

Online Conference

# **The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Impact on Post-Soviet Central Asia**

18 - 20 November 2020  
Conference Rapporteur: Ivana Vuchkova

Academy Papers #7

Online Conference

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<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPkqRoLC265XZV8R5FJjIQg/videos>

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## Introduction

The online conference was opened by the Director of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek (OSCE AiB), Dr. Alexander Wolters. In his opening speech, Dr. Wolters expressed his gratitude to Dr. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen from the Danish Institute for International Studies, who initiated the research idea and supported the individual research done on the topic, as well as the OSCE AiB Team who organized the entire event in these challenging circumstances, and welcomed the keynote speaker, Ekaterina Schulmann, a distinguished political observer based in Moscow who published widely on the issue of legislation and regime development that she speaks publicly about.

Dr. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen underlined that Central Asia may be facing particular challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis. Hence, his Institute decided to support this online conference in order to encourage suggestions for solutions. Because, as he pointed out, while medical colleagues are working hard for a vaccine, it is left for academics and researchers to try to collect some of the pieces and explain how we respond as individuals and society to this crisis.

Over the course of the three days online conference, the agenda was structured in three panel discussions. Researchers and alumni presented their papers in three thematic sessions focusing on the topics of COVID-19 and its influence on human rights, migration and foreign policy, respectively. Each panel discussion was followed by a discussant's input, a session of questions and answers, as well as a brief wrap-up by the moderator.

## COVID-19 and the Global Shift of Values Keynote Speech by Ekaterina Schulmann

Being honored to open the first online alumni conference, Ekaterina Schulmann highlighted the importance and the added value of real human communication in comparison to the online exchange of information and interaction. In her keynote speech, Schulmann provided an overview of the theories and worldwide cultural trends to show how Covid-19 could impact our values. The present conspiracy theories are piling shadows to the fears of uncertainty and insecurity driven by the unknown illness that could lead towards violent actions. Instead of "expected" religious interpretation of the disease as a punishment for our sins or going back to our belief as a cure, the world is witnessing quasi medical and quasi scientific theories. The abuse of the language of science has replaced the language of religion and caused a crisis in science like never.

Regarding the COVID-19 crisis and the global shift of values, Schulmann presented the results of the World Values Survey<sup>1</sup> (2017-2020) and The Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World (2020). As a map that shows the progress of countries from traditional towards secular-rational values on the vertical axis, and from survival towards self-expression on the horizontal, represents a basis for further analysis of the influence of COVID-19.

<sup>1</sup> The World Values Survey (WVS) is an international research program devoted to the scientific and academic study of social, political, economic, religious and cultural values of people in the world. The project's goal is to assess which impact values stability or change over time has on the social, political and economic development of countries and societies. See more: WVS Database ([worldvaluessurvey.org](http://worldvaluessurvey.org))

The observed period in the Cultural Map shows a decline of religious feelings as the most visible change in global values, even in the most populated and religious countries, especially among young population. According to Schulmann, an ideal society would have a healthy dose of traditional values but will not be individualistic and obsessed with the imperialistic values and values of expansion.

Post-soviet countries are individualistic, which is a heritage of the previous totalitarian regime. In general, they have moved to the right towards self-expression that reflects more trust, less anxiety and low growth modernization such as change in social practices, in ethical norms, that is not influenced top-down, but the other way around. Considering the traditional vs. secular values, there is no movement observed and Central Asia stays high on the lower part of the axis.

On a global level, a general positive trend is observed in the last three years. The main question is if this trend would be reversed by the pandemic. If it lasts for years and affect hunger and poverty, the positive trending could reverse towards survival. Otherwise, the trends could only be accelerated since the black swans do not bring anything new, but only speed tendencies up. What we see now, is the sacrifice for individual security and the growing power of national governments because of isolation measures, interrupted movements of goods and labor, and reduced scale of globalism.

A massive shift in the digitalization process was observed as a way of adaptation to the pandemic. If looking at the dark side, there is a general surveillance as sacrifice of our privacy, data collection by companies and governments – all that for the general safety and health.

Regarding political trends and dynamics, as governments “watch” more, they are also being watched more. As a society, we asked more from the political management than they could deliver and that would come with a price for those who did either too much, or not enough. The version of an angry generation requests accountability, even in circumstances which do not allow governments to come up with a perfect solution. On the one hand, this is a benefit for transparency in non-democratic societies, but on the other, this could make democracies vulnerable.

Another trend that has been observed is the domestication of labor, which has both advantages and disadvantages. Only now people see what amount of work has been necessary for them to get ready and go to work and come back, which was not counted in their salaries. Many companies have benefited from putting workers at their homes and saving on office rent, bills, and other costs. The world has suddenly gone 150 years backwards and all the previous wins from trade unions, were lost in only a few months. Certainly, there are some benefits for the workers. Some of them seek for new opportunities, where payment is higher, using the benefit of distance working. The understanding and appreciation for the burden of women for domestic work may also be finally acknowledged in an income that could add to the economic growth by combating gray GDP where the unpaid reproductive work for the productive work to happen, takes the second largest part. The pandemic has also caught attention and urged for more investment in the public health system, particularly on securitization of medicine and medicalization of the public sphere.

## COVID-19 and Human Rights

In the first panel of the online conference, the influence of COVID-19 on human rights was closely examined from the perspective of basic human rights as the right to freedom, safety and security, the right to work and education. The panelists used a variety of methodologies to present their findings, focusing on the region, and delivering key policy proposals.

### *Gender-based and Domestic Violence during COVID-19*

The COVID-19 crisis, as any other crisis in history, is not a matter of equal opportunities. Hence, it comes with no surprise that women as a marginalized group have been affected more. Both gender-based violence and domestic violence have observed increasing trends during this period and many factors played a role in it.

The work of the centres for gender-based violence in Uzbekistan as an example, was found inadequate during the entire pandemic period due to lack of financial and institutional capacities. The Ministry for Mahalla and Family Affairs had no sufficient knowledge or understanding of the issues of the victims. In addition, activities of NGOs were limited and consultations by phone showed as ineffective. Instead of addressing the causes of violence and acting accordingly, the police used victim blaming strategies and urged for family reunification. As policy recommendations, civil society organizations, media and bloggers can play a great role to address the issues of gender-based violence and scrutinize the work of local governments and promote intersectoral cooperation between relevant institutions. Moreover, the work of the centres for gender-based violence has to be improved through more financial and staff-training support, ideally provided by private funds.

Comparable to Uzbekistan, domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan, which as a term differs from gender-based violence, has significantly increased during the pandemic. Despite the high numbers of complaints, the number of issued protection orders by the police observe a continuous digression down to almost none. Some of the major determinants include the need for police staff training and media attention. An urgent plan for combating domestic violence accompanied by draft amendments of laws must be undertaken by the government as well. As a conclusion, further research on the topic should focus on exploring the reasons behind the ineffectiveness of institutional mechanisms. Policy recommendations for international organizations and donor driven NGOs should indicate the need for analysis based on critical theory, since the existing data analysis have not brought results in combating domestic violence.

### *Fear of COVID-19 and its Impact on Police Officers*

An interesting parenthesis from the gender perspective of the human rights concerns and developments affected by the pandemic has been made with the introduction of an institutional topic, focused on the police officers. By relying on a combined methodology of a self-reported survey and focus groups, the fear or COVID-19 and its impact on police

officers in Kyrgyzstan during the pandemic has been observed. Following the theoretical concept “fear of crime” it was presented that police officers were affected to a large extent by a perceived risk of COVID-19 infection due to the services they performed during the state of emergency. However, that did not affect the policing acts and performance.

## ***COVID-19 and the Quality of Education in Central Asia***

Within the last years, “quality of education” as a concept has slowly replaced the term “access to education”, which is also confirmed by the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda of the UN. In addition, the curricula of the last few years have put more attention on education that will provide children with skills like problem solving, communication, creativity and conflict resolution as needed skills of the modern time. While progress was achieved at each level of education, COVID-19 brought us few steps backwards to discuss again the issue of access to education, because of virtual education that requires a computer and stable internet connection. These prerequisites, however, do not mean necessarily a good quality of education.

On the one hand, there are no immediate solutions since all the problems in the education system witnessed so far, are not created, but only revealed by COVID-19. On the other hand, governments can take this as a learning opportunity and design the education system based on the needs of a modern society, including all risk factors among others security and digital wellbeing.

## **The Social Impact of COVID-19**

The second panel of the online conference was dedicated to discussing the various impacts that COVID-19 had on migration in the region of Central Asia. At the beginning, Dr. Damir Esenaliev, a senior researcher at the Leibniz Institute of Vegetable and Ornamental Crops (IGZ) and the International Security and Development Center (ISDC) addressed the audience with a keynote speech on the topic of “Social Impact of COVID-19 Worldwide and in Kyrgyzstan: Findings from the Life with Corona Study”. The results of the survey based on twelve thousand respondents in various countries, including Kyrgyzstan, show an overlap of certain developments in each country, as well as a number of differences. The six findings of the six months research include: young adults behave responsibly; the stress during the pandemic falls disproportionately on women who live with more than one other person; older people are less stressed than younger people and are less worried about current circumstances; after the peak of COVID-related deaths, support for countermeasures dropped; people around the world want a vaccine to be available globally – with the exception of people in the USA; younger people are more willing to pay to stop the spread of the disease than older people.<sup>2</sup>

The case of Kyrgyzstan as the only country from the Central Asian region that was included in the research, shows significantly less counter-coronavirus actions like wearing masks,

<sup>2</sup> Life with Corona Network (2020), Research Report: Shared Global Sentiments and Stark Generational Divides: Six Findings from Six Months of Life with Corona, ISDC, Berlin, 1 October. Accessed December 5, 2020. [https://lifewithcorona.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Life-with-Corona\\_Six-Months\\_8\\_10-1.pdf](https://lifewithcorona.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Life-with-Corona_Six-Months_8_10-1.pdf)

washing hands, and avoiding crowds. This may reflect the delayed period in which the survey was conducted in Kyrgyzstan. Another finding is the level of tensions in households, that is much higher. There is a higher level of stress experienced by young people than in other countries, while older people are less stressed, both here and elsewhere. Generosity as a cultural benchmark of Kyrgyzstan was confirmed with the joint response of a need for global access to the upcoming vaccine and the willing of young people to pay for it in order to stop the spread of coronavirus.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Damir Esenaliev pointed out that COVID-19 has influenced growing rates of violence in and outside of the household. The second phase of the research conducted by his institute would focus exactly on examining the issues that determine the scale of violence caused by the spread of virus and the subsequent measures.

## COVID-19 and Migration

The current state of the Kyrgyz economy points towards a very high level of remittances. Although remittances can be very helpful, they develop a culture of dependencies and today they represent one of the main features of the contemporary Kyrgyz economy. In times of returning labor migrants due to COVID-19, remittances in Kyrgyzstan have observed a drastic drop, especially in the second quarter of the year. Hence, one of the panelists focused on presenting policy recommendations for an alternative development of the country, based on agriculture instead of labor export. As a sector that employs 40% of the labor force, agriculture deserves a wider discussion for economic incentives that will make it an attractive job provider for young people, both in terms of payment and working conditions. Public investment in infrastructure, education and training, as well as access and quality of support services are crucial for any further advancement of the sector and its viability in the Kyrgyz economy.

As intimidation and stigmatization of female labor migrants has also been a growing challenge, financial support and subsidies for women-led agricultural enterprises must be designed. The current crisis can serve as a window of opportunity this sector to become more attractive for young people and women. In such a way, the observed trends of labor migration can be influenced and helped due to the interruptions caused by the pandemic. The government support could be beneficial if designed to support the development of small and medium size domestic companies in the sector that can have higher added value for the domestic budget and integrated in the regional value chains. They could help in building an economy that is based on processed goods instead of raw materials (producing grape juice instead of selling grapes) sold at a very low price that makes agriculture ultimately an unattractive sector for work due to the generated low income.

Likewise, more than a million Tajik labor migrants lost their jobs in Russia as a result of the pandemic that had an immense impact on the volume of remittances and hit the country in a devastating way. Along these short-term consequences, some long-term effects are to be expected as budget shortages, brain drain and further worsening of the living standard. Once again it was acknowledged that the COVID-19 crisis is not a crisis of equal opportunities. Labor intensive industries where many labor migrants were engaged earlier

and provided enough resources for a decent life for their families, despite of the distanced location, were the ones hardest hit. Looking into the existing opportunities, focus on the domestic economy is needed, followed by integration of the domestic companies into the regional value chains that could contribute towards higher added value to the domestic budget, and provide decent jobs for young people.

## Central Asian Public Opinion on the COVID-19 Pandemic

On the last day of the conference the speakers discussed the pandemic's impact on the foreign policy of the region. The panel started with the presentation by Ms. Kasiet Ysmanova, Communications Manager and Researcher at Central Asia Barometer, on "Central Asian Public Opinion on Covid-19 Pandemic." According to the Central Asia Barometer that focuses on economics, political trends, demographics, education, and public health, only 8% of the Kyrgyz citizens are confident that their government has the necessary resources to cope with the pandemics. The number was slightly higher in Kazakhstan, and surprisingly outranging in Uzbekistan - 66%. There is also a general notion among older respondents that Russia would help Central Asia the most in dealing with the pandemic, that shifts towards China with the age of the respondents towards the younger population.

## COVID-19 and the Foreign Policy of Central Asia

When it comes to medical diplomacy, an exchange of aid at the beginning of the pandemic was obtained by China from the rest of the world, which China later reciprocated with both medical staff and equipment. Traditional medicine was also found high on the list of medications that China used and donated to some countries as Uzbekistan. In addition, traditional Chinese medical staff was sent to Uzbekistan to teach about the usage of this medicine that opened a window of opportunity for strengthening cooperation. Therefore, the medical diplomacy of China has shown as a strong soft power tool in increasing its political influence in the region. However, the case of strong ties with local elites do not translate in strong governance and the issue of corruption that is present on low scale operations has to be a matter of concern. If China would like to protect its interests and power in the region, it has to pay close attention to the issue of low trust among the Uzbek population which has been manifested throughout a number of occasions, including recent projects where Uzbekistan chose other investors as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) over China.

Although defined as a medical issue primarily, COVID-19 has become a very harsh test, not only for the public system and the economy, but for international relations as well. The increasingly borderless world since the beginning of the 1990s has been affected by two major events in 2016: Brexit and Donald Trump being elected as a president of the US. As consequences of globalization, they influenced the start of a more inward focused approach on development. Then, COVID-19 happened and hindered the two major features of internationalism: trade and travels. At the global level, isolation is becoming the new mantra in international relations. The case of Central Asia is similar, although the



pandemic came at a moment when international cooperation was on the rise in the region. However, the positive rhetoric among political leaders stayed and mutual help between the countries was provided. What the pandemic revealed, was the existing inequalities among the different countries and confirmed the desperate economic situation of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Additionally, the pandemic uncovered the offensive Chinese behavior towards Kyrgyzstan with no understanding for the harsh economic position of the country and a need for restructuring the debt payment. This comes into a time when China is accelerating its global power as the least affected by the pandemics, both in medical and economic terms.

On the other side, looking into the impact of COVID-19 on EU-Central Asia cooperation, developments show a clear breakout after the issue of the new strategy for cooperation, the so-called “new opportunities for a stronger partnership”<sup>3</sup>. As a great step forward after the initial try in 2006, this strategy was seen as a new momentum for regional cooperation with the EU and assistance in terms of economic, political and environmental progress. The sectoral impact of COVID-19 in Central Asia, especially in the healthcare and education system, as well as economic hardships, have once again recognized the need for EU-Central Asia cooperation in terms of existing needs and new challenges.

## Conclusion

Looking deeper into the influence that this pandemic had on human rights, as we understand them, Central Asia has experienced a tremendous downturn, especially when it comes to women’s rights, the right of education, personal safety and security, freedom of movement, and finally, the right of having a decent job. The discussions during the first two panels that focused on human rights and migration, underline once again the fact that COVID-19 is not a virus of equal opportunities. Women, children, and workers in labor-intensive industries working abroad have been affected the most and that should be taken as a lesson in resolving the issues that have been present for a long time, but never resolved. Key reforms are needed in the education and healthcare system. However, this would only be beneficial if followed by women empowerment and decent jobs for everyone. Furthermore, regional cooperation is seen as crucial in strengthening the economic resilience of each country and the region. On a national level, the economic resilience strategy should focus on using the comparative advantages as the agricultural sector and creating decent jobs that would compensate for the lost remittances and ensure social security.

On an international level, the countries of Central Asia need to reconsider their ties with key partners as Russia, China, and the EU. In that regard, sincere plans should dominate and maximize the benefits of the cooperation offered, and to minimize the economic harm as in the case of Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan. The global green recovery trend as announced in many countries, mostly influenced by the EU is crucial if we consider that another crisis is on the horizon if no acts are undertaken to stop global warming, and that could serve as a momentum for a new, better positioning of the region internationally.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2019) The European Union and Central Asia: New opportunities for a stronger partnership. Accessed November 28, 2020. [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/european-union-and-central-asia-new-opportunities-stronger-partnership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/news/european-union-and-central-asia-new-opportunities-stronger-partnership_en).

## Conference Programme

### Chronological List of Participants

Venue: OSCE Academy in Bishkek (Online)

18 November 2020

#### Opening

Dr. Alexander Wolters, Director, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Dr. Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, Senior Researcher, Danish Institute for International Studies

#### Keynote Speech

'COVID-19 and the Global Shift of Values',  
Ekaterina Schulmann, Associate Professor, Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences (MSSSES), Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House

#### Panel 1: COVID-19 and Human Rights

*Moderator: Aigoul Abdoubaetova, Head of Research and Training Unit, OSCE Academy in Bishkek*

*Discussant: Aichurek Kurmanbekova, Associate, Human Rights Watch, Kyrgyzstan*

'Ignored Victims of Pandemic – Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Uzbekistan',  
Gulnoza Akhmetova, Project Manager of “Strengthening Civil Society to Advance Women’s Rights through Advocacy, Protection and Empowerment in Uzbekistan” Project, ACTED Uzbekistan

'Domestic Violence in Kyrgyzstan', Dr. Gulnara Ibraeva, Independent Consultant, Kyrgyzstan

'Fear of COVID-19 and its Impact on Police Officers during the Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan',  
Dr. Bekchoro Aliiaskarov, Senior Inspector of Legal and International Affairs, Academy of Ministry of Interior, Kyrgyzstan

'Education Quality in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) in Light of COVID-19: Gaps and Opportunities for Development in the Region',  
Siarova Hanna Pereira and Loes van der Graaf, Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI), Vilnius, Lithuania

19 November 2020

**Panel 2: COVID-19 and Migration**

*Moderator: Dr. Mirza Sadaqat Huda, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy in Bishkek*  
*Discussant: Muslimbek Buriev, Contributing Author and Editor, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Tajikistan*

'Social Impact of COVID-19 Worldwide and in Kyrgyzstan: Findings from the Life with Corona Study', Dr. Damir Esenaliev, Senior Researcher, IGZ - Leibniz Institute of Vegetable and Ornamental Crops, and ISDC - International Security and Development Center.

'How to stay and earn at home: Migration issues in Kyrgyzstan', Nina Miholjic, Integration Officer, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Serbia

'Labour Migration in the Shadow of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan', Bermet Akylbek kyzy, Independent Researcher, Kyrgyzstan

'Labour Migration in the Shadow of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Case study of Tajikistan', Sherzod Shamiev, Saferworld Tajikistan, and Doriyush Soliev, Independent Researcher, Tajikistan

20 November 2020

**Panel 3: COVID-19 and Foreign Policy of Central Asia**

*Moderator: Dr. Emil Dzhuraev, Senior Lecturer, OSCE Academy in Bishkek*  
*Discussant: Svetlana Dzardanova, Associate, Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies*


'Central Asian Public Opinion on Covid-19 Pandemic,' Kasiet Ysmanova, Communications Manager and Researcher, Central Asia Barometer

'China's Medical Diplomacy in Uzbekistan', Niva Yau Tsz Yan, Research Fellow, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

'What has COVID-19 Revealed about International Relations of Central Asia?' Dr. Shairbek Juraev, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

'The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the EU-Central Asia Cooperation,' Ana-Maria Angheliescu, PhD Candidate, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration Bucharest, Romania

Rapporteur: Ivana Vuchkova, alumna of the OSCE Academy (2016), Programme Coordinator at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, North Macedonia



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