

“Even the most impressive amounts with inefficient institutions and systemic problems, when money does not reach the addressees, will not amend the situation,” independent expert Sergei Marinin analyzes Kazakhstan’s government measures during the coronavirus pandemic in an article, written specifically for CABAR.asia

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Former head of the representative office of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Kazakhstan, Melita Vujnovich, now holding the same position in Russia, mentioned on April 15[1] that “Kazakhstan has made significant progress” in the first month of the pandemic, noting also that the country had sufficient potential for this progress. On the air of the Russian federal television channel in the evening show with Solovyov, she confirmed the same idea, which immediately caused a flurry of bewilderment in Kazakhstan itself. Against the background of dozens of video messages from doctors about the lack of protective equipment, crowded halls of banks and fights in the lines of desperate people who want to receive social benefits, human rights violations during the quarantine period, the assessment of the state’s efforts to resolve the current socio-economic and epidemiological situation raises many questions.

### **A few numbers**

The coronavirus pandemic took the whole world by surprise. China, where the outbreak began, notified WHO only by the end of December 2019, which was one of the factors for its rapid spread in the world. The COVID-19 outbreak received the status of a global pandemic only in the first decade of March. Back then the chief WHO official mentioned[2] that this is the first pandemic in history, the course of which mankind will be able to control.

Kazakhstan “expected” the first recorded cases of infection from March 11 to 16. The country’s chief sanitary inspector, Zhandarbek Bekshin, spoke on March 10 that the coronavirus should finally appear in the country,[3] by referring to scientists’ mathematical predictions. Indeed, already on March 13 the first officially registered case appeared in Kazakhstan, and from March 16 the state of emergency began to operate in the country. To this date, the former president Nazarbayev and the head of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan are hospitalized with the virus, and the total number of infected has reached more than 18 thousand (excluding asymptomatic), and almost 8.5 million in the

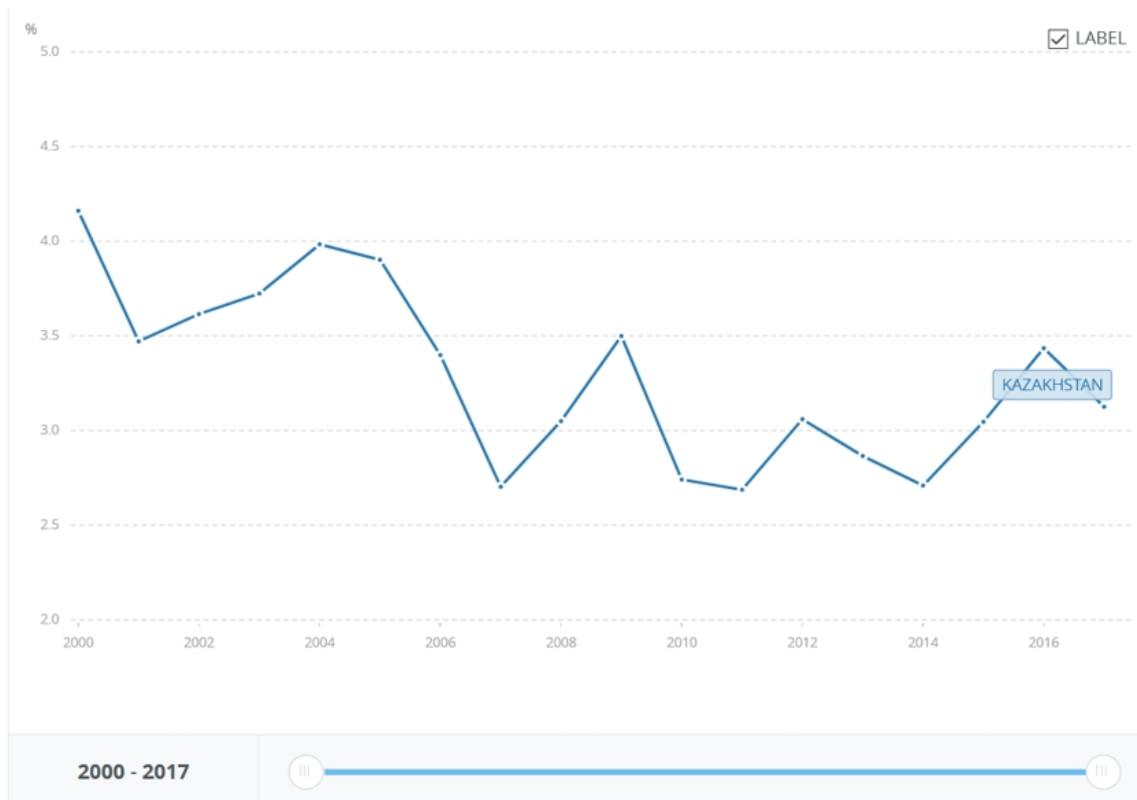
world.

### ***Kazakhstan in the footsteps of global response measures***

The measures taken by the state primarily concerned emergency investments in the field of healthcare, social support of the least protected layers of the population, and business support. Concerning the **protection of citizens' health** and preventing the spread of the virus, Kazakhstan has introduced enhanced control measures long before the detection of infected individuals in the country. From the beginning of January, sanitary and epidemiological control was strengthened at the borders, the planning of additional places for hospitalization of patients, and the purchase of protective equipment for physicians began. In the period from March 16 to May 11, there were strict quarantine measures in Kazakhstan, the movement of citizens was limited, and many public places and businesses suspended their activities. In addition, the entire educational sector began to transfer the format of work to online mode in a quick manner. According to the estimates<sup>[4]</sup> of Caroline Clarinval, the WHO representative in the Republic of Kazakhstan, - the country was in a unique position when it became possible to rely on the accumulated experience of other states, but how much of this experience was used, remains an open question.

Insufficient provision of medical personnel and doctors with protective equipment has become one of the central problems that the state has resolved inconsistently. Almost a quarter<sup>[5]</sup> of the total number of infected people are doctors who had to work at risk. This state of affairs revealed the systemic problem of underfunding of health care, which, inter alia, was solved through humanitarian aid.<sup>[6]</sup> Compared with countries with the same level of socio-economic development as Kazakhstan, where about 6.3% of GDP is spent on healthcare system, and countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where the same indicator is 9.3%, Kazakhstan spends on average<sup>[7]</sup> just over 3% on healthcare, which is an extremely low rate. However, it should be noted that Kazakhstan promptly launched a campaign for mass testing of citizens for the presence of coronavirus infection. For the period of June 16, around 1,159,989 people were tested,<sup>[8]</sup> which is a high indicator against the background of the region. Doctors of Kazakhstan had also received additional salaries, but not all of these premiums reached their destination point.

The share of annual GDP on healthcare in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2000-2017 (in%)



Source: World Health Organization Global Health Expenditure database ([apps.who.int/nha/database](https://apps.who.int/nha/database))

The Kazakhstani public also criticized the government's decision to separate patients with obvious signs of coronavirus infection and the so-called "asymptomatic", those who have mild or almost no symptoms. Some experts claim<sup>[9]</sup> that such an approach does not allow to see the completeness of the picture of the spread of the virus in the country and complicates the control and introduction of selective quarantines. However, even WHO, being the most authoritative organization in this matter, clarified on June 9<sup>[10]</sup> that scientists are not sure how often asymptomatic carriers cause new infections and the spread of the virus. Kazakhstan continues to keep records of asymptomatic carriers, which is quite consistent with world practice. Before clarification of this issue by WHO, this tactic is quite acceptable.

Regarding **social protection measures**,<sup>[11]</sup> today 190 states and territories have planned, introduced or adapted various strategies to support their citizens in response to the challenges of the pandemic. Direct social benefits to citizens are the most popular way of support in the world, where almost 60% of states have followed this path. Kazakhstan was no exception and outlined its position<sup>[12]</sup> to support vulnerable segments of the population who lost income during the quarantine period by allocating 42,500 tenge (an indicator equal to the minimum wage in the country), as well as food packages for 1-2 months, while in the

world the period of direct payments as the main type of support amounted to 3 months in average. There were much more citizens who lost their income in the conditions when the informal and shadow economy was developed in the country than was indicated in the list of the new law on social payments. Therefore, 8 million people tried to apply for receiving this amount, bypassing formal requirements. A threat of punitive response followed from the state. As a result, it was decided not to pursue anyone, but to carefully check the applications. Departure from restrictions and additional conditions allowed 4, 5 million Kazakhstanis receive this social payment. Nearly 3 million citizens received [13] same payout a second time as well.



#### Culture of Protecting Personal Data: From Online Freedom to Digital Surveillance?

It is also noteworthy that, during the state of emergency, Kazakhstan effectively deployed a system of online tools to coordinate the receipt of social benefits, and to inform citizens about the current situation. A single resource [www.coronavirus2020.kz](http://www.coronavirus2020.kz) was created, where all relevant statistics on coronavirus infection are published on daily basis. It was quite easy to apply for the required payments through the (e-gov) government services portal, quickly receiving an electronic digital signature, as well as a number of additional websites [14] that were immediately developed, as well as through various Telegram bots.

An important link in **state business support** [15] was the abolition of taxation and payment of taxes for certain types of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) for six months (from April 1 to October 1), including catering, certain trade sectors, transportation services, consulting services, IT- sector, hotel business, tourism. However, according to some experts, such a measure is nothing more than an attempt by “the state to keep entrepreneurs in a transparent tax corridor” [16] so that they do not move into the gray zone of the economy, switching to the payment of salaries to employees “in envelopes”. There are also risks associated with the procedure for obtaining preferential government loans for businesses carried out by second-tier banks. According to political scientist Sanjar Bokaev, this process is complicated by a multilevel bureaucracy, the absence of collateralized property in most SMEs, and hence access to financial instruments of state support, and a long time for

obtaining loans, which the business does not have in the difficult crisis conditions. All this makes government measures to support business, albeit an important element in the overall structure of supporting the country's economy, but highly complicated and vague.

### ***Violations of human rights and the adoption of repressive laws***

Unfortunately, human rights violations have occurred in many countries of the world, mainly in authoritarian countries, including Kazakhstan. The head of the UN, Antonio Guterres, called the corona-crisis<sup>[17]</sup> a crisis of human rights and spoke out in their defense. In Kazakhstan during the state of emergency, the main problems in this area were the detention of activists and journalists on charges of disseminating false information, administrative arrests on not always clear legal grounds, and the fact that citizens were walled up in building entrances without the possibility of going outside.

The most high-profile event of this series was the detention and arrest of Alnur Ilyashev, an activist from Almaty. He is accused of "disseminating knowingly false information during the state of emergency in the country." The lawsuit is complicated by quarantine and takes place online, causing many technical difficulties. The terms of the proceedings, when neither the defendant, nor the lawyers have the opportunity to hear the rest of the participants in the trial, seem like some kind of poorly hidden attempt to silence the entire civil society.

In this regard, the signing of the "new" law on protests, which has already been criticized by many international and Kazakhstani human rights organizations, is a continuation of the repressive trend of the state, accelerated by the pandemic. It was impossible to mobilize the democratic opposition of the country under emergency conditions and to defend their views against this law by democratic means offline. Therefore, the adoption of a tougher law went in violation of international standards.

### **Conclusions**

Despite numerous difficulties and shortcomings of the policy pursued by Kazakhstan to reduce the risks of the spread of the virus, the state has done and continues to do quite a lot. The authorities have been entitled to undertake tremendous responsibilities. The crisis affected the whole world, and few were fully prepared for the rapid development of such a negative scenario in the global economy. Kazakhstan is moderately successful during this difficult period, with relatively low rates of infection, yet listening to international experience, but having a number of systemic crises before the pandemic.

Systemic problems in the areas of governance, the fight against corruption, and insufficient funding for healthcare have intensified, and it is important for the government to take decisive measures against the backdrop of the crisis. The introduction of strict quarantine to “equalize the curve” was the right step and yet demonstrated the priority of human life. According to President Tokayev,[\[18\]](#) the fight against a pandemic in the Republic of Kazakhstan cost the budget 13 billion USD, or 8% of the country’s annual GDP. *Even the most impressive amounts with inefficient institutions and systemic problems, when money does not reach the addressees, will not amend the situation. Accordingly, it is important to carry out in-depth reforms, and not just patch holes.*

Timely and efficient deployment of communication channels and informing Kazakhstani with relevant and verified information was also an important achievement of the government. In the context of the corona-crisis, the dominance of fake news, general neurosis on this basis and uncertainty, especially at the beginning. Nevertheless, the state tried to provide access to this important information, which is certainly a significant condition for a successful pandemic survival. However, it is important to understand that excesses during the state of emergency, the criminal prosecution of activists or ordinary citizens who claimed violations of their rights and the lack of protective equipment for doctors – are unacceptable.

The second wave of the pandemic is likely to come. Many countries predict further mass impoverishment. The global decline in GDP and the negative growth of economies around the world are inevitable. In this regard, Kazakhstan, as part of the global economy, will also unavoidably suffer. If we are not able to influence external factors, then we, as a society, must pay great attention to the problems of our own citizens. And the government should be in solidarity with the people in difficult times, and not fulfill the function of the gendarme, which is familiar to it. Difficult times require non-standard solutions and the current crisis can become that eternal impulse that is constantly looking for power, where the central place should be taken by human life.

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## Corona-crisis in Kazakhstan: Has the Government Coped with the Consequences of the Pandemic?

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