to a similar pattern in 2018: "(i) vehicle registration (52%), (ii) phytosanitary activities (30%), (iii) health and quarantine (29%), (iv) customs controls (25%), and (v) transport inspection (23%)."<sup>23</sup> The highest bribe cost per truck (\$92) was for Custom Controls. Corridor 5 from China-Tajikistan-Pakistan registered the highest bribe cost for Custom Controls in 2019 (\$105) followed by Corridor 2, which crosses China to the Caspian via Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic (\$54).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> CAREC 2020 pp. 42-45

<sup>23</sup> CAREC 2020, p. 20

<sup>24</sup> CAREC 2020, Table 4.4, p. 20.

Transit is also complicated by unnecessary requirements for transloading. As explained by CAREC, “[u]nlike the European Union, where trucks, goods, and people can move with minimal border formalities, Central Asian republics tend to require foreign-registered trucks, especially those from Afghanistan, the People’s Republic of China, and Pakistan to stop at the border and transfer the shipment. Due to the generally modest number of containerized shipments, transloading is a complex and time and cost-consuming process.”<sup>25</sup>

Clearly it is not enough to build transport corridors if goods and people cannot cross borders easily. These internal trade barriers are among factors that discourage foreign direct investment, a critical lubricant for economic diversification. With the exception of a four-fold increase from 2017 to 2018 in Uzbekistan following trade and economic liberalization, FDI was trending downward across the region, as it has elsewhere since the Global Financial Crisis (Table 3).

Table 3.

**Inward Flows of FDI**

*USD millions and as percent of gross fixed capital formation*

Country	USD mln			2005-2007	percent		
	2016	2017	2018		2016	2017	2018
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	8511	4669	3817	26.9	27.3	13.1	10.4
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	616	-107	47	-	-	-1.2	-
<b>Tajikistan</b>	344	270	317	29.4	24.0	16.0	21.6
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	2243	2086	1985	-	-	-	-
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	134	98	412	9.0	0.8	0.8	3.0
<b>CIS</b>	58,475	40,129	25,620	18.5	15.1	8.4	5.1
<b>Russia</b>	37,176	25,954	13,332	18.1	13.2	7.4	3.8
<b>China</b>	133,710	134,063	139,043	6.7	2.8	2.6	2.4
<b>World</b>				11.7	10.2	7.5	6.0

Source: <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/World%20Investment%20Report/Country-Fact-Sheets.aspx>

## Impacts of COVID-19 on Trade and Transit<sup>26</sup>

Central Asia’s economic structure accentuated the downturn caused by COVID-19 while border closings and new procedures snarled transit. By exposing these deep-seated deficiencies, the pandemic made the region even less attractive for foreign investors than it was prior to the crisis. Yet to recover, diversify economically, and take advantage of its strategic location on North-South and East-West trade routes, FDI is precisely what the CA5 need.

First, the pandemic shock hit the CA5 with a one-two economic punch as global demand fell for the region’s primary exports, commodities and migrant labor, and triggered negative spillovers from key trading partners. For example, Kyrgyzstan is likely to lose 45-50% of expected customs revenue in 2020 due to closing of the borders and secondarily, to the loss of tax payments indirectly linked to border closings. The reduction of imports (70% are from China) strongly impacts domestic

<sup>25</sup> CAREC 2020, p. 23

<sup>26</sup> This section draws on a Working Paper by Marsha McGraw Olive and Cordula Rastogi prepared for the Europe and Central Asia Region of the World Bank.

production since it is not possible to obtain production components. All countries in the region will contract severely: Kazakhstan (4.5% to -3.0%), the Kyrgyz Republic (4.5% to -4%), Tajikistan (7.5% to -2%), Uzbekistan (5.6% to 1.5%), and Turkmenistan (6.3% to 0.0%).<sup>27</sup> Trade data for the first quarter of 2020 compared to 2019 (Table 4) demonstrate significant market disruption, with the most severe impact in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on exports and on Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan on imports. The increase in Kazakh exports may be attributed to oil (via pipeline) prior to the Chinese reduction.

Table 4.

**Trade Turnover in Central Asia**

Percent change, Jan-March 2020 vs. 2019

	Exports			Imports		
	Q1 2020	Q12019	YoY % Change	Q1 2020	Q12019	YoY % Change
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	3,374.7	3,788.2	-10.92%	4,765.7	5,276.3	-9.68%
<b>Tajikistan</b>	204.6	243.9	-16.10%	831.4	719.8	15.50%
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	13,908.5	13,347.9	4.20%	7,098.5	7,105.6	-0.10%
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	460.2	464.0	-0.82%	904.2	1,156.5	-21.82%

Sources:

- The Republic of Uzbekistan State Committee for Statistics. <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-komiteta/8896-vneshnetorgovyj-oborot-v-respublike-uzbekistan-yanvar-mart-2020-goda>
- National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic. Express information, 5/13/2020, <http://stat.kg/ru/statistics/vneshneekonomicheskaya-devatelnost/>
- Socio-economic development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. April 2020, Page 16-18, <https://stat.gov.kz/edition/publication/month?lang=ru>
- Agency for Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. Socio-economic development report: Jan-Mar 2020, Page 252

Second, uncoordinated border closings and health procedures contributed to confusion and delays for vital truck freight.<sup>28</sup> Several crossing points at borders with the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, China and Russia reopened but were listed as temporarily closed from April 4, 2020. Chinese and Kazakh media provided conflicting status reports on Khorgos at the Chinese-Kazakh border. Apart from COVID-related epidemiological delays, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan continued the disruptive practice of requiring customs escorts for foreign trucks or transfer of truck drivers from foreign to national origin at the border. As of June 2020, borders began to reopen, but [bottlenecks recurred at the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border](#).

## Integrating into global value chains makes sense for Central Asia

Notwithstanding the current disaffection with supply chains broken by COVID-19, it makes good development sense for Central Asia to leverage its location and natural endowments and increase connectivity to value chains in the dynamic growth poles of Asia and Europe. Prior to the

<sup>27</sup> World Bank, Global Economic Prospects, June 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Impact on freight and passenger transport of the global Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak were reported by country at [iru.org/covid19](http://iru.org/covid19).

coronavirus crisis, almost half of world trade involved the production of intermediary and final goods through global value chains (GVCs). A 1 percent increase in participation in GVCs raised per capita income by more than 1 percent, which is about twice as much as standard trade.<sup>29</sup> Given its low participation to date in GVCs, Central Asia stands to gain by positioning itself for access to new markets by diversifying from low value-added commodities to manufacturing and accessing new export markets.<sup>30</sup> The region compares favorably with emerging Europe on perceptions of non-price competitiveness except for human capital, on which it exceeds emerging Asia. But trade and transport costs present a high barrier.<sup>31</sup>

From a transport connectivity perspective, three scenarios are feasible: (i) retain a limited niche role as a transit region for goods that are more competitive by land than sea or air; ii) lose traffic due to removal of Chinese subsidies or political conflict along BRI corridors; or iii) become more competitive for freight over land than by sea or air.<sup>32</sup>

Each of these scenarios come with economic development implications. In the first, Central Asian growth would largely be reliant on resource rents and subject to global commodity price shocks. The second is largely outside the control of regional governments. The last has the greatest upside potential and could also mitigate the impact of full transport cost pricing (without Chinese subsidies). By becoming more trade and transit friendly, Central Asia would also become more competitive for foreign direct investment because the freer flow of goods reduces production costs within a larger regional market.

While it is the most optimistic scenario, increasing competitiveness will be more challenging following the COVID-19 crisis. Central Asian governments must address daunting domestic political economy constraints<sup>33</sup> while facing headwinds from lower global growth and risk appetite for investment in emerging economies. A starting point is for Central Asian governments to reduce trade and transit barriers through policy coordination.

## Regional Coordination and the Role of Uzbekistan

Prior to COVID-19, the reversal of regional tensions held promise for policy coordination. Following nearly a decade of tense relations, President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan convened an [historic summit in March 2018](#) that was the first meeting of in Central Asian heads of state on a broad agenda since 1999. A second summit followed in November 2019 in Tashkent. Then the pandemic struck. Borders closed and trade barriers mounted for critical food and medical supplies.

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<sup>29</sup> World Development Report (WDR) 2020: Trading for Development in the Age of Global Value Chains. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2020>

<sup>30</sup> Revealed comparative advantage for the CA5 include potential for higher value-added exports in energy, minerals, chemicals, metals, agriculture, and textiles. See IMF 2019, p. 30. Also horticulture holds potential for export to China, Russia and Europe. See China 2030 – Opportunities for Central Asian Agriculture. World Bank (July 2019)

<sup>31</sup> IMF 2019, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Hutson 2019, p. 131.

<sup>33</sup> These include high state ownership of industry and low transparency in business. See IMF 2019 and chapters by Lain and Kurbanov in Marlene Laruelle, ed., *China's Belt And Road Initiative And Its Impact In Central Asia*. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018. [www.centralasiaprogram.org](http://www.centralasiaprogram.org)



Against expectations, dialogue countered the disruptive effects of COVID-19. As reported in regional media, Presidents Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan and Jeenbekov of the Kyrgyz Republic discussed mutual support measures in late March 2020. In early May, Mirziyoyev and President Rahmon of Tajikistan agreed to keep trade flowing. Similar coordination efforts took place between Mirziyoyev and President Tokayev of Kazakhstan. On May 19, 2020, at the invitation of the Uzbek Minister of Agriculture and FAO, all CA5 agriculture ministers (notably including Turkmenistan) met to discuss pandemic-related logistical disruptions to food distribution and agricultural trade in the region, with participation of EBRD, ADB, and the World Bank. As a result of the meeting, each country has designated a focal point to examine food security and phytosanitary measures, opening a door to improve conditions for agricultural trade.<sup>34</sup>

Mirziyoyev's effort to reconnect the region is undeniably game-changing. The first summit resulted from his initiative and capped a series of bilateral efforts to normalize relations (most significantly with Tajikistan), demarcate contentious borders, open new border crossings and transport links, and harmonize customs regimes (between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic). During the COVID-19 crisis, actions by the Uzbek president to call his neighbors, resist food export bans, promote trade dialogue, and resolve cross-border freight delays demonstrated deft political leadership. The August 27, 2020 announcement that [Uzbekistan intends to reconnect Tajikistan and Turkmenistan](#) to the Central Asian Power System (CAPS) will eventually generate billions of dollars in fuel savings and unserved energy demands for the entire region.<sup>35</sup>

More broadly, domestic economic reforms since 2018 suggest Uzbekistan will diversify sooner and drive expansion in the now paltry level of regional trade.<sup>36</sup> For example, Uzbekistan rose to become a top five market for exports from the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 2018. From 2016 to 2018, the value of Tajik exports increased from \$6M to \$155M. More than Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan holds the key to regional dynamism and attraction of foreign direct investment.

## Geopolitical Constraints to Connectivity

Prior to COVID-19, geopolitics complicated regional policy coordination among CA5 countries. China preferred to deal with Central Asian governments bilaterally, with limited disclosure of transactions, while Russia preferred to work through the EAEU, splitting the region between members (Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic) and non-members (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). In contrast, the EU and US advocated regional cooperation among the CA5, which would enhance their bargaining power vis-à-vis China and Russia. However, with the exception of Kazakhstan, both the EU and US are secondary economic actors in Central Asia and only marginally influential on policy decisions. Central Asians overwhelmingly preferred Chinese infrastructure investments to Western pressure for institutional reforms.

New East-West tensions following the pandemic accentuated these contrasting approaches. Areas of contestation between China and Russia shrank while the gap widened with the West.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with World Bank official.

<sup>35</sup> Central Asia Energy Water Development Program (CAEWDP), Enhancing Energy Power Trade in Central Asia. World Bank Europe and Central Asia Region Report No: ACS21198, July 2016. The system collapsed in 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Only 8 percent of CA5 countries' trade is with regional neighbors compared to 24 percent in ASEAN, 49 percent in NAFTA, and 64 percent in the EU (UNCTAD Statistics 2018).

## China at the Center

China remains the economic driver of Eurasian integration. The economic impact of COVID-19 puts China on track to match the US economy in absolute terms by 2028, according to Homi Karas, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, while respect for Chinese containment of COVID has overcome criticism of its responsibility for the outbreak, China's suspension of gas imports from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan will increase Sino-skepticism, particularly if promises by China to reinstate trade and investment do not bear fruit.

The decoupling of the US and Chinese economies that began under President Trump is not likely to abate. Militarily, US Secretary of Defense Esper has declared China the number one antagonist in Great Power competition, supplanting Russia, which once held double billing with its Eurasian neighbor.<sup>38</sup> Indirect tensions between the US and China in Central Asia could become overt.

## Russia in the Middle

Being in the middle of the East-West trade route bestows some advantages on Russia. Unlike China, which increased reliance on western-oriented trade, Russia turned to import substitution after the imposition of Western sanctions following Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> This strategy also opens opportunities for imports from Central Asia in the aftermath of COVID-19. According to the EAEU Commission, “[d]espite the decline in world trade, the deterioration in demand, increased risks, and increased protectionism, [new opportunities are opening up for the economies of the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union.](#)”<sup>40</sup>

Russian support is essential to the success of the Silk Road Economic Belt (the BRI brand in Central Asia)<sup>41</sup>. That support is likely to strengthen due to the increase in Russian trade turnover with China due to BRI (Table 5).

Table 5.

**China-Russia Transit Rail Container Traffic in TEU**  
2014–2018<sup>42</sup>

Route	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
PRC to the Russian Federation	496	262	8,376	29,960	30,611
Russian Federation to PRC	85	3,940	3,871	14,899	25,094
<b>Total Containers</b>	<b>581</b>	<b>4,202</b>	<b>12,248</b>	<b>44,859</b>	<b>55,705</b>

PRC = People's Republic of China, TEU = twenty-foot equivalent unit.  
Source: Mongolia Ministry of Road and Transport Development.

<sup>37</sup> Wall Street Journal, August 25, 2020, p. A8.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Esper, “The Pentagon is Prepared for China,” Wall Street Journal, August 25, 2020, p. A17.

<sup>39</sup> Hutson 2019, 23.

<sup>40</sup> These include food and processed agricultural products for markets in China. At the same time, EEC Minister of Trade Andrei Slepnev observed the importance of maintaining markets in the EU. In 2019, 18% of EAEU trade turnover was with China and 44.5% was with the EU.

<sup>41</sup> Hutson 2019, 20-22.

<sup>42</sup> CAREC 2020, 32.

## EU in the Wings

In a 2016 review of EU strategy in Central Asia, the EU Directorate-General for External Relations stated bluntly that “[t]he EU should not and cannot compete with Russia and China in the region.” The review noted that the EU strategy, dating from 2007, with limited resources (US\$750 million from 2007-2013), had suffered from numerous challenges, including political backsliding, corruption, and the failure of Central Asian energy exports to materialize. The report concluded that EU interventions had resulted in “limited to no impact.”<sup>43</sup>

The [new EU strategy](#) is grounded in economic fundamentals, starting with support for accession to the WTO (by Uzbekistan), improving trade and transport connectivity, and extending access to the EU Generalized Scheme of Preferences and Partnership and Cooperation agreements. A primary goal of these agreements is to help countries adopt EU standards so as to increase their access to European markets.

This strategy has been upended by COVID-19 and the contested Belarus elections in August 2020. Should the EU decide to impose sanctions on officials who persecuted election protesters, President Lukashenko has promised to retaliate by blocking East-West rail transport.<sup>44</sup> The ability of one country to threaten continental integration could increase demand for routes to the south of the Caspian, putting pressure on Russia to keep the trains running.

## US at the Periphery

The US is more than geographically peripheral to European-Eurasian integration; it is increasingly isolated by a failure of policy imagination. Narrow vision, both in security policy and economic development, means the US is unable to influence the evolving Eurasian landscape. Yet in the field of trade and investment, it has numerous opportunities. For example, it could use its good offices to convene stakeholders in Georgia and Central Asia to harmonize shipment costs.<sup>45</sup> It also needs to consider the impact on Central Asia of its sanctions policy. Sanctions on Iran have impacted trade between Central Asia and Iran by diverting transit through Turkmenistan from Bandar Abbas (the preferred port) to Georgia, adding to shipment time and costs.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion: Uzbekistan as the Pivot

Geopolitical fragmentation is a deterrent to external coordination. As a consequence, progress in cooperation requires greater leadership by Central Asian states and willingness to harmonize national policies. The absence of an institutional framework owned and managed by Central Asians remains a stumbling block to regional coordination.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> European Union, Directorate-General for External Policies, Implementation and Review of the European Union – Central Asia Strategy: Recommendations for EU Action,” 2016: doi:10.2861/587065 (pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Wall Street Journal, August 29-30, 2020, p. A7.

<sup>45</sup> CAREC 2019, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> CAREC 2019, p. 55

<sup>47</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, S. Frederick Starr, and Yang Cheng, “Central Asia: All Together Now,” *The American Interest*, June 16, 2017. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/06/16/central-asia-all-together-now/>

Uzbekistan is the pivot country. It is under pressure by Russia to join the EAEU as a full member (not just observer, as passed by Parliament); China is neck-and-neck with Russia for dominance as an economic partner; and the new US strategy for Central Asia is now aimed at trilateral dialogue with Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. According to one Uzbek observer, much will depend, on the one hand, on the effectiveness of Washington's implementation of the new Central Asian strategy, and on the other, on how successfully Beijing will advance its One Belt, One Road initiative.

Within the region, the outlook depends more on actions by Uzbekistan than other players.<sup>48</sup> Uzbekistan is the most populous and most willing to undertake market-opening reforms. At the peak of the crisis in Spring 2020 it demonstrated the most enlightened leadership vis-à-vis its neighbors, led calls for coordination, and promoted industries aimed at higher-end European markets. Without serious new Western investment in Uzbekistan, Russia and China will continue to dominate, and Central Asia is likely to remain peripheral to European-Eurasian integration.

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<sup>48</sup> This view was also expressed by Luca Anceschi, author of *Analysing Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy: Regime Neo-Eurasianism in the Nazarbaev Era* on August 27, 2020 at a discussion sponsored by the Central Asian Program at George Washington University IERES.

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# BEIJING BINDS: COVID-19 AND THE CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONSHIP

By Raffaello Pantucci



Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and President of Mongolia Tsakhiagiin Elbaydorj. Photo from en.kremlin.ru



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**June 19, 2020**

Washington's intensely negative perspective on China has obscured the ability to look in detail at what is going on around the world. While it is true that many are concerned about China's assertive rise and how COVID-19 has been handled, the story is not universally negative. In Central Asia, where countries are increasingly dependent on China economically and are likely to become more so in a post-COVID-19 world, the narrative is a complicated one. Previous tensions have been exacerbated by the virus, while at the same time China has strengthened its presence and relationships. The net result is likely to be an even closer binding between China and Central Asia, notwithstanding the persistent tensions that exist between them.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
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## Patient Zero and Sinophobia

Given their physical proximity, it is interesting to note that none of the Central Asian powers have pointed to China as the source of their initial infections. The one that comes closest to pointing an accusing finger is Turkmenistan, which on February 1 saw a flight from Beijing to Ashgabat redirected to Turkmenabat after a woman on board was taken sick. She was discharged from the plane and placed in quarantine in a tuberculosis sanatorium. However, Turkmenistan has not yet had any officially confirmed cases (and this story was not reported in official media).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Kazakhstan identified their first cases as coming from Germany on March 9 and 12,<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyzstan from Saudi Arabia entering on March 12<sup>3</sup> and Uzbekistan from France on March 15.<sup>4</sup> Tajikistan only admitted official cases in late April after there had been repeated reports of people falling sick from pneumonia type diseases, making public tracing of patient zero within the country impossible.<sup>5</sup> Rumours had circulated for some time prior to these official confirmations about cases, and it is interesting that all appear to have announced their first cases at around the same time.

This relatively late link did not, however, stop a wave of Sinophobia sweeping through the region in January and February as people went down the route of attacking ethnic Chinese they saw in the markets. Whilst early rumours that violence in early February in Masanchi, south Kazakhstan between Dungan (ethnically Han but religiously Sunni peoples who have lived in the region for over a hundred years) and Kazakhs was related to COVID-19 inspired Sinophobia proved false,<sup>6</sup> there were reports of violence against Chinese in markets in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan<sup>7</sup> and Tajikistan.<sup>8</sup> In Bishkek, Parliamentary Deputy Kamchybek Zholdoshaev made a speech in Parliament about how Kyrgyz should avoid contact with Chinese citizens and all those in the country should be forced to wear masks.<sup>9</sup> On January 29, a train in the south of Kazakhstan was stopped and two Chinese nationals on board booted off when a panic set in that they might have the virus. They tested negative.<sup>10</sup>

Reflecting a broader anger against China in the country, in mid-February the announcement was made to cancel the At-Bashi logistics center in Kyrgyzstan. The US\$280 million project was signed during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping the year before and had faced massive protests.<sup>11</sup> It was not entirely clear from reporting whether the Kyrgyz government or company withdrew the project, but it was obvious that it was the volume of local protestors that drove the decision. Described as an articulation of fear of Chinese land-grab, the project's collapse is a net loss to Kyrgyzstan as it would have helped restore some of the country's role as a regional trade hub. There is no evident link between the project's cancellation and COVID-19, but doubtless it played into the background of protestors views.

<sup>1</sup> "Passazhirku reisa, sledovavshego iz Pekina, pomestili v karantin v Turkmenabate," *hronikaturkmenistana.com*, February 2, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Dva sluchaia zarazheniia koronavirusom podtverzhdeny v Kazakhstane" *Fergana.news*, March 13, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "V Kyrgyzstane zaregistrirovan pervyi sluchaï koronavirusa," *kabar.kg*, March 18, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> "U grazhdanina Uzbekistana, vernuvshegosia iz Frantsii, vyjavlen koronavirus" *kun.uz*, March 15, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> "Tadzhikistan ofitsialno priznal nalichie koronavirusa covid-19 v strane" *avesta.tj*, April 30, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> "Death Toll In Ethnic Clashes In Kazakhstan's South Rises To 11," *rferl.org*, February 13, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> "Call Tsender: Na rynke djynhay prodavcy vygnali kitaycev iz ih konteynerov," *kaktus.media*, March 2, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> "Chem Torguyut v Kitaiskih Produktovih Magazinah Dushanbe," *asiaplustj.info*, March 2, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "Kamchybek joldoshaev o koronaviryse: nyjno izbegat kontakta s grajdanami kitaia" *kaktus.media*, January 29, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "Dvuh grajdan kitaya podozreniem koronavirus snyali poezda," *Tengrinews.kz*, January 29, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> "China-led \$280 Million Kyrgyzstan Project Abandoned After Protests," *Reuters.com*, February 18, 2020.



## Medical Aid Flows Both Ways

Sinophobia was not, however, the pervasive view amongst government across the region, with the Uzbek,<sup>12</sup> Kazakh<sup>13</sup> and Kyrgyz<sup>14</sup> governments all sending various volumes of medical aid to China during the first half of February. The Turkmen government sold one million masks to China at around the same time.<sup>15</sup> In late January early February, they all gradually severed their physical connections with China, closing direct borders, air routes and setting bans on arrivals from China. These measures were imposed as much of the world was severing its contacts with the Middle Kingdom as the full measure of the COVID-19 outbreak across China became clear.

It did not take very long for the tables to turn. By mid-March, the Central Asians were facing their own outbreaks and started to seek support and aid from China. The Kyrgyz Security Council met and decided to request support from Beijing.<sup>16</sup> Beijing quickly reciprocated the donations, with aid starting to arrive by the end of the month. In the first instance it was mostly to Kazakhstan<sup>17</sup>, Kyrgyzstan<sup>18</sup> and Uzbekistan<sup>19</sup> (the three countries that had admitted they were suffering from the disease), but testing kits and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were also handed over on March 30 (a full month before Dushanbe reported cases) by Chinese officials to their Tajik counterparts at the Karasu (or Kulma) border post.<sup>20</sup> Turkmenistan remains a black hole of information.

And this munificence has continued, with repeated flights of aid from both regional authorities across China (Xinjiang seems a natural leader, but lots of other regions have provided support as well) as well as the business community. The Jack Ma foundation followed up on an earlier promise of support to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members by sending plane loads of aid to all Central Asian members.<sup>21</sup> Companies with large footprints in the region like Huaxin, Sany, Sinopec, China Construction, China Road and Bridge Company (CRBC) and many more, provided money or PPE (often through the local embassy). One shipment to Uzbekistan was sent by a group of mostly Chinese defence companies using Uzbek military aircraft to distribute PPE to security officials and front line medical staff.<sup>22</sup> In late April, the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek handed over PPE and medical aid to the State Border Guard Service.<sup>23</sup> By mid-May, the PLA got into the action, sending supplies to their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>24</sup> The Uzbek colonel receiving the aid in Tashkent noted that this was the first medical aid from abroad that the Uzbek Armed Forces had received.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>12</sup> "Uzbekistan Sending Medical Supplies to Virus-hit China," rferl.org, February 12, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> "Mid knr poblagodari kazakhstan za gumanitarnuyu pomoshch v borbe s koronavirusom," lenta.inform.kz, February 3, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "MCHS Kyrgyzstana peredalo 7 tonn gypmomoishi Kitau," kaktus.media, February 19, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "Kitaï zakupil v Turkmenistane 1 million zashchitnykh meditsinskikh masok," turkmenistan.ru, February 16, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> "Sovbez rekomendoval provesti peregovory y Kitaia poprosiat pomoshch dlia Kyrgyzstana," kaktus.media, March 16, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Pervyy gumanitarnyy grus iz Kitaya pribyl v Almaty," inform.kz, April 2, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> "Dostavlena gypmomoish ot Kitaia dlia medrabortnikov," kaktus.media, March 26, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> "Istinnoï družbe rasstoianie ne pomekha," Uzdaily.uz, March 30, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> "Kitaj predostavil tadjikistanu sredstva profilaktiki koronavirusa" avesta.tj, March 30, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Uzbekistan: "V Tashkent pribyl ocherednoï gumanitarnyï grus, predostavlennyï kitaïskimi partnerami," uzdaily.uz, April 10, 2020; Kazakhstan: "Dzhek ma napravil v Kazakstan medicinskie sredstva zaschity," lenta.inform.kz, April 11, 2020.; Kyrgyzstan: "V Kyrgyzstan pri byla pervaia partiia gryza predostavlennoogo osno vatelem alibaba djekom ma," kaktus.media, April 10, 2020.; Tajikistan— it is not clear from public reporting that any has been sent to Tajikistan, but it seems likely that some will have been sent.

<sup>22</sup> "V Uzbekistan pribyl gumanitarnyï grus iz Kitaia," uzdaily.uz, March 30, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> "Chinese Embassy hands over PPE to Kyrgyz Border Gaurds," en.kabar.kg, April 24, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> "Chinese PLA sends epidemic prevention supplies to militaries of 12 countries," english.chinamil.com, May 17, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> "Uzbekistan I kitay klyuchi ot budushchego/narodno osvoboditelnaya armiya kitaya peredala gumanitarnyy grus dlia borby s koronavirusom vooruzhe", podrobno.uz, May 13, 2020.

Even before the aid (some of which was sold rather than gifted, though from open reporting more seems given than purchased), Chinese doctors were heading to the region or providing regular video conferences with their local counterparts to share their experiences. For example, a group from Xinjiang did a 15-day tour of Kazakhstan in early April.<sup>26</sup> The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) representative in Tashkent met with his local counterparts to discuss how China had implemented its lockdowns.<sup>27</sup> The China Petroleum University, who is responsible for the Confucius Institute in Khujand, Tajikistan, launched the translation in Russian of a manual to help deal with COVID-19.<sup>28</sup> In Uzbekistan, a telemedicine system was set up between Jiangxi and Tashkent to help provide sharing of experiences.<sup>29</sup> Similar exchange structures have been suggested in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The SCO has also played a growing role, interestingly beyond the security space with which it is most commonly associated. On March 22, SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov wrote an effusive letter to remote learning firm Weidong Cloud Education. A company with a strong footprint through MoUs already around the region, Norov praised the firm's contribution to member states' ability to respond to COVID-19.<sup>30</sup> In mid-May, the SCO co-hosted a seminar with Alibaba to connect Chinese doctors from the First Affiliated Hospital of Wenzhou Medical University with their SCO counterparts. Potentially reflecting language preferences, the session did not include Indian and Pakistani experts, but did include Observer member Belarus and Dialogue Partner Azerbaijan.<sup>31</sup>

## Persistent Tensions

But all good news must come to an end, and amidst this flood of support and aid there has been a consistent pattern of bad news stories towards China as well. An early one relating directly to the virus was a diplomatic spat at Dushanbe airport in early February when Chinese diplomats returning to the country refused to be placed in mandatory quarantine.<sup>32</sup> But most of the reported stories have focused on Kazakhstan, where the government has had to manage anger around an article that emerged mid-April in China which seemed to suggest that Kazakhstan wanted to “return” to China.<sup>33</sup> Emanating from a clickbait farm in Xi'an, the article was one of many that were published written for a nationalist domestic audience in mind which suggested that most of China's neighbours were eager to “come back” to China.<sup>34</sup> Unsurprisingly, this was not well-received (though curiously did not attract the same sort of attention in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan about which similar articles were also written<sup>35</sup>), and led to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to haul the Ambassador in for a dressing down.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>26</sup>“Pribyvshie v stolicu kitayskie vrachi posetili nacional nyy nauchnyy kardiohirurgicheskiy centr,” lenta.inform.kz, April 11, 2020.

<sup>27</sup>“V GUVU d. Tashkenta obsudili opyt politsii Kitaia v period bor'by s pandemiej koronavirusa,” uzdaily.uz, April 6, 2020.

<sup>28</sup>“Chinese universities compile the first new crown prevention manual for Tajikistan,” news.sciencenet.cn, April 15, 2020.

<sup>29</sup>“China-Uzbekistan telemedicine system put into operation,” xinhuanet.com, April 25, 2020.

<sup>30</sup>“Weidong Cloud Education together with SCO to fight COVID-19,” wdecloud.com, March 27, 2020.

<sup>31</sup>“With SCO support, the Alibaba Group hosted a workshop on countering the spread of the novel coronavirus infection,” eng.sectscsco.org, May 14, 2020.

<sup>32</sup>“Mocharoi Diplomati bo Diplomatchoi Chin Furudgochi Dushanbe,” akhbor.com, February 9, 2020.

<sup>33</sup>“Kazakhstan summons Chinese ambassador in protest over article,” reuters.com, April 14, 2020.

<sup>34</sup>“Rising Nationalism Tests China's uneasy partnerships in Central Asia,” eastasiaforum.org, May 29, 2020.

<sup>35</sup>“WeChat responds to the article “Multi-country eager to return to China”: delete 227 articles, 153 titles,” thepaper.cn, April 16, 2020.

<sup>36</sup>“Kazakhstan summons Chinese ambassador in protest over article,” reuters.com, April 14, 2020.

The Embassy sought to dismiss the story as a Western concoction,<sup>37</sup> but in early May the Ministry in Beijing caused the Ambassador a further headache when they launched a coordinated rhetorical attack with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a series of U.S. supported biolabs across the former Soviet space.<sup>38</sup> Established in the wake of the Cold War, the biolabs were part of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) initiative which sought to decommission safely the many weapons of mass destruction left over from the Soviet Army. The story that circulated was that in 2017 an American team working out of one of these labs in Kazakhstan was studying Coronavirus in bats as part of a U.S. Department of Defence funded programme.<sup>39</sup> It takes little imagination to draw a conspiratorial line to the current day.

None of this played well in Kazakhstan, leading to news commentaries which in essence called a plague on both houses – saying Kazakhstan was unhappy with both China and the United States.<sup>40</sup> This confirmed polling undertaken by a NSF-funded collaborative research project on “The Geopolitical Orientations of People in Borderland States,” which suggested that both the US and China are held in low regard, with Russia only slightly higher as a *primus inter pares* amongst big powers in the region as far as Kazakhs were concerned.<sup>41</sup> It seems as though some of this tension also spilled over into the medical diplomacy China was providing, with Chinese and Kazakh doctors arguing over the amount of PPE they were using in hospital. The Chinese doctors thought all the staff at hospital should be using high levels of PPE for every patient they were handling, while the Kazakhs responded saying they were following World Health Organization’s guidelines which pointed to its use only in intensive care or patients known or suspected to be infected.<sup>42</sup>

## Get Central Asia Moving Again

Tensions aside, the Central Asians are getting quite keen to get their economies moving once again. The Kyrgyz have asked to open their border posts with China,<sup>43</sup> something which must have now happened given the fanfare that was attached to the announcement of a shipload of goods heading from Gansu to Tashkent via Irkeshtam in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>44</sup> There is further evidence of Chinese agricultural products entering the region.<sup>45</sup> The Kyrgyz have taken things even further, and sought to renegotiate their debt load with China – as part of a bigger push to re-negotiate their entire foreign debt burden. President Jeenbekov made a direct plea to Xi about this in a phone call.<sup>46</sup> It is not clear that the Chinese have signed off on this, but given the general trend globally (and China’s statements through the G20 about debt relief<sup>47</sup>), it would be likely that China will extend the repayment schedule at the very least. Presumably, a similar discussion is ongoing with Tajikistan at the very least, though it has not been publicly reported.

The Uzbeks have taken a more pragmatic approach, and instead spoken about speeding up construction of the long-delayed train line between Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China. The Kyrgyz section has held things up,

<sup>37</sup>“ChinaAmbassadorKazakhstan – Post April 17” Facebook.com, April 17, 2020.

<sup>38</sup>“China, Russia can initiate probe of US bio-labs,” *globaltimes.cn*, May 14, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> “Pentagon okuzhil rossiyu poyasom sekretnykh biolaboratoriy,” *mk.ru*, May 5, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> “Kazakhstan okazalsya mezhdru molotom I nakovalnej v konflikte SSHA I Kitaya o voenno biologicheskikh laboratoriyah,” *ehonews.kz*, May 12, 2020.

<sup>41</sup>“Kazakhs are wary neighbours bearing gifts,” *opendemocracy.net*, April 30, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> “Almatinskije vrachi otvetili na kritiku kolleg iz Kitaya,” *ehonews.kz*, April 17, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> “Kyrgyz, Chinese FMs discuss opening of border checkpoints,” *akipress.com*, May 27, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> “Uzbekistan I Kitay klyuchi ot budushchego Kitay otkryl novyy transportnyy koridor v Uzbekistan v obkhod Kazakhstana,” *podrobno.uz*, June 6, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> “Chinese business briefing working overtime,” *Eurasianet.org*, June 4, 2020.

<sup>46</sup>“Jeenbekov predlozil predsedatelju knr oblegchit ysloviia po vneshnemy dolgy,” *kaktus.media*, April 14, 2020.

<sup>47</sup>“China suspends debt repayment for 77 developing nations, regions,” *globaltimes.cn*, June 7, 2020.

but the Uzbeks now consider it essential to help create a safe corridor for transport in a time of COVID-19.<sup>48</sup> Reflecting the possibility that the Kyrgyz obstacle might still be in place, and showing further use of COVID-19 rhetoric for potentially political reasons, the Kyrgyz MP Kenjebek Bokoev said that the virus is a major obstacle to completing the line.<sup>49</sup> He appears to have been overruled, however, as the Gansu train is reportedly travelling as far as Kashgar on rail, before shifting over to vehicles before picking up a train again at Osh. This demonstration is presumably a push to try to force the conclusion of the discussion with the Kyrgyz side.

A central dilemma to this problem, however, is who is going to do this construction. Many of the Chinese engineers who were working in the region had gone home for holidays before the virus took off, and simply never returned. In early March, officials in Kyrgyzstan were already expressing concern about who was going to complete various road projects around the country,<sup>50</sup> while the Chinese Ambassador in Dushanbe pointed out that there might need to be delays to ongoing projects given absent staff.<sup>51</sup>

For Chinese workers that have stayed in the region the situation is not always a positive one. Chinese workers in Tajikistan lost their temper at local authorities, rioting at their mining site near the northern city of Khujand. Local authorities claimed it was a protest about the fact that they had not been paid in some time, but it seems more likely the men were fearful of their environment and demanding repatriation.<sup>52</sup> As has been pointed out, it is possible that all of these stories are true as the experience of Chinese workers in Central Asia is a tough one in general,<sup>53</sup> and shortly before the fight the Chinese Embassy had reported that the first Chinese national in the country had succumbed to COVID-19.<sup>54</sup> Long before the government in Dushanbe had accepted its first COVID-19 cases, Chinese contacts in Tajikistan were reporting concerns about the spread of the disease within the country. All of which suggests likely local tensions.

The Central Asian economies had been suffering even before the virus hit them full bore. The crash in remittances from migrant labor in Russia has kicked out a major pillar of many of their economies, while the collapse in commodities prices has knocked out another. China made a coordinated request to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan that they all lower the volume of gas that they are sending, part of a broader slowdown in the Chinese economy.<sup>55</sup> It is also true that China appears to have increased its oil purchases from Kazakhstan (potentially taking advantage of low prices to fill strategic reserves – something that has been seen in their purchases from Russia as well<sup>56</sup>), this is one of few bright economic lights in the region.<sup>57</sup> Chinese projects that had been suspended appear to be starting up again and reports are starting to trickle in of Chinese workers returning to complete projects across the region. No one in the region will be looking to Moscow to resolve the economic dilemma that COVID-19 has created, especially given Russia's own difficult situation with the virus at home, as well as the continuing hit from rock bottom oil prices. Rather, the current situation and its fall-out is likely to push the Central Asians into even deeper economic binding with China, and in increasingly innovative ways.

<sup>48</sup> "Uzbekistan I Kitay klyuchi ot budushchego, Uzbekistan predlozhit uskorit stroitelstvo zh d Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan I Kitay eto samyy bezopasnyy put' v uslovnikh pandemii," akipress.com, May 20, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> "Coronavirus has become a big obstacle for China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad project: PM," akipress.com, May 12, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> "Premer:grajdane Kitaia pokidaut Kyrgyzstan. Kto teper bidet stroit dorogi," kaktus.media, March 4, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> "Kitaj Pobezhdaet koronavirus I gotov okazat pomoshh mirovomu soobshhestvu," avesta.tj, March 20, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> "Strel'ba v Zarnisore: Pochemu omon podavil protest Kitaiskiv rabochix?" akhbor.rus.com, May 21, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> "Chinese business briefing working overtime," Eurasianet.org, June 4, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> "Notify the first case of new coronary pneumonia among Chinese citizens in Tajikistan," Chineseembassy.org, May 10, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> "Central Asian countries discussing shared cut in gas supplies to China Uzbekneftgaz," spglobal.com, May 5, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> "China buys record volume of Russian oil as European demand dives traders," reuters.com, March 25, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> "Kazakhstan to resume exports of its oil to China in March," reuters.com, February 26, 2020.

## Towards a Chinese E-future

Alibaba (Chinese Amazon.com equivalent) founder Jack Ma's aid towards the region comes after a meeting mid-last year with SCO Secretary General Norov and other Central Asian leaders.<sup>58</sup> Alibaba's sites are amongst the most commonly used across the SCO space, with a majority of packages travelling into Central Asia and Russia from China emanating from the company in some way. In his meeting with Norov, Jack Ma spoke of creating some 100 million jobs in the next decade and many of these would be in SCO member states.<sup>59</sup> They have also discussed using the platform's payment tools like AliPay to help facilitate payments across the entire region, as well as finding ways of using the platform to open up Southeast Asian markets to Central Asian and Russian consumers.<sup>60</sup>

While this ambitious talk may be just that, it is in many ways the realization of something that Beijing has long sought to push through the SCO. Over the years, Chinese experts have repeatedly advanced ideas of creating an SCO Free Trade Area, an SCO Development Bank or other financial institutions. Beijing's stated aim with the SCO was consistently to make it an economic structure rather than a security one. Yet they were consistently stymied by other members. Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan was particularly recalcitrant, and until relatively recently so was Moscow. Through Alibaba and the COVID-19 disaster, China might have found a vehicle to finally advance this goal.

And this is in many ways the story of China's COVID-19 experience in Central Asia. As with much of the world, the narrative is one of acceleration as a result of the virus and its fall-out. Existing trends supercharged as the world spirals into disorder and confrontation. China has long been re-wiring Central Asia into its own orbit. The virus has merely opened up new opportunities, or at least strengthened ones that were already moving in a certain direction. Economic dependence is becoming ever more real, while the underlying cultural tensions remain strong. China continues to have soft power problems in the region, but these are being subsumed by a web of economic and other links increasingly intertwining the region to China. Taking the example of how China's response to COVID-19 has played out in cyber-space with links in e-medicine, e-commerce, e-payments, e-learning and doubtless more shows how wide-ranging China's contributions and links to the region are. In many cases, it might be building on efforts that existed pre-virus, but COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to show how helpful these can also be to the region and increase their uptake. Of course, Russia is still a dominant player (for example agreements across the region through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and common Russian telcos bound by SORM legislation at home means Moscow has great access to Central Asian data<sup>61</sup>), but the foundations are being deepened into Chinese digital technologies in a wide-ranging manner across society.

Central Asians of course see this with some concern, and would clearly be interested in diversifying their options. But in the absence of serious commitments which cover the broad gamut of their interests, they will find China an irresistible force. While Secretary Pompeo's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in early February as the drawbridges were being pulled up with China was actually quite comprehensive in the range of issues that was covered,<sup>62</sup> all of the media attention pushed by the State Department was about

<sup>58</sup> "SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov, Alibaba Group CEO Jack Ma discuss intra-SCO IT cooperation," [eng.sectsco.org](http://eng.sectsco.org), August 29, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> "Alibaba to create 100 million jobs, most of which in SCO countries," [marketscreener.com](http://marketscreener.com), August 30, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "China-Russia bilateral trade expand. Alibaba Russia e-commerce," [silkroadbriefing.com](http://silkroadbriefing.com), October 9, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> "Private Interests: Monitoring Central Asia," [privacyinternational.org](http://privacyinternational.org), November 12, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> "Secretary Pompeo's Visit to Kazakhstan," [state.gov](http://state.gov), February 1, 2020.; "Secretary Pompeo's Visit to Uzbekistan," [state.gov](http://state.gov), February 2, 2020.

confronting China.<sup>63</sup> This push to get the region to more actively fight back against China is a losing battle given physical proximity and economic realities on the ground. Something especially the case when US engagement is done in such a spasmodic and occasional manner. And it has to be said that to some degree there is nothing wrong with the region having a strong relationship with China. It would be strange for the Central Asian powers to not have a relationship with such a powerful and rich neighbour. But the perennial problem is that the scales of control are not tipped in the region's favour, and judging by how the COVID-19 crisis has played out so far, this is unlikely to change going forwards. Beijing will doubtless emerge from the current disaster with stronger links to the region as the Central Asians get sucked inexorably deeper into China's orbit.

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<sup>63</sup> "Pompeo, in Central Asia, Seeks to Counter China," voanews.com, February 3, 2020.

# POST-COVID-19 CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SINO-AMERICAN GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

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COVID-19 is emerging as the geopolitical precursor to an ambitious struggle for influence in Central Asia between China and the United States. This competition, while not new, is finding novel expressions amidst COVID-19 while Central Asian states are faced with the socioeconomic and political challenges posed by the pandemic. The dire economic condition of the region's states makes it even more necessary to attract short-term financial aid and long-term economic opportunities and investment in order for states to survive the pandemic and mitigate its impact. With these challenges in mind, this paper argues that COVID-19 catalyzes existing geopolitical hostilities between China and the United States. In such a geopolitical setting, Washington's influence is declining as a result of a shift in its attention to emerging developments in the Indo-Pacific region, its reductionist approach towards Central Asia, and its domestic approach to handling the pandemic. China, on the other hand, is emerging as an economic savior of Central Asian states. This is because of China's early success in defeating COVID-19 at home and its fostering of an ambitious COVID-centric diplomacy with relatively robust economic potential, as well as its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With these factors in mind, China is more likely to retain an advantage on the post-pandemic Central Asian geopolitical chessboard vis-à-vis the United States. Conducting an argumentative analysis of Sino-US geopolitical competition in the region, this paper argues that the impact of COVID-19 will augment China's geopolitical influence in post-pandemic Central Asia with a variety of ambitious long-term economic alternatives.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

COVID-19 has emerged as the strategic enabler of a shifting power balance in major geopolitical hotspots. It has replenished Central Asian geopolitics with a renewed [Great Game](#) between China and the United States. The region, which is in a vital geostrategic position, is a source of a zero-sum gamble for both great powers, providing both countries with a chessboard on which to play out their geopolitical agendas against one another. This is especially true at a critical juncture in which Central Asian states are fraught with pandemic-related challenges.

Washington is determined to roll back growing Chinese socioeconomic and political influence, while Beijing is looking to formalize and broaden its gains in order to land a decisive blow to the United States' long-held influence in its volatile and strategic backyard. In this scenario, Washington's setbacks in its handling of the pandemic, along with Beijing's assertiveness in its "COVID diplomacy," indicates a shift in the power balance in Central Asia between China and the US.<sup>1</sup> In this geopolitical setting, with reference to the United States and Beijing's handling of the crisis, China is visibly at an advantage in executing major economic projects: hence its influence in post-pandemic Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> To deal with these geopolitical challenges, in the latest *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity*, Washington emphasized economic development, energy security, stability in Afghanistan, and the use of the C5+1 platform to enable cooperation between the United States and Central Asia. It also provided Central Asia with USD 6.8 million and gave Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan [humanitarian assistance](#) to fight COVID-19. China, on the other hand, is also rushing forward to provide technical, medical, and monetary assistance to Central Asian states in order to enhance its geopolitical position vis-à-vis the United States. Its connectivity project, costing roughly USD 1 trillion, i.e., the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), finds more space in the region amidst the pandemic and offers opportunities for trading and investing as long-term solutions for some of the ongoing issues that affect Central Asian states.

The fragile economic conditions of the region have enabled China to increase its political leverage. China's need for geopolitical leverage is particularly critical during the pandemic given that the Central Asian republics are mostly dependent on Beijing for their [commodity and energy exports](#). With the foregoing considerations in mind, this paper is divided into four parts. Part one will highlight the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 in Central Asia along with each country's response. Part one will also discuss the economic conditions that have enabled China to compete geopolitically with the United States. Part two will explain the United States' engagement in, and policy towards, Central Asia, especially during the ongoing pandemic, also discussing the declining nature of the United States' influence in the region. The third section will discuss Beijing's response to the United States' influence, as well as its commitment to improving its geopolitical foothold and growing influence in the region. This paper's fourth section will explore the future of geopolitics between the United States and China in post-COVID-19 Central Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> *COVID diplomacy* is a term used widely in the context of Chinese COVID-19 assistance provided to a wide number of countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and even North America. This phenomenon plays a role in countering anti-Chinese sentiments amidst a general perception of China as the origin of the novel coronavirus.

<sup>2</sup> *Heartland* was a term used by Halford Mackinder in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to highlight the geopolitical importance of today's Central Asia and parts of Russia as the center of Asia. To Mackinder, controlling the Heartland is the key to controlling the rest of Eurasia.



## Central Asia's Economic Challenges: A Strategic Enabler

COVID-19 presents fresh challenges to an already economically struggling Central Asia. This reality can be assessed through the region's response to the pandemic. Regional governments have [concealed data on COVID-19](#) that could otherwise help states overcome the challenges at hand by allowing them to devise appropriate responses. Meanwhile, the economic slow-down, deteriorating sociopolitical situation, and human rights violations provide a conducive environment for geopolitical competition between China and the US in Central Asia.

COVID-19 has seriously damaged Central Asian economies with disruptions in trade, plummeting remittances, reductions in oil and energy exports, and poor wages from the services sector. The excessive reliance on oil and energy exports and low levels of economic diversification are crippling the region's economic health.

According to a [World Bank Report](#), Central Asia's GDP is expected to decline by 5.4 percent by the end of 2020. The decline in oil prices presents yet another challenge for the region, which started even before the pandemic when agreements among major suppliers from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+) in March 2020 began to falter. Reductions in oil prices also lowered prices for other major commodities in Central Asia. [Reportedly](#), the price of base metal declined by 15 percent, while the figures for natural gas and crude oil were 35 percent and a dramatic 65 percent, respectively. Moreover, as part of the 20-percent decline in global remittances, the [World Bank expects](#) a 27.5-percent decline in remittances for Central Asia, with Russia and Kazakhstan being affected in particular because of COVID-19.

Despite the economic pressure households in Central Asia face, regional governments are providing little to keep them self-sufficient in terms of food and socioeconomic security. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, because of their middle-income economy, are providing economic stimuli. For instance, Kazakhstan [announced](#) the provision of USD 13.4 billion for citizens to meet their basic needs. Uzbekistan is sufficiently shielded from the adverse economic impacts of COVID-19 because of its diversified economy and relatively high exports. However, the three other regional states are unable to provide this support given their financial instability and deteriorating socioeconomic situation. Economic pressure is felt more acutely in Turkmenistan (where existing structural challenges are growing), Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—all of which are dependent on remittances for 30% of their GDP and are vulnerable to severe economic depression given sharp declines in remittances in the region.

Amidst these challenges, countries in the region have explored multiple options ranging from requesting help from China and the United States to turning to international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), and China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The Trump Administration [provided](#) USD 4.3 million by April 1 while offering an additional USD 274 million, especially to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to help the region combat COVID-19. However, these are short-term solutions. Supporting Central Asian economies in the long run requires long-term economic initiatives ranging from investments in energy, infrastructure, and non-oil sectors to major economic initiatives such as China's BRI. A deteriorating socioeconomic situation in Central Asia acts as a strategic enabler for greater Chinese influence by offering China an economic ingress.

## Washington's Decline and Policies of Survival in Central Asia

The United States has remained an influential player in Central Asia's geopolitics following the disintegration of the USSR in the 1990s. Washington helped the region's governments gain freedom of action vis-à-vis Russia in the post-USSR period and also aided them in preserving their autonomy over their natural resources. The involvement of American companies in the energy sector, especially in Kazakhstan, improved the United States' economic engagement and further complemented its political influence. The 9/11 attacks and the global war on terror transformed this political and economic influence into a strategic bulwark as part of the US' ["ambitious forward strategy"](#) in Central Asia and hence moved the region into its sphere of influence. Daniel Fried, then the US Department of State's Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, in his [statement](#) before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia in 2005, defined three major objectives the United States had for the region: "Security, Energy and Regional Economic Cooperation, and Freedom through Reform."

Central Asia has increasingly become ["less hospitable"](#) to the United States' influence. This, in addition to multiple systemic challenges, has been a result of two important regional developments: the first is the peace settlement in Afghanistan and the anticipated gradual draw-down of American forces from Kabul, and the second is growing Chinese economic and political influence that, in turn, has given Central Asian powers a better alternative to American influence. China's involvement has further promoted the region's political empowerment and the fulfillment of its economic needs. The second reason challenges Washington's influence in the region; it brings the United States to the forefront in containing China's growing influence and situates Central Asia as the strategic forward base against Beijing.

Washington's disengagement from the region is the result of its reductionist approach. The US has limited its engagement in Central Asia to using it as a watchtower to keep tabs on the war on terror and insurgency in Afghanistan. The region has remained a core zone for American foreign policy with respect to the war on terror in Afghanistan. Over the past two decades, the United States seems to have distanced itself from major economic initiatives. The United States has further limited its strategic engagement with Afghanistan. However, such a reductionist approach forfeits the growing importance of Central Asia in American geopolitical calculations vis-à-vis global peers such as China.

Given Washington's growing concern with China's influence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in February 2020. Pompeo visited the region five years after then-Secretary of State John Kerry [stressed](#) "the need for stronger regional coordination and accelerated progress ... [in order to] advance stability and prosperity in the region." With respect to China, Pompeo not only visited persecuted Chinese families in Kazakhstan but also [criticized](#) China's lending practices and economic policies, highlighted its human rights violations, and cautioned against ["Chinese activity"](#) and growing influence in the region. While mentioning the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the central threat to wider US strategic interests in the region and beyond, Pompeo [warned](#) that "the Chinese Communist Party presents [a] central threat of our time."

Similarly, in a meeting of C5+1 on June 30, a joint platform was created to discuss the effect of COVID-19; it consisted of five Central Asian countries and the United States. The US Department of State [highlighted](#) proceedings that focused on boosting Central Asia's economic resilience

through building regulatory frameworks for investments in Central Asia and funding from international financial institutions. The meeting also highlighted Central Asia's importance in fostering lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. This was followed by a [joint statement](#) on July 7 showing the Department of State's commitment to investment and economic cooperation, renewable energy and environment, and security cooperation, particularly in terms of border control, curbing trafficking, and thwarting terrorism and violent extremism.

However, COVID-19 is broadening this gap between the United States and Central Asia. Despite a commitment by Pompeo (namely, his recent engagement with the region in terms of investment, economic development, and humanitarian aid of some USD 6.8 million to fight COVID-19), the United States has fallen short in providing the region with long-term economic stability. The crippling economic conditions of the region's states during COVID-19 necessitate long-term international economic support that the United States is not in a position to provide—and even if it does provide support, it is barely able to compete with the major economic opportunities offered by China in its ambitious BRI, which is likely to see comprehensive regional support in post-COVID Central Asia.

The United States' disengagement in the region is likely to accelerate radicalism, human rights violations by authoritarian regimes, and political instability in light of the region's problems with corruption and poor governance. This, in turn, may provide China with plenty of opportunities to increase its power in the region.

## China's Surge and Central Asia's Reception to the BRI

China has scrambled for Central Asia's energy resources to fuel its regional and global ambitions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the 2001 China-Russia Friendship Treaty gave China impetus to become a [stakeholder](#) in Central Asia's strategic, economic, and political developments. China considers Central Asia as integral to its 1-trillion (USD) BRI. The region, because of this project, is integral to its global order, as signified by its economic integration through regional connectivity. The importance of this project was stressed by President Xi, who visited Kazakhstan to lay down his vision of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative in Astana in 2013. Given the difficult economic conditions of Central Asian states, Chinese economic initiatives and investments have attracted all the Central Asian republics. We might expect, especially in a post-COVID world, that Central Asia's economic challenges could help China lay the foundation for its [Pax Sinica](#) in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of China's interest in the region is geoeconomic and geopolitical. The BRI is the masterstroke in forging close economic and political partnerships with the Central Asian republics, which in turn can help Beijing gain a strategic foothold and win influence in the region vis-à-vis Russia and the United States. Furthermore, Beijing intends to neutralize extremism and terrorism in order to maintain political stability and security in China's neighboring Xinjiang. Being the second-largest consumer of energy, China has invested in the energy sector of Central Asia as part of its [SREB strategy in 2010](#) in order to "obtain access to resource potential by participating in the development of oil and gas fields and other natural resources, as well as the import of electro-

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<sup>3</sup> *Pax Sinica* is a historical term used to refer to the peaceful order led by China in East Asia. In contemporary geopolitics, the term represents China's rising geopolitical influence and its anticipated world order.

energy.” China also sees Central Asia as an [economic alternative](#) enabling an expansion of its trade and investments. This is particularly important given Beijing’s economic challenges apropos of COVID-19, its trade war with the United States, and the economic repercussions of its military confrontation with India in Ladakh.

To achieve its geoeconomic and geopolitical objectives in Central Asia, Beijing has resorted to [“COVID diplomacy”](#): that is, helping affected countries in the region with medical and financial support as well as rebutting global perceptions of China as the perpetrator of the virus. The Chinese embassy’s [immediate reaction to the developing COVID-19 situation](#), along with anti-China theories in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, reflects a shift in Chinese diplomatic discourse. This discourse has traditionally remained low-profile, especially on domestic developments in partnering countries. China has also released its [white paper on Fighting Covid-19: China in Action](#), which highlights China’s transparency and containment efforts in fighting the pandemic. In addition to providing expert advice on tackling COVID-19, China has provided Central Asian countries with [medical equipment and technical support](#). In the midst of a global economic slow-down, [Beijing has been able to buy numerous commodities](#), including oil from Kazakhstan and other states in the region. Furthermore, China’s AIIB is emerging as a competitor to the World Bank in providing financial support and investment to regional countries.

For China, the trade war with the United States necessitates access to the European market through its USD 4-trillion BRI, whose backbone, the SREB, crosses through Central Asia. In particular, Kazakhstan is known as the [“Buck of the Belt”](#) whose exports to China (to the tune of USD 6.8 billion) and status as a middle-income economy make it a vital player for China’s position in the region. Therefore, the BRI has the potential to attract more stakeholders in the region for numerous reasons. Arne Elias Corneliusen, a Global Geopolitical Analysis researcher and founder of the Norwegian Risk Consulting International (NCRI), stated at an online [conference at the Institute for War & Peace Reporting](#) that “COVID-19 does not change China’s rationale for the BRI. In fact, COVID-19 will only cement and strengthen China’s willingness to push forward with the BRI in the long term.”

Additionally, America’s challenging COVID-19 situation at home and its obsession with the growing strategic developments in the Indo-Pacific also distance it from Central Asia. This leaves China as the relatively modest alternative for the region to look to for economic recovery and much-needed investment in major Central Asian industries (particularly the energy sector). This trend of leaning towards China was visible even before the COVID-19 crisis. However, COVID-19 is likely to accelerate Central Asia’s economic reliance on Beijing. Hence, post-COVID Central Asia will give China an opportunity to surpass Russia and the United States in its ability to invest in and offer economic opportunities to the region’s states.

## **The Way Forward**

Central Asia’s emergence as the hotspot for Sino-US geopolitical competition is not a new strategic phenomenon: rather, it is historically recurrent and associated with Mackinder’s “Heartland” theory. Mackinder classified the vast region (including Central Asia) in the center of imperial Russia as the key to dominance over the entire Eurasian continent. In his [Democratic Ideals and Reality](#), Mackinder claims that

Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland;  
 Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island;  
 Who rules the World Island commands the World.

During the Great Game of the eighteenth century, Central Asia, being part of the Eurasian Heartland, continued in its role as a strategically important center of global competition. Central Asia's strategic importance in terms of connectivity, energy resources, trade markets, and proximity to the great powers makes it a place to be preyed upon by global powers.<sup>4</sup> China cannot trade this region off in view of its security, political, and economic interests; nor can the United States ignore or reduce Central Asia's importance.

Both powers have sought to adopt strategies to offset the other's influence and to promote their own geopolitical and economic objectives in the region. COVID-19 is the litmus test for the competing strategies employed by both China and the US, and this period will define the future of this geopolitical contest in the post-COVID world. However, for the United States to maintain its influence in the region, it will need to provide [new opportunities](#) in addition to merely challenging Chinese influence in Central Asia.

Although the new political setup seems to consist of protégés of former communist dictators, one should not underestimate the popular demands for liberal reforms in a free market economy, human rights, and democratic governance over authoritarianism. The United States can facilitate these reforms, winning over the hearts and minds of the population in these states to discourage Chinese ingress and augment its geopolitical influence. The United States must apply a capitalistic set of incentives to increase productivity in its political engagement with authoritarian leaders to push for democratic reforms. This will help the United States not only to create an American-like business environment but also to compete with China and Russia's influence, building further security and political partnerships with Central Asian states.

Central Asia's overwhelming economic dependence on China, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is equally raising concerns in the region about its widely practiced [debt-trap diplomacy in developing Asian and African countries](#).<sup>5</sup> Beyond providing substantial aid packages and economic incentives to regional states, the US should also work on providing alternatives to Chinese-led projects such as the BRI. This can be achieved by encouraging public and private investment, especially during COVID-19, from major US aid agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development. American influence can also assist diplomatic efforts in the region and help Central Asian countries understand the pro-authoritarian economic models of China and Russia.

Moreover, the United States can use its military edge to provide Central Asia with the latest military equipment as part of its commitment to securing Central Asia's security, prosperity, and independence. This is especially important at a time when Central Asian states are planning to replace their old Soviet-era military technology in order to face regional threats. Further, the

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<sup>4</sup> *New Great Game* is a term used to describe the geopolitical competition among major regional and global powers for control over natural resources in Central Asia following the Afghan War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> *Debt-trap diplomacy* is used with a negative connotation to describe loans extended in the context of bilateral relations between two countries. In this relationship, the creditor state intends to enlarge the volume of loans to the debtor state and uses this as a tool of coercive diplomacy.

United States should convince regional states that its military presence is not limited to its engagement in Afghanistan but, instead, is part of a commitment to preserve Central Asia's independence from immediate threats, including China's and Russia's quest for dominance.

Central Asian states also need to consider the implications of Chinese investments and China's ambitious BRI project. China's ingress brings not only economic opportunities but also risks associated with long-term pressure on regional economies. Regional countries should investigate the nature of these implications and determine whether the investment is used to genuinely push the region towards economic stability or whether it is part of a [predatory lending](#) approach used to tie down regional powers and exploit their natural resources.<sup>6</sup> In a nutshell, Washington is not willing to yield to Beijing's influence over Central Asia given its long-term security interests in the region. However, a policy of lip service with no pragmatism will do little to keep China away from its goals of achieving long-term geopolitical influence in Central Asia.

## Conclusion

Central Asia's geopolitical importance leaves China and the United States competing for influence in the area. Besides providing short-term assistance to Central Asian countries, China has developed its status as an economic savior for regional states with its long-term commitments in the form of the BRI. Its long-term economic aid has been well-received in Central Asia, where governments are attempting to revive their economies. This revival is not possible without billions of dollars of investment and a continuous flow of exports during and in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19. China is able to provide both forms of economic relief and hence is in a position to enhance its geopolitical influence in post-COVID Central Asia.

Washington's diversion from the region towards the Indo-Pacific ignores the importance of Central Asia in larger geostrategic imperatives vis-à-vis China and Russia. Therefore, Washington's efforts to provide economic and political alternatives to regional states could help revive its declining influence in the region. Dialogue with regional authoritarian governments over socioeconomic reforms, a free market economy, public-private investment, and long-term economic partnerships is now a geopolitical necessity to quell Beijing's fast-growing ingress in the crossroads of Eurasia.

Finally, Central Asia's economic decline and political instability have an added impact on increasing Sino-American geopolitical contests where regional states adopt ambivalent approaches for the purpose of maximizing their own economic, political, and security interests. Central Asian states should concede to Chinese economic assistance and regard it as complementary to their long-standing multi-pronged partnership with the United States; geopolitical shifts between China and the United States during COVID-19 represent a temporary maneuver and not a long-term decline in American influence. Such a dynamic may necessitate cohesive policy-building among Central Asian powers to achieve regional integration. Such complicated dynamics may require Central Asian countries to be more mindful of Sino-American relations and the US and Chinese quests for influence and economic power in the region.

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<sup>6</sup> *Predatory lending* is a financial practice that imposes unfair loan conditions on the borrower in order for the lender to obtain maximum but unfair benefits. In this case, China is known to have used its loans to coerce small states like Sri Lanka and multiple other Asian and African countries.

# THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND OSCE: ORGANIZATIONAL EFFORTS VS COVID-19 IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Photo by Yohann Libot



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COVID-19 has proven to be a cunning foe. Its effects have been felt at different times and, depending on measures taken and the situation on the ground, it has produced different outcomes. Months after the first outbreak came to light, we are still taking stock of the initial impact of COVID-19—and this is ignoring the fact that the shockwaves it has caused are yet to be fully felt. The unfortunate truth is that it may be some years yet before everything has settled. What is clear now at least is, while lockdowns and the closure of national borders may solve the issue on a local level, to clamp down on COVID-19 more fully, unified, and perhaps even regional responses are necessary. The EU, the poster boy for regional integration, is often used as an example, but there are certainly other actors worthy of consideration. Central Asia (CA) is one of these regions, despite being not as central in the mind's eye of many analysts.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

With that being said, there are many actors and organizations that work in Central Asia. Generally speaking, many of these are devoted to security and military matters. While certainly important, those that are strictly military-focused, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), will be set aside in the context of this paper for the simple fact that they are purely military alliances. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), too, has proven to be largely quiet on COVID-19. While there are some smaller actors, that leaves us with two organizations that are worth examining: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The two are interesting because, while both are involved in Central Asia, they also branch out to other regions. Similarly, none of them are purely Central Asian organizations per se: the OSCE has a strong emphasis on the European and Western perspective, and the SCO is a China-led organization.

How are these organizations facing up to the pandemic?<sup>1</sup> And, what do their responses to the pandemic say about their governing actors' influence in the region?<sup>2</sup>

## The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The SCO is, in the words of the most recent EU policy paper on it, "[certainly one of the less known regional organizations worldwide.](#)" Despite this, the SCO is heavily involved in Central Asia and, in fact, stretches beyond it, with various members, such as the dominant two, namely, China and Russia, but also India, Pakistan, and aspirants such as Iran. Beginning with a border demarcation focus, the SCO has since gone from being a primarily anti-terrorist organization with significant but not remarkable military aspects,<sup>3</sup> to one which has become increasingly economy-focused. This has become more pronounced as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a point of emphasis at the yearly Summit meetings of the SCO ([2015](#), [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#), and [2019](#)).

The SCO has also begun to branch out into other spheres, reflecting its varied and, at times, convoluted foci. Examples include the previously-mentioned security issues, connectivity (in both the [transport](#) and [digital](#) senses of the word, with an emphasis on [post-COVID economic discussions](#)), cultural exchange efforts (such as the [promotion of holidays, children's art](#), which aims to "share their [children's] views on the spread of the coronavirus and the struggle against it"), and [tourism](#), as well as support for education and the [fostering of closer ties between universities](#) in the SCO sphere even [during the pandemic](#). This varied approach to an international organization, in contrast to a focused type, can be both a hinderance and a strength; it can mean both diversification and dilution, or a pragmatic evolution. This varied approach has continued to blossom as—very serendipitously considering the present circumstances—the SCO and its member states adopted a statement regarding their [Joint Efforts against Epidemics](#) in 2018.

This proved fortuitous as, following in the wake of China's active post-COVID diplomacy, the SCO has also demonstrated a marked interest in at least appearing to provide support to its members. The SCO's first comments regarding COVID-19 were lodged on [January 31](#), with the SCO releasing

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was submitted in August 2020, and so reflects data received up until that point.

<sup>2</sup> While these organizations are, of course, made up of states, and are loosely institutionalized in comparison to, for example, the EU, actions on a state-by-state level will not necessarily be the focus of this article, and instead, a top down approach will be used.

<sup>3</sup> See Marcel De Haas, "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 3 (2016): 378–406.



an official statement on [February 14](#). The statement itself was largely one of support by the members for China (as with [this one made in March](#)). From then onwards, there has been a steady stream of SCO statements regarding COVID-19 that are often somewhat congratulatory in nature. For example, the aforementioned press release in reaffirming commitments to one another, [meetings](#) between the SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov and the former OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger, [meetings of health officials](#) from the SCO space, and other initiatives.

However, despite this active and visible media posture, the SCO itself has largely not donated aid itself, or procured experts and sent them on its behalf. Instead, it is continuing to act as it always has up until recently, i.e., a forum for its member states to popularize their actions, as well as to help foster bilateral agreements between them.

Could the SCO change its approach? The organization has recently added an [intriguing note](#) to their website, worth quoting in full:

Currently the special working group on healthcare is conducting selection of projects aimed to set up a structure in the SCO framework similar to the World Health Organisation (the working title is "SCO WHO") which would work in the interest of improving medical services in the SCO member states, developing disease-prevention capabilities, and satisfying the needs of population in high-tech medical treatments.

This obviously demonstrates a great deal of ambition, but also raises two questions. The first of these questions is related to capacity, and whether the SCO even has the aptitude to create an institution of this magnitude.<sup>4</sup> The second question is rather simple on the surface, but raises others: why would the SCO want to do this? Is the WHO insufficient for the SCO sphere, and therefore member states believe that a more regionally focused health organization is necessary?

Furthermore, the SCO does not appear to have any rapid response force or any formal mechanisms to deal with emergencies like this, though there were [discussions to create one](#). This is especially disappointing considering the fact that the SCO previously mentioned in its 2018 Statement for “Joint Efforts Against the Threat of Epidemics in the SCO Space” that it recognized the threat—and yet the amount of direct, attributable aid has so far been minimal. These summits are of great importance since the SCO is one of the few regional organizations in the world that attracts the leaders of so many countries, many of which are distinctly outside the Western realm. The Summits are also important as they are often useful fora to propagate large scale projects or visions. The next one has been confirmed to occur in an online format in November, [according to Russian President Vladimir Putin](#). As the BRICS Summit will occur on [November 17](#), it is probable that the SCO Summit will also be held around that time. With months of dealing with the pandemic already, one can guess COVID-19 will take center stage in the member states’ deliberations.

Indeed, there are a number of initiatives that the SCO has brought forth that could perhaps be of use in the current situation. The [SCO Interbank Consortium](#), for example, primarily functions as a way to develop infrastructure, technology, and loans to stimulate these areas, as well as to encourage trade; it could also provide emergency funds across borders to deal with the economic aftershocks of COVID-19, and it in fact had a [conference discussing these issues](#). In addition, if economic problems linked to the slowdown of global trade continue to rise, then the resultant

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<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps it would be more apt to ask whether China and Russia have the ability to do so.

increase in unemployment could lead to a spike in radicalization. This point was made by the SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov at [a joint conference held with the United Nations \(UN\), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\), and other bodies](#). He stated that terrorist groups could take advantage of the instability caused by the current socio-economic crisis. Here, the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), [which collaborates with the International Criminal Police Organization \(INTERPOL\)](#), could also prove relevant; the [UN also acknowledges](#) its effectiveness.

To understand the SCO as a forum and amplifier for the policies of member states is not to diminish its importance as a regional actor. For example, despite the fact that aid in the form of equipment from the SCO seems rather limited, the organization has successfully coordinated multiple meetings of health experts, as mentioned before. They have also published [a report](#) on the actions they took to fight the pandemic. The SCO also leverages its influence as a platform to give more exposure to Chinese companies such as [Alibaba](#), and developing connections between [Alibaba and the SCO Youth Group](#) (or SCOLAR). What is also clear is the close association the SCO is trying to encourage [with the UN](#) as a way to secure its own legitimacy.

Therefore, the SCO's goals can perhaps be best understood as enhancing the ability of its member states to resolve the pandemic for themselves. This differs with how multilateral organizations are assumed to deal with problems, i.e., through their own institutions, and through aid given directly by themselves. [The UN](#) falls under this category. Viewed in this light, the SCO is, in fact, performing as it is set out to be. Enhancing dialogue by increasing the number of meetings, the SCO is, in theory, empowering member states. There are exceptions, of course, as with [Tajikistan](#) until it [could not hide the presence of the pandemic any longer](#).

However, the most useful feature of the SCO in the pandemic period may be its public outreach, and its efforts to shape the debate regarding COVID-19. Suffice it to say, the SCO figures into how Beijing is reaching out to other countries, as it is also being used as a tool to boost the profile of China. For example, while ostensibly about how to combat COVID-19, the [most recent webinar](#) the SCO organized (August 11, 2020), with experts across the region, was mostly related to public diplomacy and expounding a sense of community and shared destiny.<sup>5</sup> Thus the webinar seemed to be more focused on countering negative media coverage rather than the pandemic itself.

## The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

This paper will now look at the actions of the OSCE regarding the pandemic. To summarize, the OSCE started cold, became hot, and then, for an extended period, went completely silent on the issue.

The generally accepted date for the official, or recognized, outbreak of COVID-19 was in late December 2019 and early January 2020. While the OSCE does not, in its extensive breadth of activities, claim to be directly involved in pandemic-related issues, such issues most certainly have effects on its professed realm of responsibilities, especially on security matters. Therefore, the fact that the OSCE only began to deal with COVID officially from [March 16–17, 2020](#) is troubling. This is

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<sup>5</sup> The webinar itself was off the record and is not posted on common video sites.

particularly concerning because it was only when [Austria](#), where the OSCE Secretariat is located, began its [own lockdowns](#), that the OSCE sprang into action.

From this point forward, the OSCE had a fairly regular stream of aid-related offerings to Central Asia, such as to Tajikistan (in [April](#) and [August](#)), Kyrgyzstan ([April](#)), and twice to Uzbekistan (in [mid- and late April](#)). There seems to have been a clear push for action in April. These aid packages were in the form of either protective equipment, such as face masks or disinfectants. Understandably for an organization with as widespread a membership as the OSCE, these activities were interspersed with offerings to other states in Europe, such as [Albania](#) and [Montenegro](#). Furthermore, the OSCE's COVID-19 efforts were spread between other emphases, such as [minority](#) and [gender rights](#), as well as observing the conflict zones in [Ukraine](#).

The good news regarding the OSCE's COVID-19 countermeasures ends here. News relating to COVID-19, and any measures the OSCE was taking, suddenly ended on May 29 with the aforementioned delivery to Albania. This silence continues until August 4, referred to earlier in the paper, when the OSCE sent medical deliveries to Tajikistan. This is a gap of more than two months. The simplest explanation for this gap is that the OSCE was not involved with any new initiatives during this period, nor did it have any news to report regarding its activities. Having already dispersed aid to various states, perhaps the OSCE had been in the middle of restocking or re-adjusting its stance on COVID-19.

This explanation does not adequately deal with *why* the OSCE was quiet for more than two months on the subject. While the earlier efforts were laudable, why would things stop so suddenly? Furthermore, if the explanation lies with the fact that the OSCE does not deal with pandemics, why send equipment and create dialogue in the first place? Viewed in this way, the breakdown in effort that the OSCE put forth could be demonstrative of its generally overstretched nature.

Furthermore, the OSCE is devoted to human security and related causes; COVID-19 has caused massive issues, in, for example, the [return of Central Asian migrant workers](#) from Russia. These migrants are [especially vulnerable](#) to the economic problems brought on by the pandemic, and which the UN rightly sees as [considerable](#). A failure to stay at least visible, and hopefully also relevant, in supporting segments of the population in need is a misstep that may have consequences for the OSCE image in the region.

Finally, the pandemic period is most assuredly not a time to be having [a succession crisis](#) at the OSCE. This crisis officially began on July 18 but will now extend [until December 2020](#). Particularly damaging is the fact that it is not just the most senior Secretary General position that is left open, [but also three others](#), which means that all of the OSCE's senior leadership is gone. While the everyday machinery of the organization is certainly moving forward, with no leadership to take charge and provide direction during this turbulent time, the OSCE is not only rudderless but can also be perceived as less than unified in the face of a true test. Even if these positions were filled soon, the breakdown and inability to solve the problem earlier is demonstrative of rather large differences of opinion in the membership.

## SCO and OSCE: How Do They Compare?

Looking at these two organizations as reflecting a competition between value systems, one can notice that the China-led SCO is more interested than the OSCE in shaping discourse on the reaction to COVID-19, as evidenced by its frequent news articles and webinars, and importantly, meetings between health ministers. This parallels Beijing's active campaign to get in front of narratives associating China with the virus, as well as its approach to present itself as the savior as, for example, through so-called [mask diplomacy](#).

In contrast to this, the OSCE, as a Western-leaning organization based on the values of democracy and individual rights, is proving to be less effective in the face of the battering it is taking in relation to COVID-19. In particular, since the OSCE is a European security-focused organization, it may reflect poorly on perceptions of European efforts. The aforementioned failure to elect a Secretary General is also particularly damaging for the OSCE in that it furthers a perception that Western countries are floundering in the face of the pandemic. If the OSCE is indeed concerned with security issues, it should be much more active, doing its best to nip these future problems in the bud now.

It is here that SCO and OSCE differences come to the fore. The SCO, while certainly lacking in some areas regarding its response to COVID-19, is nevertheless concerned with being active, a demonstration that the organization is interested in its credibility on the world stage. The SCO could certainly perform better, at least as an avenue for funds from wealthier members, such as Russia, India, and China. Its members, particularly China, are very aware that they can better project an image of efficiency in the face of this disaster through the SCO. In comparison, the OSCE appears as less concerned about its image in the region.

There are no easy solutions for the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that every day brings a new wrinkle to the difficulties that the world at large is facing. The trick will be in mitigating the ills, rather than fully cancelling them out. For while the medical side of the calamity can be largely dealt with through a reliable and properly tested vaccine, the economic damage that COVID-19 has wrought will take years to untangle. It is through efforts now, at this critical juncture, that organizations such as the SCO and the OSCE can make advances that will strongly influence the future of their security mandates, as well as their legitimacy, in Central Asia.

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Addendum: The date for the SCO Summit has since been released. It will be held on November 10.

# RESPONSES TO COVID-19 AND THE STRENGTHENING OF AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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In March, activist Alnur Ilyashev took to Facebook to criticize the government of Kazakhstan for its response to Covid-19 and accusing officials of embezzling funds earmarked for those affected by the pandemic. Three weeks later he was arrested for “dissemination of knowingly false information that threatens public order during the state of emergency.” Later a court sentenced to three years “restricted freedom” and banned him from activism for five years.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

Covid-19 has caused significant economic shocks in Central Asia, laying bare the vulnerabilities of economies dependent on energy and migration and exposing the weaknesses of the health sector in each country. As of July 15, there were almost 100,000 officially registered cases of Covid-19 in Central Asia, although this is likely an underestimate due to the lack of widespread testing. Facing such a multifaceted crisis, it has been necessary for the state to step in to enforce certain restrictions on citizens. For democratic states, the disruptions to freedom of movement imposed as a result of the pandemic have been temporary and governments have emphasized that it is imperative to return to normal life. But for authoritarian and hybrid regimes, like those in Central Asia, the virus offers an opportunity to suppress dissent, test strategies of public control and strengthen authoritarian norms. While the Central Asian states, with the exception of Turkmenistan, have recognized the spread of the virus in order to receive international humanitarian assistance, they have to varying degrees hidden the true number of infections, and forbidden doctors from talking publicly about the dangerous working conditions in hospitals, and imprisoned citizens for spreading false information. Representatives from the so-called “power ministries,” police, security services and the military, with limited experience with public health, have been the bodies responsible for crisis management, leading to a securitized approach which prioritizes order and stability over public health.

Responses to Covid-19 have differed across the region. Kazakhstan, the first country to confirm a case on March 13, quickly declared a state of emergency, enforcing a strict quarantine in the largest cities. Having lifted the restrictions in May, the country went into another lockdown in July after the arrival of “second wave” of cases. Similarly, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where the first cases were also registered in mid-March, are also facing a spike in cases and Uzbekistan has enforced lockdown measures once more. The two other Central Asian republics have not introduced widespread lockdowns. Tajikistan closed its borders at the end of March, but continued business as usual, with the mass events organized for the Navruz holidays. After it registered its first case on April 30 on the eve of a visit from a World Health Organization (WHO) delegation, cases immediately spiked, although there has been no lockdown in the country and officially deaths have slowed. Meanwhile Turkmenistan remains the second most populous country with no official cases after North Korea with life remaining largely unchanged. A WHO delegation, which visited the country in July, recommended the government activate “measures as if COVID-19 were circulating,” but failed to confirm there were active cases in the country despite many independent media [reports](#) to the contrary.

In this article, focus on three areas. First, we explore how Central Asian governments have attempted to restrict the dissemination of information about the virus, blocking websites, threatening doctors and only permitting state media to break curfew to cover the crisis. Second, we examine how medical students have been forced to work in hospitals in the region. Lastly, we explore how Covid-19 allows governments to promote themselves as effective leaders both at home and abroad.

## **From Lockdowns to Denial: Central Asian Governments Respond to Covid-19**

Crises present challenges to both democratic and authoritarian governments as the state is often expected to take a central role in responding quickly and effectively to resolve the situation (Chan 2014). Given that the state in authoritarian countries often plays a greater role in regulating

citizens' daily lives and restricting their rights, they may be expected to be better placed to respond to a crisis like Covid-19 which requires the state to enforce restrictions on the population. In an article comparing China and Taiwan's response to the 2003 SARS pandemic, Jonathan Schwartz argues that China's response was more effective than Taiwan's because it was able to centralize decision making, rapidly enforce restrictions without debate and shape a unified public message (Schwartz 2012). The five Central Asian states have adopted differing approaches to Covid-19 from aggressive lockdowns to outright denial. But each country has taken a top-down approach that emphasizes the leadership of governments in the crisis. Indeed, there has been a degree of convergence in policy responses to the crisis, referred to in the literature as diffusion, or "any process where prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters," although the precise mechanisms through which this has unfolded remain unclear (Strang 1991: 325).

The first case of Covid-19 was registered in the region's largest country Kazakhstan. Two days after the first official case was registered, on March 15 Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, the President of Kazakhstan, introduced a state of emergency in the country. The government created a "State Commission on Ensuring the State of Emergency under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan," which was endowed with unlimited powers during the state of emergency. The Commission quickly closed the country's borders and prohibited mass gatherings. The president's [decree](#) gave law enforcement strict instructions to strengthen control over persons who "evade medical examination and treatment, do not comply with the quarantine regime, hid data that are important for determining the epidemiological situation." On March 26, quarantine was introduced in Nur-Sultan, Almaty and Shymkent. By April 3, 2020, similar restrictions were introduced in all regions of Kazakhstan and large cities were quarantined. The state of emergency in Kazakhstan ended on May 11 and with restrictions gradually being lifted before being re-introduced on July 5 following a spike in cases.

Two days after Kazakhstan's first case, on March 15 Uzbekistan announced its first case, a citizen who had recently returned from France. Uzbekistan had already [established](#) a Special Republican Commission on Covid-19 on January 29. However, the authorities of Uzbekistan did not introduce a state of emergency, as in Kazakhstan. Instead, on March 23 the Cabinet of Ministers [introduced](#) an enhanced quarantine regime against the spread of coronavirus. Measures were introduced step-by-step, with closure of borders (March 23) the introduction of penalties for not wearing masks (March 25) and then enforcement of a strict lockdown (March 27). In order to preserve the effectiveness of the measures, the Special Republican Commission decided to extend the restrictive measures to counteract the spread of coronavirus infection until June 30. As the number of cases declined, the government introduced a "traffic light" system, with a range of restrictions based on the number of cases in specific areas. As cases rose, a fresh nationwide lockdown was introduced on July 10.

Like the other two countries, the government of Kyrgyzstan created a body to manage the response to the crisis. Kyrgyz authorities under the Ministry of Health created an operational headquarters to monitor the situation with coronavirus in China on January 24. On March 18, the Ministry of Health officially [announced](#) the first cases of coronavirus, three citizens who arrived in the country on March 12 after performing the minor Hajj in Saudi Arabia. Four days later a state of emergency was [introduced](#) for one month in Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad, Suzak, Nookat and Kara-Suu. This was lifted on May 11, although some restrictions still apply.

Tajikistan's government was long in denial about Covid-19. From February onwards, the government actively [hid evidence](#) that the virus had arrived in the country with "pneumonia" cases spiking in January. Arguably the government did not want to sow panic and wanted the March 1 parliamentary elections to run smoothly. Even after the election, the government refused to introduce any measures to curtail the spread of the virus. Despite reports of cases, the government continued as though everything was normal; the football season began and Navruz, the Persian new year, was celebrated by tens of thousands in the northern city of Khujand. The Tajik authorities only confirmed the first case of Covid-19 on April 30, on the eve of the visit of a delegation from the World Health Organization. Despite the official recognition of cases, the government did not order a mass lockdown. Instead, president Rahmon dismissed Minister of Health Nasim Olimzoda on May 5 for mishandling the situation and appointed Jamoliddin Abdullozoda, head of one of the largest medical institutions in Dushanbe and a native of the same district as the president, as the new minister. As of July 15, there were 56 official deaths, although an [investigation](#) by Radio Free Europe put the death toll at a minimum of 152.

Turkmenistan is the second most populous country with no official Covid-19 cases after North Korea. The closed authoritarian state has continued to hold mass gatherings and enforced no stringent measures until May. On May 15, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow [approved](#) the government's plan on "Turkmenistan's preparedness to stand against the pandemic and ways to rapidly react to it," including restrictions on mass gatherings, border restrictions and an awareness campaign around personal hygiene. Yet, by late July there were still no official cases in the country. Numerous reports have indicated that cases exist in the country. On June 15, staff at the Ashgabat Infection Hospital had been [locked](#) in and their phones confiscated. An employee at the Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases [told](#) Radio Azatyk that the outbreak was "serious, [with] some patients in extremely serious condition," and with fatalities.

## Controlling the Narrative

Questions and inconsistencies have emerged from the official narrative about Covid-19 in each country. A cemetery outside of Almaty created solely for Covid-19 victims had more graves than [reported](#) deaths in city. In Tajikistan, despite the fact that there were no official Covid-19 cases, in April bodies were being taken away by men in hazmat suits to be buried. Although, officially at least, the reported cases of coronavirus in Central Asia are not significant when compared to other parts of the world, the pandemic has become a catalyst for governments in the region to strengthen their control over public information. This is in keeping with previous crises of public order such as the Andijon massacre of 2005, the Zhanoezen protests in 2011 and the 2010 conflict in the Rasht Valley Tajikistan, when the governments took measures to monopolize the narrative on the events and suppress any alternatives (Lemon 2014; Megoran 2008; Lewis 2016). Authorities argue that allegedly false information disseminated through the independent media and social networks poses a threat to public health.

Two days after the first case was made public, the Ministry of Information in Kazakhstan made a statement arguing that the country had recently witnessed an increase in the dissemination of false information and [warned](#) citizens they needed to strictly observe the law to maintain the stability of the country. Article 274 of the Criminal Code stipulates that under a state of emergency "disseminating knowingly false information" is [punishable](#) by 3 to 7 years in prison. By April 3, 41 [cases](#) had been opened against those accused of spreading false information.

Uzbekistan has adopted similar measures. In addition, the government made amendments and additions to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Responsibility on March 26, 2020. According to these amendments, violation of the quarantine regime or “spreading untrue information on the spread of the infection” is [punishable](#) by fines or imprisonment up to ten years. The March 23 decree by the Cabinet of Ministers [noted](#) that “mobile phones, audio and video equipment, bank cards and other storage media belonging to persons infected or quarantined on suspicion of being infected with coronavirus will be temporarily confiscated” a way of preventing patients filming in hospitals. When adopting these amendments, senators noted that “laws are being introduced to prevent unjustified panic among the population, ensure public safety and create conditions for the normal functioning of state structures.” New legal amendments [allowed](#) the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Guard to detain people violating quarantine for up to 24 hours. The government [argued](#) that these measures were in keeping with the Constitution, in particular Article 24, the right to life. Blogger Usmonjon Qodirov was [jailed](#) for 15 days after criticizing that state requiring citizens to break lockdown to prepare for the president’s visit to Ferghana region.

Kyrgyzstan’s Republican Coronavirus Headquarters emphasized that distribution of false information was also criminalized. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that the State Committee on National Security (GKNB) distributed information about at least 27 people it accused of “spreading knowingly false information” about the virus. In the meantime, the government only provided information to journalists about the crisis in the form of briefings, refusing to answer questions at other times. Only the state media were given permits to move freely around the cities where lockdown was fully enforced, including the capital city Bishkek. On June 26, parliament [passed](#) a new law on disinformation. The law prohibits the distribution of “false or non-credible information,” without defining these terms, but allowing “authorized state bodies” to do so. It obliges the owners of websites to “immediately restrict or prohibit access” to such information or face being blocked. The parliamentary deputies who proposed the bill claim it is necessary to fight the spread of false information about Covid-19.

Tajikistan was in denial about having any cases of Covid-19 throughout March and April, despite independent media reports to the contrary. In response these contradicting narratives, the government of Tajikistan took steps to curtail the flow of information and punish those reporting about the gravity of the situation. The Prosecutor General [warned](#) the population not to spread “unfounded rumors about the increase in deaths, rising prices, shortages of primary products, closure of roads between the regions of the country,” threatening legal action against those spreading such information. In April, Tajikistan’s government formally [blocked](#) independent media outlet Akhbor, which had posted information contradicting the government’s narrative on Covid-19. A few weeks later it restricted access to [kvtj.info](#), a crowdsourced site reporting many more from suspected Covid-19 infections than the official statistics would suggest. On May 11, two masked men [attacked](#) Asia Plus journalist who had reported on Covid-19 Abdulloh Ghurbati near his house in Dushanbe. Asia Plus was blocked towards the end of April. Protests from civil society and the media did not cause any change in government policy. A [letter](#) from eighteen civil society organizations and independent experts urging the government to be more transparent did not receive a response. Like the other Central Asian governments, Tajikistan has also amended its legislation to curtail the follow of information. On June 10, the government amended the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code. According to amendments, penalties are provided for disseminating inaccurate and inaccurate information through the media about a pandemic of 580 somoni (\$60) for individuals, and up to 11,600 somoni (\$1150) for legal entities.

In Turkmenistan, the government has taken steps to curtail any reports about Covid-19 in the country, discouraging the very use of the word. For example, pro-government *Gundogar News* [published](#) an article on March 28 accused *Radio Free Europe* of publishing “fake news” about cases of COVID-19 infections in Turkmenistan with the aim of “creating panic.” Those speaking about the virus in public or wearing masks have been [punished](#) with up to ten days in jail. Reports indicate that doctors in the country are being [forced](#) to work in infectious disease hospitals for two weeks at a time with no phones. In April, a doctor working in the quarantine zone in Turkmenabat was [detained](#) after being found with a mobile phone.

## Co-opting Medical Students

By the third week of March 2020, all educational institutions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, from kindergartens to universities, had been closed. This affected more than 14 million students. While most students have continued their studies remotely, the governments have co-opted medical students into serving in hospitals with no pay, driven by a shortage of medical personnel especially in the regions. Working with little PPE, healthcare workers have made up considerable proportions of the deaths due to Covid-19 in Central Asia.

Kazakhstan was the first country in the region to resort to the practice of turning to medical students in the fight against Covid-19. According to the Minister of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan, [Yelzhan Birtanov](#), “professional duty obliges senior medical students and interns to be actively involved in the fight and in the treatment of patients with coronavirus. Since they have taken the appropriate oath as doctors, they are now involved, of course voluntarily.” While the government claimed that the students volunteered, there was a [shortage](#) of 4,000 doctors and 800 epidemiologists throughout Kazakhstan. In Pavlodar region, for example, the authorities were [forced](#) to resort to allowing imprisoned doctors to be released from jail to treat and care for the sick.

Following Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan began to conscript medical students in the fight against Covid-19. The authorities of Uzbekistan [involved](#) students of medical schools at a single hotline of the Agency for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare of the Republic of Uzbekistan and sent them to the regions to conduct preventive interviews with the population. The Tajik authorities also actively began to copy the practice of attracting young specialists from medical universities of the country to fight Covid-19. In early May 2020, the leadership of the Tajik State Medical University, compiled a list of fifth-year students who did not pass final exams, about 200 students (60% of the total number of graduates) and threatened all with expulsion if they did not agree to go to work in hospitals in the country. Each individual had to work in the hospital for two weeks and then isolate at home for the next two weeks. At the same time, the situation in the healthcare system of Tajikistan is complicated by the shortage of masks, special protective suits, respirators, disinfectants, anti-viral drugs and many other means of protection against coronavirus. At least this was [stated](#) by one of the forced students of the medical university that “among them there are also many volunteers who want to help the country's doctors in the fight against coronavirus, but when attracting students to work in hospitals they should pay a salary and provide personal protective equipment.” In early July, following the arrival of a second wave of infections, the Kyrgyz authorities [said](#) that students and residents of medical universities will be involved in hospitals to help doctors.



The involvement of senior students of medical universities in the fight against coronavirus has become common practice in post-Soviet countries, as well as around the world. However, where some democratic countries such as the UK have [allowed](#) medical students to graduate early in order to begin working in hospitals, they volunteered and were paid, unlike in the Russia and the countries of Central Asia.

## Covid-19, Soft Power and State Legitimacy

Each government has claimed to have been effective in addressing the public health crisis, attempting to amass symbolic capital for their response to the pandemic. This is particularly important for the region's "performance-based" authoritarian regimes Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where governments' legitimacy rests on increasing living standards and addressing social issues from the top-down (Lemon 2019; Schatz 2009; Foa 2018). Governments have mobilized pro-government youth organizations and their ruling party youth wings to fight the spread of coronavirus infection by informing people about hygiene and holding events to show the people how the government is effectively fighting the virus. At the same time, clearly hiding their obvious oversights in the health care system in the provision and provision of high-quality medical care to the population, as well as in countering the spread of coronavirus in their countries. In Tajikistan, Avangard, a Ministry of Internal Affairs sponsored youth group with 5,000 members, [handed](#) out leaflets about cleanliness around the country. The youth wing of the ruling People's Democratic Party, Sozondagoni Vatan, also [handed](#) out informational leaflets and distributed aid among the population. In Kazakhstan, Zhas Otan, 5,000 [volunteers](#) from the youth wing of the ruling Nur Otan party, were involved in delivering aid.

The Covid-19 crisis has offered him the region's two largest states Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan an opportunity to continue engage in "virus diplomacy." Since coming to power in 2016, Mirziyoyev has actively pursued a diplomatic strategy to place Uzbekistan at the center of the region. Mirziyoyev has made 14 calls to other Central Asian presidents since March, outshining Tokayev's nine phone calls. Uzbekistan has also [outmatched](#) Kazakhstan in terms of humanitarian aid to the region's poorest states, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (see Table 1). The government of Uzbekistan has [sent](#) medical aid in April and a team of [eight](#) doctors in May to Tajikistan, making Uzbekistan Tajikistan's [largest](#) donor of humanitarian aid. It also [donated](#) food and medical supplies to Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan made its own donations shortly afterwards, [donating](#) 5,000 tons of flour to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the midst of its own second wave in July, Kazakhstan [sent](#) Tajikistan a further 100 ventilators, a move that drew criticism from those who argued they were sorely needed at home.

**Table 1: Intra-Central Asian Humanitarian Assistance**

Donor	Recipient	Description
Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	10 ambulances, 24-ton cargo consists of medicines, mainly antibiotics, 18 railway cars with medicines and foodstuffs to Tajikistan, 10 tons of medical equipment, as well as 144 medical containers, 8 virologists

Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	440 Medical beds, 1000 electronic pyrometers, 2,500 protective overalls, 150,000 medical gloves, 150,000 medical masks, 50 oxygen concentrators and 100 ventilators
Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	5,000 tons (\$1.5 million), 100 ventilators
Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	5,000 tons, \$1.5 million

Despite the fact that the government budgets just \$30 per person for healthcare, the lowest in the former Soviet Union, the government of Tajikistan has claimed to have been effective in fighting Covid-19. In a meeting with healthcare professionals on May 20, president Rahmon [claimed](#) the government had taken “timely measures” to address the crisis. “The Tajik people have gone through situations that were many times more difficult than this disease. I can confidently say that they are going through this with their heads held high,” he concluded. State media has continuously [praised](#) the selfless work of doctors. Tajikistan has boasted enviable recovery rates. In two days in May, a reported 1,000 patients with Covid-19 were [reported](#) to have recovered. Officially, new cases have decreased from a daily high of 407 to an average of 40-70 per day since June 1. Once the region’s deadliest outbreak, deaths have plateaued, with 44 of the 57 official deaths coming during the first three weeks of April.

While the governments of the region have received hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign assistance to help them deal with the negative effects of the pandemic, they have also shifted the burden to civil society and patriotic citizens. In Tajikistan, after the president pledged a month’s salary to assist those in need, the state media [reported](#) a wave of similar promises from officials and entrepreneurs “following the initiative of the leader of the nation” (*pairavi az tashbbusi peshvoi millat*) who donated to a fund established by the Ministry of Finance, with some state employees having their pay diverted without their consent. In Uzbekistan, the government has placed the burden on the emerging entrepreneurial class. The government requested donations be [channeled](#) to GONGOs O'zbekiston mehr-shafqat va salomatlik (Uzbekistan - Mercy and Health) and Saxovat va ko'mak umumxalq harakati ('Generosity and Assistance'). Like in Tajikistan, some employees of the state or large companies have [complained](#) that their salaries were diverted to the fund without their permission. In March, the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, created a fund for Covid-19, Biz Birgemiz (We are Together). Quickly, the ruling Nur Otan had [allocated](#) 150 million tenge (\$360,000) to provide assistance to low-income families, elderly and disabled people and soon after a range of entrepreneurs and workers also contributed. Dispersal of aid was often accompanied by a list of officials and citizens with the amount of money they had pledged. In all countries, there was a lack of accountability and transparency on how the funds would be dispersed. For example, a deputy mayor in Akkurgan district was accused of misappropriation.

## Conclusion

While the Central Asian governments have taken different approaches and had different levels of success in addressing the pandemic, it has presented each government an opportunity to test their capacity to control the population. To varying degrees, each government has cracked down upon those spreading “disinformation” about the situation or challenging the official narrative. Each country, apart from Turkmenistan, has amended its legislation to introduce penalties for violating quarantine and other measures to respond to Covid-19. It does appear that a degree of diffusion

has taken place in their responses to the pandemic. While such measures are framed as being in the public interest, and they have been somewhat effective in curbing the spread of the virus, next time they may not be used for such purposes. There does not seem to be a [correlation](#) between regime type and the effectiveness of responses to Covid-19. While some authoritarian states, such as Singapore, have effectively managed the crisis, others like Iran have failed. Instead, previous experience with managing pandemics, such as the 2002-2003 SARS pandemic, effective state capacity and high public trust in the government are more important in shaping the efficacy of crisis management. To varying degrees, the Central Asian governments do not meet these conditions. Although the pandemic has presented opportunities to Central Asian governments to extend their control over their populations, they also face a serious challenge to their economies and potentially to the stability of their political systems. Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether Covid-19 will lead to a strengthening of authoritarian governance in different Central Asian states or whether it will lead to an erosion of public trust in the state and provoke increased resistance.

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# COVID-19 IN KAZAKHSTAN: ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

By Zhandos Ybrayev



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The coronavirus outbreak and subsequent policies of lockdowns both in cities and on interregional scales has brought about immense, and simultaneous, public health, economic, and social crises in Kazakhstan. This is particularly due to the COVID-19 induced negative supply shock, quarantine measures that have affected the service sector disproportionately, thus driving economic activity in certain industries down to zero. Due to the potentially long-term sluggish structural adjustment of the economy, a large proportion of workers employed in those industries (both formal and informal) are facing the grim perspective of a prolonged period of lost-incomes and possible mass layoffs with lasting depressing effects on aggregate demand, which can further depress the economy.

Consequently, Kazakhstan will likely experience the adverse impact of the lockdown from medium to long-term perspectives with a high chance of prolonged scenarios of recovery. Thus, it is also vital to analyze pointed monetary and fiscal policy responses, which will help to mitigate long-term economic losses and save human lives.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

Governments and central banks in advanced economies were quick to adopt aggressive and unprecedented policy interventions. Various lockdown procedures, with most businesses ordered to shut down and workers to remain at homes, were emerging as a general first response to the pandemic. In addition, fiscal authorities executed rapid cash transfers to people in order to compensate for lost incomes and provide secure funds for the most vulnerable social groups. Following the widespread quarantine measures in many Western countries, unemployment claims have skyrocketed, reaching historically high levels in a very short period of time. Developing and emerging countries have also adopted similar measures of strict general lockdowns. (Alon, et al. 2020) However, it soon became evident that these same policy responses could not be reproduced in less-developed economies. In particular, these governments lack the fiscal capacity for delivering transfers to the population for a prolonged period of time, as workers are characterized with a very high propensity to consume out of their current income, making lengthy lockdown policies economically impractical. In addition, large size of informal sectors significantly limits the taxable base (Alfaro, Becerra and Eslava, 2020). Thus, there are growing concerns that the policy responses in the developing world should be different from the ones realizing in advanced economies.

In this paper we investigate the following question: what is the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis in Kazakhstan? To answer this question we provide several aggregate macroeconomic outcomes, which will help us to analyze the degree and magnitude of the market disruptions to the economy. Thus, in this paper, we consider the latest available statistical evidence on several core issues, such as unemployment numbers, headline inflation, and retail trade dynamics numbers, which is one of the largest portions of consumer spending and main component of aggregate demand and national output. These short-run effects also are likely to be a lower bound on the adverse economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown, as repetitive quarantine measures will probably cause more business failures and further deterioration of the country's economic outlook. Nevertheless, adequate and timely assessment of the damage instigated by the coronavirus-originated supply and demand shocks is also central to design effective policy interventions.

This paper is organized as follows: the next section briefly reviews the available literature on the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis both in advanced and emerging economies. Section Three provides the latest statistics on coronavirus infections, death rates, and age distribution of the population in Kazakhstan. Section Four characterizes the macroeconomic consequences of the coronavirus-induced lockdowns on unemployment, inflation, and retail trade. Section Five presents policy responses undertaken by the government and possible scenarios for cooperation with key international organizations for greater relief packages. The last section concludes.

## Related Literature

Early papers on the dual economic-epidemiological impact of novel coronavirus provided an introduction to the SIR model (susceptible-infectious-recovered) and its implication for COVID-19 in the U.S. (Atkeson 2020) (Stock 2020). A number of following studies started combining the economic trade-offs and conducting the optimal policy analysis within the SIR framework (Rowthorn and Toxvaerd 2020) (Eichenbaum, Rebelo and Trabandt 2020) (Alvarez, Argente and Lippi 2020). Additionally, another study (Acemoglu, et al. 2020) develops a multi-group version of the SIR population-based model and focuses on identifying the benefits of targeted policies that

lockdown various groups differently. In particular, for the baseline parameter values for the COVID-19 pandemic applied to the U.S., the authors found that the optimal strategies differentially targeted risk/age groups considerably outperform uniform lockdowns and the largest gains realized through stricter lockdown measures on the oldest group.

In addition, (Chetty, et al. 2020) another study reviews the U.S. private sector's daily data on consumer spending, business revenues, employment rates, and other key microeconomic parameters by county, industry, and income group. They found that high-income individuals reduced spending sharply, particularly in areas with a high-rate of COVID-19 infections and with businesses that require physical interaction. This reduction of spending significantly decreased the revenues of small firms, and particularly those located in affluent ZIP codes. Indeed, businesses that offer fewer in person services, such as financial and professional services firms, experienced smaller losses. Hence, the most efficient path to a full recovery for advanced economies in the long run is understood as a rebuilding of the consumer confidence by addressing the virus itself, rather than stimulating aggregate demand (which is already restrained due to health concerns) or providing liquidity to firms (Allen, et al. 2020) (Romer 2020).

Relative to the experience of emerging market economies, it is important to consider the informality of the labor markets and employment, which accounts for over half of the labor force. At the same time, workers in less developed regions are increasingly concentrated in occupations requiring physical contact with the customer, and thus, make them less fit for telework. Thus, employees in EMEs are more exposed to immediate income losses due to blanket lockdown policies and social distancing practices, especially those occupied in non-essential services (hotels, cinemas, theaters, gyms, apparel). Moreover, the aggregate socio-economic impact might be larger, because workers often lack formal employment protection, which is exacerbated by the already weak and/or inefficient mechanisms of state-organized social safety nets. At the same time, informal sectors recover from lockdowns more rapidly than those located in formal industries, and they also face minimal organizational capital and hiring and firing costs. Formal firms and workers, albeit more resistant at the initial states, may suffer even more during the prolonged economic deterioration, because once shattered, organizational capital is highly valuable and difficult to rebuild.

(Alfaro, Becerra and Eslava, 2020) Another study uses the case of Colombia as a typical example of a developing country with a very high informality and high concentration of workers in self-employment and small- and micro-businesses. The authors found that as many as 56% of jobs and 43% of the value added output (aggregate output) as the lockdown measures were imposed. However, as informal sectors rebound rather quickly during recovery, the employment-at-risk decreases to 20% of the baseline, which are entirely in the formal sector jobs. Thus, the authors suggest that restarting the informal sector is better addressed through direct cash transfers than through job protection policies. Also, they conjecture that the strategies of lengthy strict lockdowns are not feasible in developing countries. To reduce the need for repetitive lockdowns and given the narrow fiscal capacity in developing economies, the most successful health strategies will require extensive and wide-spread policies on testing, tracing, and timely isolation of local outbreaks.

There is broader literature exploring the difference in firm size, distribution across countries, and their influence on aggregate economic activity. Previous research has found that small firms mostly dominate the distribution of firms within manufacturing, compared to advanced

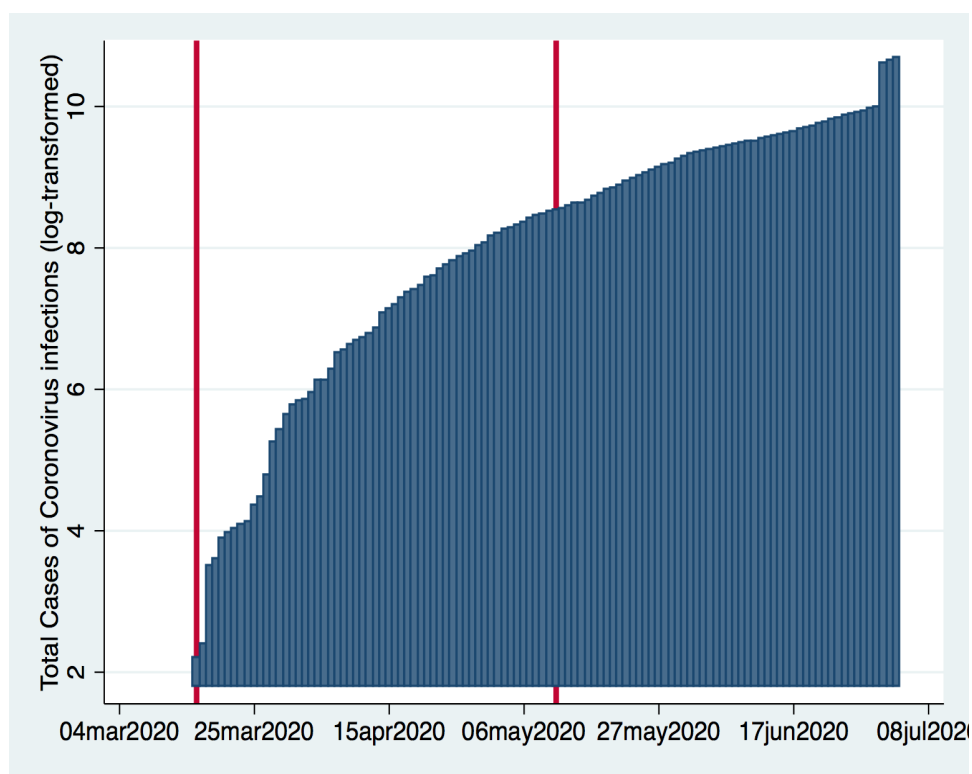
economies (Tybout 2000) (Hsieh and Klenow, 2009) (Poschke 2018). The possible causes of such developments can be found in the average lower growth cycle of manufacturing in developing countries and poorer performances of super star firms (Hsieh and Klenow, 2014) (Eslava, Haltiwanger and Pinzón 2019). Moreover, there is a disproportionately large concentration of small-size employment in developing countries that has been documented not only in manufacturing, but also in service sectors (Alfaro, Charlton and Kanczuk, 2009). Studies have shown that the domination of small-size firms and small firm employment in developing countries is associated with the market distortions of the optimal allocation of resources (Hsieh and Klenow, 2009), (Bento and Diego 2020). Recent papers have focused on labor market outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cajner, et al. 2020) (Coibion, Gorodnichenko and Weber 2020) (Naidoo 2020), and those specifically discuss the perspective of small firms (Humphries, Neilson and Ulyssea 2020) (Bartik, et al. 2020). Therefore, within the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the contributions of this paper is to describe the differential exposure within the distribution of Kazakhstan’s firms to government-imposed lockdowns that slow down the spread of the coronavirus, which also should be the base for well-designed policy interventions.

## COVID-19 in Kazakhstan

The first coronavirus case was recorded in Almaty on 13 March, 2020. It involved two Kazakh citizens on their return back from Germany (Coronavirus2020.kz). On 15 March, President Tokayev declared a state of emergency that began at 8am on 16 March to 7am on 15 April, 2020. In addition, on 17 March, Tokayev ordered the cancellation of Nauryz (public holiday) and military parades in honor of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory day in the Second World War. Beginning 19 March, 2020, the cities of Nur-Sultan and Almaty were fenced by roadblocks and sanitary posts, which restricted the entry and exit of individuals to the cities and also imposed a blanket lockdown that started. On 13 April, 2020 the state of emergency was prolonged until 11 May, 2020. This date effectively marks the strict lockdown period and “shelter-in-place” policy due to the coronavirus outbreak in Kazakhstan.

As of 1 July, 2020, the total number of cases in Kazakhstan reached 41,065 patients, with about 1,500 new cases daily on average during the month of June 2020. As seen in Figure 1, the log-transformed graph of total cases in Kazakhstan demonstrates a positively sloped dynamics throughout the entire period starting with the first case recorded on 13 March, 2020 in Almaty city. Two referenced lines indicate the state of emergency and blanket lockdown period. As we can conjecture from the statistics, in terms of mitigating the spread of the disease, the lockdown policy was effective as the curve was steadily converging towards plateau by the end of the lockdown term. However, the eventual lift of the state of emergency policy produced another upward-sloped tendency in total cases, which did not allow for a sufficient enough suppression of the coronavirus infection and contributed for rapid uncontrolled spread later. The uptick at the end of the graph displays a moment, when the Ministry of Health Case of Kazakhstan started to combine asymptomatic and symptomatic cases together, thus likely underestimating the real total number of cases in the country.



**Figure 1: Coronavirus infections (as of 1 July, 2020)**

Source: coronavirus2020.kz

Next, in Table 1, we can highlight several important points about the distribution of deaths in Kazakhstan. First of all, the death rate is disproportionately high among the elderly. The share of people aged 50 and above constitute for about 91 percent of all recorded deaths due to COVID-19 in Kazakhstan (as of July 1, 2020). Within this group, the percentage of those aged 60 or older accounts for about 70 percent, with 68 percent of those patients male and 78 percent female patients. The number of lethal cases falls sharply with the next group of population aged 49-40. The death rate among this age cohort (49-40) accounts for about 8 percent of total deaths, whereas the group 39-30 barely comprises 1 percent. The youngest group of (0-29) does not have a single coronavirus-related death officially recorded. Such a stark difference in magnitudes also suggests analyzing the benefits of targeted lockdown policies, instead of strict quarantine measures for all.

Table 1. Death by age group\*

Age	Male	Female	Total	Share of Males	Share of Females	Total share by age
60+	68	57	125	62 %	78%	68 %
59-50	31	11	42	28 %	15%	23 %
49-40	10	5	15	9 %	7 %	8 %
39-30	1	0	1	1 %	0 %	0.5 %
29-0	0	0	0	0 %	0 %	0 %

Note: \* as of 1 July, 2020. Source: coronavirus2020.kz

Thus, as seen in Table 2, individuals aged 63+ for men and 59+ for females represent around 11 percent of the entire population in Kazakhstan on average. The highest proportions of elderly people are registered in Northern and Eastern oblasts (regions) of the country: North-Kazakhstan-18%, Kostanay-17%, East-Kazakhstan-17%, Pavlodar-15%, and Akmola-15%. Whereas, the smallest percentage of people older than 63+(59) are concentrated in Northern and Southern oblasts regions: Mangystau-7%, Turkestan-7%, Atyrau-8%, and Kyzyl-Orda-8%. These death and age distribution statistics suggest that general lockdown measures that keep the majority of citizens confined to their homes were motivated partly to shield the older part of the population, which primarily suppressed the spread of the coronavirus in general, across all age groups. Thus, another alternative lockdown strategy is to effectively address the isolation techniques of those 11 percent of older people, who are also most likely to experience health complications and will require special equipment in hospitals. In addition, administrative regulation of lockdown policies should be different in the North-Eastern and South-Western regions, where the proportion of older/younger people is different, such that the areas with higher proportion of aged individuals will go through stricter quarantine measures.

**Table 2. Age-group distribution across regions in Kazakhstan (January 2020)**

Region	Total	0-15	16-62	63+(59)	Share of 63+(59)
Kazakhstan	18,631,779	5,636,761	10,874,656	2,1203,62	11%
Akmola	736,735	186,927	442,158	107,650	15%
Aktobe	881,651	268,474	522,184	90,993	10%
Almaty	2,055,724	677,809	1,159,969	217,946	11%
Atyrau	645,280	227,571	364,028	53,681	8%
West-Kazakhstan	656,844	182,586	390,026	84,232	13%
Zhambyl	1,130,099	399,884	618,759	111,456	10%
Karagandy	1,376,882	347,006	825,820	204,056	15%
Kostanay	868,549	186,332	538,489	143,728	17%
Kyzyl-Orda	803,531	283,057	452,602	67,872	8%
Mangystau	698,796	259,177	389,117	50,502	7%
Pavlodar	752,169	182,016	454,768	115,385	15%
North-Kazakhstan	548,755	121,546	326,461	100,748	18%
Turkestan	2,016,037	799,717	1,068,281	148,039	7%
East-Kazakhstan	1,369,597	333,409	808,322	227,866	17%
Nur-Sultan city	1,136,156	351,925	694,254	89,977	8%
Almaty city	1,916,822	463,505	1,226,014	227,303	12%
Shymkent city	1,038,152	365,820	593,404	78,928	8%

Source: Committee of Statistics, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

## Economic consequences of COVID-19

The impact of the imposed lockdown on business operations to slow down the spread of the COVID-19 is not uniform to all sectors of the economy. Some industries are more exposed to the nature of the lockdown than others. Thus, for instance, those sectors of the economy that produce essential goods and services, such as food or communication technologies are less

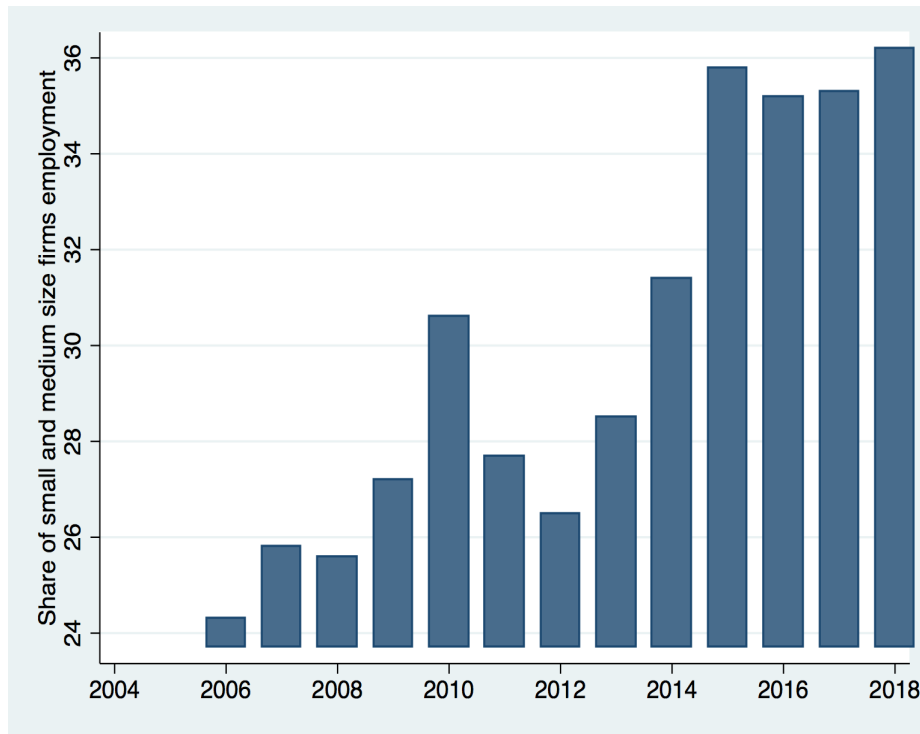
exposed to total quarantine measures since they can continue operating both in real and virtual realms. Additionally, the jobs in those sectors are more secure. Other types of industries, requiring non-essential production of goods and services and not fit for telework, such as retail stores, restaurants, hotels and construction which are more directly vulnerable to general shutdown policies and also face greater demand shortages in the future as people are likely to reduce their activities in high-physical contact trades, at least for a time being. According to the data from the Committee of Statistics, in 2019 the share of service sectors contributed for about 55.5 percent in the total value added in Kazakhstan, while the production of goods generated only around 37.5 percent of GDP (Nakipbekov 2020). Thus, the improvement of service sectors in the aggregate economy activity is immensely important.

At the same time, service sectors, informal employment, and small firms are at a greater risk of business failures and voluntary closures due to blanket lockdown policies. Informal jobs are often not covered by employment protection instruments, which among other things include firing restrictions and severance payments. Thus, informal jobs are much more flexible both in terms of separation and hiring decisions, and so they are likely to get destroyed first as soon as the shutdown hits, but also recover more rapidly than those in formal employment. In addition, the firm size determines the likelihood of the business' survival and the jobs attached to those sectors. Hence, larger firms can rely on greater cash reserves and easier, cheaper credit lines, which can preserve employment for longer periods of time. On the other hand, smaller firms operate on much more limited reserves and frequently have a constrained access to emergency loans, such that it is harder for them to keep people employed.

In the case of Kazakhstan, the share of small- and medium-size firms employment is significant, which means high economic risks for short-term destruction of jobs in these sectors. Figure 2 shows that for about the last five years, the share of small- and medium-size firms employment comprise about 40 percent out of total labor force. In addition, as seen in Figure 3 the value added in aggregate output (national GDP estimates) is also substantial. Recently, the share of small and medium firms has risen (2015-2018), and small and medium enterprises steadily contribute about 30 percent of Kazakhstan's GDP. The aggregate statistics demonstrate that strict lockdown policies can seriously damage the economic activity, both in terms of income losses and jobs preservation schemes, which can start demand-induced business failures in the longer-term.

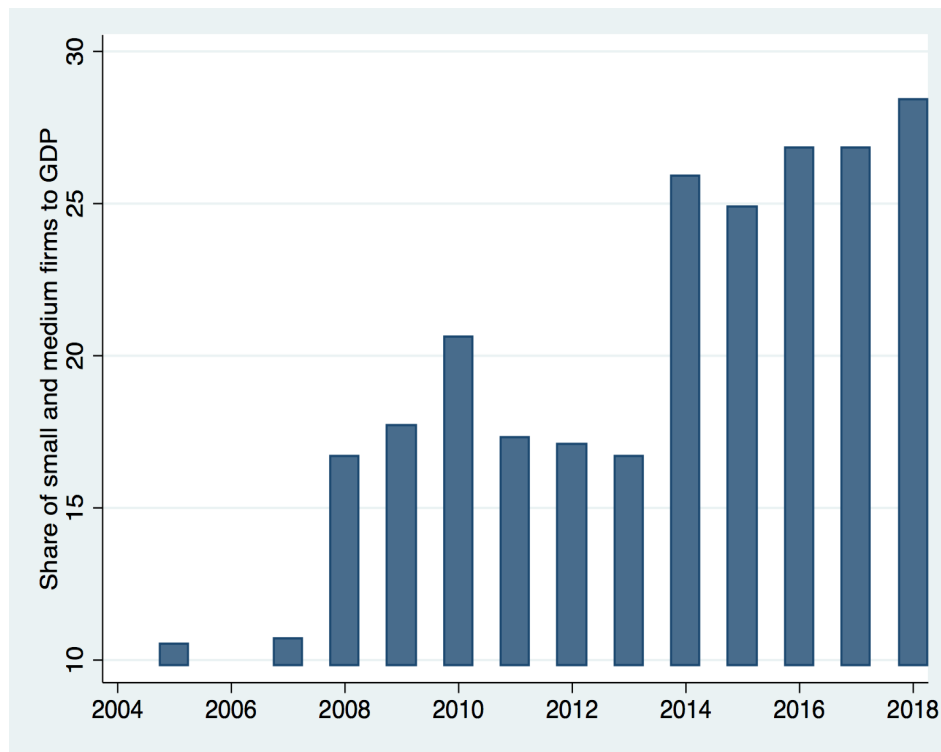
It is also important to analyze the regional distribution of small- and medium-size firms employment in Kazakhstan. Thus, as the Figure 4 reports, the average employment and lower bound of small and medium enterprises employment in all the regions is between 20 and 30 percent. In particular, the southern regions (Almaty oblast, Zhambyl oblast, Kyzylorda oblast, Turkistan oblast) exhibit a lower share of small-size firms' employment on average than other regions. The natural resource-rich regions of West-Kazakhstan (Atyrau oblast, Mangystau oblast, and West-Kazakhstan oblast) employ about 40 percent of the entire regional workforce in small and medium enterprises. This can be explained by the prevalence of service sectors responding to a greater demand for the development of large mining industries. At the same time, a larger need for service sector employment might attract workers from the southern regions as well. Apart from regional disparities, the two largest outliers are the cities of Nur-Sultan and Almaty, which both account for more than 60 percent in small and medium business employment. Thus, we can conjecture that small-size firms' employment is mostly concentrated in large cities and administrative centers of oblasts, and strict lockdown measures pose a potential risk of lost incomes and jobs for workers employed in these larger urban areas.

**Figure 2. Share of small and medium size firms employment: 2006-2018\***

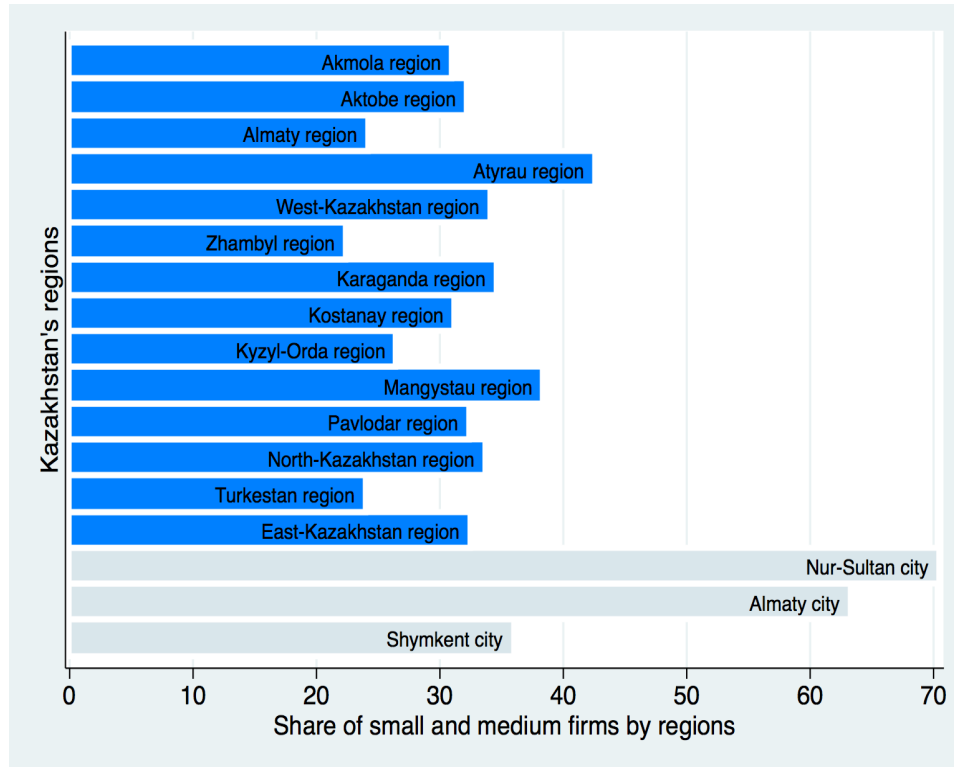


Note: \* As a percentage of total labor force. Source: Committee of Statistics, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

**Figure 3. Share of small and medium firms value added in GDP: 2006-2018\***



Source: Committee of Statistics, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

**Figure 4. Regional distribution of small-and medium-size firms employment.\***

Note: \* Aggregate statistics for the year of 2018.

Source: Committee of Statistics, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

## Unemployment

With the launch of the state of emergency measures and subsequent general lockdown policy, the government shortly afterwards started to issue direct social payments, equal to one minimum monthly wage (42,500 tenge or about \$100), to all those who lost jobs and sources of income due to the coronavirus pandemic (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection 2020). The majority of the population quickly responded to the call, massively applying online to the financial assistance. Since the state of emergency lasted two months, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection has scheduled to transfer funds two times, for the months of March and April, to all those who applied in a timely manner. The scope of the program proved to be unprecedented, and in addition for obvious social aid purposes, this is used as an indicator to sketch out the depth of the economic downturn and estimate the relative magnitude of real-time unemployment caused by COVID-19 disruptions.

According to the data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, 8 million people applied for social assistance (out of 9.2 million people in total labor force as of Q1 2020 as shown in Table 3). A total of 4.6 million people received the payments, with 2.9 million people collecting the payment in the second month as well. Therefore, it is possible to derive the hypothetical effects of the unemployment rate in Kazakhstan. Thus, as it is clear from Figure 5, for a significant period of time before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of unemployed people fluctuated around 400,000-500,000 people quarterly, which corresponds to about 4.9 percent of the

unemployment rate. We assume that those who applied for the direct social assistance program temporarily lost their jobs and were technically out of employment for the period of the lockdown. Hence, as the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection has later reported, after relaxing some strict lockdown measures on 20 April, 2020 (the state of emergency and blanket lockdown ended on 11 May, 2020) a considerable part of the population was able to return to work. Thus, according to the estimates from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, in the period of May-June 2020, there were approximately 1,140,000 unemployed people (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection 2020). The agency is forecasting a 6.1 percent unemployment rate by the end of the year, which is equivalent to about 700,000 people out of employment. Overall, 4.6 million people who received the social payment from the government during the lockdown (around 50 percent of total labor force) is nearly 10 times greater than the typical structural unemployment numbers of 450,000 people before the pandemic, which principally represents the sheer economic cost of the pandemic-induced supply shock. While the effect may rapidly be reversed to a degree, the economic scar is likely to have long-term depressing impacts on jobs and aggregate income in Kazakhstan.

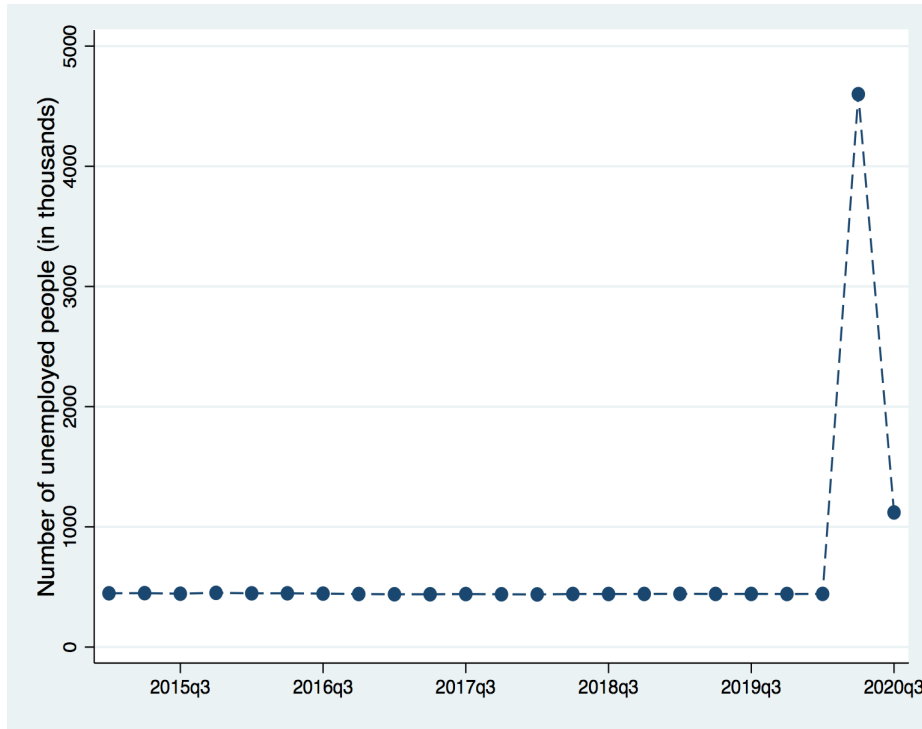
**Table 3. Total Labor Force in Kazakhstan (number of people 15+), 2015Q1-2020Q2**

2017Q1	8,893,360
2017Q2	8,980,289
2017Q3	9,013,097
2017Q4	8,980,623
2018Q1	8,976,709
2018Q2	9,078,885
2018Q3	9,169,455
2018Q4	9,151,635
2019Q1	9,175,422
2019Q2	9,204,749
2019Q3	9,215,323
2019Q4	9,214,796
2020Q1	9,236,463

Source: Statistics Committee, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

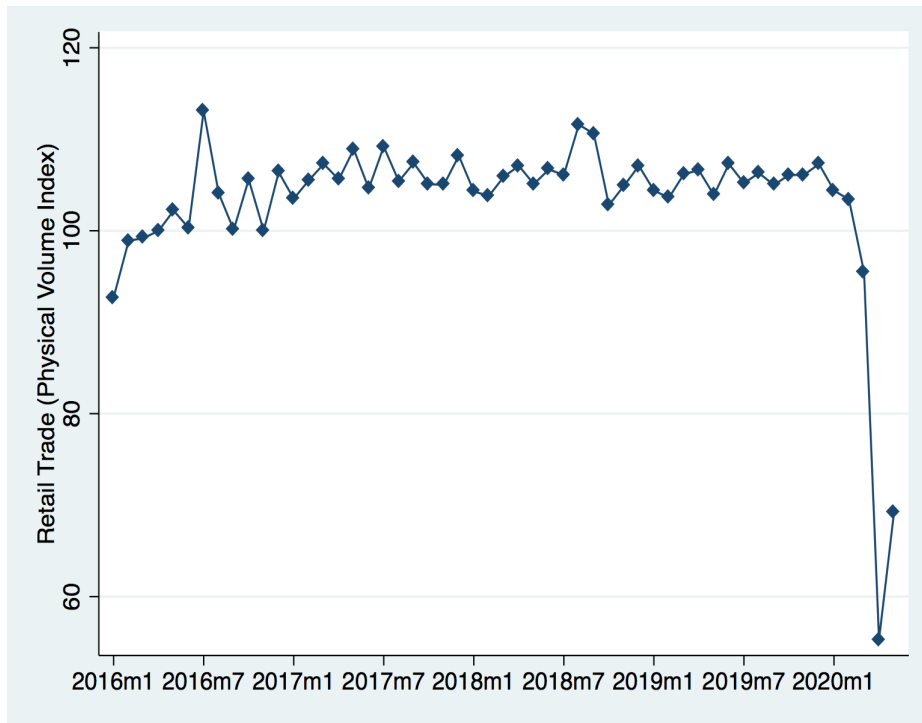
Another source of statistics on economic activity, which helps grasp the depth of the coronavirus-induced economic downturn, is the dynamics of the retail trade, measured by the physical volume index, presented in Figure 6. As we have mentioned earlier, the production of services accounts for about 55.5 percent of total value added in the country, so the impact on retail trade capacity bears a significant adverse impact on the overall potential economic output. In particular, the index first fell 7 percent in March of 2020, with a staggering 42 percent crash in the month of April. Nevertheless, the retail index rose by 25 percent in the following month of May, which simultaneously signaled the lowest point of the trade statistics. Again, the retail trade index dynamics illustrates that the effect of a strict lockdown contributed for around half of lost output (aggregate income) in a given period of 1.5 months, which is roughly identical to 8 percent of annual GDP. The economic consequences of such magnitudes imply that in the short-term people can consume less, which will cascade down on the negative ability of firms to recover and restart their businesses.

**Figure 5. Unemployed Population in Kazakhstan, 2015Q1-2020Q2**



Note: 2020Q2 is a projection of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection.  
 Source: Committee of Statistics, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

**Figure 6. Retail Trade Index (Physical Volume), 2015m1-2020m5**



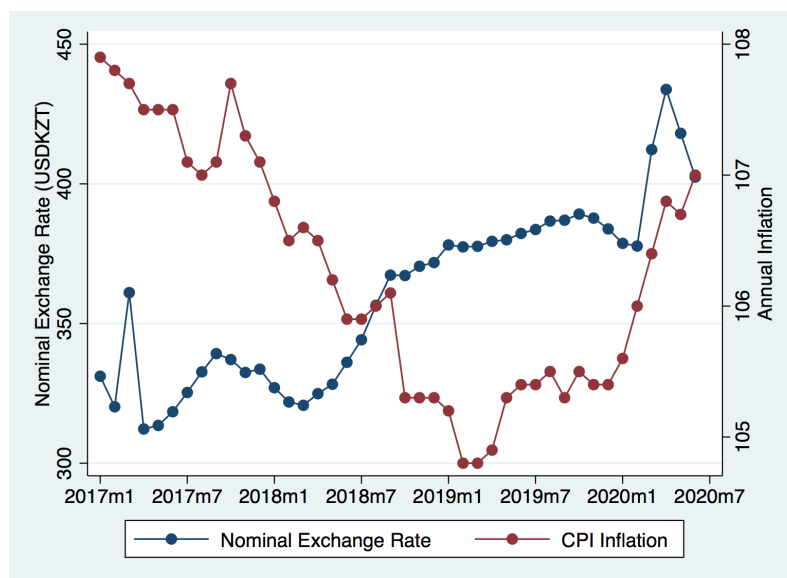
Source: Committee of Statistics, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

## Exchange Rate and Inflation

A set of major macroeconomic effects of the double-mixed oil and coronavirus shock has its impact on the exchange rate and inflation (Figure 7). The effect on the aggregate demand in Kazakhstan is typically transferred through the value of currency as a large share of the domestic consumption, and contains imported goods and services. Following the drop in oil prices, the domestic currency, tenge, initially depreciated rapidly, reaching 450 tenge to 1 USD at its lowest point in March 2020, which accounts for about a 20 percent decline from its previous average trend value. However, subsequently in the months of April and May, the national currency bounced back to the level of around 400 tenge per 1 USD and remained relatively stable around this newly elevated level. This level now represents about a 5 percent decrease in the international value of the national currency, and has some important implications for domestic prices.

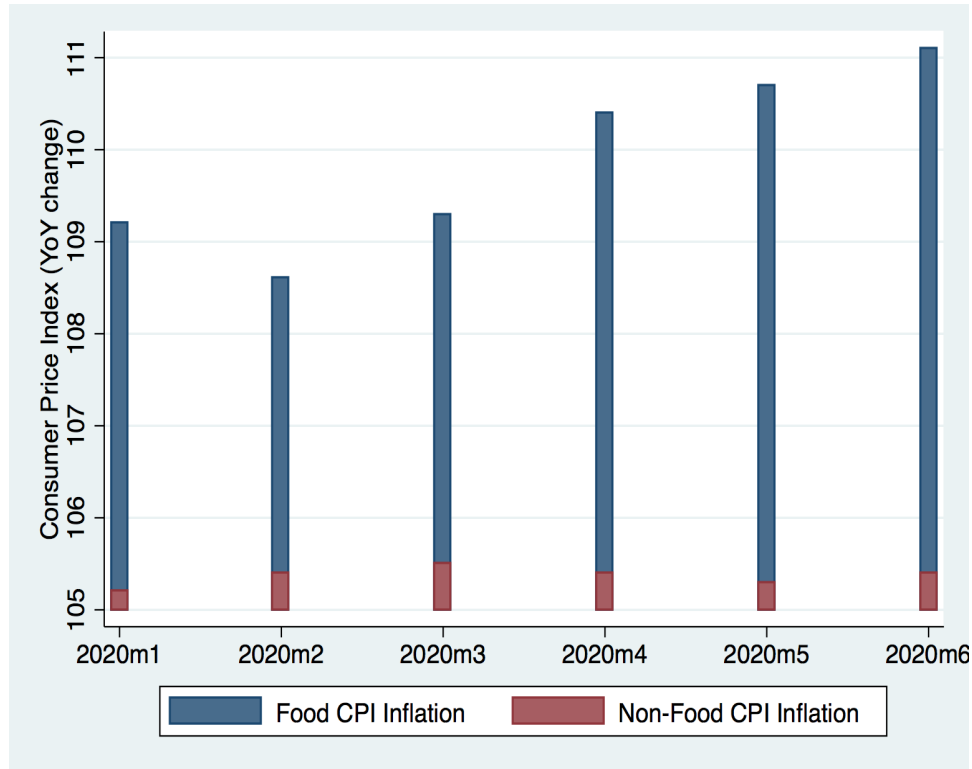
Inflation, a general increase in prices of goods and services, started to accelerate since the beginning of the pandemic, which by decreasing the purchasing power of wages will ultimately lead to a deterioration of economic well being for Kazakhstani citizens. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 8, within the headline of CPI inflation (consumer price index), there is a noticeable pattern of divergence between food and non-food inflation. Thus, since February 2020, food inflation increases sharply, leading to a maximum of 11.1 percent annual increase in June, while the non-food inflation raised only to a relatively modest extent of 5.4 percent. Thus, we can conjecture that the overall increase in domestic prices is primarily driven by food-inflation, a major spending item for low-to-middle income groups of population. The source of higher food-inflation might reflect both an increased excess demand for food products during the lockdown and a decrease in the value of the domestic currency as a substantial amount of food commodities is imported. Thus, to tackle the economic threat from the COVID-19 pandemic on rapid worsening of people's economic conditions, the government's fiscal response should also take into account accelerating food-inflation.

**Figure 7. Nominal Exchange Rate and Inflation (YoY change), 2017m1-2020m5**



Source: Statistics Committee, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan



**Figure 8. Food and Non-Food Inflation (YoY change), 2020m1-2020m6**

Source: Statistics Committee, Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's government announced a relief package to help both businesses and workers emerge from the lockdown period, and reportedly designated around \$13 billion dollars on pandemic response, which accounts for about 8 percent of GDP. On 25 June, 2020 the Asian Development Bank approved a \$1 billion assistance package to help Kazakhstan mitigate the health, social, and economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. In particular, ADB is aiming to support a comprehensive COVID-19 health policy response, social protection and employment protection measures, and an economic stimulus plan introduced by the government to alleviate the adverse impacts of the pandemic (ADB 2020).

Due to the increased number of infections and deaths, on 29 June, 2020 the government adopted additional measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which includes a significant improvement of mass testing capacities and an increase in domestic production of medical supplies. Also, Kazakhstan ultimately imposed a second national lockdown starting 5 July, 2020 until 2 August, 2020.

## Conclusion

Since the writing of this paper, the pace of acceleration for the infection rate and the death toll is even more alarming and is forcing the government of Kazakhstan to place new measures of fighting the disease and its economic costs at the highest priority. The optimal response to the local development of the pandemic should be concentrated in immediate mobilization of resources to fund the medical system to save lives and to provide emergency loans for small and

medium firms to avoid liquidation and then a cascade of bankruptcies. The provision of liquidity and credit at low-interest rate is also important to keep workers afloat and prevent a long-term depression of aggregate demand, which may have far more dire economic effects.

In this paper, we also showed that Covid19-induced negative supply shock and subsequent quarantine measures differentially affects the service sectors, driving productive activity in certain industries down to zero. Also, characterized by a higher share of informal employment and a greater absorption of small firms, service industries are at the greater risk of business failures and voluntary closures due to blanket lockdown policies. Thus, effective lockdown policies should be designed to aid the health sector with possibly a minimal exposure to general lockdowns. Well-designed policies include massive testing, tracing and isolation programs to ensure early mitigation of the spread of the virus. Such preventative measures, however costly they can initially appear, are negligible compared to the total costs of the blanket lockdowns.

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# POST-COVID-19 REGIME STABILITY IN UZBEKISTAN

By Bekzod Zakirov



Photo by Patrick Barry



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**August 10, 2020**

2020 did not start well for Uzbekistan. The country had just launched its modernization bid to integrate itself into the global economy after its new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, replaced long-time strongman Islam Karimov in 2016. The coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, that spread across the globe, costing as many as 546,000 lives as of July, became a stress test on the ability of the new leadership to navigate the challenges of globalization. While dealing with the socio-economic consequences of the health crisis, the regime faced another disaster when the wall of a newly built dam catastrophically collapsed near the town of Sardoba, forcing nearly 70,000 and 5,400 residents of Uzbekistan and the neighboring Kazakhstan out of their shelters, respectively. Yet, simultaneously facing these dual crises, the political leadership in Uzbekistan did not flounder.



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The government's effective actions, although they came at a huge economic cost, helped contain the virus from spreading wildly. In the case of the dam collapse, the government's immediate response through active engagement with the affected people saved its reputation in the eyes of citizens. The competence of leadership in crisis management led [many](#) to believe that the overarching reforms that the new regime launched a few years ago were already proving their efficacy. It appears that the jubilant leadership, having passed the worst, should not have much problem moving toward loosening the lockdown measures in Uzbekistan for immediate economic recovery.

However, it is too early to assume that government's public diplomacy and socio-economic assistance will be able to adequately tackle the challenges ahead. While giving credit to the government's relative success in crisis management, I argue here that the true cost of the pandemic to political stability will emerge after the quarantines end; the real challenge awaiting the regime is the impending economic hardship caused by the pandemic and the way it will further exacerbate existing social tensions. Unless addressed with meaningful political reform, the impending economic hardship and social tension may erode the political legitimacy that the new regime relies on to sustain its authoritarian rule.

## The Emergency Response

As COVID-19 rapidly made its way into the heart of Central Asia, very few people expected Uzbekistan could handle a health crisis of such magnitude with its [underfunded](#) healthcare system, which is usually beset by corruption. According to the Global Health Security [Index](#), the government health system scored only 34.3 on a scale of 100. Yet, to everyone's surprise, Uzbekistan, in comparison to others in the region, [managed](#) to contain the damaging consequences of both crises through prompt actions.

Although the leaders initially was slow in assessing the risk of the virus, soon after the first case of infection was found, Uzbekistan took a myriad of emergency [measures](#) to prevent the rapid spread of infection throughout the country. The government effectively mobilized a huge number of medical personnel and law enforcement to immediately enforce the strict "[stay home](#)" lockdown policy. Surprisingly, the government willingly abandoned the Chernobyl mindset of hiding the truth and established various lines of communication by which to inform the people with daily updates about the virus. It effectively mobilized the media, including TV channels, bloggers and spiritual leaders as a means to encourage compliance with the quarantine rules.

Although many still consider the numbers of infections as well as deaths [suspicious](#), the government's relative transparency in communication marked a radical break from previous regime. In the meantime, the leadership was preoccupied with introducing a wide range of economic support [packages](#) to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on socio-economic stability. A myriad of urgent measures were implemented to ensure adequate support for domestic businesses, including an immediate set-up of anti-crisis fund of \$1 billion. However, in the face of inadequate budget, the president signed a [decree](#) that allowed the government to borrow long-term loans of around \$3.1 billion from multiple international financial institutions.

In the midst of the pandemic, the government met with the incident of the Sardoba dam [collapse](#), which, wiping out multiple cities in both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, almost doubled the burden

on Uzbekistan’s already strained budget. To avoid any popular resentment in this tense situation, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [flew](#) to the scene immediately after the disaster to meet with affected residents, promising that “no one will be left uncared for”. Massive charity campaigns that civil society groups organized to provide the affected people money, food and clothes, eased the government’s budgetary distress amid COVID-19 crisis. Also, thanks to the President Mirziyoyev’s quick manoeuvring of soft diplomacy with the leaders of Kazakhstan, the government [avoided](#) the devolution of the country’s recently repaired relationship with Nur-Sultan.

However, these effective measures—accompanied as they were by a myriad of governance failures and human rights [violations](#)—did not necessarily mean that people held or will continue to hold positive attitudes towards the government’s performance during the pandemic. The official rhetoric that depicted the pandemic as an “external enemy” beyond their control may have convinced some people to temporarily return to the natural economy—the economy of [self-sufficiency](#) with available means—but people’s collective self-sacrifice is likely to be short-lived. Once confronted with the anxieties of real life stretching beyond the current health crisis, Uzbek society is likely to develop grievances over access to health, decent jobs and livelihoods, which, adding to existing mistrust, sense of injustice and corruption might erode the political legitimacy—and political stability—of the regime.

## Political Legitimacy and Regime Stability

All political regimes, regardless of type, must establish their political legitimacy—the justification for their rule—if they are to maintain long-term power.<sup>1</sup> Jean-Marc Coicaud defines political legitimacy as “the governed recognizing the right of the governors to lead and, to a certain extent, their entitlement to the perks of power”.<sup>2</sup> Multiple research studies, in fact, show that the legitimizing discourses of stability, economic achievement and security that authoritarian leaders often draw on can serve as powerful tools to maintain real stability for authoritarian regimes. However, these regimes can remain dangerously vulnerable to the loss of this legitimacy, especially during the crises of economic downturn, war or pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The government that succeeds in preventing the spread of infection during the pandemic but fails to lift people out of the poverty after the crisis will have a hard time legitimizing its claim to power in the eyes of its citizens.

Having faced dual crises in 2020 with impending consequences yet to come, the current regime in Uzbekistan runs a similar risk of losing its [political legitimacy](#), as its predecessor did. Exploiting turbulent times to leverage a peaceful transition, the Karimov regime emphasized the relative economic success, political stability, improved social welfare and nation-building promised as part of their lofty concept of the “Uzbek Path” to buttress its claim to power.<sup>4</sup> People thus came to associate national independence and security with the personality of Islam Karimov, accepting him

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<sup>1</sup> Finer, S.E. *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Coicaud, Jean-Marc. “Legitimacy, across borders and over time.” *Fault lines of international legitimacy* (2010): 17-29.

<sup>3</sup> Pepinsky, Thomas B. *Economic crises and the breakdown of authoritarian regimes: Indonesia and Malaysia in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Omelicheva, Mariya Y. “Authoritarian legitimation: assessing discourse of legitimacy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.” *Central Asian Survey* 35, no.4 (2016): 481-500.

as a national hero capable of defending the country against its enemies.<sup>5</sup> However, the actual reality of the regime—relying on a corrupt system in which the elites exploit state institutions to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary people—radically diverged from its rhetoric of *Musaffo Osman* (serene sky) over the years. Having lost the legitimacy in the eyes of its people, the Karimov regime clung only to fear and utopian propaganda to sustain political stability.

Inheriting the legacy of years-long grievances, dissatisfaction and a moribund economy, the new political leadership under Shavkat Mirziyoyev crafted a policy of [economic reform](#) to gain popular support in 2016. Not long after ascending to power, Mirziyoyev promised to bridge the gap between reality and rhetoric and improve people’s lives by modernizing the economy, overhauling governance, fighting corruption and creating a space for free-speech. The discernible changes in society that came as a result of the reforms he passed gave people hope for a bright future under the new regime.

Yet, Mirziyoyev’s [authoritarian modernization](#) failed to uproot the deeply engrained corrupt practices that still dominate Uzbekistan’s institutions and economy. Even worse, the exalted reforms aggravated existing [social tensions](#) of people towards the corrupt elite, triggering demonstrations in response to property expropriations and demolitions. Such demonstrations were unthinkable during previous regime. Those who were immersed in both the physical and online Uzbek community could fairly discern that feelings toward the regime were mixed and that beliefs that the reform only benefited the elite were widespread. Here I argue that the COVID-19 crisis may further exacerbate these tensions, putting the regime’s ability to sustain political stability through performances of legitimacy under a serious question.

## COVID-19 and Political Stability

Although the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic is global in its scope, the way it tests the capacity of individual governments depends on the nature of their particular [socio-economic](#) arrangements. The pandemic’s devastating consequences in Uzbekistan may shake the legitimacy of the current leadership, which will undermine the stability of their rule in two interconnected, important ways: exacerbating economic hardship and its impact on existing social tensions.

The most important aspect of the COVID-19 crisis in Uzbekistan concerns the huge economic losses the country will sustain due to the fall in commodity prices, which has created and will create unprecedented pressure on the state budget. Although GDP predictions give reason for hope, the crisis hit Uzbekistan during a period of prolonged [economic hardship](#) bequeathed to the state by the previous regime. Over the years, the economy of Uzbekistan has become highly dependent on its neighbors for trade and employment. Due to the lack of diversity in the country’s exports and production, the COVID-19 crisis is having a huge toll on the main drivers of its economy, including the oil and mineral exports, service sector and labor remittance.

A major problem for the economy is the drop in exports of raw materials, a major source of foreign exchange, due to falling demand. According to JSC Uzbekneftegaz, annual gas deliveries from Uzbekistan to China accounted for about [10 billion](#) cubic meters of gas in 2019. However, in March

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<sup>5</sup> March, Andrew F. “State ideology and the legitimation of authoritarianism: The case of post-Soviet Uzbekistan.” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8, no.2 (2003): 209-232.



2020, PetroChina, issuing a force majeure notice, started to cut gas imports from Uzbekistan, which dropped [38.4%](#) in the first quarter. The total loss in gas exports due to the fall in demand is estimated at [\\$500–600 million](#). Further, *Forbes* reported that Uzbekistan may face a drop in foreign exchange earnings of [\\$2–4 billion](#) if oil prices remain low and the national currency of Russia and Kazakhstan continues to fall. Other spheres of the economy that are expected to suffer include the trade of consumer goods and tourism. Due to the transport restrictions between countries, Uzbekistan recorded not only a decline in its export of consumer goods to neighboring countries but in the number of incoming [tourists](#) visiting from abroad.

Another economic problem posed by the COVID-19 pandemic concerns money transfers from Uzbek migrant workers living in neighboring countries for work, who would otherwise be sending money home, offering another means of covering the foreign trade deficit. Earlier, the proceeds from money transfers had reached a record high of [\\$6.6 billion](#) over five years. A large portion of money transfers—70%—come from Russia, where around [2.1 million](#) Uzbek migrants work in different sectors. However, the spread of the virus and the plunge in the value of the ruble further exacerbated the suffering of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia. According to a World Bank report, the remittances are expected to drop by [50%](#), which might cost the government an extra \$1–2 billion of foreign exchange earnings.

The impact of COVID-19 will also exacerbate government debt. Unable to address the pandemic with state coffers already drained by corruption, Uzbekistan’s government had to take [economic assistance](#) in the form of loans from multiple financial institutions, although the received amount accounts for a very small amount to rescue the economy. According to IMF estimates, the debt-to-GDP ratio of Uzbekistan rose to 36.9% in 2020, reaching [\\$25.1 billion](#) as of April. Although the country can rely on its reserves, the impact of the accumulating debt will last for years, reducing the fiscal space needed for economic recovery.

The tightening of global financial markets may also destabilize the economy. Even before the pandemic, Uzbekistan’s government had accumulated a high level of [dollarized debt](#)—that is, debt financed by falling export revenues. Due to the rise in external debt, S&P Global Ratings [downgraded](#) Uzbekistan’s status from stable to negative, stating concerns that “rapid debt accumulation reduce[s] [the] country’s fiscal flexibility.” The debt issue, which first started to [trouble](#) Uzbek officials in 2019, has become a frequently discussed subject of popular concern. In fact, the national debt is dealing a serious blow to the current regime’s legitimizing rhetoric of *buyuk kelajak* (great future) since indebtedness is traditionally regarded in Uzbek society as a sign of weakness. It is for this reason that the government recently held a [discussion](#) with the media to subdue public concern. In short, the external shock of the pandemic—aggravating Uzbekistan’s failing economy—is likely to destabilize political stability within the country, eroding the promise of economic prosperity that the current regime relies on to legitimize its authoritarian rule.

COVID-19-related economic hardship will unavoidably bring social and political consequences. The major challenge for the current regime is the increasing social tensions that result from the deterioration of people’s lives. The national lockdown that halted domestic trade, consumption and investment cost up to 40% of people their jobs, depressing already tough economic conditions. According to World Bank experts, 15% of the population in Uzbekistan makes less than [\\$3.2 per day](#) to begin with. The fact that a large portion of the population works in [informal sectors](#) of economy makes them more vulnerable to the crisis; informality not only makes the businesses harder to adapt but also to qualify for assistance, putting them at higher risk of falling into poverty.

Another source of social tension that haunts the regime is the influx of returning labor migrants who had previously worked abroad to support their families back. Having already lost their jobs or facing bleak future in countries hit hard by the pandemic, some [39,000 migrants](#) had returned to Uzbekistan by May 2020, while many more remain trapped in limbo, directing their frustrations at an incompetent government.

The economic future of low-income people is further threatened by the government's [fiscal incapacity](#) to distribute financial assistance to those who faced substantial losses in income and revenue. Due to their strained budget, mounting debt and fear of an inflationary spiral, the government explicitly rejected the idea of direct cash distribution to the population, proposed by experts multiple times. Instead, the government opted for temporary measures to help the most needy—measures in which it hugely relied on the humanitarianism of civil society, especially the businesses, both volunteered and [coerced](#). The sustainability of the government's economic assistance to the population is unclear as the question of austerity from external debt looms large.

The social tensions enflamed by COVID-19 fall against a backdrop of an already fractured social contract between the new regime in Uzbekistan and its people. Although people have seen the changes over the past few years, they have also shown dissatisfaction towards certain aspects of economic reform that failed to improve their lives, as usually voiced by bloggers. A few mentions from a long list of critiques include the existence of entrenched interests around economic monopolies, increasing protectionism and tariffs, and commercializing new laws to fill in the strained budget.

The regime's urbanization policy, however—which gave rise to illegal property seizures, [demolitions](#) and evictions—angered people. The executors of these policies were new governors, *khokims*, who then became targets for discussion in social media. Since the beginning of Mirziyoyev's presidency, people have been very [disappointed](#) with some *khokims* who recklessly abused their expanded power, leading in turn to the erosion of domestic stability in certain regions.

Do the economic reforms the regime launched a few years ago give hope for post-pandemic economic restructuring in Uzbekistan? Experts seem [optimistic](#) that the ongoing reforms will help the country to rapidly recover after COVID-19 through the influx of investment. However, it is too early to put confidence in such prophecy as [new patterns](#), particularly decoupling, reshoring and de-globalization, are re-emerging in global economic order that come with impacts on developing countries. Even if the current global economic order—in which abundant capital chases opportunities in capital-hungry countries—remains unchanged, the fundamental problems facing the regime in Uzbekistan are likely to make the government's attempts at economic recovery futile.

First, the regime is unlikely to attract the capital investment it seeks due to the lack of credible commitment it has displayed over the past years. The government's recent desperate move to target the wealth of Uzbek entrepreneurial expatriates demonstrates the impotency of its attempts to tap foreign capital. Second, economic recovery is inhibited by the presence of [powerful clans](#). Their rush to devour the country's leftover resources when the government attempts to "[fire sale](#)" its assets amid fiscal pressure will bring further damage to the economy. The contraction of the state budget following the redistribution of resources will compromise the government's ability to manage post-pandemic restructuring. Finally, the political leadership, already facing a decline in their legitimacy, is going to have a hard time bringing the economy out of this challenging phase.

## Conclusion

The dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and Uzbekistan's dam collapse has provided a stress test for the new leadership in Uzbekistan. The collapse of energy prices, the disruption of both domestic and international trade, the sudden drop in money transfers by migrant workers and the loss of income earnings of ordinary people have already resulted in an unprecedented social and economic crisis. The shrinking resources and economic pains as a result will exacerbate existing social tensions and pose a huge challenge to the reform agenda of economic development that the current regime relies on to legitimize its rule and sustain political stability. Given that the impending hardships will get worse with the second wave of pandemic, the current leadership runs the risk of ending their honeymoon period in the first term of Mirziyoyev's presidency. Although these social tensions are unlikely to catalyze massive street protests that would endanger social order, the regime might face a crisis of legitimacy and may resort to repression once more like its predecessor.



# UZBEKISTAN AND COVID-19: A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

By Davide Cancarini



Photo: World Bank



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**July 23, 2020**

The spread of the COVID-19 virus sparked a global race to send aid abroad and to communicate this effort widely—a phenomenon called “mask diplomacy” by many media commentators. China, in addition to being the first country in which the virus spread, has also been at the forefront in terms of propaganda, aiming to appear as a global leader concerned with international well-being. But China has not been the only country to use the pandemic as a tool of political communication: in Central Asia, Uzbekistan stands out for its advanced COVID-19 communication strategy.



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## “Modernizing Authoritarianism”

Uzbekistan’s COVID-19 communication strategy is part of what I define as “modernizing authoritarianism.” In the Central Asian context, the term is often associated with Kazakhstan, but since Savkat Mirziyoyev’s rise to power, it has also become applicable to Uzbekistan. In a few words, the concept of “modernizing authoritarianism” involves developing a range of innovations, very often related to the economic dimension and sometimes with a clearly defined time horizon, in a context wherein an authoritarian management of power is maintained.<sup>1</sup>

Since coming to power, Mirziyoyev has fostered many political and economic changes, both formal and substantial. Although his ultimate goal is to maintain internal stability, an objective shared with his predecessor Islam Karimov, the path he has taken is very different, giving preference to economic and commercial liberalization, and terminating regional isolationism. This dynamic of controlled openings that are limited to certain dimensions, defined as “modernizing authoritarianism,” is similar to the trend witnessed in Kazakhstan since independence. These efforts to open up the economy, strengthen regional connectivity, and attract foreign investments have been accompanied by a parallel commitment to communicate better with domestic audience and the international community. The objective is twofold. On the domestic front, the aim is to ensure that Uzbek citizens embrace economic modernization while at the same time agreeing to postpone demands for greater social and political openness. On the external front, the goal is to persuade international public opinion (and especially investors) that Uzbekistan has changed profoundly, and that the system is significantly more open than it was in the first 25 years after independence.<sup>2</sup>

## Uzbekistan and COVID-19

The first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Uzbekistan in mid-March and, as of July 9, the government had officially confirmed 11,447 cases and 49 deaths (even if there are doubts about the real figures, as described below). The impact of the pandemic on the economic sphere is expected to be important: the country’s growth will fall around 1.6% in 2020, against a pre-crisis outlook of +5.7%.

On the internal front, from the very first moment (mid-March), the authorities acted promptly, introducing tight lockdown and prevention measures. This contributed to containing the spread of the pandemic in the country but, after a partial reopening, on July 8 the authorities were forced to introduce a new three-week lockdown—until the beginning of August—after a surge in cases of transmission.

In parallel with the measures adopted domestically, in the first weeks of the pandemic, Mirziyoyev was very active on the international front as well. First of all, he asked international institutions for help, receiving much positive feedback: from the Executive Board of the International Monetary

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Gel’man & Andrey Starodubtsev, *Opportunities and Constraints of Authoritarian Modernisation: Russian Policy Reforms in the 2000s*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:1, pp. 97-117, Routledge, January 2016

<sup>2</sup> Luca Anceschi, *Regime-Building through Controlled Opening. New Authoritarianism in Post-Karimov Uzbekistan*, pp. 107-119, in *Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Area Development Policies, Regional Trends, and Italian Interests*, *Eurasiatica*, Quaderni di studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale, N. 13, edited by Carlo Frappi and Fabio Indeo, Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, Venezia, 2019

Fund, which approved a disbursement of [US\\$375 million](#) to sustain Uzbekistan’s response to the pandemic; the World Bank, which approved a [US\\$95 million](#) financing package to support the country’s immediate response to the impacts of COVID-19; and the Asian Development Bank, which announced a [US\\$1.26 million](#) grant to Uzbekistan for medical equipment and supplies.

Secondly, Tashkent has been very active towards its regional neighbors, although not exclusively. Since the global spread of the virus, Uzbekistan has provided humanitarian support (in the form of medical or food aid) to the following countries (in alphabetical order): Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Hungary (through the Turkic Council), Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Particularly noticeable is the case of Tajikistan: in fact, Tashkent has become the largest donor of humanitarian aid to Dushanbe in the fight against COVID-19, providing about [\\$2.5 million](#) since the pandemic began in January. Tajikistan then “returned the favor” after the partial destruction of the Uzbek Sardoba Dam occurred in the Syrdarya region on May 1, [sending construction materials](#). The “mask diplomacy” involved Uzbekistan in the opposite direction, as well. Tashkent has, in fact, received support in the fight against COVID-19 from the following entities (in alphabetical order): China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the US. Furthermore, Uzbekistan sent a group of doctors to Italy—one of the most affected countries globally—to [gather information](#) on how to deal with the virus.

Uzbek activism has been even more evident when it is compared to Kazakhstan, by far the largest economy in Central Asia. Nur-Sultan sent aid only to China, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It is necessary to point out that Kazakhstan, which has about 18 million inhabitants compared to over 32 million in Uzbekistan, was also the most affected country in Central Asia, with official numbers listing over 51,000 cases and 264 deaths as of July 9. But even considering the contrast between the two countries in terms of official measures of contagion, the difference between their responses to the crisis is clear.

## Phone and Social Media Diplomacy

Mirziyoyev, who has pushed for a [common response](#) to COVID-19 in Central Asia, has been particularly active in talks with regional and non-regional leaders. Looking at the official Twitter profile of the President’s Press Service, from March 16 to early June, Mirziyoyev had 25 telephone conversations with regional and international leaders such as Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel. The majority of these calls (17 out of 25) were to regional leaders. This may seem trivial, but it is not when viewed in the context of a region where mutual distrust and intra-regional tensions have for long periods directed relations between the five Central Asian states. As mentioned, this attention to the Central Asian dimension is part of Mirziyoyev’s clear strategy of placing Uzbekistan as a regional leader, a dynamic that the COVID-19 crisis has deepened from a communication point of view as well.

Mirziyoyev’s official Press Service Twitter profile is one of the most important tools through which the Uzbek President shares information globally about his activity. Occurring only in English, the communication channeled through social media is mainly directed towards an international audience. The graphic style adopted is characteristic, and the pictures posted always refer to a clear PR objective: i.e., showing a leader capable of managing both international and local issues and of understanding the needs of ordinary people. The communication initiatives are, on every occasion, very timely, as in the case of the clashes that took place at the beginning of June between

Uzbek and Kyrgyz citizens in a disputed border area. The same day, the official Twitter profile published a post about the phone call between Mirziyoyev and the Kyrgyz president Sooronbay Jeenbekov in which the incident was discussed. The same can be said regarding the partial collapse of the Sardoba Dam. In the first three days after the disaster, nine posts were published on the Mirziyoyev's Twitter profile to show the President's willingness to act as quickly and transparently as possible while dealing with the matter.

To compare, one can mention for instance the denial strategy adopted by Berdimuhamedov in Turkmenistan after the storm and the heavy rains which hit the Lebap region between late April and early May. In fact, in the days immediately following the disaster, Turkmenistan's state television channels **did not even mention** what had happened. Later, on June 7, Berdimuhamedov visited the region without mentioning the damages caused by the bad weather. Turkmen state television, one of the cornerstones on which the Arkadag's propaganda is built, obviously gave great emphasis to the visit without referring to the disaster.

With respect to the communication dimension, the strategy put in place by Mirziyoyev—based on transparency, timeliness, and clarity—is an innovation not only vis-à-vis some of its regional neighbors, but also considering what happened in the first 25 years after the country's independence.

## Legitimize “Modernizing Authoritarianism”

More specifically, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, during the still-ongoing crisis, Mirziyoyev and his entourage have paid great attention to communication activities related to the aid sent abroad and the dialogues held with regional and international leaders by the President. These two aspects could be considered as a new step in the path taken by Mirziyoyev to consolidate the model of “modernizing authoritarianism” that characterizes his management of power.

This is confirmed, in the negative, by looking at the domestic sphere. In general, in the “modernizing authoritarianism” model, economic dynamism is associated with the maintenance of political closeness. But in the case of the pandemic, soft power and transparency towards the outside world have been so far associated with internal opacity. Indeed, on the domestic front, not everything has been as transparent, especially regarding the figures on **internal contagion**. Despite the readiness of Uzbek authorities to introduce lockdown measures, the reporting of far fewer cases than in Kazakhstan and a suspiciously rapid trend towards normalization have contributed to rising doubts and **uncertainties** that not even the national media outlets have helped solve. The spread of suspicion about a manipulated management of the pandemic has also led important officials, such as the Director of the Institute of Virology Erkin Musabayev, to **deny rumors**.

The more general path undertaken by the Uzbek leadership in its internal/external management of power seems confirmed from a propaganda/communication point of view during the pandemic. As mentioned above, Mirziyoyev's objective appears to be twofold: to emerge as a reliable leader open to international cooperation while at the same time maintaining strong control over the internal sphere in order to avoid any potential risk of destabilization.

As in the case of the more general features of the model of “modernizing authoritarianism” that Mirziyoyev is implementing in Uzbekistan, from the point of view of communication, there are



some serious risks. Regarding the broader political management, the main threat is that Uzbek citizens, although welcoming economic openings, will start to demand tangible openings in the political realm, too. That is what has happened in Kazakhstan starting from Nazarbayev's resignation and Tokayev's appointment in the spring of 2019.<sup>3</sup> Regarding communication, if the pandemic crisis were to worsen again, the lack of transparency displayed so far with contagion numbers could make the discrepancy between national and international communication strategies even more visible. In this latter worst-case scenario, even the great attention paid by Uzbekistan's officials to external powers' perceptions may no longer be enough to convey to an international audience the image of a leader capable of managing the country transparently and effectively.

## Conclusion

On the communication front, COVID-19 crisis management in Uzbekistan has been a small-scale confirmation of a more general trend observed in the country. In terms of emergency management, it must be said that Mirziyoyev acted as promptly on the international front as he did on the domestic side, given the aid sent abroad and the tight closure measures promptly adopted. If the communication toward the international community was targeting international donors to send assistance,, the domestic measures were certainly important to contain the contagion. However, so far, the factor which more than others has been the confirmation of the application of a model of "modernizing authoritarianism" in the country has been the ambivalence of Mirziyoyev's policy: it lies in the great difference between communication conveyed externally and the lack of domestic transparency on transmission numbers.

COVID-19 is an international crisis, the management of which is attracting a great deal of attention at a global level, and has also shed light on the potential and more general repercussions of mismanagement in individual countries. This could represent an external risk factor for Mirziyoyev: the lack of data transparency could undermine the propaganda efforts undertaken so far to show the President as a reliable leader capable of bringing Uzbekistan out of isolation. Internally, especially if the pandemic peaks again, the crisis generated could cause domestic resentment, fueled by the economic and social difficulties that large sections of Uzbek society are likely to face in the coming months.

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Mallinson, *Governance, in Kazakhstan: Tested by Transition*, Chatham House Report, London, 2019, p. 18



# THE AUTHORITARIAN TREATMENT OF COVID-19: THE CASE OF TAJIKISTAN

By Hafiz Boboyorov



**HAFIZ  
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**November 17, 2020**

Rieux rose. He suddenly appeared very tired.

‘You’re right, Rambert, quite right, and for nothing in the world would I try to dissuade you from what you’re going to do; it seems to me absolutely right and proper. However, there’s one thing I must tell you: there’s no question of heroism in all this. It’s a matter of common decency. That’s an idea which makes some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency.’

Albert Camus, *The Plague*, page 149

## **Choice between ‘political measures’ and recognition of COVID-19**

Tajikistan’s authoritarianism imposes upon its citizens a false vision of safety and divinity, whereby people may believe that they are under the celestial protection of the government. Ideally, inhabitants of such a country might feel as though they are the happiest nation in the world, regardless of whatever political, social, and economic deprivation they may experience.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

Their leaders claim they fulfil their sacred mission of protecting them from plagues, including COVID-19. Closed authoritarian states in Central Asia, including Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, have sought to endure such a vision by exerting a great deal of effort to conceal cases of COVID-19, while their three neighbours have “swiftly moved to close borders and enforce lockdowns, curfews, and [impose] quarantines” ([Putz 2020](#)).

In March 2020, when many nations in Central Asia and around the world undertook restrictive measures, including quarantine recommendations to slow the spread of COVID-19, Tajik authorities publicly celebrated Nawruz, i.e. the first day of the Tajik New Year in the Sughd Province. They gathered crowds, in defiance of appeals and recommendations to abstain from public gatherings from international organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO). Instead, the state celebrated Nawruz in the Central Stadium of Khujand city to show the superior power of Emomali Rahmon, the country’s supreme leader, vis-à-vis the plague. While he and the Governor of the Sughd Province maintained a physical distance from one another on an isolated tribune (picture below), the stadium was full of visitors from different regions of Tajikistan, where pupils, students, and artists engaged in theatrical and musical performances.

Prior to April 30 2020, Tajikistan did not officially recognise or register any cases of COVID-19. [As a physician confirmed](#), “[w]e were forced to keep silent before a number of political measures had been enacted”. Besides the Nawruz celebration, another political measure, which took place on April 17, was the appointment of Rustami Emomali, the son of Emomali Rahmon, as the Chairman of the National Assembly (upper chamber) of the Parliament of Tajikistan. Appointing his son was regarded as solidifying Tajikistan’s dynastic rule. The Constitution of Tajikistan states that should the President suffer from health complications or be unable to continue with his political duties, the Chairman of the National Assembly will act as a replacement. Cynical behaviour from the ruling elites has thus far demonstrated that despite a plague and the ensuing chaos, the state can enact political policies they find advantageous.

Since Tajikistan has acknowledged COVID-19 cases in the country, one anonymous physician was told by security services to not spread information about the disease prior to the state enacting “a number of political measures”. Some witnesses informed by healthcare workers working in hospitals with COVID-19 patients, stated that they were not allowed to wear protective clothing in order to hide news about the disease from patients. Before April 30, furthermore, those who spread news or rumours about increasing cases in Tajikistan were slandered in the media as “enemies” and “traitors”. Recommendations to curb the disease, including the importance of quarantine, were hidden from victims and infected patients. This was a means of staving off damaging perspectives about the nation’s leader and his handling of the pandemic.

## COVID-19 as a secret

Before any “important political measures” were enacted, Tajik authorities reacted to the situation with aloofness and demanded that the media impose a positive perception for the nation to consume, and one where the pandemic had not reached Tajikistan. They stubbornly denied any coronavirus cases, despite “deepening concerns that the public [was] being deprived of clear and impartial information on a [potentially catastrophic] health crisis” ([Eurasianet 2020](#)). The Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Republic of Tajikistan (hereafter, Ministry of Health)

repeatedly asserted that there were no cases of COVID-19 in Tajikistan, pointing to 4,100 negative tests ([Putz 2020](#)).

Ironically, the authorities could also convince [Galina Parfiliyeva](#), the country's representative at the WHO, to repeatedly and insistently confirm the country's lies about the virus's presence to the global community. At the end of April on the eve of the visit of a special commission from the WHO Headquarters in Geneva to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, Parfiliyeva hastily revised her position that she had meant there were no *official* cases of COVID-19. While repeatedly [refusing](#) to talk with Tajik journalists, on April 22 she gave an interview with the Russian newspaper [Kommersant](#). This time around, she said that "to categorically state that there are no cases [of COVID-19] in the country is not possible" ([Eurasianet 2020](#)).

The Tajik authorities treated any information flow about the situation in hospitals and quarantine zones as state security. [An activist](#), who after her return from abroad was sent to a quarantine zone in the Varzob district, wrote about the situation on her Facebook account daily. She noted that a young man had approached and warned her that she should not write about sensitive issues pertaining to the virus on her social media. She further stated that during February 1 until April 30 authorities released 8,438 out of 10,937 quarantined persons without testing them for COVID-19. Additionally, [a young scholar](#) was admitted to the hospital after having been stabbed six times and thrown from the second floor of a quarantine zone in the Varzob district. After his recovery, he immediately denied any claims that he had committed suicide, a claim that the authorities had pushed, and promised to tell the public the truth after his recovery. Despite this, however, he has remained silent.

The security officers regularly visited hospitals and further intimidated and forced health workers to keep silent. For any piece of leaked information, authorities punished vulnerable health workers. Reports from healthcare facilities, however, stated that healthcare workers were most vulnerable to the virus. [Different sources in social media](#) informed that more than 70 physicians and medical workers had died due to having contracted the disease from their patients. Despite many wanting to resign, authorities forced them to work without the appropriate protective clothing, further threatening workers with prosecution ([ACCA 2020](#)). A physician asserted that they were not allowed to dress in protective clothing so as to disguise the seriousness of the situation.

On May 7, after a week of officially registering COVID-19 cases, [several Tajik physicians](#) anonymously confirmed that they fought the disease on the eve of Nawruz, despite authorities pressuring them to keep silent. The physicians sent a computer tomography of patient lungs to their colleagues, including to pulmonologists in Tajikistan and Russia, all of whom confirmed the virus. Later, the physicians asserted that hospital managers also knew of infected cases but forced them to not spread information to the public before appropriate political measures could take place. Physicians who treated COVID-19 patients supported one another through messenger services, where they shared information about symptoms and methods of treatment. Both patients and physicians were infected with the coronavirus, despite the disease continuing to be labelled as pneumonia or an acute respiratory viral infection. One of the physicians, without revealing their identity, disclosed that an increasing number of cases were present in his hospital, whereby over 200 patients had been infected, 17 of whom had died before April 30. New patients were sent to the hospital in the Hisar district, while hospitals in Dushanbe were overwhelmed with patients. In Khujand, three hospitals had admitted coronavirus patients exclusively and had been overcrowded.

Other hospitals had also taken in infected patients and had dedicated special sections to patients ([ACCA 2020](#)).

To conceal the disease from the public, authorities did not organise quarantine zones in hospitals. Therefore, health workers were forced to leave hospitals after their shifts had been over. Often they rented temporary apartments to be away from family members and thus to avoid any possible spread of the disease. [Some physicians](#) in Dushanbe and Khujand confirmed that they had rented apartments. Health workers further admitted that they had to save antiseptics given their scarcity. One physician revealed that in her hospital in Khujand, 12 health workers had only four items of protective clothing, which they had personally purchased. They further had only one PPE (personal protective equipment) which could be worn by a duty physician who was obliged to visit emergency areas in the hospital. As one physician anonymously confessed:

I have reusable protective clothing but it is air proof, glasses which [the colleagues and I] bought in a sports store [and included] swimming glasses which easily [make one] sweat. Masks with a respirator are gifts [given that] they are reusable. I clean and disinfect them. We get gloves and antiseptics in the hospital. I have bought diapers in case if we have to work 12 hours or more without a break, but so far I [have] not worn it.

After the country's official recognition of the disease, citizens continued helping health workers with money, food, and protective clothing and equipment ([Tursunzoda 2020](#)). Prior to the official registration of COVID-19 in Tajikistan, some civil rights activists supported health workers with food and protective clothing. [Zebuniso Solieva](#) organised one of most successful civic actions in the Khujand city, whereby measures to keep patients and health care workers anonymous would keep authorities from identifying and harming supporters and those involved with the virus. Her initiative collected support from people and distributed it to healthcare workers without revealing their names. Healthcare workers could ask for help with the right to remain anonymous ([Bobokhodzhiev 2020](#)).

## “Preventive measures”

The official media tends to interpret anti-COVID-19 measures, including the quarantine of the infected and related people, abstinence from religious mortuary rituals and strict sanitary rules, as “prophylaxis” and “preventive measures”. The state news agency [Khovar](#), for example, relayed resolutions and activities of the Republican Headquarters for the Prophylaxis of COVID-19 at the Government of Tajikistan to “prevent contagious diseases” and to “complicated economic and social situation in the world and [the] enforcement of food security and consumption market of the country”. It has excluded COVID-19 while updating the list of diseases in Tajikistan and covering news and apocalyptic reports about COVID-19 around the world. The title of the Republican Headquarters also aimed to conceal the real situation in the country by suggesting that it does not fight COVID-19 but rather takes preventive and precautionary measures.

Preventative measures, which the official mass media reported, includes the isolation of infected people in hospitals and their relatives and neighbours at home. At the outset, the hospitals did not give the corpses of deceased people to their families for proper religious funerals but instead wrapped bodies in fabric immersed in chlorine liquid and covered in cellophane. Those who were

responsible for burying corpses wore protective clothes ([Putz 2020](#)). Only outspoken protests from relatives forced authorities to bring dead bodies to mortuary rituals without allowing relatives to get closer and touch their loved ones.

Authorities and related reporters in mass and social media claimed that a village in northern Tajikistan was mandated to “self-quarantine” after a man had died from “pneumonia” with his family members hospitalised in Khujand city. On April 25, the Republican Headquarters ordered the Ministry of Education to close down kindergartens and schools in Dushanbe for two weeks. [The press-secretary of the Ministry of Health informed the public that they would not need to quarantine per se, but rather take “a temporary break \[...\] to prevent any infectious disease” and “to protect the public health and security of the population, especially children and adolescents”.](#) Additionally, the [Headquarters](#) temporarily suspended public events, including meetings, celebrations, sport activities, cinema, and theatrical scenes, and at the same time denied the presence of COVID-19.

Before the official registration date, the Ministry of Health related all death cases to pneumonia, respiratory diseases, heart diseases, tuberculosis, renal failure, and even car accidents. [In response to the letter](#) of 18 civic activists and civil society organisations, the Ministry of Health replied that during the first quarter of 2020, there had been 5023 cases of pneumonia, and only 169 cases less than the same period of last year. According to the Ministry, as of April 27, there were 319 people under quarantine in the Dushanbe Medical Centre No 1. [The independent media](#), however, revealed that half of them were healthcare workers. On April 22 and April 23, the Ministry of Health reported to the media that 7 people had died from “pneumonia”, though later on the second day it pressured certain media outlets to “correct” their reports and state that COVID-19 was the real reason of death. Accordingly, 4 people died on April 22, not from “pneumonia”, but rather from “car accidents”. On April 23, moreover, no deaths were cited. Many sources still referred to earlier reports and additionally stated that on April 24 two more people, a physician and a state employee, had died from pneumonia. Frequent denial from the Ministry and the Headquarters became increasingly absurd and no longer convincing especially after a bizarre explanation of the death of a nurse from “tuberculosis”. Many people could not believe explanations provided by the media and the Ministry, with pressure from the public to have healthcare workers go through a medical examination every six months, especially to screen for contagious diseases ([Rafieva 2020](#)).

Despite having officially recognized COVID-19, authorities have continued to conceal the real situation. The relevant measures have been crafted in order to impress and convince the public that the ruling elites control the situation. The official sources from the Ministry of Health has repeatedly claimed that COVID-19 patients have been treated free of charge. At the same time, the it has concealed alternative information from healthcare workers, patients, the relatives of patients, journalists, and civil activists. Measures to conceal the virus have been done to minimize the virus’s severity.

Prior to officially recognizing COVID-19’s impact on public health, the Ministry of Health threatened medical workers, journalists, reporters, bloggers, and civil activists with criminal prosecution if they were to spread officially unconfirmed information about the disease. [The Head Physician of the Central Hospital](#) of the Sughd Province was dismissed from his position because he refused the order of authorities to send COVID-19 patients to their homes before the visit of the WHO representatives to Tajikistan. In the evening of May 11, two unknown men attacked and bit [Abdulloh Ghurbati](#) near his home. Ghurbati reported the situation on streets, in markets and other

public places of Dushanbe and collected views from citizens. Authorities blocked [a public website](#) which had collected and disseminated data related to COVID-19 ([Nadirov 2020](#)). In contrast to the [66 confirmed cases](#) from authorities, until July 22 the website registered [446 death cases](#) with names, personal details, and with sources of information.

## The authoritarian response to institutional failure

The government of Tajikistan has demonstrated its extensive weakness in fighting COVID-19 which has also been another reason for its concealment. It has only supplied basic medicaments for curing COVID-19 and patients are required to purchase additional and auxiliary medicaments for their own safety and health. Some patients also explained that they were not fully covered by the treatment they received from the healthcare's system. A patient was not admitted to a hospital because physicians diagnosed him with a sore throat. This patient had later tested positive for COVID-19 and was prescribed medication ([Nodirov 2020](#)). Another patient wrote on social media that the reanimation centre of the Dushanbe Medical Centre No 1 accepted COVID-19 patients daily, with several patients having died from a lack of oxygen. The Ministry of Health eventually admitted that the government would not be able to supply protective equipment and clothing without humanitarian aid from foreign countries and international organisations ([Bobokhodzhiev 2020](#)).

When coronavirus was in full swing, foreign countries and international organisations provided [financial, technical, and material aid](#). The official media of Tajikistan interpreted the aid as not for fighting COVID-19 but rather for undertaking preventive measures and mitigating the consequences of the pandemic to Tajikistan's economy. Moreover, the media concealed from the President of Tajikistan himself, requests to foreign countries and international organisations for support which would undermine his image as the Leader of the Nation and the only saviour of Tajikistan. [Independent media](#), however, wrote about the request of Tajik authorities to foreign countries and international organisations for financial and technical support.

Foreign countries and international organisations sent financial and technical aid to not only help the country provide its citizens with preventive measures, but also to tackle the virus. Such countries and institutions who aided Tajikistan include the European Union, the United States of America, Germany, Uzbekistan, China, the Asian Development Bank, the Swiss Office for Development and Cooperation, and UNICEF. The aid included sanitary and medical equipment, protective clothing and disinfection materials for hospitals, educational institutions, and border guards. Uzbekistan, for example, sent 144 mobile medical containers for the deployment of field hospital in Dushanbe to treat COVID-19 patients ([Yuldashev 2020](#)), while the IMF's disbursement of 189.5 million USD on May 6 was aimed to cover Tajikistan's budgetary shortage ([IMF 2020](#)). The World Bank assigned its grants for "funding the emergency response programs for coronavirus infections". This was particularly the case when purchasing 100 new intensive beds for reanimation departments and intensive treatment, equipment for testing infected people, and protective equipment for healthcare and medical laboratory workers.

The public has accused the president of concealing the disease and failing to take the appropriate measures in a timely manner. To shift responsibility from him to others, the president dismissed the Minister of Health and Social Protection of Population, Nasim Olimzoda, from his position. Such an action did not save his reputation, nor did it contribute to a narrative of benevolence and generosity. These narratives and practices have only served to compensate for the president's



failure to shape institutional responses to the plague. Instead of taking responsibility for the country's failure to react to the virus, authoritarian justice is built on the individual benevolence of the elites. There is no shared value of public wealth while the state position is regarded as a divine privilege of accumulating private benefit. The elites are not obliged to distribute their private wealth but by doing so, they have the opportunity to demonstrate to the public how benevolent and generous they are. Hence, the narrative of benevolence and generosity should ideally help curate a narrative of the leader as saving his country from COVID-19.

Emomali Rahmon adapted a public initiative titled 'Fund for Fighting Coronavirus' as a pillar of his authoritarian rule. He took over the public initiative by allocating one month's worth of his presidential salary to the Fund. His son, family members, as well as other elite families, followed his lead by allocating one month or even one year's worth of their salaries. Families and individuals who have donated part of their salary attempt to demonstrate to their own citizens, foreign countries and international organizations that they have contributed to the fight against the virus. They have allocated 9 million TJ Somoni and US\$35,247 to the Fund. This strategy also stress sacred hierarchical division between the Leader of Nation and his dynasty, their direct clients, and the public. The ministers and governors who transferred some of their salaries, along with entrepreneurs who allocated large amounts of money to the Fund, were introduced as 'the followers of the Leader of Nation and his son'.

The media, which includes television broadcasters, print and electronic outlets, along with independent news sources, and Asia-Plus and Avesta News Agency, propagated such narratives of benevolence from the president and his family. Besides his monthly salary, the Leader of Nation distributed aid in his name to hospitals, schools, and families across the country. Ozoda Rahmon, the president's daughter, sent aid to the Danghara district. Shamsullo Sohibov, the son-in-law of the president, distributed 25 cars with 200,000 items of protective clothing, masks, and medicaments to hospitals across the Khatlon Province. The media reported that the Avesta-Group—70 percent of whose stocks belongs to Rustami Emomali, the son of the President—distributed medical and protective equipment and gear to hospitals in Dushanbe, amounting to 2.5 million Somoni. Earlier, the company Oriyonfarm, which belongs to Avesta-Group Holding, brought medicaments from India and distributed them to pharmacies for sale. [A source](#) did not exclude that medicaments were given to Tajikistan as a gesture of humanitarian aid from India.

The media, however, attempted to highlight the company as charitable, stating that such a charity was in pursuit of humanistic initiatives of the Leader of Nation and the Mayor of Dushanbe. Some witnesses asserted that after exhibiting aids in the front of a hospital they have been taken back to the tracks. China provided medical equipment and protective gear to Tajikistan, while holding trucks transported items to hospitals. According to the [Avesta News Agency](#), in early May, humanitarian aid offered by China, which included protective clothing, medical masks, gloves and glasses, was delivered to the Qulma-Qarosu border crossing corridor in the Badakhshan Province and given to the Tajik side. Not all items were distributed to hospitals, however. [An expert](#) claimed that authorities had sold remaining aid through chief physicians (managers) of hospitals.

Where other parts of humanitarian aid disappear, nobody knows but there were reports and photographs in [media](#) as well as in the Tajik segment of the Internet which showed that aid was sold in pharmacies, hospitals, and markets. Widespread rumours and evidence allowed ruling elites to dismiss the powerful governor of Kulob city not only [in response to his misappropriation of the aid](#) but to his rivalry with the Minister for Communication, the member of Rahmon's extended

family. At the same time, healthcare workers and COVID-19 patients still experienced an acute lack of protective means and medicaments. Although Tajikistan [received more than one million units](#) of protective clothing, masks, protective glasses, and medicaments, the central hospital of the Sughd Province in Khujand was still dependent on support from local residents.

## Final remarks

Already in May, official media reported that Tajik authorities won the fight against COVID-19. They claimed that thanks to the president's heroic role, the disease had only caused a small number of deaths and insignificant economic damage. Such statements were meant to be fodder for the country's presidential election in fall 2020. On August 8, the National Assembly of Tajikistan decided to shift the day of the election to one month earlier, i.e. to October 11. [The deputies pointed](#) to the possible outbreak of the second wave of COVID-19 in later autumn. According to unofficial sources, the second wave of the disease has already been in motion since early August. Authorities, however, continue to fail in recognizing all COVID-19 cases, so as to not curtail future political measures.

# INFORMING THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE DANGERS OF A PANDEMIC. EARLY COVID-19 COVERAGE BY NEWS ORGANIZATIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN



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In Kazakhstan, news of the COVID-19 pandemic was greeted with alarm. The government was concerned with protecting public health and information security to prevent panic and unrest. Bloggers with social networks, as well as ordinary citizens using the Internet, became media sources themselves. To suppress rumors and so-called provocative information, the government created two Centers: one for Coordination and Centralization of the Media Work and one for COVID-19 Monitoring and Accounting. However, the main burden of informing the public fell to the professionals of the “pen and microphone.”

During the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March to August 2020), Kazakhstani journalists acutely felt the power, pressure, and control of the authorities as they attempted to obtain and disseminate accurate information. This study used a survey of print, online, radio, and television editors, followed by structured in-depth interviews with chief editors, to explore how national and local news organizations have worked to inform the public about COVID-19 and to combat fake news and misinformation. The results show that journalists faced obstacles in receiving credible and accurate information from government and medical officials and that they engaged in self-censorship.



Journalists from traditional and new media in Kazakhstan, like their colleagues in other countries, confronted a new global challenge in 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic. This topic has shaped the agenda for much of the year as the news media responded to the pressing need to understand and explain a force majeure situation for readers, viewers, and listeners. Covering the issue has become a priority for most domestic media outlets in Kazakhstan. Since the beginning of the pandemic, each news organization has developed its own approach to data collection and processing, as well as the dissemination of relevant information. For example, a number of media outlets chose to transmit only official statistics on coronavirus cases and deaths. Some decided not to cover the topic in general, citing the fact that they specialize in other types of stories.

A paradox arises here. On the one hand, traditional media should cover all relevant topics; on the other hand, they have the right to choose topics that, in their opinion, are more interesting to, or important for, their audiences. In setting their daily agenda, the choice of what to report was largely associated with the reputation of each journalistic organization, at least for leaders of most traditional media outlets that adhere to this principle. The reality that journalistic work takes place under conditions of risk and crisis did not change that basic, uniform professional principle of journalistic autonomy, even as media organizations made significant changes in production and organization (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger 2017). Meanwhile, travel restrictions prevented journalists from actively moving around their cities to do reporting and increased their reliance on online reporting. Free training webinars for journalists were launched en masse and focused on coverage of COVID (Lee and Bottomley 2010).

Researchers describe “crisis” as a kind of transitional state that can arise based on an accident (Fearn-Banks 2017), unstable government (Fink 2002), or damage (Coombs 2018). Models of media behavior depend on the attitude of news organizations and journalists toward a crisis (Vakurova 2015). A news outlet’s reputation in the eyes of the public and government depends on how its journalists perform in such a difficult period. Therefore, it is useful to examine the work of journalists and media executives during the pandemic from the perspective of a communication crisis.

For the media, any crisis is an opportunity to provide information, because public-facing crisis coverage is a professional responsibility of journalists. The media are traditionally considered a bridge between government and the people, yet both parties have different views on any given crisis situation. The more accurate, transparent, and complete journalistic coverage of the situation is, the greater will be the trust afforded to the journalistic organization (and therefore also its reputation) in the public’s eyes. The new global challenge in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic shows how severely nations are divided in terms of information and communication, and how journalists find themselves at the epicenter of this division.

In Kazakhstan, the boundaries of the information vacuum began to expand from the first days of the pandemic. Media organizations had to make many efforts to provide important information to different segments of society as members of the public felt completely at a loss about the scope of the situation and what to do about it. This was a period of information starvation as government officials intentionally refused to fully disclose what they knew about the virus and about how the government, medical professionals, and the pharmaceutical industry could respond. The government established two Centers for Coordination and Centralization of the Media Work and for COVID-19 Monitoring and Accounting to coordinate and centralize the work of the media,

maintain social stability, combat fake news and misinformation and monitor and register COVID-19 patients. It also established the coronavirus2020.kz website as an official source of reliable and verified information.

The first four official cases of COVID-19 infection were registered in Kazakhstan on March 13, 2020. As of September 9, 2020, there were 106,498 cases, including 1,634 deaths (Coronavirus2020.kz 2020). These numbers continue to rise. Kazakhstanis initially underestimated the danger (Bisam.kz 2020). In addition, the lack of reliable information about the coronavirus and reassuring professional risk assessments from medical experts spread the false belief that the threat was exaggerated.

Given the powerful influence on editorial policies that investors and government agencies wield (as they finance the media in Kazakhstan), it was extremely difficult for journalists to fully cover the pandemic amid quarantine restrictions (Internews.kz 2019). That is why only dry statistics appeared on TV screens and why criticism of the government appeared only occasionally in newspaper articles and on the Internet.

## Brief Overview of the Media in Kazakhstan

As of January 10, 2020, Kazakhstan had 3,669 registered media outlets: 2,964 periodicals, 161 television channels, 73 radio stations, and 471 news agencies and online publications. The most numerous are print media with 1,859 newspapers and 1,105 magazines. Most are published in Kazakh or Russian, with 1,348 being only in Russian and 882 only in Kazakh. The remainder appear in other languages or in three or more languages (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2020). The four largest-circulating newspapers are Karavan and Karavan-Class (partly private, in Russian, weekly, combined circulation 500,000); Yegemen Qazaqstan (state-owned, in Kazakh, five times weekly, circulation 201,750); Kazakhstanskaya Pravda (state-owned, in Russian, five times weekly, circulation 100,000); and Ekspress-K (partly private, in Russian, five times weekly, circulation 100,000). The top four TV channels are 1 Channel Eurasia, NTK, KTK, and 31 Channel. The most-used news agencies are Today Kazakhstan, KazInform, Bnews, Business Resource, and Interfax-Kazakhstan (International Research & Exchanges Board 2019, 236).

According to the authorities, 90% of the media outlets are private, and under the law, the state has no right to interfere in their activities or editorial policies (Official Information Resource of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2019). Yet, over the past three years, Kazakhstan has moved up only by one spot in the international ranking of freedom of the press issued by the nongovernmental organization Reporters without Borders. Among 180 countries, Kazakhstan moved from 158<sup>th</sup> in 2018 and 2019 to 157<sup>th</sup> in 2020 (Reporters without Borders 2020). However, the authorities dispute the rating, asserting that it does not reflect the real picture of press freedom in the country (Liter.kz 2020).

## Research Question and Methods

In such a context, how did domestic news media inform Kazakh society during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic? During the six-month study period from March through August 2020, the heads of newspapers, TV companies, news agencies, and online media faced the responsibility

of creating an atmosphere of trust among the state and society, journalists, and audiences. Simultaneously, social media content creators, bloggers, and civic activists were grabbing attention with their own agendas, which were dominated by emotion.

The authors of this study chose the survey method and in-depth interviews as the most effective means of researching the question under the conditions of quarantine restrictions. They first sent about 200 surveys to editorial and personal Internet addresses of journalists and media executives in all regions of the country and received 75 responses. The survey (provided in both Kazakh and Russian) had 19 questions. Seven were open-ended questions involving detailed written answers; twelve were closed-ended questions.

As a follow-up to the survey, the authors subsequently conducted in-depth telephone interviews with the heads of five traditional and online media outlets about their journalistic priorities in informing Kazakhstan's society and about their selection of news sources.

## Findings

Survey questions were divided into four thematic parts: Part 1: General information about the respondent; Part 2: News priorities of the respondent's editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media; Part 3: Reporting methods; Part 4: Impact on news policy from the editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media organization. Among the 75 respondents, 41.33% answered in Kazakh and 58.66% answered in Russian. The largest number of respondents were journalists working at newspapers (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Survey Respondents' News Organizations**

№	Type of media	% of respondents
1	Newspapers	44%
2	News agencies	12%
3	Television	17.33%
4	Online media	25.33%
	Survey respondents	N=75

Most respondents reported that they work in private media (68%); only 29.33% work in state media. One-fifth (21.33%) have more than ten years of work experience in a news organization, a third (32%) have from four to nine years of experience, and the remainder (42.66%) are less-experienced journalists with fewer than three years in the profession. Respondents included chief editors, staff editors, correspondents, and producers, including members of editorial boards and individual journalists.

Asked about the news priorities of their editorial office, respondents in both language groups and all types of media provided similar responses. They said providing health information to the public and presenting government positions and statements were high priorities. However, Russian-language media more often relied on international sources, while Kazakh-language journalists said they trusted information from local authorities more. Russian-language editors focused more often than Kazakh editors on the pandemic's negative impact on citizens' economic situation. Table 2 (Russian-language newsrooms) and Table 3 (Kazakh-language newsrooms) show the differences in the respondents' choice of news sources.

**Table 2: Priorities of the Editorial Office (Russian-Language Newsrooms)**

№		High priority	Some priority	Not a priority
1	Economic impact of the pandemic on the public	24	16	1
2	Economic impact of the pandemic on the nation	12	18	7
3	Providing health information to the public	29	9	3
4	Presenting government positions and statements	26	12	2
5	Combating misinformation and “fake news”	22	8	7
6	Maintaining advertising revenue and circulation	11	15	11
7	Human impact of the pandemic on the public	20	11	4
8	New research developments for vaccines and/or treatment of COVID-19	19	12	7
9	Protecting the health of its journalists	18	12	6
10	How neighboring countries (Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) deal with the pandemic	10	12	15
11	Effects of the pandemic on Kazakhstan’s international relations	7	21	8

**2b: News Sources Used (Russian-Language Newsrooms)**

№	Types of sources	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
1	Office of the President	24	17
2	Ministry of Healthcare	35	7
3	Members of Parliament	19	20
4	Regional and local health officials	37	6
5	Regional and local political officials (governor, akim, etc.)	34	5
6	World Health Organization	31	8
7	Medical researchers in Kazakhstan	27	11
8	Health care providers (doctors, hospitals, nurses, etc.) in Kazakhstan	35	7
9	Other specialists (economists, political scientists, etc.)	27	12
10	International news organizations of Russia, Europe, U.S., etc.	25	13
11	NGOs (Kazakhstan)	27	13

12	NGOs (international)	12	24
13	Ordinary citizens	28	13
14	Other types of news sources	23	13

**Table 3: Priorities of the Editorial Office (Kazakh-Language Newsrooms)**

№		High priority	Some priority	Not a priority
1	Economic impact of the pandemic on the public	12	14	3
2	Economic impact of the pandemic on the nation	8	11	9
3	Providing health information to the public	24	6	1
4	Presenting government positions and statements	16	11	2
5	Combating misinformation and “fake news”	12	15	2
6	Maintaining advertising revenue and circulation	4	12	12
7	Human impact of the pandemic on the public	15	14	1
8	New research developments for vaccines and/or treatment of COVID-19	11	12	6
9	Protecting the health of its journalists	14	8	7
10	How neighboring countries (Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) deal with the pandemic	10	12	6
11	Effects of the pandemic on Kazakhstan’s international relations	13	10	6



**3b: News Sources Used (Kazakh-Language Newsrooms)**

№	Types of sources	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
1	Office of the President	12	16
2	Ministry of Healthcare	27	1
3	Members of Parliament	13	14
4	Regional and local health officials	26	2
5	Regional and local political officials (governor, akim, etc.)	23	5
6	World Health Organization	23	6
7	Medical researchers in Kazakhstan	21	8
8	Health care providers (doctors, hospitals, nurses, etc.) in Kazakhstan	26	3
9	Other specialists (economists, political scientists, etc.)	20	8
10	International news organizations of Russia, Europe, U.S., etc.	14	13
11	NGOs (Kazakhstan)	12	15
12	NGOs (international)	7	19
13	Ordinary citizens	20	8
14	Other types of news sources	23	4

There was a clear difference in main news sources used according to language. That difference is especially important for an audience that lacks access to the Russian segment of the news realm. Sometimes rumors spread about the alleged artificiality of the coronavirus problem and its far-fetchedness, giving rise to a frivolous attitude toward the dangers of the spreading infection. Thus, the Kazakh-speaking population continued to celebrate weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries more than the Russian-speaking citizenry. As a result, many people died due to untimely information or misunderstandings of the importance of following the rules.

Self-censorship is a powerful constraint on independent, ethical journalism in Kazakhstan (Kurambayev and Freedman 2019). The term refers to individual journalists' and news organizations' practice of not covering certain news topics, or not publishing or broadcasting certain stories, for fear of angering government authorities or advertisers (Junisbai 2011). Slightly more than 60% of respondents from both language groups reported that they had not experienced self-censorship, while about 40% answered that they had carried out self-censorship (see Tables 4 and 5).

**Table 4: Was There Self-Censorship in Russian-Language News Media?**

	Yes	No
Have you seen self-censorship of individual journalists and/or news organizations in their coverage of the pandemic?	38.6%	61.4%

**Table 5: Was There Self-Censorship in Kazakh-Language News Media?**

	Yes	No
Have you seen self-censorship of individual journalists and/or news organizations in their coverage of the pandemic?	37.9%	62.1%

In general, media representatives believe Kazakhstani news media should provide more coverage of the pandemic to better inform the public of its economic impact, impact on education and schools, and consequences for the quality of medical care. The authors believe that these reasons partly reflect that many people lost income due to the pandemic, and not all regions and not all families of schoolchildren were ready for the distance learning format. For example, remote villages either had no Internet or their signal was weak, which hindered the administration of online classes; in addition, not all children had computers. A separate point is the quality of medical care, given (for instance) a shortage of drugs.

During the study period, Kazakhstani media dealt with “fake news” about the pandemic, mainly via Facebook and other social networks. For example, some media outlets wrote that one should not believe rumors that a helicopter was flying over Almaty, the country’s largest city, and spraying coronavirus. There were even fake reports from doctors who contributed to the panic through social networks. On the other hand, some doctors were supporters of the press and actively blogged, openly criticizing the power structures of health administration at the city and national levels. However, their voices could not always be heard by the authorities.

As Tables 6 and 7 show, responses about fake news were very similar in both languages.

**Table 6: Answers of Russian-Language Media about “Fake News”**

	Yes	No
Did your editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media outlet receive any misinformation or “fake news” about the pandemic?	30.2%	69.8%
If yes, was this information received from:		
	Yes (number of responses)	No (number of responses)
Twitter	2	15

LiveJournal	2	14
Facebook	9	9
TikTok	2	14
Other social media sites	10	8
Telephone calls	5	11
Press releases	3	14
Press conferences	5	12
Emails	4	14
Other	4	11

**Table 7: Answers of Kazakh-Language Media about “Fake News”**

Did your editorial office, TV channel, news agency, or online media outlet receive any misinformation or “fake news” about the pandemic?	33.3%	66.7%
If yes, was this information received from:		
	<b>Yes</b> (number of responses)	<b>No</b> (number of responses)
Twitter	2	10
LiveJournal	1	11
Facebook	9	6
TikTok	3	9
Other social media sites	8	7
Telephone calls	6	7
Press releases	3	10
Press conferences	3	9
Emails	2	10
Other	4	8

In their survey responses, journalists reported that various difficulties thwarted their ability to obtain official information. During press conferences, for example, officials answered questions that came in advance, did not answer urgent questions raised during the press conferences, and sometimes ignored questions. In the end, the material published in the outlets’ stories was not always exclusive, and newsrooms repeated each other’s reports. Journalists did demonstrate civic and professional responsibility by using social networks to protest and criticize restrictions on obtaining information from the specially created press centers of the Ministry of Healthcare.

Outlets were further hampered by the country’s lack of journalists specializing in medical topics, so it was difficult for reporters to understand and accurately explain the specifics of treatment protocols offered by Kazakh, Russian, Japanese, and European doctors. Similarly, there was confusion about the drugs being used, including which were effective and which were harmful.

Many citizens flocked to news on the Internet and social media, and there was strong competition between professional journalists and bloggers, who also defended their status in the information field. As a result, inaccurate information from the Internet was sometimes incorporated into stories by professional journalists.

## In-Depth Interview Results

Five chief editors were interviewed in depth to provide a qualitative picture of the situation to help the authors analyze the problems and identify new aspects of pandemic-related coverage. Table 8 provides background information about them. They were selected based on the popularity and circulation of their publications. The authors of the study believe that the five experts working in the same area of interest are a sufficient sample size for in-depth interviews in this qualitative study. Two respondents represented a state publication or a publication financed by a regional executive body; the others were from private media outlets (newspapers, a magazine, and online media) with high circulation and fairly wide audience coverage, publishing both traditionally and online.

**Table 8. Background on Chief Editors Interviewed**

	Position	Description of news organization	Ownership of news organization	Total circulation (copies)
Leader 1	Deputy chairman of the board & chief editor	National republican newspaper	State	More than 185,000
Leader 2	Chief editor	Social and political newspaper	Private	More than 130,000
Leader 3	Chief editor	City newspaper	State	34,000
Leader 4	Chief editor	Educational magazine for children and adolescents	Private	10,000
Leader 5	Director & chief editor	Internet edition	Private	N/A

The authors chose to interview print editors because print media have been the most negatively affected by restrictive quarantine measures compared to other media. Interviews took place by phone and were recorded for transcription using Audacity, the multi-platform audio editor. Each interview lasted from 25 to 40 minutes.

All interviewees agreed that the pandemic had become a priority editorial topic. At the same time, one chief editor emphasized that “the topics that the newspaper traditionally covers, and this is the fight against corruption, shortcomings in the work in law enforcement agencies, and so on, of course, remained.” Another chief editor said the staff “looked for comments on everything. This also applied to the work of medical workers, their professional training, their support and compensation for their dangerous work during a pandemic, the quality of their work and the quality of service for the sick, the condition of the sick, treatment, plus problems with the provision of medical supplies and medicines.”

The interviewees said in-depth articles had gained particular importance since the beginning of the pandemic and their journalists sought to provide readers with detailed accounts of the causes and consequences of the problems. As one interviewee explained:

Since the beginning of the pandemic, this issue has become even more relevant since people trust the information published in the newspaper. It is difficult to predict the consequences of incorrect statements and questionable advice. Therefore, our main principle is to avoid misleading facts and doubtful opinions in the newspaper [and] rely only on the opinion of qualified specialists, doctors, and scientists.

Interviewees from state media said they received no direct orders from officials about how to cover the pandemic. “We have not received any commands from the government,” the chief editor of a privately owned children’s magazine said. “Our magazine consists of 32 pages. We immediately allocated two pages to the pandemic issue. The stories and poems of children sent to the editorial office were sorted and published on the pages dedicated to the coronavirus problem.”

### ***Obtaining Information***

All the interviewees acknowledged problems obtaining useful, truthful, and reliable information. In addition, in times of widespread pessimism among the public, the authorities recommended publishing and broadcasting less news about the pandemic and publishing softer and more positive content.

“We did not know about the epidemic that began in December until March, and the Ministry of Healthcare did not understand how to respond. Therefore, we refused to publish the information because we did not have access to it,” one interviewee said. Another said:

The official medical structures, which were supposed to provide as much information as possible on the situation, unfortunately at first did not work well enough to explain the whole situation to people, both about the infection itself and about the protocols and, in general, the work of medical structures. Therefore, all the criticism fell on them, and they rapidly lost confidence.

A chief editor criticized the government’s weakness in communications:

According to the law, you need to apply with an official letter to find out whether the information disseminated is correct or not. First, the request goes to the office, then to the minister. A response will be received in at least three days. This is determined by law—the answer is provided within three to seven days. Now think about it: There is a pandemic on the street, terrible rumors, etc. Who will wait for an official response? Now everyone has smartphones. They shoot what they see. Is anyone going to check this information? No offense, but the state mechanism was not ready for such a situation.

### ***Fake News and Social Networks***

According to most interviewees, social networks spread misinformation, which is a troubling reality. “If we compare it as a percentage, then during this time there was only 5% of useful information on social networks. That is, some kind of operational information to which one could really react,” a chief editor said. “The rest was all fake. We never link to social networks and never take information from there. In general, social networks have shown their exceptional destructive role at this moment.” Another strongly worded response: “Of course, there was even the most serious fake news in my opinion, that there is no coronavirus infection at all. That is all a lie. We

were faced with such facts, and of course we tried to explain all this with the help of adequate speakers and specialists.”

One interviewee said the main problem is that traditional media are unable to block the spread of fake news on social networks and instant messaging. The reason lies in the nature of traditional media and the characteristics of social networks. For example, the former have a smaller audience reach than the latter. As one editor explained, “Newspapers are physically late [in arrival] to their readers, and the number of daily visitors to [newspapers’] information sites is not so great. The people are sitting on social networks, video, and text publications.”

### ***News Organization Economics***

Asked about the impact of restrictive measures on newsrooms’ economic situation, two interviewees responded that the impact was highly negative. Two others rated the degree of impact as moderately negative. One interviewee said the restrictions did not affect the financial and economic situation of their organization’s editorial operation. The reason for such divergent answers relates to where each chief editor worked. Those reporting high negative effects worked for private newspapers and magazines whose budgets depend on advertising and sponsors. Those who rated it as only a medium negative impact headed state publications or publications financed by the local executive authority. The only interviewee who reported no negative impact heads two privately owned online publications with a small number of employees and a budget reserve.

All the interviewees reported that their editorial offices did not lay off staff. One said that everyone worked remotely at their regular salaries, and some were paid extra, for example, to travel to checkpoints in the first week of the pandemic. That chief editor said, “The pandemic has not affected advertising because the advertising market has not gone anywhere. If the publication is good, then there will be advertising as well.” Another said, “We had money for salaries until September, and we tried to pay. There were no reductions. At the very beginning, after consulting with the staff, I said that if we suffer from the pandemic and cannot pay your salary, then after September you will go on vacation without pay. The employees agreed with this condition.”

There was agreement that the pandemic and quarantine restrictions hurt circulation and distribution of their publications. One cited the government’s “absolutely wrong decision” at the beginning of the pandemic that “print media are among others as a carrier of the virus, although studies have already been known that the virus does not remain on newsprint.” One non-financial consequence of that decision: “Older people, who are more at risk of illness, did not receive newspapers. Together with the volunteers, we donated free newspapers to whom they delivered food packages. Of course, circulation decreased for everyone.”

The closure of kiosks selling newspapers and magazines also hurt. “Retail sales, the so-called live circulation, was for us a certain kind of sign of our relevance among the readers who bought the newspaper,” according to one chief editor. “That is, it is not enough for them to read us in the electronic version on the Internet. Here we have lost about 25,000 newspapers a week.” In addition, publications suffered from the closure of printing houses and delays in transportation. One interviewee said, “In some places the traffic was blocked, it was very difficult to reach them. It was difficult to deliver to the nearest places by mail. Readers called us and asked, ‘Why aren’t your magazines published?’”

### ***Protecting Employee Health***

An analysis of the interviews showed that all five media organizations adopted measures and guidelines recommended by the government, represented by the Ministry of Healthcare, to protect the health and safety of journalists. Their main and universal step was moving employees to teleworking. According to the chief editors, only employees who were urgently needed remained in the editorial offices. One chief editor said, “We have introduced a strict regime at the entrance to the office, all the necessary disinfectants and so on. We employ about 100 creative and technical personnel. During this time, only three people were ill with a mild form [of illness] and were [working] at a distance.” However, that chief editor said up to 45% of employees got sick at other news organizations working with an open office system where “everyone sits in the same nest.”

When self-isolation began, journalists at another news organization “worked quite hard, practically seven days a week,” one editor explained. The news organization paid employees more because they were working much more than eight hours a day. However, some had to be in the office, this interviewee explained, “since we are also a print publication that requires typesetting and all the classic traditional efforts,” and the company provided masks and sanitizers and followed “sanitary and hygienic protocols.” Other common health measures included staff meetings on Zoom and sending stories and photos to editors by email. Even so, one interviewee said, “There were times when it was necessary to go outside, for example, to take a photo for the cover with six or seven students. We were all wearing masks and pulled them off for a couple of seconds when we took a photo together.”

In addition to their professional work under difficult logistical, financial, and political conditions, some participated as volunteers in campaigns to financially support and deliver food to needy citizens and to help sick journalists purchase scarce medicine or medical equipment.

### ***Lessons Learned***

Some interviewees acknowledged that they would most likely have changed their approach to covering the pandemic if they had known in March what they knew at the end of August. As one participant explained:

In my opinion, it would be possible to switch to informative and useful news. I would take away political information. It would be possible to make videos useful for the population based on international experience. After all, this is not only a pandemic issue, but above all a hygiene problem... In other words, instead of political information, I would offer useful information to the public, be it a video or text.

Another interviewee said the government should have provided full and reliable information to journalists, “who serve as a bridge between the government and the people.” That would have “increased the society’s ability to resist infection. For example, when no one knew how to be treated, people rushed to find traditional and alternative medicines.” Referring to a rumor of a six-week quarantine and rising prices, that chief editor said sellers “took advantage of the situation and increased the prices of ginger, lemon, and other products. At that time, the media should have strengthened contacts with the population and explained how to resist the disease.”

Yet some interviewees defended their early approach in covering the issue. One expressed it this way: “I believe that we covered [it] normally and sufficiently. Everything was as it should be, and [if] there was criticism about drugs, we always published it. I didn’t see any change in the content or quality of colleagues.” Another said, “Nothing has changed in this area... Now I do not have any criticism of what has been done, what could be redone. They were professional problems, they remain and appear every day, and every day you need to react to them and try to do it professionally.”

## Conclusion

The results of this study reflect that the pandemic has become a priority topic in the work of Kazakhstani news organizations—and it promises to stay that way for a long time. Lessons learned from journalists’ early coverage may improve their professionalism and responsibility in coverage of future crises. Those lessons may also guide the government toward more transparency and fuller disclosure to the press and the citizenry during this and future crises.

Journalists said domestic media tried to cover the issue from all sides, as far as the information available about the pandemic allowed. Full-fledged coverage with high-quality analysis based on verified information and the opinions of competent experts gained particular importance against the background of rumors and fake news about the coronavirus. Meanwhile, journalists independently chose their sources and the tone of coverage but still experienced problems obtaining useful, accurate, and reliable information. Study participants agreed that social media contributed to the spread of fake information, saying social networks and instant messaging played an extremely destructive role. There was, however, an acknowledgement that social media could be useful in providing an impetus for journalists to search for objective information and refer readers to high-quality news.

An important observation with implications for journalistic coverage of future crises is that traditional media could not stop the spread of fake news through social networks and instant messaging. One major reason why so many citizens turned to social media for information is that traditional media relied on official information that was seriously delayed by the government. The existing mechanism of communication between the state and journalists, respondents said, does not allow the government to promptly provide the public with official news regarding crises.

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# COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA: HAS THE TIME COME FOR SOCIAL INNOVATIONS?

By Bakhrom Radjabov



Photo by Christian Wiediger



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This paper critically examines health and social care projects that have been undertaken by four umbrella organizations: namely, Ezgu Amal in Uzbekistan; Peshraft in Tajikistan; and the Kazakhstan Never Sleeps and the Together volunteer communities in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The paper conducts critical project evaluations against social innovation criteria to find out whether, and to what extent, they are progressing towards becoming true social innovations. Critical analysis is achieved by applying social practice and human development theories.

Research found that the projects have aimed at greater inclusion and more participation and responsiveness through the extensive use of information and communication technologies as well as social networks and platforms. Particular emphasis in these projects focused on their social impact, specifically in terms of the identification of social challenges and the creation of new social relationships. In this regard, the projects mainly achieved five common features of social innovation: newness, sector neutrality, networking, needs satisfaction, and human-centeredness, but they are still progressing towards two other features: scaling up and making a social impact.



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

The unprecedented health and economic crises caused by COVID-19 have put a lot of pressure on the welfare states in developed economies and have increased disparities in developing and poor countries. The virus outbreak became a stress test for the health and social care of Central Asian republics. After plummeting, the virus soared back in the whole region. The second wave of infection has, however, severely hit particularly poor households as it tore through Central Asia. Retightening restrictions on residents and businesses created more poverty and social problems. While the coffers of Central Asian governments were quickly dwindling, they have had to stop shortfalls by tapping emergency donor funds. In this context, the pandemic disabled the provision of health and social care services. Subsequently, this left the population without the highly desired social support and fundamental health capacities.

While COVID-19 warnings have reverberated across the region, new projects led by civil society organizations and local volunteers have also mushroomed. Their main purpose is to solve social issues and to fill in the gaps in the state health and social care sectors. In this context, it is not surprising that social innovations initiated within the last years in developed and developing countries, as Buchegger puts it, “were seen as a solution for many social problems.”<sup>1</sup> For instance, in her study analyzing social innovations in particular developing countries (Uganda and India) and developed countries (USA and UK), Asadova argued that “in developed countries, it is the nature of social innovation characterized by the scarce government resources for certain type of social issues which spurs social innovation.”<sup>2</sup> In developing countries, according to Asadova, “the role of social innovations was in their ability to meet social needs.”<sup>3</sup>

In the post-Soviet context, social innovation is a relatively new concept. The United Nations was the first organization to introduce social innovation as a new instrument in its development work in this part of the world. According to its development strategy, UNDP launched the [first Social Innovation Lab in Armenia](#) in 2011, following [projects in Ukraine](#) and [Uzbekistan](#). The major purpose of social innovation was to enhance good governance and better economic performance through innovations in the public sector. I have studied these projects in Uzbekistan, Ukraine, and Armenia, and, based on [my research findings](#), I have concluded that they had different levels of progress towards becoming real social innovations.

Now, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, new projects are thriving in Central Asia. Their genuine goal is attending to the social needs of people and addressing the breaches in the state health and social care services. Since these projects, emerging from the grassroots level, are sustainable and focused on the needs not addressed by the existing state health and social nets, they are likely to manifest in an emergence of a new set of social actions.

## Background and Purposes

As I mention in [my analytical article](#), “according to the Global Health Security Index (GHSI) scale between 0 (absolutely not prepared) and 100 (well prepared), none of the Central Asian republics scored above 50, although their degree of preparedness based on the GHSI score differed.” Barriers

<sup>1</sup> B. Buchegger and M. Ornetzeder. (2000). Social innovations on the way to sustainable development. ESEE Conference (pp. 1-11). Vienna: Zentrum für soziale Innovation, 2.

<sup>2</sup> E. Asadova. (2013). *What does social innovation mean for the developing and developed countries?* Tashkent: Westminster International University in Tashkent, 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

to bailing people out have included missing financial resources and the unavailability of accurate data about the people in need.

To fix these policy failures, CSOs and volunteers have jumped in with their projects. The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze these projects to find out whether Central Asian states are ready to embrace ideas of social innovation. In order to do that, I am going to evaluate the projects supported by the two CSOs and two volunteer groups. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, civil society organizations (CSOs) [Ezgu Amal](#) and [Peshraft](#) are leading organizations established before the COVID-19 outbreak with the broader goal of helping people in need. Later, they adapted their activities to respond to the pandemic. *Ezgu Amal* is an Uzbek charity foundation established by volunteers in October 2019 to help people with low income (including children), homeless people, and to those who need to purchase medical equipment such as for cancer treatment. *Peshraft* is a Tajik public, charitable, and non-profit organization established in 2011 whose mission is to invest in the human potential of the country. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, volunteers have created Telegram and Facebook groups such as [Kazakhstan Never Sleeps](#) and [Together](#) to help citizens and physicians.

The research question guiding this paper is as follows:

*How have the projects in Central Asian republics progressed and what challenges continue to prevent them from becoming social innovations?*

In answering the research question, the paper draws on both qualitative data and an analysis of documents and other available sources of information. On the level of primary data collection, the paper uses *in-depth interviews* with local civil society leaders and volunteers implementing projects. The documentary analysis looks at available resources focused on relevant projects as the COVID-19 response, with a particular focus on texts by local activists as experts in this area.

Picking selected CSOs and groups of volunteers for analytical purposes certainly has its limitations. This approach does not allow for a full coverage of the scope of informal groups of activists, physicians, experts, etc. gathered in chat communities through social networks. It only allows a snapshot of the civic activism which blossomed in Central Asia due to the pandemic. Therefore, this paper does not intend to reveal all tacit activities driven by the COVID-19 response. It does intend to uncover the emergence of new social practices which are able, if successful, to change existing social structures and social realities in Central Asia.

Although the projects I selected as case-studies largely meet the usual criteria of social innovations on newness, human-centeredness, networking, sector neutrality, and needs satisfaction, it is too early to assess if they will fulfill two other standards of social innovation: scaling up and social change. They all exhibit a crucial role of CSOs, volunteers, and information and communications technologies (ICTs), with an active contribution of government to enable them to make significant gains.

## Theoretical framework of the study: Social practice theory and the concept of human development

The primary challenge of social innovation is the absence of a consistent theoretical foundation of the concept. As Howaldt et al. argues, “the lack of consensus [around the term] has to do with different understanding of the notion of the ‘social’ in social innovation not as a technological artifact, but as a social practice.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, in [research](#) on social innovation projects in Armenia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, I emphasize that “numerous theories, namely development, entrepreneurship, sociological etc., contributed to the understanding of the concept of social innovation.”<sup>5</sup> These theories have been discussed, for instance, by Moulaert et al. (2005), Evers et al. (2012), Howaldt and Schwarz (2010), and Marques et. al (2018). One of the recent and the most influential books, *The Open Book of Social Innovation*,<sup>6</sup> “was very significant in the European debate, and provides a multitude of examples, methods and concepts of social innovation.”<sup>7</sup>

Domanski agrees with Howaldt et al. and points out that “the concept of social innovation cannot be limited to one focus, be it social entrepreneurship or social economy, and demonstrates that widening the perspective is crucial for understanding social innovation.”<sup>8</sup> Social practice theory emphasizes that social innovation is a new combination and/or configuration of social practices prompted by certain actors or constellation of actors in an intentional targeted manner, in certain areas of action or social contexts, with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices.<sup>9</sup> For social practice theory, invention is a central element for social development,<sup>10</sup> but *imitation/repetition (diffusion)* is the central mechanism of social reproduction, change, and innovation. The social change in the social structure of the society appears as Zapf suggested “in its constitutive institutions, cultural patterns, associated social actions and conscious awareness.”<sup>11</sup> In the current paper, social practice theory is applied in a manner providing the scope of social innovation criteria to conduct an accurate assessment of the projects that have emerged as the response to the COVID-19 outbreak. For this purpose, social innovation criteria have been picked up for the evaluation of the projects (Table 1).<sup>12</sup>

Since social practice theory explains the process of social innovation through the combination of new social practices, it can definitely benefit from what Howaldt et al. calls “a normative and application-oriented framework that focuses on the opportunity and ability for a good,”<sup>13</sup> the

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<sup>4</sup> J. Howaldt and M. Schwarz. (2017). Social Innovation and Human Development: How the Capabilities Approach and Social Innovation Theory Mutually Support Each Other, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Radjabov, B. (2019). A Critical Analysis of UNDP-Supported “Social Innovation” Projects in Local Governance in Armenia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, *Journal of International and Advanced Japanese Studies*, 117

<sup>6</sup> See Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan (2010).

<sup>7</sup> Howaldt, J., and M. Schwarz. (2017). Social Innovation and Human Development: How the Capabilities Approach and Social Innovation Theory Mutually Support Each Other, 4

<sup>8</sup> D. Domanski (2017). Exploring the research landscape of social innovation. Dortmund, Germany: A deliverable of the project Social Innovation Community (SIC), 21.

<sup>9</sup> J. Howaldt, A. Butzin, D. Domanski, and C. Kaletka. (2014). Theoretical approaches to social innovation: A critical literature review. A deliverable of the project: ‘Social innovation: driving force of social change’ (SI-DRIVE). Dortmund: Sozialforschungsstelle, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Zapf cited in Howaldt, J., & Schwarz, M. (2014). Social Innovation and Human Development: How the Capabilities Approach and Social Innovation Theory Mutually Support Each Other, 427

<sup>12</sup> J. Howaldt and M. Schwarz. (2017). Social Innovation and Human Development: How the Capabilities Approach and Social Innovation Theory Mutually Support Each Other, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

capability approach. The human development concept and capability approaches have been inspired by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and discussed by many scholars<sup>14</sup> as a critique of development limited to economic growth only. Sen has argued for the capability approach to development in the form of freedoms and opportunities for individuals, mostly from deprived communities. Essentially, the capability approach “puts human agency at the center of the stage”<sup>15</sup> providing a *people-centeredness criterion* (Table 1) of social innovation, which is applicable in the current analysis. As an evaluative framework, the capability approach can “promote the concept of social change as human development by focusing on social innovation as a new combination of capabilities.”<sup>16</sup>

**Table 1. Features of social innovations gleaned from the social practice and human development theories**

Features	Explanation
Newness	New inventions (new actions or new in social contexts).
Networking and collaboration	Networking and collaboration among different actors (government, CSOs, private companies, individuals) for the generation and progress of social innovations.
Sector neutrality	Social innovation does not emerge in one sector and is not limited to one focus.
Needs satisfaction	Addressing particular social problems and social needs.
Scaling up	Scaling up/diffusion of social innovations across the social system.
Social change	The process of change in the social structure of a society in its constitutive institutions, cultural patterns, associated social actions, and conscious awareness.
People-centeredness	Individuals experiencing certain problems come up with solutions to these problems, which is at the core of any social innovation. Social innovations strive for more inclusiveness of individuals and social groups left behind by the previous policies and programs.

*Source: Table compiled by author based on social practice and human development.*

The criteria of social innovation derived from the theoretical literature should help to determine the progress (if any) of projects in Central Asia towards becoming true social innovations. Selected indicators of the social innovation framework model assist in rigorously explaining the operational environment of the projects.

<sup>14</sup> See Elsen (2014), Ibrahim and Tiwari (2014), Millard (2014).

<sup>15</sup> J. Howldt and M. Schwarz. (2017). Social Innovation and Human Development: How the Capabilities Approach and Social Innovation Theory Mutually Support Each Other, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Millard and Ziegler cit. in Howldt, J., & Schwarz, M. (2017). Social Innovation and Human Development: How the Capabilities Approach and Social Innovation Theory Mutually Support Each Other, 12.

## Discussion: Evaluation of projects in Central Asia

- *Newness: New actions in the new social context*

The newness criterion of social innovation, in accordance with social practice theory, has been fully fulfilled for our four selected case-studies. In Central Asia, it was applied in the sense that there are new inventions or actions responding to the new context born from the global pandemic, which has modified existing settings of operation for the government, civil society, and individuals. By default, governments and CSOs are pushed to invent new methods or adapt existing mechanisms and actions, primarily in the health and social care sectors, to save lives and overcome the pandemic. For instance, as President of the [International Federation of Medical Students Association \(IFMSA\)](#) Kamila Narkulova says,

we [physicians, members of association] jointly with “Ezgu Amal” Foundation install oxygen accelerators for those who needs [sic] this based on health condition: saturation, blood pressure and other indicators, because state health system is not able to provide everyone with oxygen therapy during COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, installing oxygen accelerators at home was not practiced. Moreover, such an effort by volunteer-physicians was an entirely new practice which emerged in Central Asia to address the health care problems occurring due to the coronavirus. The same applies for [Kazakhstan](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), and [Tajikistan](#), where professional physicians have organized volunteer groups, offered medical counseling through social networks (Facebook, Telegram) on COVID-19 treatment, and broken stereotypes and skepticism about the virus.

One can find plenty of groups communicating online using social networks. ICTs were used extensively in Kazakhstan for the [Kazakhstan Never Sleeps](#) project and in Uzbekistan through the Telegram channel of physicians.<sup>18</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, an online Facebook group called *Together* assisted doctors at [seven Bishkek-based medical facilities](#). Thus, ICTs and social networks facilitated new practices that started emerging in Central Asia during the coronavirus outbreak.

- *Networking and collaboration: Active role of diasporas abroad, CSOs, and governments*

Networking and collaboration, per social practice theory, imply the constellation and collaboration of different actors for the generation and progress of projects. This criterion has been completely fulfilled in our case-studies. My recent [research findings](#) from Armenia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan have revealed that government support of ‘social innovation’ projects were either uneven or completely missing. In case of a pandemic outbreak, however, governments (including embassies) were keen on cooperation with CSOs and diasporas of Central Asians living abroad. This is a clear sign of changing political and social frameworks implying the rise of political and social awareness about the implemented projects.

For instance, one of the founders of Tajik NGO *Peshraft*, Zuhursho Rahmatulloev, mentioned, alongside the director of this organization, Matlyuba Salihova, that they “contacted [the] Tajik

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<sup>17</sup> Kamila Narkulova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Kamila Narkulova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.



diaspora in Russia, Europe, US, Japan etc.” to raise funds for people in Tajikistan,<sup>19</sup> in order to purchase masks, medication, and food. The same was true in the case of the Uzbek *Solidarity with Uzbekistan* campaign organized by Uzbeks living abroad. As one of the organizers, Kamola Makhmudova, says:

The idea of raising money was offered by the London-based Uzbek NGO Bilim (Eng. “Knowledge”). I have helped to shuffle it into a good and transparent fundraising campaign. Since I did not like the idea of just asking for funds, I decided that we can offer something to exchange it for money. This is how we decided to teach Uzbek dance, talk about the history of Uzbekistan and its culture. We could invite Ms. Marinika Babanazarova, former director of Savitskiy Museum in Karakalpakstan, to talk about this museum. We could also arrange Uzbek dance classes online. Honestly, I was pleased to note people, sometimes non-Uzbeks, not just donating, but also willing to learn Uzbek dance, culture and history. We even have several funny stories of people donating just not to dance. Now, we have collected even more money than I was expecting.<sup>20</sup>

Zaynab Muhammad-Dost, a volunteer campaign supporter, said “funds gathered allowed [us] to apply for an additional matching of the sum by EBRD—the bank supports its staff’s involvement in certain community initiatives.”<sup>21</sup> Kamola Makhmudova, who is working for the EBRD in London, clarified that “as a result of the matching to the money raised was approved by the EBRD’s special shareholders fund in amount 50.000 Euros for charity work on EBRD employees.”<sup>22</sup> In this case, the money will be spent for the social project led or co-organized by an EBRD worker. After a very careful check, as Kamola Makhmudova mentioned, the “*Ezgu Amal* NGO in Tashkent was selected for transferring collected money, in order to purchase health equipment, masks and food for people in Uzbekistan. This organization was picked up due to the excellent reporting and transparency it practices.”<sup>23</sup>

Rahmatulloev and Salikhova from Tajikistan and Makhmudova and Muhammad-Dost from Uzbekistan have highlighted the assistance and support they have received from the governments. Salikhova mentioned that “she was surprised how fast the local government of Dushanbe provided the list of Tajiks living below the poverty line in the city,”<sup>24</sup> Muhammad-Dost highlighted that the “Uzbek embassy was supporting the initiative,”<sup>25</sup> and Makhmudova added that the “Uzbek embassy in London offered plenty of options of individuals and organizations they can contact in Uzbekistan with a request to participate in the solidarity campaign, later issuing individual letters of gratitude to every participant.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, social cohesion and mobilization of social capital and networks among the diasporas, local NGOs, and the state has contributed to the fulfillment of the networking criterion of social innovation.

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<sup>19</sup> Zuhursho Rahmatulloev and Matlyuba Salikhova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Kamola Makhmudova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Zaynab Muhammad-Dost, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Kamola Makhmudova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Kamola Makhmudova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Matlyuba Salikhova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Zaynab Muhammad-Dost, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Kamola Makhmudova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

- *Sector neutrality: Cross-sectoral projects driven by CSOs and volunteers*

This social innovation criterion was also fulfilled. The projects were designed in a cross-sectoral manner—an important accomplishment during the pandemic. Post-Soviet governments usually try to maintain tight control over the civic sector, even taking over its functions. This has also partly happened in Uzbekistan where the Uzbek government asked volunteers to join the governmental [Sahovat va ko'mak \(Generosity and Support\)](#) centralized movement to help people in need through the *mahallas* (local communities). However, as Munira Khodjakhanova from *Ezgu Amal* says: “CSOs and informal groups were allowed to continue helping.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, CSOs and volunteers were the drivers of the projects. In other words, people united to help their compatriots left in difficult situations due to the coronavirus. Governments that were usually cautious about civic activism did not challenge it this time. In contrast, they collaborated with CSOs in raising funds, providing administrative support, or allowing rapid access to data about poor households. For instance, Munira Khodjakhanova says that their CSO activist Aziza Umarova “could reach out to the Cabinet of Ministers to rapidly receive a permission to import oxygen accelerators as a humanitarian aid, thereby avoiding taxation.”<sup>28</sup> Matlyuba Salikhova mentioned that

The *hukumat* [local administration] of Dushanbe was willing to rapidly provide to *Peshraft* the list of households living below the poverty line. Usually, it takes longer time to get this data. It is not publicly accessible because of privacy of the information about the poor families. Thus, the fact that government allowed *Peshraft* to access this information, tells about the high level of its credibility to what we do in Tajikistan.<sup>29</sup>

These examples of synergy and collaboration are key elements of change. They show that governments can ally with CSOs and citizens for the sake of public good. Ultimately, if the lesson is learned, those experiences might lead to changing political and social frameworks in Central Asia in order to favor innovations.<sup>30</sup>

- *Needs satisfaction: Attempts to address the needs not tackled by the state*

With respect to addressing particular social problems and people’s social needs, our selected projects also fulfilled this criterion. The problems that the projects intended to tackle in the area of health and social services were not addressed fully by governments despite the growing needs of people for such services. This is particularly true during the second wave of the pandemic outbreak. Once the virus flared up again, it became clear that additional help was needed. In this context, projects were tackling a number of issues:

1. Providing correct and timely information about the symptoms and treatment of COVID-19. This essential support by professional physicians was enabled through the Telegram chats and TV programs. Self-treatment and treatment by the doctor at home are not allowed.

<sup>27</sup> Munira Khodjakhanova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Munira Khodjakhanova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Matlyuba Salikhova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>30</sup> G. Krlev, E. Bund, and G. Mildemberger. (2014). *Measuring What Matters: Indicators of Social Innovativeness on the National Level*, 204.

However, a huge demand for fact-checked and accurate information shared by professionals helped to mitigate undesirable panic and incorrect treatment.

2. Though home treatment was prohibited in Uzbekistan, delivering and installing oxygen accelerators was possible, and, in fact, it saved lives among those experiencing breathing problems due to pneumonia. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, CSOs and volunteers have launched the campaigns *Breathe Uzbekistan* and *Breathe Kyrgyzstan*. As Kamila Narkulova from *IFMSA* and Munira Khodjakhanova from *Ezgu Amal* pointed out: “in Uzbekistan this campaign was supported by [the] CSOs *Ezgu Amal* and *IFMSA*.”<sup>31</sup>
3. Volunteers of the projects delivered food and medication for elderly people, people with disabilities, and those who lost income. Governments also arranged assistance for the poor and disabled people. However, existing government resources were not sufficient, and the helping hand of volunteers was always welcome. For instance, the director of *Peshraft*, Matlyuba Salikhova recalls:

I received a call from the deputy chairperson of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) with request of support of the poor families (and/or families with a family member with disability) that lost their jobs, because the administration of GBAO heard about *Peshraft*'s activities in Tajikistan. We have also contacted hospitals to provide individual protection means (masks, overalls, respirators, glasses, shoe covers, gloves).<sup>32</sup>

Even so, this help was not enough, or data inaccuracy sometimes prevented projects and their leaders from helping those in real need; nevertheless, these projects contributed to better health and social care coverage.

- *Scaling up: Plans to diffuse the projects*

According to social practice theory, any invention should be repeated, or, in other words, diffused or scaled to achieve, over time, a sustainable social change. At the moment, the spread of our selected projects and their activities is uneven throughout the region. For instance, *IFMSA* and *Ezgu Amal*, as their leaders say: “are mostly operating in Tashkent, capital city of Uzbekistan.”<sup>33</sup> In case of Tajikistan, Zuhursho Rahmatulloev shared that “their team plans to open a *Peshraft* daughter organization in Uzbekistan.”<sup>34</sup> However, these are still plans on the paper, and, at the moment, this criterion of social innovation has not been achieved.

- *Social change: The assessment problem or different understanding of social impact*

Any social innovation is expected to make a social impact. In Central Asia, projects were launched quite recently, and, therefore, their social impact can be evaluated only prematurely. Moreover, to find out if any social impact from the projects has happened, adequate measurement tools should be applied. Measurement instruments to assess social impact from the projects were not available and have not been applied. In fact, as Kamila Narkulova said, “it was not a primary goal of

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<sup>31</sup> Kamila Narkulova and Munira Khodjakhanova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Matlyuba Salikhova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Kamila Narkulova and Munira Khodjakhanova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Zuhursho Rahmatulloev, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

the projects.”<sup>35</sup> The same was true for the Kazakhstani project *Kazakhstan Never Sleeps* or the *Aksakal* (elderly) and Telegram channel projects uniting physicians. All projects are implemented by citizens voluntarily, and as one of the inspirers of these initiatives, Arman Satimov, says: “we have metrics of [... the] help physicians provided to people through Telegram. This is all we have so far. We have projects changing peoples’ [...] minds about COVID-19. Important project, but it is hard to measure its impact.”<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly enough, the projects had to do with the identification of social challenges and the establishment of new social relationships to tackle these challenges. For instance, Kamola Makhmudova said:

The campaign *Solidarity with Uzbekistan* helped to found relationships that otherwise would not be established. The impact from the project was in helping people sitting at home to cope with psychological issues, by taking Uzbek dance, culture and history classes online, and to contribute financially to help people in Uzbekistan.<sup>37</sup>

- *People-centeredness: Citizen-driven projects for solving problems*

Projects that accord with social practice theory should come up with inventions or actions nurtured by individuals experiencing problematic issues and hence fully assure the fulfillment of this criterion. A human-centered approach has been achieved by all our case-studies projects through the inclusion of individuals living in the communities and in solving the existing problems. Individuals themselves could identify the problem, and then design and apply the solution to the problem, as opposed to a solution that is government-driven.

In fact, all projects appeared as new inventions and actions and they were designed by individuals willing to provide help to their communities and beyond. They intended to identify individuals left behind due to the pandemic outbreak, but still in need of support and care, in order to directly provide aid. The *Ezgu Amal* CSO and *IFMSA* in Uzbekistan, the *Peshraft* CSO in Tajikistan, and the assistance of Kyrgyz and Kazakh volunteers were directed towards people to save their lives. As Kamila Narkulova from *IFMSA* said: “we helped people because the traditional health system was not able to take care of everyone.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Projects supported by and implemented by CSOs and volunteers in the Central Asian states as a response to the COVID-19 outbreak manifested the changes happening in the local civil societies, despite the existing [difficulties in NGO registration](#). It is clear that the societal and political environment—or as Krlev puts it, “frameworks”<sup>39</sup>—are evolving and turning into a more favorable ecosystem for social innovations. However, the projects are not yet qualified as true social innovations because: (1) more time and effort is needed to diffuse them; and (2) the projects must

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<sup>35</sup> Kamila Narkulova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Arman Satimov, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Kamola Makhmudova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Kamila Narkulova, personal interview with the author, August 2020.

<sup>39</sup> G. Krlev, E. Bund, and G. Mildemberger. (2014). *Measuring What Matters: Indicators of Social Innovativeness on the National Level*, 204.

be institutionalized to enable social change.

What is remarkable is how social networks and ICTs have impacted the spread of civic initiatives across the Central Asian states. ICTs helped to organize communities of experts, primarily physicians and volunteers willing to help others. Moreover, the role of the government in pandemic times has also changed to become more engaged with civil society. Although in some cases government still tried to replace CSOs, it nevertheless did not discourage volunteers and CSOs in their activities nor their willingness to help people in need. Thus, changes prompted by the global pandemic might create more opportunities for social innovations in Central Asia.



# KYRGYZSTAN: THE SOCIOECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 CRISIS

By Julien Bruley and Iliias Mamadiarov



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<https://univ-lille.academia.edu/JulienBruley>.



Photo by Irene Strong

**November 10, 2020**

The present article seeks to provide an overview of COVID-19 health crisis management in Kyrgyzstan at the macro and micro levels. As a matter of fact, Central Asia was hit relatively late by the pandemic. Indeed, the outbreak expanded in the region after it had affected China, the Russian Far East, and Europe. The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 appeared in the region in the second half of March: first in Uzbekistan, then in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and finally in Tajikistan in May 2020. As for Turkmenistan, it remains an exception since the country stated it has recorded zero official cases of [coronavirus](#).

Likewise, as in many regions across the world, in Central Asia the pandemic served as a trigger event that produced exceptional political, social, economic, and cultural circumstances that required the implementation of various measures on the part of local governments in order to alleviate the consequences of the crisis. In this regard, Kyrgyzstan finds itself in a peculiar situation as the country's dilapidated and vulnerable political and economic institutions have had to maintain a precarious balance both on the domestic and the [international front](#). Furthermore, the pandemic has fully exposed vulnerabilities of this developing country, also highlighting its prompt reaction to the crisis.



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The current study attempts to carry out two levels of analysis, macro and micro, to be placed in an evolutionary chronological perspective of the COVID-19 crisis in Kyrgyzstan. As such, the study puts an emphasis on the so-called anticipated “return to normal”—a period which offered a spurious end to the health crisis in the country some time at the end of May or beginning of June 2020. Finally, to reflect upon these developments as well as to elaborate on the potential implications of the present outbreak, this paper draws conclusions based on two main sources: data collected in the Kyrgyz media and data obtained during interviews with actors of Kyrgyz public life.

## Kyrgyzstan: The period of the propagation of the pandemic

While its geographic proximity to China would suggest otherwise, according to official data, Central Asia was able to steer clear from contracting the virus during the initial stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Chinese mainland. In its capacity as one of the key economic partners in Central Asia as well as an active participant of China’s Belt and Road project, Kyrgyzstan saw its first fears related to the possible spread of the virus on its territory set in towards the end of January 2020. The government adopted several measures in an attempt to stave off the immediate epidemiological threat that included, among other things, the closures of land borders with its powerful neighbor along with the suspension of all flights to and from [China](#).

As early as February, Manas International Airport, the country’s principal airport located in the northern part of Bishkek, introduced mandatory temperature control for passengers arriving on every international flight. The government took further proactive actions as it imposed restrictions on public gatherings. The chain of events evolved rapidly during the following weeks: in March, all the airlines flying to Kyrgyzstan cancelled their flights, and Russia altogether closed its borders to [foreigners](#). In summary, the government put a high priority on measures aimed at obviating the necessity of countrywide lockdowns to prevent possible infections slipping in through land or air borders. But the results of such drastic measures were not long in coming. Indeed, in the face of complete closures of borders and suspension of airline traffic with neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and China, Kyrgyzstan quickly found itself in a state of *de facto* isolation.

As a matter of fact, a retrospective study of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kyrgyzstan allows us to hypothesize that, even if a government’s attempts to ward off the spread of the virus may not have been as impeccable as many outspoken Kyrgyz citizens wished they were, the measures nevertheless contributed in keeping the country virus-free for a certain period of time. In particular, it was only on March 18, 2020, that Kyrgyzstan registered its first confirmed COVID-19 cases. Three people from Suzak district, in the southern part of the country, who had earlier returned from pilgrimage to Mecca, were diagnosed with coronavirus after they visited a local hospital following their health [complications](#).

With the further increase of COVID-19 cases that followed the introduction of quarantine measures on [March 17](#), the government declared a countrywide state of emergency on March 25, with curfews introduced in the major cities in the south and in the capital [Bishkek](#). Initially set to last from March 25 to April 15, the state of emergency was extended until May 10, following the decisions of Kyrgyzstan’s neighbors such as Kazakhstan and [Uzbekistan](#). The quarantine measures halted almost all economic activity. With the exception of supermarkets and pharmacies, which remained open only during specified daytime hours, most other businesses had to wait until June



1 to become fully operational again. Finally, the infections gradually spread to the rest of Kyrgyzstan, with Talas oblast being one of the last to be affected upon the renewal of interregional transportation inside the [country](#).

## Kyrgyzstan during quarantine, first observations

Along with an obvious countrywide economic slowdown, the quarantine resulted in somewhat less discernible but nevertheless significant impacts on domestic and legal levels. This section provides a quick review of the repercussions stemming from the latter fields.

### *Domestic violence*

According to Pomfret, apart from endemic corruption and pervasive clientelism, an “increasing Kyrgyz chauvinism” has been one of the marked evolutions that the country experienced since its [independence](#). Furthermore, it appears that against the backdrop of strict confinement, the rising trend of male chauvinism has triggered an upsurge of incidents of domestic violence across the country.

Indeed, as Akisheva reports in her detailed analysis of cases of abuse against women during lockdown in Kyrgyzstan, if during the pre-pandemic period six in ten women were “beaten, sexually abused, or otherwise ill-treated,” within the context of quarantine, the country has recorded a 60% rise in the number of cases of domestic violence against [women](#). In fact, with families restricted to living in clusters during lockdown, men have been forced to spend lengthier periods of time than usual at home with their spouses. The conditions have substantially raised the cases of abuse against women throughout the country, revealing the tensions and social divisions existing in Kyrgyz society.

A particularly manifest example of the latter is the incident that took place on March 8, when a parade, in support of women’s rights and composed predominantly of women, was disrupted by masked men belonging to conservative, nationalist-patriotic groups such as [Kyrk-Choro](#).

### *Legal aspects*

Numerous issues have surfaced with respect to repercussions in legal fields, such as families being deprived of the opportunity to visit their relatives in prison, and employees requiring legal support as they face massive lay-offs due to lockdown. Based on our anonymous interview with a private law firm in Bishkek, it was possible to shed light on certain developments that took place during the countrywide confinement period. As such, the law company observed a considerable rise, i.e., 30%, in the number of requests for legal consultation from employees who had been abruptly laid off during quarantine. The majority of the lay-offs, our interlocutor explained, concerned freelancers as well as individuals working in the garment sector—a group which is financially vulnerable and therefore treated as expendable due to the [informal nature](#) of the labor market, which explains the absence of employment agreements for this sector’s workers.

Another important evolution concerns the prisons. Restrictions to visit inmates impacted not only the family members of prisoners, but also a majority of doctors and lawyers, too. For instance, out of some 2,500 lawyers who applied for state authorization to access their clients in jails, only 139

received authorization during the lockdown. The number is to be compared with the pre-pandemic period when almost all of the lawyers requesting authorization to access jails received them.<sup>1</sup>

### *Major economic consequences of the initial lockdown*

As with many developing countries vulnerable to macroeconomic shocks, in Kyrgyzstan the economic repercussions stemming from external or internal shocks tend to exert a major effect on the country's political stability. Indeed, since gaining its independence, Kyrgyzstan has been profoundly shaken by two incidents of political distress, with the last one, as Pomfret explains, resulting from the [Russian economic recession of 2008–2009](#). With a substantial fall of remittances coming from Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia as well as the workers' gradual return home, the country experienced a deep economic recession which eventually provoked a violent overthrow of the second Kyrgyz President, [Kurmanbek Bakiyev, in 2010](#).

Certainly, the unprecedented nature of the present health crisis makes it extremely difficult to provide an all-encompassing analysis of the economic consequences of the pandemic. Nevertheless, it is possible to shed light on immediate macroeconomic impacts of the quarantine measures as well as to look upon several economic trajectories in which coronavirus can leave a lasting negative impact.

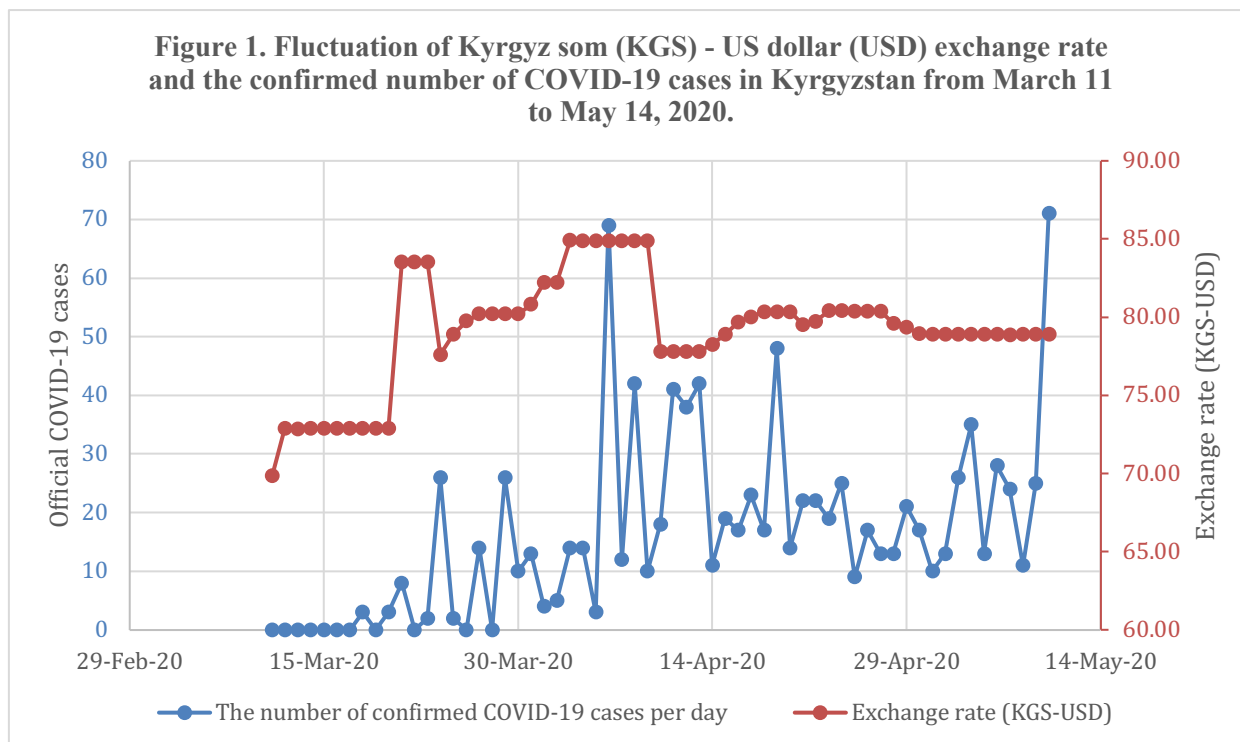
One of the foremost sectors in Kyrgyzstan hit hard by the health crisis was the financial market. In particular, the Kyrgyz som (KGS) experienced a number of major fluctuations in the days before and during the initial quarantine period. Indeed, a week before the announcement of the first official cases of COVID-19 in the country, the som's exchange rate against the [US dollar decreased by 4%](#). To prevent the panic buying of US dollars, the National Bank of Kyrgyz Republic (NBKR) performed a monetary intervention by [selling](#) US\$53.7 million. However, despite the anticipated forecast of monetary stabilization, the Kyrgyz som continued to plummet, hitting the exchange rate of 85 som against \$1 (to compare with 69 som per 1 of pre-pandemic period) on [March 19](#). In his press conference, the director of the NBKR, Tolkunbek Abdygulov, underlined two factors to explain the drastic devaluation of national currency. On the one hand, he argued that the rising demand for dollars in the country was driven by psychological factors of buyers set against the backdrop of the global health crisis of COVID-19. On the other hand, the fall of international oil prices which affected internal financial markets was seen as the second reason causing [monetary fluctuations](#).

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the fluctuations of the Kyrgyz som's exchange rate in relation to the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus. To corroborate the explanations of the director of NBKR, we performed a bivariate analysis to examine the correlation between the pandemic and fluctuations of the Kyrgyz national currency. In particular, the application of a simple linear regression analysis taking the daily number of new infections as an independent variable and the exchange rate as a dependent variable results in an  $r$ , i.e., the correlation coefficient, of 0.2835 approximately  $\approx 0.3$ . Furthermore, with the application of a [shorthand formula to test the statistical significance](#) ( $|r| \geq \frac{2}{\sqrt{n}}$ ), we obtain  $0.28 > 0.26$ . In other words, at an approximate significance level of 0.05, it is possible to assert that a positive linear relationship between the

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<sup>1</sup> Authors' interview with anonymous lawyers.

spread of COVID-19 infections and fluctuations of the national currency exists and is statistically significant.



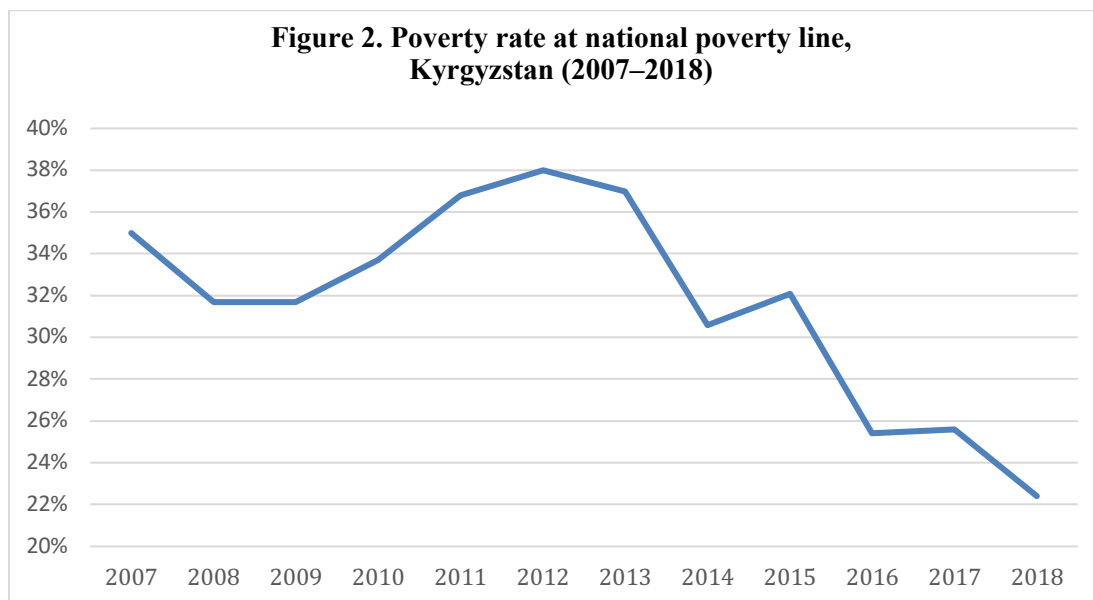
*Source:* 1. National Bank of Kyrgyz Republic, USD-KGS “[Official Exchange Rate from March 11, 2020 to May 14, 2020](#)”.  
2. Official site on [coronavirus in Kyrgyzstan](#).

An important caveat must be taken into account when looking at the bivariate analysis presented above. First, the simple linear correlation does not seek in any way to explain all the complexities of the financial markets in Kyrgyzstan (as well as in a global perspective) in relation to the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, given the fact that financial markets have numerous coalescing factors which impact their course, their study requires analyses which go far beyond the bivariate regression analysis applied here. Second, the primary objective of our study was to corroborate the explanations put forward by the director of NBKR, who held the pandemic, among other things, to be responsible for fluctuations of national currency. Third, the analysis employed a fixed period, i.e., from March 11, the day of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in [Kazakhstan](#) that immediately impacted the price of dollars in the region, through to May 10, the day of the end of the state of emergency in Kyrgyzstan and the partial lifting of the confinement order. More importantly, though, NBKR’s efforts to prevent the devaluation of national currency paid off towards the end of May 2020 with relative stability of som’s exchange rate but at the cost of major [monetary interventions](#).

Another significant economic aspect to examine within the present health crisis concerns the remittances of Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russian Federation. Indeed, since Kyrgyzstan is one of the world’s top countries dependent on [foreign remittances](#), the pandemic takes a particularly heavy toll on the country’s economy. According to Suzy Blondin, the pandemic has produced a

mobility problem for the tens of thousands of Kyrgyz households from mountainous regions of the country whose family members and other relatives work in Russia. With quarantine measures significantly hampering international travels, migrant workers face the risk of losing mobility—and subsequently jobs—driving more families into [poverty](#). Indeed, according to the [estimations](#) of the World Bank, the COVID-19 crisis may trigger up to a 27% reduction of remittances to European and Central Asian countries due to a “fall in the wages and employment of migrant workers, who tend to be more vulnerable to loss of employment and wages during an economic crisis in a host country.” Along with the possible soaring unemployment levels and the rise in poverty, it seems that the health crisis has already triggered a much-feared recession for Kyrgyzstan’s remittance-dependent economy, as argued by Kyrgyz economist [Nurgul Akimova](#).

In the same vein, the World Bank projects several outcomes of the present crisis in Kyrgyzstan. In the best-case scenario, with an inflation rate of 5% and a reduction in remittances of 30%, the crisis may drive some 400,000 individuals (roughly 5.9% of the population) below the poverty line. By contrast, the worst-case scenario, with an inflation rate of 20% and a reduction in remittances to 50%, may see up to 1.5 million people (approximately 22% of the population) facing the risk of falling below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the projection is based on the national poverty line in Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 2), which suggests that 22% of the population, or a little less than one fourth of the country’s residents, are already considered as poor during the pre-pandemic period. Hence, the fact that worst-case scenario of COVID-19 may plunge close to half of the country’s population, i.e., 44%, below the poverty line, provided that no appropriate intervention measures are put in place, sends an alarming signal for the necessity of implementing appropriate policies to alleviate the impact of the crisis.

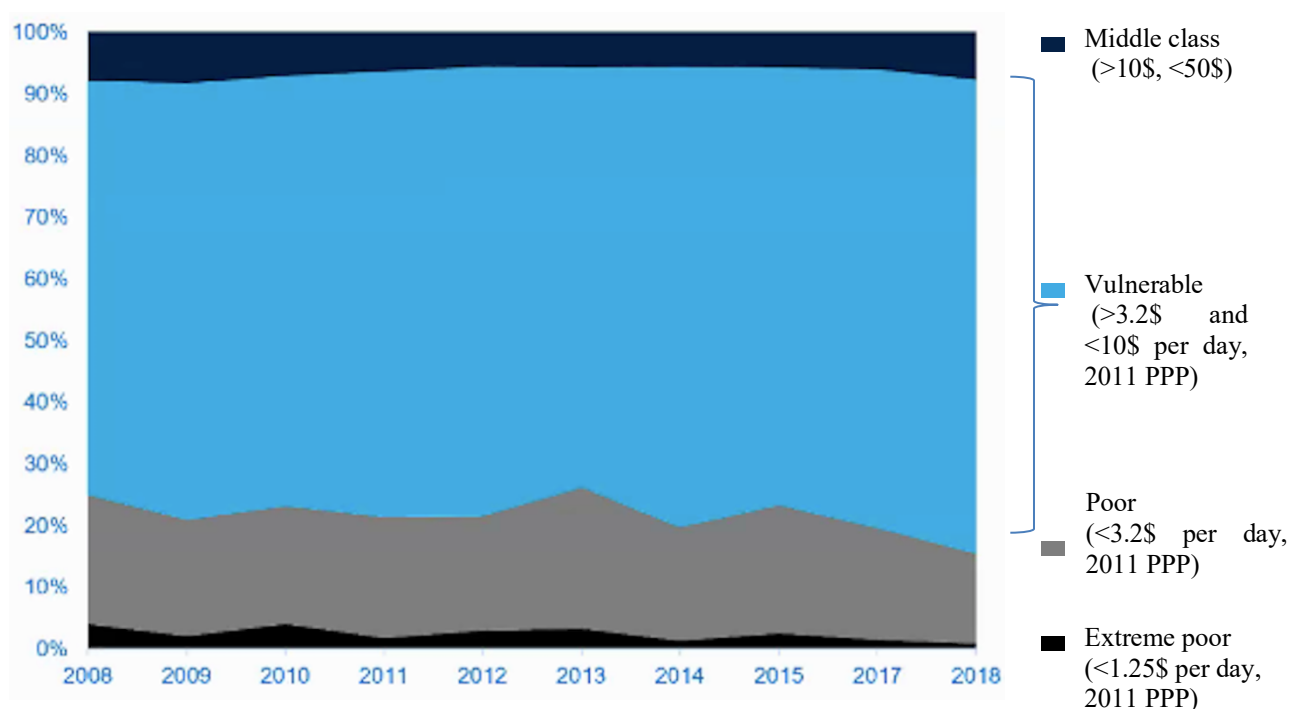


Source: World Bank, [DataBank](#), 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Entitled *Kyrgyz Republic COVID-19 Poverty and Vulnerability Impacts. Micro-micro simulations of COVID-19 shock*, the study, which has not yet been the subject of an official publication, was presented on June 30, 2020, during the online applied training “Poverty and Welfare Analysis” organized by the World Bank Kyrgyzstan from June 15–30, 2020.

The pandemic's threat of driving 44% of the population below the poverty line implies that more than 15 years of the country's fight against poverty is at risk. In this regard, such a distressing outcome is closely linked to the notion of "vulnerability to poverty," a concept which pertains to households' "[resilience against a shock—the likelihood that a shock will result in a decline in well-being.](#)" In Kyrgyzstan, the level of vulnerability stands at a significantly high level. More specifically, the declining level of national poverty in the country over the years was offset by a growing number of financially precarious households that managed to remain above the poverty line by a narrow [margin](#). Figure 3 illustrates the extent of vulnerability to poverty in Kyrgyzstan. The graph shows that more than 60% of households remain in the vulnerability zone, which implies that economic recession threatens to take a heavy toll on more than half of the country's population.

**Figure 3. High vulnerability, Kyrgyzstan**



Source: 1. World Bank, [DataBank](#), July, 2020.

2. World Bank. *Kyrgyz Republic: From Vulnerability to Prosperity. A Systematic Country Diagnostic, 2018*, 2018.

Last but not least, Kyrgyzstan will have to face a major challenge in the near future: the country's foreign debt. It is certain that the present health crisis significantly hampers the country's efforts at debt settlement. As of 2019, the foreign debt constituted 50% of Kyrgyz GDP, with China representing the chief creditor, i.e., [more than 45%](#). Nonetheless, one reassuring aspect of the sum owed to China concerns the nature of the loans. In particular, almost all of the loans that Kyrgyzstan has contracted with the Chinese government are concessional. Therefore, as Bakyt Dubashov, the chief economist for Kyrgyzstan at the World Bank, argues, repayment terms of these loans are [flexible](#). Finally, the fact that China has agreed to [defer the repayment of Kyrgyz loans for the entirety of 2020](#) demonstrates, among other things, the flexible nature of the debt.

## A crisis of trust?

« *Savons-nous encore faire confiance ?* » (Do We Still Know How to Trust?) is the title of the article, translated from German, published in a Swiss journal, *Courrier International*. Published on July 8, 2020, the article points out, among other things, that our society, once based on conviction, control, and confidence as the key elements of its stability, suffers today from a deep disarray marked by the omnipresent environment of uncertainty and fear due to the pandemic: “Before the pandemic, we lived in societies based on control, risk minimization and uncertainty reduction. And then crash! All our convictions were [shaken](#).” While the article examines the general situation of individuals’ mistrust of scientific experts and local authorities generated by the spread of coronavirus, it should be noted that in Kyrgyzstan, distrust of public institutions existed long before the current health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic further worsened the problem of mistrust, a development which comes against the backdrop of the enormous challenges that the country’s [fragile health care system has been facing since the dissolution of the Soviet Union](#).

Indeed, according to the study carried out by the National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic in the second half of 2019 on trust levels, the country’s Ministry of Health held one of the lowest scores of trust of the population, appearing at the bottom of some 47 state institutions ranked in order of their [trustworthiness](#). Furthermore, the survey of Bishkek residents evaluates the Ministry of Health as an agency with one of the highest levels of corruption (see Figure 4). With this caveat in mind, it is possible to assert that one of the reasons for the skyrocketing COVID-19 death cases, especially in Bishkek from the end of June 2020, may be related partly to the public’s lack of trust and unwillingness to heed the anti-COVID-19 public awareness campaign launched by the Ministry of Health. In particular, since the start of the lockdown, the Ministry of Health has repeatedly insisted on the importance of following social distancing rules as well as avoiding crowded places and events with mass gatherings. But the rising number of infections that shook the country in July demonstrates that the Ministry’s advice was largely ignored.

**Figure 4. Seven public institutions perceived as highly corrupted by Bishkek residents, 2019**



of *Note: the actual score of perceived corruption ranges from +100 to -100, with bigger negative number associated with higher level of corruption.*

*Source: The “[Index of trust of the population, second half of 2019](#),” Statistical Committee of the KR, 2020.*

August 24, 2020, the number of total confirmed coronavirus cases in Kyrgyzstan stands at 43,245, out of which 1,057 are [deaths](#). In terms of official cases, Kyrgyzstan has the second highest number of infections after Kazakhstan in Central Asia. However, in terms of mortality rate per 100,000 people, Kyrgyzstan is in first place in the region, occupying leading positions in the entire Eurasian zone on this [number](#).



*A woman walking in Dordoi Bazaar, a wholesale and retail market in Bishkek.  
Photograph by the authors.*

In the same vein, it is equally worth noting that within the context of the actual health crisis, significant reconfigurations of social relations and solidarity networks are taking place. Indeed, on the one hand, in the face of the rapid spread of cases of infections, self-help unions—mostly made up of young people—have been formed in order to relieve the medical system which found itself on the verge of collapse under the weight of the crisis. In this regard, several hotels, schools, and sports centers were turned into makeshift hospitals in Bishkek with the help of active young volunteers as well as financial support provided by the local community of [entrepreneurs](#). But the pandemic equally takes its toll on the country's vibrant civil society as it disrupts day-to-day solidarity networks. For example, Guljan, a 60-year-old woman and resident of a village in Talas, a region in the north-west of Kyrgyzstan, says she has observed significant changes in the behavior of her neighbors: “The fear of contracting the virus forces everyone to live in isolation; if formerly



the villagers often paid each other casual, daily visits, today we are becoming more and more indifferent; each family decides to stay away from the community.”

One of the cornerstone challenges that Kyrgyzstan faces within the context of the current health crisis is related to the fact that COVID-19 seems to altogether up-end the deep-rooted, day-to-day religious practices in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, this concerns the cases of flouting funeral customs and norms, a rather unprecedented event: “This pandemic, it changes and shakes up everything. People are afraid, we cannot trust even our family members and relatives because we are not sure whether they are carriers of the virus or not,” says Aidarbek, a 36-year-old dentist and resident of Bishkek whose uncle passed away on July 16, 2020, from cancer. “Even though my uncle wasn’t affected by coronavirus, most of his relatives and acquaintances could not attend his funerals out of the fear of contracting the virus or infecting someone.” Hence, out of 200 people expected, around 40 attended the Aidarbek’s uncle funeral.

As a matter of fact, in a society such as Kyrgyzstan’s where, as Kathleen Collins argues, clanic mechanisms and networking play a vital role in the distribution of [economic and political favors](#), social gatherings represent an essential tool for individuals to build and expand on their informal contacts to access crucial [socioeconomic resources](#). Therefore, the fact that COVID-19 significantly thwarts individuals’ opportunities to fully benefit from their social capital illustrates the extent of the crisis’ impact on the social and economic lives of the population.

## Concluding remarks

For the time being, Kyrgyzstan is walking a tightrope between recovering economic activity, indebtedness, and a new wave of contamination. Furthermore, there is every likelihood that the COVID-19 crisis will result in the emergence of popular discontent, expressed massively through social networks, attacking the dilettante management of the crisis (e.g., massive funds received from abroad, but no infrastructure hospital set up before July). This discontent has been recently aggravated by the claims of the Kyrgyz government to toughen its legislation on media. More specifically, the state parliament in June passed a controversial bill called “[On manipulating information](#),” which purportedly seeks to address the problem of inaccurate information spreading online by enabling the authorities to restrict or block access to internet sites as well as shut down social media accounts without the need for a court decision. The bill produced a strong public backlash, with its opponents comparing the law to [legislations in effect in neighboring authoritarian states](#), notorious for their practices that openly flout the rights of their citizens’ freedom of speech. In light of the backlash, and although the Kyrgyz President, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, has returned the bill to parliament on the grounds that the legislation requires further rectifications, it seems the final ratification of the law is simply matter of time.

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# IDENTITY-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN KAZAKHSTAN: MIGRANT WORKERS IN PANDEMIC TIMES

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Photo by Elizabeth Foco



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Covid-19 has brought about unprecedented changes in the lives of migrant labourers all across the world, threatening their survival both socially and economically. The worldwide imposition of lockdown along with social distancing measures have affected major and minor economies with migrant labourers having been hit the hardest. After emptying the pockets of daily wage labourers during lockdown, the pandemic has pushed Kazakhstan to stall migration across borders, thus creating thousands of stranded labourers in the country. Most of these labourers are from the neighbourhood, i.e. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with whom the Kazakhs have shared a common civilizational history and post-independent ethnic conflicts. The region's complicated ethnic relations have contributed towards identity-based discrimination against stranded labour migrants in Kazakhstan.



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Identity-based discrimination can be described as the [exclusion](#) of a particular group from the titular group, based on one's ethnic, linguistic, gender, and/or religious identity, along with the restriction of such groups' access to common socio-political and economic benefits provided by the state. In Kazakhstan, migrant workers from bordering nations form the excluded minority group and are deprived of many state protections. Kazakhstan re-opened its borders on [August 5](#)—however, many foreign [labourers cannot return](#) to their home countries as a result of poor employment prospects, financial hardship, and other factors. At present, stranded migrant labourers find themselves in a precarious position, although steps have been taken to resolve a number of issues. This article aims to investigate cases of identity-based discrimination against stranded migrant labourers in Kazakhstan during the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that the roots of the ongoing discrimination lie deeper in the identity politics of Kazakhstan but that the problems have intensified during the pandemic.

## **Discrimination against stranded migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has been quick in responding to COVID-19 and was the first country to announce a nationwide [lockdown](#). On 15 March, President Tokayev declared a [state-wide emergency](#) from April 16 to May 14. Nur-Sultan and Almaty were fenced by roadblocks and sanitary posts, thus restricting the mobility of individuals inside and outside of these cities. The lockdown prevailed until May 11 and, at the time of writing in September, the measures are still in place along with a [“shelter in place”](#) policy. As of September, 23, Kazakhstan has recorded about 138,000 Coronavirus positive cases. However, despite the falling number of cases and Kazakhstan having ended its emergency in May, the economy has continued to weaken, with the state announcing measures to strengthen the country's economic structure [“urgently”](#).

However, the social system has also experienced tremors of division as the debate around identity politics have intensified due to local versus migrant issues. Some of these debates have stemmed from the facilities and privileges made available by the government for citizens while excluding foreigners and/or stranded migrants. For instance, the government has announced special relief packages, collectively called [“anti-crisis package,”](#) worth \$13 billion (9% of the GDP) for citizens, including those who have lost their jobs due to the lockdown. The anti-crisis package includes [“unemployment benefits](#) in the amount of \$100.42 per month, [with] no tax liabilities for up to 6 months and preferential loans” for local workers. The relief package has come after reports that the industrial sector was currently facing a loss from \$233 million to \$2.3 billion due to the lockdown, with further difficulties including hurdles in supply chains and a lack of available workers. However, these benefits have not been extended to foreign migrant workers, a group which consists of approximately [3.5 million](#) people, around 8% of the country's total population.

No relief aid regarding health or job has been granted to foreign migrant workers by the government. Migrants have nevertheless reported about the economic discrimination they are facing. In an interview conducted by the Central Asian Bureau of Analytical Reporting, [10 migrants](#) of Tajik origin who have been working in the construction sector at the Karaganda Oblast since 2015 explained that they have been stuck in the region since lockdown enforcements. They are stranded in camps or quarters provided by employers, though their accommodations have become temporary for most of them, as employers may ask them to vacate at any point. Many migrant workers in the [Zhibek Zholy \(Silk Road\) checkpoint](#) have complained that they have been made to



stay outdoors despite hot afternoons and cold nights. They have not only been deprived of their salary but cannot demand unemployment benefits as they hold no [residential permit](#) in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, in July, several migrant workers lost their jobs due to expenditure cuts.

Migrants have alleged that, while they have been denied work and payment, Kazakhstani workers continued to be paid. One migrant worker revealed that employers communicated to him that they cannot sacrifice jobs and payments to Kazakhstani workers and thus had to let go of Kyrgyz and Tajik workers instead. This is due to Kazakhstan's unfavourable migration laws towards foreign workers. According to the World Bank, seasonal migration among migrant workers of Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan will [fall by 95%](#) after the pandemic due to the economic, legal, and social hardships the country is facing. It is also stated that migrants' social security has been compromised, as there is no regional body to collectively speak for the rights of migrant workers.

Over the years, migrant workers have been exploited by recruiters, employers, authorities, and even xenophobic and radical nationalist groups who accuse them of ["stealing jobs from locals"](#). Tajik workers stranded in the Karaganda Oblast state that the cause of this discrimination is a ["lack of trust"](#) between migrant workers and employers, whereby the former are seen as flight risks by the latter. Such assumptions are made despite the fact that these migrant workers have worked for the informal and unorganised sector for decades without adequate legal and social security.

Migrants have also allegedly been denied COVID-19 testing and treatment by local doctors and hospitals. Such social discrimination from locals can be explained by the absence of a feeling of 'ethnic solidarity' toward Uzbek or [Kyrgyz migrants](#). Even Russian migrants enjoy a better status in Kazakhstan than Central Asian migrants. The former have still retained the jobs from which Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrants have been laid off. One Central Asian worker stated that when his group attempted to contact their [employers for assistance or help](#), they rarely met with success, as the families of the employers view migrant workers as "unhygienic" and "sick". Such taboos about migrants make it difficult for even empathetic doctors or employers to communicate with and help them.

Migrant workers are also viewed as outsiders even when they get a work or residence permit after staying in Kazakhstan for over a decade. Workers interviewed in the Karaganda Oblast have described the discrimination they face despite having official documentation, from all sides of the society, be it doctors, shop-owners, house-owners, or neighbors. Describing his experience with social discrimination at the time of the pandemic, a Tajik worker stated that one of his Tajik friends was [refused treatment](#) despite having permanent residency. He stated,

The medical team identified him as a foreign national from his appearance and it took much convincing to get him treatment as the medical team was not sure of the social and legal [protocols regarding migrant workers](#).

Workers additionally become worried and anxious about legal procedures that require them to produce various papers before presenting to healthcare facilities. More so than legal discrimination, these workers face social discrimination by landowners, who have asked migrants to vacate residences. Some Uzbek migrants live in [temporary residences](#), as locals deny them accommodation in contrast to their accommodation of Kazakh or Russian workers. Under such circumstances, migrants use their savings to survive in the country as local vendors despite not receiving food or other essentials.

While the social and legal discrimination faced by migrant workers is nothing new, the pandemic context is uniquely stressful. The migrant workers of Karaganda admit that they have been anxious and stressed for several months in terms of their [personal security](#) and commitments towards their families. In addition to these struggles, an unempathetic attitude and identity-based discrimination against Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek labourers have further diminished their morale and mental health.

Literature on the mental health of workers during COVID-19 suggests that migrant labourers are the [most vulnerable group to mental illness](#), as they are under immense pressure to survive. Studies also indicate that while migrant workers face social discrimination during normal times, the pandemic has exacerbated the stress they experience in half of the world, including Central Asia. While these workers are not being able to return home due to mobility restrictions, their chances of infection are almost [as high as frontline workers](#). This is mainly due to a lack of proper accommodation, access to food, and health care. Around the world, migrant workers face various problems, from lacking awareness about the virus and its effects, lacking knowledge on social distancing protocols, lacking the appropriate hygienic materials, such as toilets and sanitizers, and living in shared houses or apartments.

With these considerations in mind, there is little doubt that the pandemic has intensified discriminatory attitudes against migrant labourers. While some business owners are sympathetic to them, most migrants continue to struggle for secure access to food, basic medical aid, and permanent asylum in Kazakhstani industrial cities. Despite these issues, they are not in a position to return to their home-states, where they have no means of earning a livelihood.

## **Identity politics and laws for foreign migrant workers**

Identity politics in Kazakhstan is as old as its Soviet legacy. [Ethnic nationalism](#) is one of the core tenets of nation-building in Kazakhstan and, therefore, its identity politics is mainly driven by ethnic and linguistic identities. After 1991, Kazakhstan's nation-building was based on ethno-nationalism and the legal framework laid the foundation of a "[Kazakh first](#)" policy. Kazakh is the state language of Kazakhstan and the Kazakh people are given utmost priority in all sectors of public life—from education to employment to health and human rights.

While Kazakhs are the titular ethnic group and enjoy a superior status in terms of financial, political, and socio-cultural security, Russians also enjoy benefits due to the social capital they gained during Soviet period. Their status as ex-colonial masters have saved them from social stigma in an ethnically-divided Kazakhstani society. The same status enjoyed by Russian workers in Kazakhstan, however, is not shared by their [Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik counterparts](#).

As everywhere in the world, under Kazakhstani laws, the status of national workers is superior to foreign workers. Current labour laws, such as [Articles 23 and 24](#) of the Kazakhstani constitution I provides foreign migrants with the freedom of labour and choice of occupation, the right to safe working conditions, to just remuneration without discrimination, and to protection against unemployment. The labour law of 1999 amended previous laws and guaranteed the protection of life and hygiene to all workers, further prohibiting the employment of minors.

Despite such laws, however, reports of violations against migrant workers are numerous. For instance, the International Federation for Human Rights have discovered that migrant workers

often work under unhygienic conditions, are paid unequally (i.e., less than Kazakhstani and Russian workers for equal or similar work), are not guaranteed employment, and are barred access to basic health facilities. Most Tajik and Kyrgyz workers in Kazakhstan are not even [registered](#) and therefore remain deprived of various facilities. Such legal and financial strains have further cultivated social taboos and stigmas. The perception that migrant workers are inferior to local workers is widespread, as is the opinion of them as untrustworthy and harmful for ethnic Kazakhs.

According to an Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) report, while Kazakhstan is making efforts to extend social security rights to citizens of the EEU, migrant workers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, two countries that remain outside the Union, receive very limited access to social security benefits. They are deprived of not only equal remuneration for the untimely and unfair termination of jobs but also do not receive relief packages that other workers receive. Furthermore, foreign migrant workers are not covered by the law “On the Mandatory Social Insurance” and have therefore been barred from certain labour activities, such as occupational freedom that Kazakhstani and Russian workers enjoy during the pandemic. While non-nationals are allowed to work in state institutions, they are not authorized to self-employ or secure positions in strategically sensitive domains, such as private security companies. However, in the case of Russian migrant workers, working in private security firms is allowed on a [case by case basis](#). Discrimination faced by Central Asian migrant workers is thus grounded in the country’s labour laws, economic inequalities, social hierarchy, and ethno-national politics.

## **Suggestions and conclusion**

Although Kazakhstan’s legal framework on migration is well-developed and has been amended a number of times, e.g., as in [2013](#) for the purpose of allowing more protection to migrant industrial workers, there remains a gap with respect to the framework’s implementation due to a lack of consistency between the policies of different enforcement agencies. The problem lies in irregular meetings at ministerial levels and, even when such meetings are held, expert opinions are not consulted on migrant workers’ rights and security. There is also a lack of clarity around current rules and regulations related to migrants’ access to healthcare system, which creates confusion for health practitioners when it comes to testing or treating infected Uzbek or Kyrgyz workers.

Furthermore, state-intervention is required from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan on the matter of their citizens working in Kazakhstan to ensure their safety. Amidst the grave insecurities in respect of access to food, shelter, health and physical protection, the home-state needs to make arrangements for its diaspora by either co-ordinating with the host country, i.e. Kazakhstan, or by itself ensuring the return of its workers to their home countries.

International organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) need to exercise their power to prevent identity-based discrimination. Kazakhstan is a signatory to the ILO convention on the protection of workers and has ratified 24 contentions on workers’ human rights. To some extent, Kazakhstan has successfully fulfilled some of the conditions mentioned in the conventions, such as protecting migrant children from forced labour, but has failed to protect foreign migrants in the midst of a pandemic. A more inclusive form of nation-building, especially toward other Central Asians, would help facilitate the rise of regional cooperation and ensure better cultural interaction between the countries of the region.



# MIGRATION AND COVID-19: CHALLENGES AND POLICY RESPONSES IN KYRGYZSTAN



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COVID-19 carries significant social and economic consequences for Kyrgyzstan's migrants and their home communities. It deepens the existing vulnerabilities of migrants who are unable to return home and who do not have job security in host countries. COVID-19 also impacts the lives of internal migrants who have lost their jobs. The dependence of rural communities on remittances provides additional risks of unemployment and socio-economic inequality. The COVID-19 crisis once again demonstrates the lack of migration policy in Kyrgyzstan and the necessity of elaborating a multisectoral approach towards migrants and families who have been "left behind."

The theme of migration was not in the centre of elections in Kyrgyzstan, though embedded in discourse around it – whether we talk about the country's dependence from remittances, or whether we refer to the fact that not all migrants were able to vote in the 45 created centres abroad. We argue that considering the role which migration plays in Kyrgyzstan's economy and society, it is crucial to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migration and its policy responses.



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Migration is a part of everyday life for hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyzstan's citizens. People move internally from rural areas to Bishkek and Osh for long-term employment or temporary work, and many go to Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and other countries. Kyrgyzstan is within the top five countries with the highest share of remittances in their gross domestic product (GDP) (Knomad 2019). The remittance inflows hovered around 30 percent of the country's GDP in 2012–2019, with USD 2.5 billion in remittances in 2019 (ADB and UNDP, p.10). Therefore, when, as a response to COVID-19, Kyrgyzstan temporarily closed its borders to many other countries in March for several months, the money transfers, which were the primary source of income for many families, dramatically decreased. Overall, the situation highlighted many other challenges which existed for Kyrgyz migrants and society before the pandemic.

In this paper, we look at the consequences of COVID-19 on Kyrgyzstan through a migration lens. We cover the period from March to August 2020 based on observations, four elite interviews, twelve interviews with migrants, and desk-based analysis. We argue, firstly, that the pandemic deepens the vulnerability of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan in the most common destination, Russia. Secondly, we look at how COVID-19 saw a decrease in remittances, which has resulted in growing poverty, especially in rural areas. Then we address issues internal migrants face within Kyrgyzstan. Finally, we analyze the government and international organizations' responses to the negative impacts of the pandemic on migrants from Kyrgyzstan.

## The increasing vulnerability of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan in Russia

Russia is the leading destination of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan. The official statistics of the Russian Federal Service of Security, which collects data on border crossings, show that in 2019, over 959,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan arrived in Russia, and the majority stated that their primary goal was work (557,000), business (41,000), or a private visit (265,000) (Rosstat 2019), which can include accompanying family members or people working informally who are unwilling to disclose the details of their employment. There is no information available on how many citizens of Kyrgyzstan were on the Russian territory when the pandemic started, but it can be confidently estimated that there were at least several hundred thousand.

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing issues that labor migrants regularly face in Russia, such as informal labor and discrimination. Despite some changes in the labor migration regulations, including the recent creation of a single labor market within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the embeddedness of informality in the Kyrgyz migrants' work experiences remains problematic (Kuznetsova and Round 2019). While Russia has regulatory frameworks surrounding migration, labor, and employment, employers far too often circumnavigate these frameworks with the tacit support of the state and its various actors. It leads to a lived experience where many migrants constantly worry about low wages, fear of detention by the police, lack of permanency in the workplace, underutilization of their skills, and no prospect of career progression or training.

COVID-19 prevention measures in Russia have included the closing of restaurants, non-food retail outlets, and many other urban service providers from March to the end of April (though this depends on the region), which impacted thousands of migrants working in the foodservice sector. The temporary limitation of mobility within and between cities affected other sectors. Though

there is no accurate data about the consequences of COVID-19 on migrants from Kyrgyzstan, we can expect similar trends that were highlighted by a Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration survey. It revealed that 40 percent of labor migrants became unemployed due to COVID-19, compared with 23 percent of surveyed Russian citizens. Additionally, 42 percent of migrants in Russia do not have any savings (Varshaver 2020). Considering the fact that informal labor is still prevalent in Russia, migrants working in this sector did not receive any compensation after losing their jobs (Sarkisyan and Raspopov 2020, Volkov 2020), placing many of them in debt as they struggled to pay rent and other bills (UN news 2020), which even resulted in evictions (BBC 2020).

The Agency of Social Information suggested that the government should establish unemployment benefits for migrants, but it has not been considered (Gal'cheva et al. 2020). Moreover, Russian politicians and mass-media have fed into the criminalization discourse towards migrants. For example, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, claimed that such massive unemployment creates “a breeding ground for crime” and called for a tightening of migration legislation (Trifonova 2020). This fed into discriminatory rhetoric produced by officials and mass media many years before COVID-19 towards migrants from Central Asia, portraying them as “criminals” and “diseased” (Round and Kuznetsova 2016).

There are some potential issues regarding access to health care among migrants from Kyrgyzstan as well. It is common among those who work in the informal sector that any period of illness will lead to dismissal and that a significant health event would be catastrophic since migrants are barred from accessing the Russian health care system. Some migrants purchase health insurance, but it is often too expensive for them to justify or they are tricked into making payments for worthless policies (see also, Demintseva and Kashnitsky 2016). Furthermore, overcrowded housing conditions, together with difficulties in self-isolating in case of COVID-19 “are likely to exacerbate the risk of infection for Central Asian labour migrants” (King and Zotova 2020).

## The unprecedented decrease in remittances can deepen poverty in Kyrgyzstan

COVID-19 has seriously affected remittances to Kyrgyzstan. The global drop in demand for oil resulted in a significant fall in its price, which in turn had a significant impact on Russia's economy, leading to a reduction in its labor market size. The situation in this market was aggravated by the de facto lockdown introduced in Russia and Kazakhstan at the end of March 2020, which meant fewer jobs for labor migrants were available, including those from Kyrgyzstan, and lower wages for those migrants who managed to retain jobs. Seasonal migrants who returned home for fall-winter 2019-2020 were locked in Kyrgyzstan while the borders closure. Also, as the UNDP stated, “while borders may remain closed for some time, the expected general decline in the incomes of the middle classes in neighboring countries and globally is also likely to be a key factor” (p. 10). The massive reduction of remittances to Kyrgyzstan (fig.1) in turn can result in a 4–5 percent decrease of GDP in Kyrgyzstan (ADB and UNDP 2020, 10).

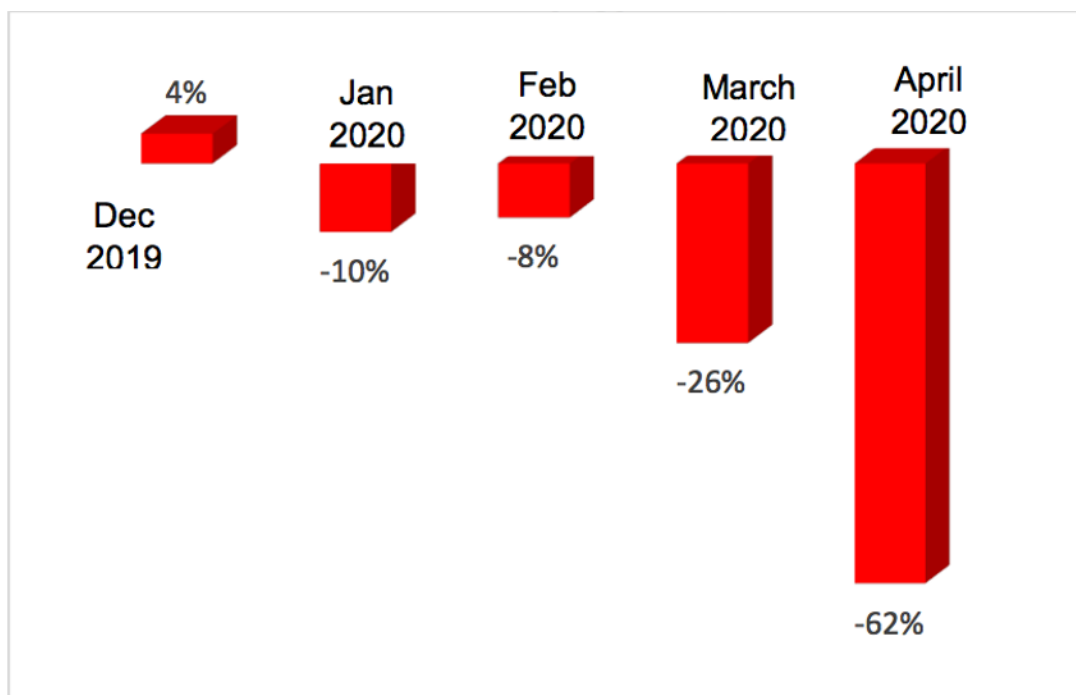


Figure 1: Year-on-Year Trends in Remittance Inflows into the Kyrgyz Republic (UNDP 2020, 61)

The situation changed in June and July 2020, when the de facto lockdown in Russia was gradually phased out, and many migrants were able to go back to work. Migrants then tried compensating their households for the fall in remittances in the previous months. Overall, the remittances between January and July 2020, appeared to be 10 percent less than between January and July 2019 (data of the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic). This decline can have negative impacts on the welfare of households, especially in rural areas that traditionally have a higher rate of poverty and unemployment. According to the UNDP, remittances impacted the 11.1 percent reduction in the national poverty in 2019, which translates to 715,000 people being raised out of poverty (2020, 23–24). The pandemic and lockdown demonstrated the significance of informal work, which both communities of origin and emigrants depend on.

## “Agriculture, construction and taxi,” but will there be enough jobs in rural areas?

As one of the local government employers mentioned in an interview, “It is difficult now. It is impossible to go anywhere. Transfers have also fallen. It is difficult time. The state helps a little with food products. The only income is from agriculture, as all the other work, such as construction, taxi services are all up” (village Jany-Jer Ayil Aimak, Batken, Kyrgyzstan, April 21, 2020). Migrant households with diversified sources of income, such as from trade and agriculture in addition to remittances, are less concerned about their prospects for survival than households whose primary income is from remittances.

There is a stratum of returning migrants who before the pandemic had invested in agricultural developments such as horticulture and livestock. People in this group have a “safety net,” and they



do not plan to migrate again. Similarly, those who were able to accumulate some savings do not plan to migrate. As one of the informants who started a small construction business in Batken area mentioned, “Many of the migrants now cannot leave because of quarantine. For more than ten years I have been engaged in construction in the village. [...] I have a job, maybe those who are engaged in trade were affected. The state does not help us in any way. [...] Everything that I learned in Russia, I use here in a village at a construction site. If you work in the village, you can earn” (former migrant, Jashtyk village, Batken. April 15, 2020). However, our observations during fieldwork revealed that most of the families of labor migrants are concerned about the future and have high risks of poverty.

## Impacts on internal migrants

COVID-19 has also impacted internal migration in Kyrgyzstan. As the recent International Organization of Migration (IOM) research demonstrates, internal migrants who move mainly from rural areas to Bishkek and cities in Chui province make up 18 percent of the country’s population (IOMa 2020, 31). The search for economic stability is a primary push factor for internal migration, as is the case for the international migration as well, but other factors include the search for better infrastructure (including access to education and health care) and other family factors. Most of the internal migrants work informally, with only 29.1 percent having negotiated conditions of work “on paper.” It is the same with living conditions: 75.6 percent are not registered officially on a place of residence (IOMa 2020, 91). Even though internal migrants, including those who live in informal settlements, are diverse in terms of welfare, their dependence on informal income and remittances are additional factors of risk.

As journalists showed, children from one of the districts in Bishkek, Dordoi-1, where many internal migrants live informally, experienced under-nutrition during the lockdown as their parents were not able to work and provide adequate amounts of food (Khokhlova 2020, AZATTYQTV 2020). The fact that some of the parents or relatives of the residents of such informal settlements were locked down in Russia without any job due to the pandemic and were not able to help made the situation even worse.

## Government and international organizations’ responses

The main governmental stakeholder responsible for crisis management concerning migrants has been the Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Embassy of Kyrgyzstan in Russia. The Embassy formed a rapid response group consisting of employees of the State Migration Service of Kyrgyzstan (SMS), IOM, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and leaders of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia. However, none of these efforts seem to be reflected in the work of two governmental working groups, one on health, the other on the economy, which were set up by the government in the second half of January to prepare the country for the pandemic; nor in the donor-led/governmental groups working towards recovery planning (interviews with a representative of OSCE Mission in Kyrgyzstan, June 18, 2020).

The government’s primary response was to provide food and shelter to those who were in extreme need and to those stranded at Russian airports. IOM Kyrgyzstan distributed protective supplies: masks, gloves, antiseptics, and hot meals, and provided accommodation for 282 migrants stranded at Moscow and Novosibirsk airports (IOMb2020). The Kyrgyz government further declared the

establishment of an equivalent of over US\$188,000 (15 million KG soms) in order to support migrants abroad, out of which \$127,000 was transferred to Russia, and \$62,800 was for migrants in the United Arab Emirates (Azattyk 2020). Considering the high number of migrants from Kyrgyzstan in these countries, the amount was not able to cover all needed expenses. Some migrants in Russia criticized the poor quality of food provided as humanitarian aid, raising speculations about how the money could have been misused.

The main criticism of the government's reaction was its inability to organize transportation to migrants swiftly to Kyrgyzstan. The authorities tried to justify their "cold position" as there are "better chances" for employment for Kyrgyzstan's citizens in Russia in comparison to the challenging situation in their home country. As the Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to Russia, Mr. Alikbek Dzhekshenkulov stated:

More than 60 percent of Kyrgyzstani citizens in Russia were unemployed during COVID-19. At the same time, there are jobs in construction. There are offers of employment in the Moscow region and other regions. The Russian economy is stronger and more stable than ours [Kyrgyzstan]. After quarantine, the economic crisis will continue around the world. I advised our countrymen to wait for the crisis here and not to go anywhere (Nurmatov 2020).

Nevertheless, the president and government of the Kyrgyz Republic issued an order to support the return of citizens residing abroad due to the temporary border closures, flight suspensions, and quarantines. They facilitated this through charter flights and bus transfers. As a result, by August 24, 35,469 Kyrgyzstani citizens returned from 21 regions of Russia (Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation 2020). There were also flights organized to return from China, India, the United Arab Emirates, and some other countries. Citizens living abroad had to apply to the embassy, which formed lists for charter flights and gave priority to women and children. From August 27, 2020, Kyrgyzstani citizens who wished to leave Russia could freely buy flights themselves without applying for a waiting list. However, the primary advice for migrants in Russia was to stay there: the embassy emphasized that in the event that they return to Kyrgyzstan, they will not be able to go back to Russia as the borders are still closed (Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation 2020).

Although migrant agency and mutual help are not the foci of our paper, it is important to mention their role in supporting migrants in host countries, as diasporas provided significant help to their fellow citizens impacted by COVID-19. For instance, many medical doctors and nurses of Kyrgyz origin residing in Russia and Turkey volunteered during the COVID-19 spike in Kyrgyzstan.

## Conclusion

The nexus of COVID-19 and migration in Kyrgyzstan reveals the following issues. Firstly, COVID-19 and its subsequent border restrictions and economic issues in host countries, as Russia's case demonstrates, deepens the vulnerability of Kyrgyz labor migrants who face unemployment, have difficulties in paying rent and accessing health care, and cannot return home. Secondly, the economic and social consequences of temporary border closures, and the decline of employment opportunities in host countries has resulted in decreasing remittances for many households who may need to turn to agricultural activities as a replacement for their lost incomes. This

replacement, in most cases, could be only partial, thus many run the risk of falling into poverty. Those migrants who are locked inside Kyrgyzstan have to look for temporary employment at home, increasing labor supply on their farms as well as in the domestic non-agricultural economy. This can increase unemployment in the country and deepen inequality. Thirdly, the pandemic highlights issues internal migrants in Kyrgyzstan face, especially those who live in informal settlements and have lost their only sources of income. Finally, government responses focused on the return some groups of migrants while international organizations provided humanitarian assistance to migrants in host countries. However, there was no assistance to families in Kyrgyzstan with family members stuck abroad, although it is a large portion of the population.

The COVID-19 crisis once again demonstrated problems caused by the lack of a formal migration policy in Kyrgyzstan. The State Migration Service was established at the end of 2015 as a result of the reorganization of the Ministry of Labor, Migration, and Youth, but there is still no migration policy in place (Murzakulova 2020). Existing migration management is still lacking intersectoral collaboration with returning labor migrants and their families, which is especially crucial in the context of COVID-19.

There is an urgent need for a coherent policy towards migration and migrants in Kyrgyzstan. This would involve close collaboration between the State Migration Service Ministry of Labor and Social Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Economy, together with international organizations and NGOs. It is crucial that policies look at migration beyond the statistics of people crossing the border and remittances data, and elaborate relevant and effective mechanisms of support for families who are “left behind”: internal migrants and migrants who are unable to go abroad or come home. It is also vital that the Eurasian Economic Union engages with the social consequences of migration and provides not only the conditions for a single market but also delivers social security for migrants. Finally, it is necessary to reconsider rural development in Kyrgyzstan in order to give meaningful support for local small businesses and initiatives.

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# WOMEN FACE-TO-FACE WITH DOMESTIC ABUSE DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: THE CASE OF KYRGYZSTAN

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Domestic violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread instances of human rights violations of our day. Further, in the context of the current pandemic, the problem of domestic violence is spreading on a wider scale, and Kyrgyzstan has not been spared. This paper centers on domestic violence against women and girls during the lockdown introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses its regulation in Kyrgyzstan under domestic law. The study considers the following questions: how does Kyrgyzstan legally regulate the problem of domestic violence against women, and does the country effectively cope with an increased level of such violence during COVID-19 lockdown and, if it does cope, to what extent?



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

Nowadays, in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of domestic abuse has become even more pressing. The problem has not bypassed the Kyrgyz Republic. Although relevant legislation has been adopted, the issue of gender-based violence against women remains serious. According to UN Women, in pre-pandemic days, six in ten women in Kyrgyzstan were [beaten](#), sexually abused, or otherwise ill-treated, and, given the region's traditionalist socio-cultural practices, these issues have often falsely been interpreted as religious matters. What, then, are we to say about domestic violence during a lockdown situation? As the "stay at home" protocol began, the concern of a growing global trend in cases of domestic violence increased even more.

Beginning on March 17, 2020, the country undertook [quarantine measures](#) due to the [first cases](#) appearing on its territory. From March 25 to April 11, Kyrgyzstan introduced a [state of emergency](#) in the most affected cities and regions. The lockdown restrictions were prolonged twice: through [April 30](#) and [May 11](#), respectively. With the introduction of the state of emergency in several cities and regions of Kyrgyzstan, the number of reported cases of domestic violence [increased by 60%](#) in comparison to the preceding year. What's more, crisis centers across the country suspended admitting people to the shelters and switched to online work.

## Legal Regulation of Domestic Violence Before Pandemic

The 2010 Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic ([Art. 16\(4\)](#)) and [the 2008 Law](#) on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women establish equal rights and freedoms between men and women and equal opportunities for the enjoyment of these rights.

The main legal document regulating the issue of domestic violence is [the 2017 Law](#) on the Protection and Defence against Domestic Violence, which replaced [the 2003 Law](#) on the Social and Legal Protection against Domestic Violence, which was criticized by many.<sup>1</sup> The new law requires police to register a domestic violence complaint made not just by the victim, but [by anyone](#). As an alternative to criminal prosecution to prevent domestic violence, [special measures](#) providing for the issuance of protection orders were taken. Furthermore, [the law provides](#) the necessary legal, medical, and psychological assistance, social support, and counseling services to the victims of domestic abuse.

Crisis centers are considered the only structure that provides [real assistance](#) to victims of domestic violence. However, these units have often suffered from constraints in financial and human resources. For example, centers must rent premises, and they are [limited](#) in beds in shelters (in some centers, shelters have only two to four beds). The head of one of the country's shelters stated that sometimes they resort to [desperate measures](#), with employees contributing part of their salary to buy food for women and children in the shelter. There are [15 non-governmental crisis centers](#) in the country, and only [two](#) of them are able to provide asylum. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MLSD), the authorized state body for the implementation of the Law on Domestic Violence, for 2020, the Ministry of Finance [will not allocate](#) more money to create shelters for victims of domestic violence.

<sup>1</sup> The 2003 Law did not fulfil its task of ensuring the liability of the offenders: according to the results of the study of the EU and UN project "[Operationalising Good Governance for Social Justice](#)", after the adoption of the law, in 2011 only in one out of 10 cases of domestic violence were the perpetrators found guilty.



Moreover, issues of assistance with domestic violence are also within the competence of public institutions, such as the *aksakal* (elders') court, though statistics show that affected family members turned to the elders' courts much less often than to the crisis centers.

All the above-mentioned measures taken by the government reflect an intensified response to violence against women and girls in the pre-pandemic period. However, despite numerous measures taken by the internal affairs bodies, health and education systems, NGOs, the media, and women's centers, the problem of domestic violence has not diminished. According to the last pre-pandemic national Periodic Report on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the number of complaints of domestic violence from citizens remains, on average, more or less constant, and data on the number of issued protection orders, criminal cases, etc. confirm this trend.

Even still, on an optimistic note, it can be observed that the population has gradually begun to positively perceive the introduction of protection orders—especially temporary ones. By virtue of the establishment of a multidimensional statistical base, during the law's implementation period, a reasonably reliable picture of the state of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan began to appear. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), after the adoption of the new law, in 2017 the number of registered cases of domestic violence reached more than 7,000. In 2018, this figure increased by 14%; 8,730 people turned to crisis units and other specialized institutions, most of whom were women (almost 80%); 62 women died from domestic violence, and another 288 were injured. As for recent events, just in the beginning of the 2020 New Year holidays, tragedies occurred when two women died as a result of family quarrels in which they were brutally beaten by their spouses. Certainly, an increase in the number of cases of reported domestic violence does not indicate a positive result, but at least it demonstrates a more believable number of cases due to their official registration.

## Combating Domestic Violence During Quarantine

With the introduction of the state of emergency in several cities of Kyrgyzstan due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of reported cases of domestic violence increased by 62%; 95% of victims were women 21–50-years-old. The problem of domestic violence was especially aggravated in Bishkek. According to the data provided by the Bishkek City Commandant's Office, it increased by 65% compared to the same period the previous year. The reason lies in the fact that it has become much more difficult for women to avoid domestic violence during quarantine, and many women are too afraid to call either the police or crisis units.

As per a report from the Main Department of Information Technologies of MIA, from January to March 2020, law enforcement agencies registered 2,319 complaints of domestic violence. Up to 105 criminal cases were launched on the basis of family violence (an increase of 49%), and of 2,682 incidents falling under the classification of the Code of Misconduct of the Kyrgyz Republic, 354 cases were recorded under article 75, "Domestic violence". Also, at a briefing on April 24, the commandant of Bishkek city reported on new domestic abuse complaints: only in the capital, from March 24 to April 24, 162 new cases were registered.

## Hotlines During COVID-19 Lockdown

With the establishment of the emergency rules, crisis centers across the country suspended the admission of people and switched to online work, providing psychological and legal advice through e-mail and social networking [platforms](#) such as Facebook or Instagram. However, hotlines continue to operate in each region, which, in fact, provide first aid for victims of domestic violence. Today, the [hotlines](#) 111, 112, and 117 are working, redirecting calls to psychologists and family therapists. As [reported](#) by the Association of Crisis Centers, within one month of lockdown, the crisis units received about 700 calls from victims of domestic violence, and most of them were in need of food.

## Exceptional Curfew Rules for Women Affected by Domestic Abuse

It is worth noting that, officially, no exceptional rules from the lockdown's restrictive measures were provided for women affected by domestic abuse during the "stay at home" isolation measures. Nevertheless, no cases of arrest in such situations were recorded.

Meanwhile, in April, the "Together" human rights defenders movement [sent an appeal](#) to the government and Ministry of Internal Affairs demanding urgent action to protect victims of domestic violence by adopting a protocol that will provide standards for the police and for victims of domestic violence in an emergency situation. Besides, one of the deputies of the Kyrgyz Parliament (*Jogorku Kenesh*) [proposed](#) the development of norms allowing women in situations of domestic violence to leave their homes if their lives are at risk and providing for the administrative arrest of domestic abusers for [15 days](#).

Only at the beginning of May 2020, at the end of lockdown, did the Kyrgyz Parliament pass [amendments](#) to the Criminal Procedure Code allowing for the detention of the aggressor of domestic violence for 48 hours.

## Protection Orders

Police stations continued to operate in granting protection orders during COVID-19 quarantine, just as before the pandemic. At least [2,319 protection orders](#) (an increase of 72%) were issued based on domestic violence in the first three months of 2020.

## Women's Access to Justice

Regarding the judicial system during the quarantine, [no complete information](#) was reported on the activities of courts in the cities and regions where a state of emergency was introduced. Therefore, it is unclear whether the women affected by domestic abuse were able to fully enjoy their right of access to justice during the pandemic.

It is known that the courts of Osh, Jalal-Abad, Chui regions, and Bishkek city [suspended](#) their work from March 30 to April 30 due to the introduction of lockdown measures in their territorial jurisdictions. To compensate for this suspension of activities, the Supreme Court of the country was [granted](#) the right to change the territorial jurisdiction for civil/criminal/administrative/misconduct cases and materials of pre-trial proceedings in Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad, the Suzak district of Jalal-Abad region, and the Nookat and Kara-Su districts of the Osh region.

The Coalition against Torture contested this decision, stating that the courts did not inform the public of their operation during the introduced lockdown regime, adding that access to justice must be guaranteed even during emergency situations. In turn, the Supreme Court replied that the announcement on suspension of the courts' work was false and assured the public that the courts continued their functions during quarantine, particularly, the watch of judges and staff of the apparatus was organized in the courts. Cases of an urgent nature were considered first, while the rest of the claims were postponed for a later date.

### **Women's Access to Healthcare**

Regardless of the continued operation of medical services and institutions, except those whose medical workers were affected in high numbers by COVID-19, women, especially those from vulnerable groups, have experienced difficulties with the introduction of restrictive measures against COVID-19. According to data from Operational Gender Analysis, women had difficulty in accessing the most basic resources and opportunities: for example, medicine and personal protective equipment, access to medical services, hygiene and sanitation, water and social services, and the purchase of food.

No precise data on specific risks for pregnant women are available, but reproductive health experts consider that the pandemic may have negative consequences for sexual and reproductive health and related rights of women. The two-month quarantine in the country will lead to a "baby boom", and possibly to an increase in the number of abortions. The main reason is the redirection of the health system's resources to the fight against COVID-19, which will also affect the financing of the country's reproductive health system.

## **Peaks and Valleys in Tackling Domestic Violence During Lockdown**

### **Obstacles in Countering Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 Lockdown**

Both before and after quarantine, major assistance to women in the country was provided only by crisis centers, whose budgets and human resources are often extremely limited. For the period of the state of emergency, only five crisis units, which are part of the Association of Crisis Centers, were supported by financial means of, on average, KGS600,000 (approx. USD8,000) from public procurement; not a single crisis unit had the support of international organizations until May 2020. As outlined by MLSA, crisis centers in Kyrgyzstan were closed, since the admission of new people could threaten the health of those already in shelters. There was no opportunity to admit women nor to send them home; crisis centers were only able to help them return to their relatives.

Moreover, according to the Head of Association of Crisis Centers, crisis units were not ready for an emergency situation such as the pandemic, and further, the public procurement of funds have not been available for purchasing the antiseptics materials for women already in shelters.

Suspension of the work of public transport could also cause obstacles, 32.7% of women faced difficulties after the operation of public transport was terminated. For instance, it is a barrier to reaching some crisis centers, especially if such women live in remote regions.

## Good Practices in Combating Domestic Violence During the COVID-19 from Government and NGOs

Positive practices could be distinguished with the introduction of the “[Spotlight Initiative](#)”. Under the support of the latter, MLSD launched a program in cooperation with the UN and EU in May 2020, after almost two months of quarantine. The Initiative was directed at eradicating incidents of domestic violence against women and girls.

The Initiative has already implemented many efforts aimed at preventing or resolving cases of domestic violence in a pandemic. Specifically, in addition to [psychological](#), medical, and legal advice for victims of domestic abuse, humanitarian and financial help to crisis centers, and informational campaigns on decreasing of domestic violence being [provided](#), the Initiative helped by supplying temporary “[safe places](#)” for women who have experienced violence and their children.

The [algorithm](#) of steps for assisting within the Initiative was as follows:

1. A call is received on hotline 111 or 112.
2. Specialists answering calls immediately report to MLSD and indicate the addresses, depending on the severity of the situation.
3. The Spotlight project team travels to the site and picks up the victim.
4. The victims take COVID-19 tests and are placed in temporary housing that has been prepared.

The term “safe places” implies alternative shelters: in particular, abused women are placed into rented apartments with financial aid received from business communities until they find an alternative place to stay. Temporary crisis centers are [organized](#) in each region, although those who have used such an opportunity are registered only in Bishkek at the time of writing. In particular, five women with children were provided with temporary housing during the lockdown. Indeed, many more persons sought support, but due to limited resources, crisis units were able to help only [five women](#).

Additionally, another project was developed within the framework of the Spotlight Initiative. On May 12, the UNDP in cooperation with UNICEF conducted the first [Online Hackathon](#) in Kyrgyzstan on the issues of domestic violence. The winners of the Hackathon received financial support for the implementation of their projects, which were directed at helping women and youth to recognize signs of domestic violence, as well as connecting them with the nearest crisis centers and psychologists through online platforms.

## Conclusion

Domestic violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread patterns of women’s rights violations in the Kyrgyz Republic—and not only during the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the fact that the [2017 Law](#) on the Protection and Defence against Domestic Violence was passed in the state legislature, the problem of gender-based violence stands unsolved.

In parallel, one of the underlying legal issues today in Kyrgyzstan is that the state did not become a party to the [Istanbul Convention](#), which is one of the primary legal tools providing a comprehensive framework to tackle violence against women, including domestic violence.

Moreover, considering the fact that crisis centers appeared to be the only source of real help for female victims of domestic abuse, the measures taken by the government to fight domestic

violence seems to be insufficient. The government should provide greater cooperation and financial support to NGOs and other institutions combatting domestic violence in order to avoid all kinds of women's rights violations. These measures must include the expansion of women's economic capacities, improvement of legal knowledge, change of the norms of behavior, and education and raising awareness on women's rights.

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TRANSFORMATIONS

**MARLENE LARUELLE, ED.**

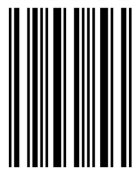
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