

Conference

The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Impact on Central Asia

9 September 2021, Bishkek
Conference Rapporteur: Ivana Vuchkova
Bishkek, September 2021

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Watch the recording of the event here.

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Introduction

As no crisis is a crisis of equal opportunities, the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought various precarities onto different groups of people in Central Asia. Unsurprisingly, if nevertheless still quite sadly, those who suffered the most were women, youth and workers with either terminated job contracts and/or migrant status in foreign countries. More broadly, the notion of education, healthcare, and safety as forms of human rights also took a major step backwards. These and other related issues were the focus of this year's conference, 'The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Impact on Post-Soviet Central Asia'. Organised by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek in partnership with the Danish Institute for International Studies, and financially supported by the latter and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, the conference saw presentations of several policy papers that examined the effects of emergency lockdowns in the early months of the pandemic, as well as longer term impacts from COVID-19 on Central Asia. Held in a hybrid online-offline format, more than 35 researchers, academics and practitioners participated offline and online, sharing and discussing the numerous challenges facing both the region as a whole and specific countries.

Dr. Alexander Wolters, Director of the OSCE Academy, welcomed all participants and expressed gratitude that the first physically-present event since the outbreak of COVID-19, if only partially so, could be held. Dr. Wolters highlighted the impact that the pandemic had on the work of the Academy, not only in terms of organising conferences and events, but also in terms of adapting the education process, as well as in terms of supporting research. Beyond academia, Dr. Wolters noted how the COVID-19 pandemic made developments in Central Asia more volatile and unpredictable, as well as contributed toward increased tensions within and between states. Research thus has been, and will continue to be, crucial to identify current and future effects of the pandemic, as well as to identify ways to prevent or mitigate negative trends.

Following Dr. Wolters' remarks, Dr. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen from the Danish Institute for International Studies expressed his support for the Academy's unique role in conducting research in this unprecedented time of crisis. For his part, Dr. Hansen expressed hope that COVID-19's systematic impacts may make Central Asia both more resilient to challenges and more open to cooperation.

After the opening session, the conference was structured into two panel discussions. The first panel discussion explored case studies from Kyrgyzstan, while the second panel discussion widened the scope to Central Asia as a whole. The panel discussions were followed by an interactive session of questions and answers with all participants. Key recommendations and possible ways forward were also explored by the moderators.

Impact of COVID-19 on Kyrgyzstan

Lockdown Policies and the COVID-19 'Infodemic'

The last decade has seen an explosion of disinformation, and government policies and instruments to combat the problem are severely lacking. The scope of this problem enlarged significantly with the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. As in many other countries, Kyrgyzstan was rocked by an 'infodemic', i.e., 'an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution'.¹ An analysis of more than 8,000 articles published in the largest media outlets in Kyrgyzstan show not only a pattern of disinformation, but also attempts at refutation undertaken by the Kyrgyz government that yielded mixed results.

Google trends analysis reveal two periods of the infodemic inside Kyrgyzstan during which disinformation peaked in the domestic information space. These periods were Spring and Summer 2020, coinciding with the first official positive cases in the country and the eruption of COVID-19 infections that nearly overwhelmed healthcare facilities, respectively. Unfortunately, as part of the state of emergency declared by then-president Sooronbai Jeenbekov, Kyrgyz authorities actively curtailed access to information by the mass media and the public.² These actions only served to exacerbate the infodemic. The chief lesson learned from this mistaken strategy is that the Kyrgyz government should have used, and should use in future crises, all available communication channels to inform the public.

Police versus Pandemic

Much focus has been given to workers in healthcare, education and services as 'frontline' defenders against the novel coronavirus, but law enforcement officers also deserve attention. As enforcers of the lockdown in Kyrgyzstan, police not only needed to maintain public order, but were themselves frequently in danger of infection. In interviews, many police expressed fears not only for their own health, but also the health of their families. While they were nevertheless successful in maintaining public order during the height of the epidemiological crisis, going forward there is a strong need for institutional solidarity that will enable adequate social, medical and logistical assistance to police and their families.

Volunteers to the Rescue

In the three decades since the country's independence, Kyrgyzstan's healthcare sector has been severely degraded. During the pandemic, post-Soviet youth stepped in by serving as volunteers to plug institutional gaps and support healthcare workers and law enforcement officers. Such intensity of civic engagement represents an opportunity for the country. In the future, the Kyrgyz government should remove barriers to civil society and create conditions to foster greater civic participation. For example, Kyrgyz lawmakers should resume the process, started in 2019, of adopting a law that outlines a definition of volunteer activities, including rights (e.g., right to a written volunteering agreement, to supervision

¹ The United Nations Department of Global Communications. UN tackles 'infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis. Published March 31, 2020.

² Media Policy Institute. Review of the violations of constitutional rights to access to information and freedom of speech, and violations of journalists' rights during the emergency in Kyrgyzstan. Published: April 8, 2020.

³ Draft bill of the Kyrgyz Republic, 'On Volunteer Activity', <https://www.kenesh.kg/ru/article/show/5251/na-obshtestvennoe-obsuzhdenie-s-19-aprelya-2019-goda-vinositsya-proekt-zakona-kirgizskoy-respubliki-o-volonterskoy-deyatelnosti>.

and training, protection from liability for unintentional harm or damage) and duties of a volunteer.³ Clearer terms and protections will help attract the more ad hoc volunteers towards more sustainable, longer-term forms of engagement to foster participation, address social issues beyond the COVID-19 crisis, and strengthen civil society.

Impact of COVID-19 on Central Asia

Lack of Regional Capacity for Digital Education

Like nearly every other country during the pandemic, the Kyrgyz government chose to close schools and switch to digital education. At the beginning this seemed like a reasonable solution, especially considering the proliferation of contemporary information communication tools. Yet, this strategy soon revealed itself to be ineffective due to a lack of digital capacities among both teachers and families. Indeed, the abrupt and unprepared switch to digital education occurred against the backdrop of, and significantly added onto, an already weak education system in the region.

Going forward, Central Asian governments need to enact serious reforms and make meaningful investments into the education sector, in particular prioritising the modernisation of curricula, teaching methods and learning means and tools in an online or hybrid format for all learners (including the creation of unified or well-structured learning platforms in each country). In general, Central Asian governments also need to change policy-making approach. Currently, their focus is on challenges and emergency solutions; instead, they should seek to develop human capital and ensure innovation and competitiveness in the region – which, if successful, will help mitigate against the negative effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic and future crises.

Gender-Based Violence in Uzbekistan

Women were disproportionately and negatively affected by the epidemiological crisis. In Uzbekistan for example, there were numerous incidents of violence against women during the lockdown, yet state officials and institutions were indifferent. This was largely due to widespread gender-biased norms, as well as a chronic lack of responsiveness on the part of state institutions in general. Nevertheless, throughout the pandemic, civil society organisations were and have been actively attempting to assist victims of gender-based violence. The lesson learned is that there needs to be stronger cooperation between government and civil society in Uzbekistan, not only to prevent gender-based violence, but also to close the gap between social responses and government responsiveness.

Tajikistan and Labour Migration under the Shadow of COVID-19

COVID-19 has reminded all societies of the vital importance of that labour migrants play in the prosperity of nations, as they toil in labour-intensive, low-paid yet necessary industries. During the pandemic, labour migrants needed to contend with the new challenge of lockdowns and states of emergency in foreign countries, all the while having limited access to healthcare and repatriation support. Tajik labour migrants in the Russian Federation

suffered such conditions keenly, as most lost their jobs yet were trapped due to a drastic increase in flight prices. As their homeland, Tajikistan, has long been dependent on the remittances they sent back, that country has experienced a severe budget deficit and inflation. The national poverty rate has, unsurprisingly, also increased apace.

Clearly, a critical mass of the problems faced by Tajik labour migrants during the pandemic pre-existed the epidemiological crisis. Looking ahead, Tajik labour migrants need greater access to opportunities to develop pre-employment skills before traveling to a destination country like Russia. Not only this, but there should exist better coordination between governments – both those exporting labour and those importing it – to make the migration process more streamlined and safer, as well as to provide access to healthcare, legal and social protection services for labour migrants.

China's Misplaced Medical Diplomacy

The COVID-19 infodemic occurred not only because of a lack of access to accurate information, but also because of an increased distrust in medical expertise. The People's Republic of China sought to exploit this situation by making the promotion of its traditional medicines an element of its aid diplomacy in Central Asia. Yet, because distrust in medical expertise is really a subset of distrust in authority more generally, which itself is an expression of severe social stratification and lack of economic development, what China really should have done during the height of the epidemiological crisis, and should do going forward into the future, is address corruption and threats to its businesses. This would have had, and will have, the positive effect of lifting economic development in Central Asian countries, thereby facilitating trust and social cohesion, which will be much needed in future crises.

Conclusion

Conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic has proven fruitful in uncovering important policy flaws and systemic weaknesses in Central Asia across a range of issues. The moral of the story, so to speak, is that what is needed in the future are more institutional mechanisms and strengthened inter-sectoral cooperation between governments and civil society. This, in turn, requires ensuring human rights, such as access to information and the right to assemble. Central Asian states also need to cooperate together to minimise the negative effects of the pandemic, as well as to mitigate future crises.

Conference Programme

Chronological List of Participants

Venue: OSCE Academy in Bishkek and Zoom Webinar

14:00	Opening Remarks Dr. Alexander Wolters, Director, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
14:10	Opening Remarks Dr. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, Senior Researcher, Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark
Panel 1. Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan	
Moderator: Niva Yau Tsz Yan, Research Fellow, OSCE Academy in Bishkek	
14:15	How the Government Contributed to an Infodemic During the COVID-19 Crisis: The Case of Kyrgyzstan <i>Savia Hasanova, Independent Researcher and Data Analyst, Kyrgyzstan</i>
14:30	Volunteering During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan: Challenges and Opportunities for Civic and Political Engagement of the Post-Soviet Generation <i>Pia De Gouvvello, Independent Researcher, France</i>
14:45	Fear of COVID-19 and Its Impact on Police Officers During the Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan (<i>online presentation</i>) <i>Dr. Bekchoro Aliiskarov, Senior Inspector of Legal and International Affairs, Academy of the Ministry of Interior, Kyrgyzstan</i>
15:00	Q&A Session
15:30 – 16:00	Coffee-break
Panel 2. Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Central Asia	
Moderator: Marc Jeandesboaz, Associate Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan	
16:00	Education Quality in Central Asia in Light of COVID-19: Gaps and Opportunities for Development in the Region <i>Siarova Hanna Pereira and Loes van der Graaf, Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Lithuania</i>
16:15	Ignored Victims of Pandemic: Addressing Gender-based Violence in Uzbekistan <i>Gulnoz Akhmedova, Project Manager of the ‘Strengthening Civil Society to Advance Women’s Rights through Advocacy, Protection and Empowerment in Uzbekistan’ Project, ACTED, Uzbekistan</i>
16:30	Labour Migration in the Shadow of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Tajikistan (<i>online presentation</i>) <i>Sherzod Shamiev, Saferworld Tajikistan, and Doriyush Soliev, Independent Researcher, Tajikistan</i>
16:45	China’s Medical Diplomacy in Uzbekistan <i>Niva Yau, Research Fellow at OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan</i>
17:00	Q&A Session

A decorative graphic consisting of several blue squares of varying shades (light blue and medium blue) arranged in a sparse, non-uniform pattern on a brown background. The squares are scattered across the page, with some appearing in vertical columns and others in horizontal rows.

OSCE Academy in Bishkek
1A, Botanichesky pereulok
Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic 720044
Tel: +996 (312) 54-32-00, 54-12-00
Fax: +996 (312) 54-23-13
E-mail: rtu@osce-academy.net
Website: www.osce-academy.net