

Pandemic in the ‘Stans’: How is Central Asia Managing Covid-19?

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Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic has exposed long-standing social, structural and economic vulnerabilities in Central Asia. Regional authorities have enacted various states of emergencies such as quarantines and curfews, many of which have been ended even as case numbers continue to grow. However, these efforts are taking place within a regional context featuring authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments that have long-established structural complications. Due to a shortage of personal medical equipment, ventilators and other critical medical supplies, all Central Asian countries have struggled to obtain adequate lifesaving equipment needed to protect medical staff and treat patients. Abrupt, country-wide suspen-

sions of economic and social life have exposed weaknesses of the working poor in middle-income economies, as the majority of people's livelihoods depend on the informal sector. The resulting economic crisis is likely to aggravate many preexisting conditions in these societies: mistrust of governments, pervasive corruption, and widespread poverty. This discussion paper suggests that in order to understand the long-term implication of the pandemic in Central Asia, it is imperative to look at broader underlying structural problems of the five "Stan" states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and their regional ramifications. All data and analysis in this situation are preliminary, as we continue to learn more about these new and evolving problems rapidly.



Crews disinfect streets, stations and public places in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan on March 25, 2020. Authorities are stepping up their efforts to stop the spread of Covid-19 in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. (Nur Sultan Governorship / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

General Overview

Having existing poor track records on freedom of speech issues more broadly, “false information” and “hiding the truth” has been on the increase since the onset of the pandemic in Central Asia as government responses to the Covid-19 crisis reflect both how far and how little their leaderships have progressed from the Soviet mentality of hiding the truth during crises. When Covid-19 reached the level of a global pandemic, these five republics initially appeared as virus-free and had zero confirmed infections for quite some time. Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian nation to publicly confirm it had Covid-19 cases on March 13, followed by Uzbekistan on March 15. While Kyrgyzstan confirmed its first case on March 18 and Tajikistan did not report any cases until April 30, the eve of a World Health Organization visit. Before this, authorities allowed mass gatherings, and even in some countries, the celebration of Nowruz, also known as Persian New Year. Turkmen authorities have so far not officially announced any cases of Covid-19 in the country and even banned the term coronavirus from public discourse.

Experts assume that mismanaged and failed policies by local authorities to combat fake news regarding the pandemic have served to not only restrict freedom of expression but also increase public distrust in official narratives. By limiting access to data and reports about the spread of the virus and implementing restrictions in discriminatory or arbitrary ways, Central Asian governments have failed to consistently uphold human rights obligations in their responses to migrant remittances, oil and mineral exports, and the service sector.

Bruce Pannier, an RFE/RL correspondent reporting on Central Asia, told TRT World Research Centre, that “the pandemic helped expose how incapable Central Asian governments are at handling a crisis, and there are certainly different levels of incompetence being displayed in the five countries.

Initially, all moved to close off their borders and curtail, then suspend international passenger connections to other countries. But in the case of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the government took measures early to implement quarantine, but then eased these restrictions too soon and now all three are facing drastic surges in the number of cases. Though to be fair, many thought the successes these three governments were touting were not entirely accurate and that

many cases of coronavirus were being attributed to other illnesses. All five governments say they are working to control the spread of the coronavirus, and are succeeding, but the misery from the virus is now widespread and obvious to everyone in these countries. The authorities have lost credibility, at least what credibility they might still have had, in the eyes of the people.”

On March 15, Kazakh President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev passed a decree that introduced a state of emergency in the country (Akorda, 2020). The president’s order gave law enforcement strict instructions to increase restrictions over citizens who “avoid any medical treatment and do not comply with the quarantine regime, hid data that are important for determining the epidemiological situation” (Interfax, 2020). On March 26, quarantine was introduced in three major Kazakh cities: Nur-Sultan, Almaty and Shymkent. The state of emergency in Kazakhstan ended on May 11 and restrictions are gradually being lifted. Among Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is showing greater competence in its handling of the pandemic than many expected, including a what for many is a surprising level of transparency about infection rates (Wood, 2020). At the same time, Covid-19 has spread nationwide, even reaching the senior levels of the government. Former Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev was diagnosed with the virus in June (“Kazakh first president,” 2020). Disproportionately high disease rates among Almaty medical workers revealed inadequate preparedness and shortages of protective equipment in Central Asia’s wealthiest country (Kayirtayuly, 2020), which could exacerbate social tensions, given the Kazakh government’s records of excessive spending on high-profile projects. Meanwhile, the country is also clamping down on civil society activism and has deployed digital surveillance tools to monitor the population during the lockdown (Kumenov, 2020), including drones and traffic cameras to identify unauthorised movement in cities (Cozens, 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these technologies did not stem the disease’s spread. According to Bruce Pannier: “The authorities have lost credibility, at least what credibility they might still have had, in the eyes of the people.

This will make it difficult for Kazakhstan’s President Qasym-Zhomart Toqayev going forward, particularly after first President Nursultan Nazarbayev, whom many think still has a substantial role in running Kazakh-

stan, dies. A segment of Kazakhstan's people already opposed Toqayev's ascension of the president, and his government's failure to prevent the spread of the virus will haunt him after the pandemic crisis passes. If he chooses to run for a second term, there will likely be more protesters on the streets than there were after he was named acting president in March 2019 and just before and after he won the June 2019 presidential election."

Handling its first significant crisis under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Uzbek government has also displayed an unusual level of transparency, including the publishing of information about infection rates. Once the country announced a lockdown, strong law enforcement measures were followed (Hashimova, 2020). The Uzbek government put in place strict measures to limit movement both within and between cities, with strong punishments for violators and those who fail to wear masks in public (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2020). It requested help from China with regards to curbing movement and disease-spread prevention measures. However, it has struggled to restrain the spread of the disease, including among medical staff.

At first glance, Kyrgyzstan seems to be coping with the Covid-19 crisis better than other regional states. The number of cases has remained relatively low compared to the rest of the region as of early July. However, with Kyrgyzstan's history of economic instability (Stronski & Quinn-Judge, 2016) widespread poverty, and poor governance, the crisis still presents a significant challenge for the country. Kyrgyzstan is dependent on international assistance for basic medical supplies and protective gear (Imanalieva, 2020a). The Health Ministry acknowledged that more than half of the country's ventilators are inoperable. The virus is spreading among medical staff (Government of Kyrgyz Republic, 2020), large-scale testing started late (Radio Azattyk, 2020), and its efficacy is uncertain, which means that the disease could be far more widespread than official numbers suggest. Poor public awareness (Pennier, 2020) and police corruption have undercut the effectiveness of quarantine measures. The authorities undertook strict measures to contain the disease, but there has been a lack of communication and advice from senior state officials. In major Kyrgyz cities, neither independent media outlets nor lawyers have been permitted to pass police checkpoints to do their jobs. While the government has recognised the spread of the virus in order to receive international humanitarian assistance, they have forbidden doctors to speak out regarding

unsafe working conditions in hospitals, and have even reportedly imprisoned citizens for spreading false information (Human Rights Watch, 2020b).

According to a recent Human Rights Watch report, Central Asian governments have used restrictions to target reporters and activists by carrying out quarantine measures in ways that have at times proven arbitrary and disproportionate. Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch stated: "All Central Asian governments have obligations to protect their citizens' right to health by providing accurate information about Covid-19". He further added: "They should not use restrictions to muzzle journalists, healthcare providers, and others attempting to inform the public or protect against rights violations" (Human Rights Watch, 2020a).

Within this context, information about the Covid-19 situation in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is limited (The Economist, 2020). According to several experts, until now, the Turkmen government has been considered the worst performer among Central Asian countries with regards to its response to the global pandemic. Ashgabat has denied the presence of Covid-19 in the country and continues to assert that it is coronavirus-free, even though journalistic evidence has increasingly indicated the opposite. Bruce Pannier further added that: "Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov is now in the position of depending heavily on his security services to keep him in power. He has ruined the economy, and now his incompetence and denial of the presence of the coronavirus are costing hundreds and before the end almost surely thousands of lives among Turkmenistan's people. He is more unpopular than he has ever been." What makes the Turkmen government's statement so extraordinary is that all four of its immediate neighbours—Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Iran—have reported significant outbreaks of Covid-19. State representatives have taken steps to raise awareness about hygiene measures such as handwashing, however, for months state media and high-level government officials have been denying the existence of the virus. Authorities have sought to silence medical workers and others who have been speaking about the impact of the virus in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, an independent group that operates from Vienna, released a statement in April that there were at least seven confirmed cases (Khronika Turkmenistana, 2020). In a briefing with United Nations (UN) officials in Ashgabat on April 22, Foreign Minister

Rashid Meredov stated, "If there were a single confirmed coronavirus case, we would have immediately informed ... the [World Health Organisation] in line with our obligations" (Reuters, 2020). Amidst all this ambiguity, the closed authoritarian state continued to hold mass gatherings and imposed no stringent rules until May. On May 15, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov supported the government's policy on "Turkmenistan's preparedness to stand against the pandemic and ways to rapidly react to it," including restrictions on mass gatherings. Nevertheless, by late July there were still no officially confirmed cases in the country. Nearly seven months after the pandemic first appeared, the global community seems no closer to fully understanding the situation inside Turkmenistan.

Tajik authorities were long in denial about Covid-19. From February onwards, the administration actively hid (Babakhanov, 2020) the evidence that the virus had been spreading in the country with "pneumonia" cases spiking in January (Radio Ozodi, 2020). Arguably, the government did not want to sow fear and panic and wanted the March 1 parliamentary elections to run efficiently and smoothly. Parliamentary elections were held and, according to the Central Election Commission of Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon's ruling party, People's Democratic Party (PDPT) party won 50.4 per cent of the vote, securing 47 seats in the 63-seat Majlisi Namoyandagon (Assembly of Representatives). President Rahmon has been widely criticized for mishandling the economy, marginalising the opposition, and cracking down on independent media during the Covid-19 period (RFE/RL's Tajik Service, 2020). Even after the election, authorities refused to introduce any rules to curtail the spread of the virus on the fears incurring economic losses associated with a mass shutdown.

As a result, the Tajik government were only confirmed the first Covid-19 case on April 30, on the eve of the visit of a delegation from the WHO. The delegation has provided data and guidance on how to limit the spread of the disease, and have visited educational facilities and army bases to better inform people about Covid-19 (Committee for Emergency Situations of the Tajik Republic, 2020). Independent sources, such as Radio Liberty's Turkmen Service, have reported of acute cases of pneumonia, and a worsening health and economic situation in the country. However, the authorities have not imposed a quarantine or encouraged social distancing in any meaningful way.

Steve Swerdlow, a human rights lawyer and associate professor at the University of Southern California, told to TRT World Research Centre that, "as it has in much of the globe, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only ravaged Central Asia but exacerbated and held up a mirror to the region's abominable human rights record. The pandemic began with two of the Central Asian states—Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—brazenly denying the very existence of the disease among the population, refusing to take even the most basic safety precautions recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO), and continuing to hold mass events that led to many citizens becoming infected. Six months later, Turkmenistan continues to deny any Covid-19 cases while numerous deaths take place.

Covid-19 has also shined a light on the abysmal prison situation across Central Asia, including for imprisoned human rights defenders, political activists, and journalists. In July, the long-imprisoned human rights defender Azimjon Askarov died in prison in Kyrgyzstan despite repeated calls both earlier and during the Covid-19 crisis on Bishkek by the UN, the European Union, the United States, and many human rights groups to release him from detention. High-profile political prisoners in Tajikistan, such as lawyer Buzurghmehr Yorov, journalist Daler Sharipov, and opposition activist Rahmatullo Rajab have also very probably contracted the disease. But the Tajik government, which has waged a fierce crackdown on the political opposition since 2014, refuses to release the prisoners, or at least transfer them to house arrest".

For Swerdlow, government responses across the region have pointed to how the lack of checks and balances on executive power, enduring corruption, and few protections for a critical, free press have actively undermined the ability to control the spread of the disease. He strongly believes that it is imperative that Central Asian governments take immediate steps to protect the most vulnerable among the population, including at-risk prisoners and political prisoners, and include citizens and civil society more directly in the fight against the virus.

Economic Instability

The pandemic situation is also presenting significant challenges to economic development and reform agendas across the Central Asian region, given shortening resources and growing economic pains. Mismanaged monetary savings, employment in the informal sectors of the economy, and weak social security networks for a large share of the population are but a few obstacles that have been exposed by the crisis.

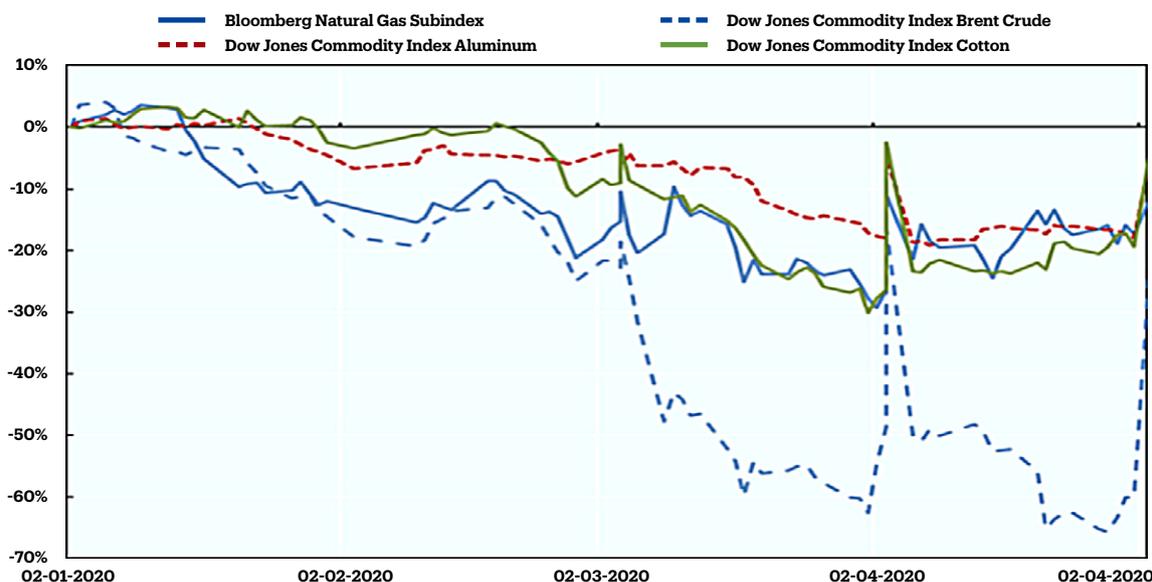
The Covid-19 and the consequent economic crisis is considered as the third major exogenous shock to hit the region in a little more than a decade. Being relatively small, and in most cases, reasonably undiversified, Central Asian economies depend heavily on foreign trade, as the ratio of trade turnover to GDP across the region averages 65%.

Before the global pandemic, among all the Central Asian governments, Uzbekistan was expected to have the largest and most dynamic economic growth rate in the region, projected at 5.7 per cent in 2020 and 6.0 per cent in 2021 (Radjabov, 2020a). However, the economic growth rate now corresponds to 1.6-1.8 per cent. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) forecast for Uzbekistan's GDP growth in 2020 is

about 1.5 per cent with the prospect of growing up to 6.5 per cent in 2021 (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2020).

The pandemic and the subsequent collapse of commodity prices have put these economies under immense pressure. Amidst the exacerbating economic scenario, measures taken by Central Asian states were not unique, yet distinctive depending on the time and resources available for fighting the pandemic. It is imperative to mention that quarantine measures in the region were necessary in order to restrain the spread of the virus and to allow local medical care systems to adapt to the situation more effectively. For the most part, Central Asian states could rely on fiscal rather than monetary tools to support local trade and businesses and to assist enterprises and branches of their economies. Value chains have been disrupted, as officials in Central Asia have progressively shut their borders with neighbours and limited domestic movement of people and goods to impede the spread of the virus. These value chains, as well as the availability of domestic goods and food security, will be further endangered by border restrictions imposed by Russia, Iran and China (Radjabov, 2020b).

The value of many key Central Asian exports has plummeted since January 2020



Source: Financial Times, 2020

Protracted and stalled reforms have left many economies in Central Asia with highly undiversified production and low export profiles, relying mainly on the export of raw extractive goods. This lack of diversification in the country's economic profile will not only have implications for revenues but also for investment, employment and longer-term recovery. At the macro level, these five countries are undergoing pressures on their balance of payments, fiscal accounts and currencies (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Development, 2020). These obstacles are more substantial in smaller economies, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two countries distinguished by tight fiscal space, limited foreign exchange reserves and large stocks of foreign currency-denominated debt. Meanwhile, oil and gas exporters, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, though currently relying on significant fiscal buffers and international reserves to block the negative impact of Covid-19 containment measures on the economy, will also be facing complication as a result of a dramatic decline in the demand for energy resources.

Almost all Central Asian economies will continue to have very high levels of external debt, often in dollars which are linked to a narrow range of capital-intensive enterprises that contribute to the majority of trade revenues. While the more significant economies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can mitigate some of the pressures by using reserves, the pressures for smaller economies, in particular Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are particularly severe.

Economic decline could also realign the foreign policy priorities of Central Asian states depending on the ability of China, Russia and other major actors to extend their financial, industrial and economic support. In any scenario, the current economic and health crises will define the future of the region for years to come, with the most critical challenges relying heavily on the willingness of the people to accept governments bailouts.

In addition to the pandemic, the Central Asian states are dealing with rising poverty as remittances from Russia have been falling (RBK, 2020), and unemployment (Nurmatov, 2020) and wage arrears rising, as migrants from Central Asia have maintained an impressive remittance rate. According to a World Bank report published in 2015, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan ranked as the top two among all countries for remittances as a share of GDP, at 52 per cent 31 per cent respectively (Trilling, 2016). The Covid-19 situation has caused millions of migrant labourers from Central Asia to lose their jobs in Russia. Kyrgyz authorities have promised relief for hard-hit citizens and businesses, but lack the necessary financial means and have to seek help from international partners, especially China (Imanalieva, 2020b).

Russia's decision to close its borders to non-Russian citizens has further highlighted the precariousness of Central Asian reliance on Russia for employment. One of the most dependent countries is Kyrgyzstan, which already saw remittances fall by 9% year-on-year in the first quarter (Ralph & Sayeh, 2020). Any significant fall in remittance revenues in the region would have severe implications for Central Asian economies' current account deficits.

Public Health Crisis

While the economic crisis has highlighted difficulties in national economies and social safety nets in the region, the Covid-19 health crisis has also revealed the weakness of health care systems in the region. From sharing personal struggles with exposure and treatment of the virus to more clinical assessments of emergency care, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Uzbeks are more vocal than ever about the failure of their governments to deliver essential services. In a matter of days (in June 2020), hospitals in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were filled with pneumonia patients, while many others were dying in their homes as they were unable to obtain medical support. The Health ministries of these countries warned

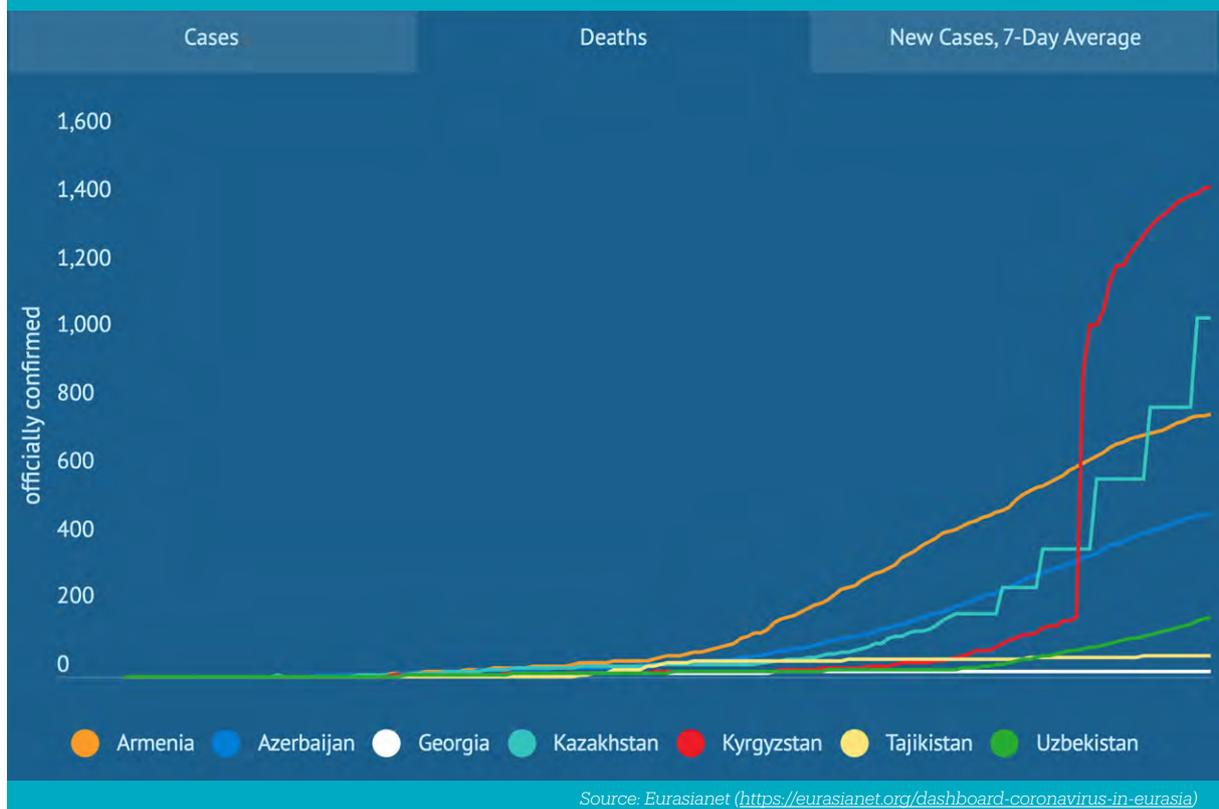
of a scarcity of beds, ventilators, and oxygen concentrators in intensive care units.

As of July 21, Uzbekistan, with a population of 33 million, had nearly 18,000 infections and 93 deaths. Kazakhstan, a country of 18.3 million people, has the highest infection rate in the region with more than 73,000 cases and 585 deaths. Kyrgyzstan, with 6.3 million people, has the highest fatality rate with 1,079 deaths among 28,251 infected patients. Tajikistan with a population of 9 million people, did not report any cases until May but now has at least 7,000 patients, 57 deaths and nearly 6,000 recovered patients.

Number of Covid-19 Cases in Eurasia



Number of Deaths from Covid-19 Cases in Eurasia



Suffering at the individual and household levels associated with the collapse of the economic system have been compounded by sharply reduced funding for health services. According to the Global Health Security Index (GHSI) score, 73 per cent of the world's population live in countries where health systems scored below 50 on a scale between 0 - meaning "absolutely not prepared" - and 100 - corresponding to "well prepared" (Global Health Security Index, 2019). The report found that Central Asian countries were not prepared for a pandemic as all five states lacked fundamental health care capacities vital for pandemic response. According to the index, none of the Central Asian states scored above 50.

As governments continue repatriating citizens living in countries with high infection rates, this continues to hold a higher risk of importing more infections. At the onset of the crisis, it was estimated that between 2.7 and 4.2 million Central Asian labourers were residing in Russia. Border closures have led to large numbers of migrant workers returning to their home countries. Meanwhile, many migrant labourers who were unable to return have continued to work in countries with high rates of infection. Central Asian governments have taken steps to support the repatriation of their citizens on

condition of strict quarantine measures upon their return. However, people returning from countries with high caseloads have caused an increase in Covid-19 cases, putting a strain on already under-resourced and weak social services.

As in other countries, medical workers have borne the brunt of the pandemic, making up an estimated 15 per cent of the overall number of cases in Kyrgyzstan (Aki-press, 2020). The growing number of Covid-19 cases among front-line health staff indicates that the health care system may be on the brink of collapse, and doctors are increasingly taking to social media to highlight the problem. As the government failed to arrange any public transportation, doctors have to come to work by walking, sometimes more than 20 kilometres and are given gauze masks, which do not provide sufficient protection.

Low levels of government spending have led to an extraordinarily large share of the cost of healthcare being transferred to homes, putting further downward pressure on household budgets, with Central Asia having some of the highest ratios of out-of-pocket healthcare spending to total health expenditure in the world.

International Assistance and Regional Implications

As coronavirus cases and fatalities continued to rise, Central Asian countries are facing an unprecedented challenge that is testing not only their political, economic and social systems but also their future foreign relations. Some partners in the West that have for the past three decades provided financial assistance through the non-governmental sector to Central Asia's state-building, and economic and political reforms. Russia might normally be expected to be eager to capitalise on the West's own economic challenges and seeming inability to assist struggling Central Asian states during the pandemic. However, it has limited resources to do so, as the country itself is struggling to deal with the pandemic (Guriev & Weiss, 2020).

The economic downturn across the region will likely have long-term impacts on Russia's Eurasian Eco-

nomie Union (EAEU). Amid the pandemic, Kazakhstan pushed back against Moscow's draft vision for Eurasian integration through 2025 (Leonard, 2020). With global gas demand down, Russia and Armenia have started disagreeing again over gas prices. Closed borders and the growing economic problems have caused migrant labour opportunities to exacerbate the relationship with EAEU members states.

Amidst this complicated background, multilateral aid from international financial agencies has continued to actively support Central Asian countries in their reaction to the pandemic. The World Bank has implemented pandemic related projects with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (The World Bank, n.d), while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is providing \$120.9 million in credit to help the economy of Kyrgyzstan (International

Monetary Fund, 2020). At the same time, Kazakhstan is also using the World Bank's Health Insurance project to buy medical equipment and machinery. In Asia, the Asian Development Bank (2020) was the first to announce a \$6.5 billion investment, while the Chinese Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (n.d) has provided a \$5 billion post-pandemic recovery facility while promising to improve its investments in public health infrastructure.

In late March, the Chinese government assisted Kyrgyzstan with 10,000 respirator and 100,000 disposable masks (Kaktus Media, 2020). On April 8, they provided another distribution of personal protective medical equipment worth \$100,000 (Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2020). Chinese companies have also contributed, including Jack Ma of Alibaba, who has pledged \$255,000 worth of protective masks, suits, thermometers, coronavirus tests and ventilators (Imanalieva, 2020c).

While it was clear that strict quarantine rules should be rapidly introduced, not all Central Asian regimes decided to implement them. Balancing between maintaining economic activities and saving lives became a severe dilemma that not all Central Asian republics were able to confront. Central Asian governments have implemented fleeting public health and economic policy measures, which has led to appeals for aid from International Financial Institution's, the European Union and individual countries, particularly China. China has provided protective gear, soft loans and other types of financial support to the region further supporting health infrastructure development. This assistance comes

in the context of China's long-standing investment of more than \$50 billion since 2000, most notably under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Wooley, 2019). However, it is imperative to mention that BRI projects have also financed recipient countries' borrowing, which has led to what is often referred to as China's debt-trap diplomacy. There are several aspects of Chinese investments that are problematic in the case of Central Asian countries. For example, it has been calculated that, by the end of 2017, China owned up to 42% of Kyrgyzstan's public debt through Chinese Eximbank (Mogilevskii, 2019). While Tajikistan, one of the poorest countries in Central Asia, has been described as the first leg of the land-based elements of BRI.

As of today, some have questioned whether or not Western-led institutions are leading global support efforts during the pandemic. Covid-19 is massively testing the West's, and specifically Washington's, ability to lead the global response. That leaves Beijing as the most prominent remaining potential source of assistance to the struggling region during such turbulent times. While China has been trying to get its own outbreak under control, Beijing has decided to support Central Asian nations during the Covid-19 pandemic (UZ Daily, 2020). It has promoted its approach through Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to spread the narrative of its response to the pandemic and global assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020). The Chinese policy continues to impress Central Asian publics, which may soften the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the region.

Conclusion

Finally, as Covid-19 cases continue to rise in the region, there is no clear pattern that the countries which are considered autocracies are doing better in responding to the pandemic than countries which are known for being more democratic. The global pandemic has exposed several problems in the five Central Asian countries' medical, social, economic, and political development. While each Central Asian government has taken varied approaches and had different levels of success in addressing the Covid-19 crisis, it has presented each state an opportunity to test their capacity to control the population and strengthen their regimes. It has undoubtedly not been easy for authorities to rapidly

get the right arrangements since financial resources are scarce, and health care systems were mostly unprepared for the pandemic. To varying degrees, each regime has cracked down on those spreading "disinformation" about the situation or those who challenge the official narrative. Each Central Asian state, apart from Turkmenistan, has amended its legislation to introduce penalties for violating nationwide quarantine and other measures meant to respond to Covid-19. Within this context, the pandemic seriously exposed the region's weak and even collapsing trust formation, as the authorities would not admit the severity of pandemic or even the presence of the virus in the country.

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