April 2020 in Central Asia is remembered for the scale of outbreaks and the number of deaths from coronavirus, extended lockdown and quarantine, terminated governmental events, anti-crisis measures, currency surge and stabilization. The analytical platform CABAR.asia provides a brief overview of the most significant events in the region over the past month.

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KAZAKHSTAN

Epidemiological situation

As of April 1, Kazakhstan reported 386 active cases, 2 deaths, and 26 recovered from coronavirus. By April 30, the number of coronavirus cases in Kazakhstan totaled 3402, whereas 866 recovered and 25 died[1].

Extended lockdown

On April 29, Kazakh President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev signed a decree to extend the lockdown across the republic until May 11, 2020[2].

This is a follow up to the April 14 decree, which extended Kazakhstan lockdown until May 1, 2020[3].
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Eased restrictions

On April 29, the state committee on securing emergency rule decided to ease restrictions. The Committee approved of the list of business entities to reconvene from May 4 in all regions.

Among them are ICT companies, non-food shops, barbershops, notaries, and microfinance organizations. The Committee also reported on the resumption of flights from Nur-Sultan and Almaty to several cities[4].

At the state committee meeting on April 27, another list of business entities was approved to reconvene in all regions starting from April 27, and from May 1 in Shymkent, while maintaining strict public health standards[5].

Industrial enterprises, construction companies, transport services, banks, and financial organizations, along with other services, resumed their work. Besides, the resumption of air services between Nur-Sultan and Almaty to take place starting May 1[6].

Canceled statewide exams
On April 10, Kazakhstan’s Education Ministry had reported the cancellation of final exams for grade 9 and 11 students. In distance learning, the final performance review will be based on end-of-course assessments[7].

**Revocation of Bek Air License**

On April 17, Kazakhstan’s Aviation Administration has revoked the airworthiness certificate from Bek Air. The certificate was revoked for failing to meet directives to address violations[8].

Previously, the aviation administration, together with the transport prosecutor’s office, had reportedly conducted a dawn raid on Bek air’s activities. Gross violations affecting flight safety were detected following the dawn raid[9].
On December 27, 2019, a plane had crashed near Almaty, killing 13 people. The Bek Air airliner on a domestic flight crashed into a residential building just after takeoff, having lost altitude.

**A note of protest to China**

On April 14, Kazakhstan sent a protest note to China just after the article “Why Kazakhstan seeks to rejoin China” was published on a Chinese website[10].

The author of the publication argues that the territory of modern Kazakhstan historically belonged to China. The author then claims that there are about 400 thousand ethnic Chinese that works in various areas and hold managerial positions in Kazakhstan[11].

According to the Kazakh side, such publication is inconsistent with the spirit of the everlasting comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries[12].

**Responses to the crisis**

On April 20, 2020, the government of Kazakhstan approved new taxation measures. The correction factor “0” was established for the rates of income tax for individuals, social tax rates, among others[13].

Taxpayers-residents of the Republic of Kazakhstan engaged in the passenger air transport are granted a VAT tax deferrals until January 1, 2021, calculated for a non-resident in maintenance and legal support of aircraft leasing[14].

The anti-crisis package also stipulates income tax deferrals for employees engaged in combating the epidemic.

**An increasing number of infected medical staff**

The Almaty Central Clinical Hospital was closed in April following the coronavirus outbreak among its staff members. As a result, health workers and patients were assigned to other hospitals. As of April 22, medical workers accounted for half of all COVID-19 cases[15].

According to the investigation of mass infection among doctors, it was found, medical institutions had no security clearances to test infected patients. Public services were not notified upon the isolation of patients in hospitals. Besides, the medical personnel carried their work without the required protective equipment; it is recorded on CCTV cameras[16].
The head of the public health department Tleukhan Abildaev said that the infected medical staff in Almaty will receive reparation for 2 million tenges [17].

**Special conscription campaigns**

On April 2, Kazakh President Kassym Zhomart-Tokayev signed a decree summoning of persons liable for military duty to equip the territorial troops of the Armed Forces[18].

Special conscription campaigns, under Kazakhstan’s law, are military summoning conducted to introduce and secure emergency rule, to ensure emergency management, and in other cases determined by the president of Kazakhstan[19].

**A new law on rallies**

On April 30, the Senate of Kazakhstan has approved several bills on the organization and conduct of peaceful assemblies[20].

The new bill was developed by the Information and Public Development Ministry. One of the draft law’s innovative principles is the holding of rallies in specially designated places. Venues will be determined by local authorities. The new bill also provides for a mixed model of peaceful assemblies – by notification and through regulation. Besides, the new bill stipulates that the coverage of rallies may become the reason for media closure[21].

The new law on rallies is widely criticized by experts and civil society members. The document, experts believe, pointedly limits the citizens’ right to peaceful rallies and the journalists’ rights to cover the public events[22].

**Quota for women**

On April 22, the Kazakh parliament approved the amendments to introduce a 30 percent quota for women and youth[23].

Kazakhstan’s Justice Minister Marat Beketaev believes that the introduction of quotas will actively engage young people in the parliament. He argues that this also preserves gender equality in local government[24].

**New hospital**

A modular infectious diseases hospital for the COVID-19 treatment was opened in Almaty on April 24[25].
The new hospital, built in 18 days, has a capacity of 280 beds. The hospital is equipped with up-to-date medical gear, including 28 ICU ventilators. The institution has been staffed by 75 medical facilities, including 100 nurses and junior staff[26].

Analogous institutions are now under construction in Nur-Sultan and Shymkent. The government has allocated a total of 800 million tenges for the construction of hospitals.

**Foreign aid**

- On April 24, China sends personal protective equipment to Kazakhstan[27];
- On April 22, the US government allocates $800 thousand to combat coronavirus[28];
- On April 19, India sends aid in the form of 30 thousand medicines[29];
- On April 13, Poland sends laptops and 100 thousand medical masks[30];
- On April 10, Chinese businessman Jack Ma sends PPE[31];
- On April 9, Chinese doctors arrive in Nur Sultan to assist in the fight against coronavirus[32];
- On April 6, 13-ton humanitarian aid arrives from the UAE[33];
- On April 2, China sends PPE, thermometers, and a set of the test suite.[34]
KYRGYZSTAN

Epidemiological situation

On April 1, Kyrgyzstan reported 111 active coronavirus cases, zero death toll, and 3 cured patients. By April 30, the number of cases totaled 746, whereas 462 recovered and 7 died[35]. Coronavirus had been revealed in almost all areas of the country except for the Talas region.

Lockdown

On April 14, President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov signed a decree to extend the lockdown until April 30, 2020. The emergency rule is extended in the cities of Bishkek, Osh, and Jalal-Abad; as well as Nookat, Kara-Sui, and Suzak districts[36].

On the same day, the president signed a decree to introduce the emergency in Naryn town and At-Bashy district[37].
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On April 28, the president has extended lockdown in the cities of Bishkek, Osh, and Jalal-Abad, and the At-Bashy region, until May 10, 2020. Meanwhile, ending a lockdown in Karsu, Nookat and Suzak regions, along with Naryn town. These areas will be under the emergency state[38].

Cabinet shuffle

Sооронбай Жээнбеков signed a decree on April 1 dismissing Vice Prime Minister Altynay Omurbekova and Health Minister Kosmosbek Cholponbaev[39].

At the Security Council meeting on March 31, the president criticized the former minister for his poor work in supplying medical staff with personal protective equipment (PPE)[40].

By a presidential decree of April 1, Sabirzhan Abdikarimov was appointed Health Minister, while Aida Ismailova was named Vice Prime Minister.

The partial lifting of restrictions
On April 16, Kyrgyzstan’s “southern capital” commandant Malik Nurdinov signed an order to reduce curfew hours in the city of Osh, as well as in the Nookat and Kara-Sui districts[41]. A day earlier, Bishkek’s commandant’s office stated its intention to reduce curfews in Bishkek[42].

Following the negotiations with the Chinese side, it was agreed on April 14 to restore the Irkeshtam checkpoint operations on the Kyrgyz-Chinese border. The checkpoint was reopened exclusively for freight traffic between the two countries[43].

Kyrgyz Prime Minister Muhammedkaly Abylgaziev, on April 28, announced a phased procedure development for the resumption of economic activity. Resumption will take place in three stages, scheduled for May 1, 11, and 21.

Among permitted economic activity are the industry and production, construction, repair and maintenance of vehicles, notary services, trade, taxi, and the media[44].
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Social payments

On April 10, the Kyrgyz government determined the amount of reparation to medical staff infected with the coronavirus. The government will allocate 200 thousand soms in case of COVID-19 infection, and 1 million soms in case of death[45].

Prime Minister Muhammedkaly Abylgaziev signed a decree on April 16, on the allocation of 200 million soms to provide food to people in difficult life situations during lockdown and emergency state[46].

Coronavirus Amendments to the Criminal Code

On April 1, Parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal Code. The document provides for several fines and other types of punishment (such as imprisonment) for violation of public health and safety rules[47].

Re-scheduling governmental events

On April 6, Sooronbai Jeenbekov signed a decree abolishing the spring conscription campaigns. The decree on the military discharge of the members of the armed forces was also suspended[48].

On April 17, the National Statistical Committee re-scheduled the country’s population and housing census until further notice[49].

On April 28, the president said that the Immortal Regiment rally, dedicated to the 75th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, will be held online[50].

Exchange rate stabilization

On April 2, the dollar has appreciated to 85 soms. The National Bank, as a result, was forced to intervene in the foreign exchange market, selling a total of $ 14.2 million[51].

This intervention is the eighth since the beginning of 2020. 216 million dollars have been sold since early 2020[52].

Evacuation of citizens

177 Kyrgyz citizens arrived from Novosibirsk on April 22. All passengers were sent in isolation centers for safety reasons[53].
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A charter flight arrived from Istanbul on April 24, with 349 Kyrgyz citizens on board[54]. Another flight arrived from Istanbul on April 17, carrying 211 people on board[55]. The latter had passengers that tested positive for coronavirus[56].

178 Kyrgyz citizens arrived from the United Arab Emirates on April 28. Additional two charter flights for Kyrgyz citizens in the UAE are to be carried out shortly[57].

A flight with 157 Kyrgyz citizens arrived from Yekaterinburg to Bishkek on April 28[58].

There have been many reports over the past month that Kyrgyz citizens abroad are not able to return to their homeland due to the pandemic. Labor migrants were reported under a difficult financial situation[59].
Controversy with health workers

As of April 30, there are 746 coronavirus cases in Kyrgyzstan. Of this number, 195 people, i.e. about 27 percent, are medical staff[60].

Health workers since early April have recurrently complained about the poor-quality protective suits and the lack of PPE. Representatives of the Health Ministry regularly reassured on no PPE shortages[61].

Special services pressured doctors to apologize publicly for disseminating allegedly false information[62]. Some activists argued that the authorities would rather silence those who speak up on critical PPE shortages rather than resolving the issues[63].

On April 15, MPs instructed the Prosecutor General to end the persecution for disseminating information on the reality of the fight against coronavirus[64].

Restrictions for media

On March 30, Bishkek’s commandant Almaz Orozaliev announced that no journalist will be granted an accreditation allowing unimpeded city movement during the lockdown. The decision is reasoned by the safety and health of journalists[65].

Journalists believe that restrictions on the work of the media impede the provision of reliable and timely information. They also refer to the fact that Kyrgyzstan’s constitution does not provide for restrictions on the media during the lockdown[66].

On April 13, the Committee on Resistance to Political Repressions cautioned against cleansing the media terrain by extruding independent media and opposing views on the eve of the parliamentary elections[67].

Social issues

According to the Interior Ministry, there has been a rise in suicide cases among minors after the quarantine imposition. The Ministry explained that a violation of the individual interacting with his immediate environment triggers a suicide attempt[68].

On April 24, the commandant of Bishkek said that there were 100 domestic violence complaints made between March 24 and April 24. This figure is 61 percent higher than for the same period in 2019[69].
Foreign aid to Kyrgyzstan

- Between March 30 and April 20, the Red Crescent has donated 20 thousand PPE, 4,700 food packages and 97 thousand booklets[70];
- On April 2, the World Bank approves the allocation of $12.15 million to purchase equipment and for ICU and isolation center repairs[71];
- On April 2, Uzbekistan sends humanitarian aid in the form of PPE and food[72];
- On April 3, the Republic of Korea allocates $50,000[73];
- On April 6, Russia allocates 5,000 reagent test systems. A total of 7,600 test systems and 10 thousand test packages were provided between March 3 and 21[74];
- On April 8, China provides 640 thousand yuan-worth PPE, PCR diagnostic reagents, and infrared thermometers. China also sends 21 thousand reagents SARS CoV-2 on April 2[75];
- On April 8, as part of initial UNDP support, 50 thousand masks and 2 thousand respirators are delivered to the country[76];
- On April 9, the Asian Development Bank approves $200 thousand aid to purchase medicines and equipment[77];
- On April 9, the Islamic Development Bank allocates a 350 thousand US dollars grant[78];
- On April 10, Chinese billionaire Jack Ma donates humanitarian aid in the form of PPE, thermometers, rapid tests, and ventilators for a total of 1 million 800 thousand yuan[79];
- On April 10, the OSCE Program Office announces the allocation of $100,000 for the purchase of PPE[80];
- On April 12, the Altynken gold mining enterprise transfers humanitarian aid for 200 thousand US dollars[81];
- On April 16, UNICEF, with the support of the UK Department for International Development, provides PPE in the amount of 2 million 620 thousand soms[82];
- On April 17, WHO donates 64 PCR test systems for 6,720 testings;
- On April 19, a group of medical workers from Poland arrives in Kyrgyzstan through WHO to help combat COVID-19[83];
- On April 20, a group of medical workers from China arrives in Kyrgyzstan to assist local doctors[84];
- On April 21, the Aga Khan Fund project, funded by Switzerland, allocates more than 3.5 million soms to support farmers[85];
- On April 28, the European Union announces the allocation of 36 million euros in the form of grants to support macro-financial stability, social protection, and food security.[86]
TAJIKISTAN

Epidemiological situation

On April 30, Tajikistan has confirmed the first coronavirus cases in the country. The Health Ministry reported 15 infected people in the Sughd region, as well as in Dushanbe. The Republican headquarters reported that about two thousand people are under observation.

With confirmed COVID-19 cases, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon held a regular government meeting on April 30. Rakhmon gave instructions on the preventive and sanitary measures, health policies, and awareness-raising campaigns for the people.
Until recently, Tajikistan was one of the few countries in the world with no coronavirus cases, according to local authorities. Pneumonia cases have increased in the country since early April, thus raising the doubts on the absence of the COVID-19 epidemic[89].

Cases of pneumonia

On April 27, Tajikistan’s Health Ministry reported hospitalization of 319 people, including 136 medical workers, with suspected pneumonia. Earlier, reportedly 11 people died from pneumonia in hospitals, whereas 8 people are currently in the intensive care unit. 107 people have been treated and discharged. The ministry said that pneumonia cases are rising with seasonal climate changes[90].

Coronavirus Prevention

- On April 30, the republican headquarters decided to announce summer breaks for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-year undergraduate students starting May 4, 2020. The headquarters also adopted the decision on the mandatory use of medical masks[91];
- 10 thousand 937 people were quarantined from February 1 to April 30, of which 8 thousand 438 were discharged[92];
- On April 29, the Dushanbe City Hall announced the termination of clothing markets until May 10, 2020[93];
- On April 25, at the republican committee meeting, temporary vacations were declared in schools, kindergartens, and colleges until May 10, 2020. It was also decided to temporarily ban public events and suspend the export of certain goods[94];
- On April 24, Dushanbe authorities launched large-scale city disinfection due to the coronavirus spread. Calcium hypochlorite solution is used in disinfection[95];
- On April 18, the Ulema Council of the Islamic Center banned public prayers and religious rites in the country’s mosques[96];
- On April 10, Tajikistan introduced temporary restrictions on entry and exit for foreign citizens and stateless persons[97].

Rustam Emomali The Senate Speaker

On April 17, Rustam Emomali was elected speaker of the Majlisi Milli, the upper house of parliament in Tajikistan. In the secret ballot, the candidacy of the president’s son received unanimous approval[98].
The presidential election in Tajikistan is scheduled for the fall of 2020. So far, neither the incumbent president nor his son has a stand for the election[99].

**Diplomatic Note to Kazakhstan**

On April 27, the Tajik Foreign Ministry representatives sent a note to the Kazakh side requesting a legal evaluation of one of the episodes on Kazakh Patrol tv show[100].

In one of the episodes, Kazakh police detain a person of an unkempt appearance. He is mistaken for a migrant from Tajikistan and taken to the department, where he is asked to wash the car and paint the corridor. Later in the story, it appears that the detainee is the Tajik ambassador, who lost the way to the embassy[101].

The Tajik side has demanded an early hearing per Republic of Kazakhstan’s legislation for defamation and intentional infliction of ethnic hatred.
Price increase

Over the last two months, Tajikistan has seen an increase in prices for certain agricultural products. Overall food prices rose by 1.5 percent, as a result. Potatoes went up by 21.4 percent, fruits by 11.4 percent, and vegetables by 8.6 percent[102].

Tajikistan’s National Bank attributes the price increase to foreign currency appreciation.

Conviction of journalist

On April 16, a Dushanbe city court has sentenced journalist Daler Sharipov to one year in prison, to be served in a penal colony.

Daler Sharipov was detained on January 28, 2020, for allegedly publishing more than 200 articles of an extremist nature aimed at instigating religious hatred[103].

On February 3, the journalistic community representatives, as well as several human rights organizations, made a joint statement to the authorities calling for an investigation on all internationally accepted standards[104].

Ban on Slavic suffixes in surnames

On April 29, the lower house of parliament passed amendments to the law on state registration. According to the amendments, Slavic suffixes are prohibited from using in surnames and middle names when registering newborns[105].

The amendments do not apply to those who already received birth certificates with the corresponding suffixes. The exemption will also be given for national minorities living in the republic[106].

The authorities believe that the arrangement will facilitate patriotic sentiments among the people.

Lowering the rate

On April 29, Tajikistan’s National Bank of Tajikistan has lowered the interest rate by 1 percent, setting it at 11.75 percent per annum.

The adoption is attributed to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a potential decrease in domestic inflationary pressure due to the import restriction of agricultural
products and the introduction of monetary easing policies[107].

Earlier, the World Bank has forecasted a drag on Tajikistan’s GDP growth due to the pandemic’s negative impact on the country’s economy. WB analysts predicted a slowdown in the republic’s GDP growth to 1.7% or lower this year.

**Foreign aid**

- On April 28, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, together with UNICEF, provides Tajikistan with PPE for 500 thousand somonis [108];
- On April 15, the European Union, in response to Tajikistan’s request, agrees to provide financial assistance for 78 million euros: 48 million in the form of a grant, 30 million in loans[109];
- On April 9, the United States Agency for International Development delivers 56,000 kg of food worth $ 171,000. The United States plans to allocate a total of 850 thousand dollars [110];
- On April 2, the World Bank declares allocating a grant of $ 11.3 million to finance the coronavirus emergency response program[111].

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**TURKMENISTAN**

**Epidemiological situation**

There has been not a single case of coronavirus infection officially confirmed in Turkmenistan. There are 14 countries left in the world that claim zero confirmed cases. Ten of them are Pacific island countries with a total population of just over 1.5 million people.

**Hurricane in Lebap**

A severe hurricane had hit parts of Turkmenistan on April 27. The Lebap Velayat is considered the most affected area, where the military traffic police blocked the roads and communications were cut off following the natural disaster[112].

Hundreds of residents are left homeless as a result. Dozens of dead and missing have been reported. The regional hospital is crowded with those affected. Besides, there has been the
discontinuation of the supply of gas, electricity, and drinking water for several days. Turkmenabad is subject to food shortages, resulting in overcharging[113].
Residents are outraged by the inaction of the central and regional authorities, as well as the state media’s silence on the problem. Turkmen television has not mentioned the difficult situation in the Lebap Velayat at all[114].

Despite that, President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a decree on April 30 to send humanitarian aid to Afghanistan[115].

**Hiding the epidemic**

On April 22, at a briefing with international organizations, Turkmenistan’s Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov denied allegations that the country’s authorities were hiding the coronavirus cases[116].

Once the representatives expressed their intention to visit Turkmenistan, the authorities decided to send the people in quarantine to velayats’ remote rural medical institutions. According to unofficial data, as of April 14, at least seven people with coronavirus were detained in the quarantine zone of Turkmenabad[117].
However, on April 27, during their visit, WHO commended Turkmenistan’s preventive COVID-19 measures. Turkmenistan was said to actively adhere to the WHO recommendations[118].

On April 10, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov participated in a video conference of the Turkic Council, where he said the country is taking measures to impede the spread of infection. He then claimed to his counterparts that the epidemiological situation in Turkmenistan is stable[119].

On April 16, the US Embassy in Turkmenistan indicated that the government may not be inclined to confirm the coronavirus cases in the country. The diplomatic mission recalled that Turkmenistan’s medical protocols do not comply with American standards[120].

**COVID-19 Prevention Measures**
On April 23, Health Minister Nurmukhammed Amannepesov stated that there are 30 thousand test kits for the coronavirus diagnostics. The Minister claims that there are three quarantine zones created in the country. 151 people, predominantly Turkmen citizens, were in there[121].

On April 20, amendments to the law “On Turkmenistan’s State” came into force, according to which trucks and rail transport are subject to disinfection[122].

On April 16, Turkmen Airlines published on its website a message extending the suspension of several international flights until May 20, 2020[123].

**Governmental events**

Despite the COVID-19 preventive measures, on April 15, the President of Turkmenistan signed a decree on the national Turkmen horse holiday[124].

On April 25, Ashgabat hosted the national holiday with Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov in participation. The event was attended by many, including government and public organizations representatives. Festivities, competitions, and various exhibitions have also been held[125].
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On April 7, for the World Health Day, mass recreational and sports activities were held in the sports complexes of the Olympic town involving members of the government and public organizations[126].

**Cash turnover reduction**

At a cabinet meeting on April 10, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov noted that a promising area for banks is to reduce cash flow and introduce cashless payments, i.e. bank cards. In this connection, it was instructed to regulate financial transactions with their use[127].

Cash withdrawals were a challenge for Ashgabat residents since July 2019. Several hundred people stood in long lines at ATMs. In November 2019, state stores added a requirement for cashless payment. The idea was to reduce cash turnover, which led to continuous queues at ATMs[128].

**Currency ban**
On April 1, the Central Bank ordered financial institutions to suspend salary payments in USD. Employees, from now on, will be paid in manats at the state rate[129].

Economic observers attribute new requirements to the crippling currency shortage in the country. The new rules will also apply to all foreign bank transfers[130].

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**UZBEKISTAN**

**Epidemiological situation**

As of April 1, Uzbekistan reported 181 active coronavirus cases, 2 deaths, and 8 cured. By April 30, the number of coronavirus cases in the country totaled 2017, whereas 1,096 recovered and 9 died[131].

More than 85 thousand citizens are in quarantine, 16.9 thousand of them are in isolation centers, 62.4 thousand are at home. More than 1000 patients continue receiving treatment in hospitals[132].

**Coronavirus Prevention**

On April 23, the government of Uzbekistan adopted a decree imposing restrictions on the export of raw materials (to produce medical appliance) until December 31, 2020. Restrictions are also imposed on the import of cement products. Temporary restrictions are enforced to meet the domestic market’s needs[133].

On April 18, a Special Republican Commission decided to extend quarantine rules and increased community policing until May 10, 2020, to counter the coronavirus spread in the country[134].

The Central Bank’s press service of the central bank, on April 13, said that the payment of pensions and salaries would be entirely through bank cards[135]. On April 19, the Ministry of Justice decided to lift commissions for pension bank card transactions[136].

Namangan region halted any traffic and citizens’ movement since April 13. Citizens can buy essential commodities within 100 meters of where they live[137]. By the time restrictions
were in place, the number of infected people was 65 in the Namangan region.

On April 6, Uzbekistan has imposed binding self-isolation regime for all citizens: a) citizens were kept from leaving their homes unless necessary; b) citizens over 65 were strictly forbidden to leave their homes; c) citizens are called upon to practice social distancing of 2 meters; d) motor vehicles and bicycles movement is also limited[138].

**Easing of quarantine rules**

On April 30, a Special Republican Commission to combat coronavirus decided to ease certain quarantine rules. Drivers were authorized to use their private cars at a particular time of the day. The Commission had reopened the traffic between cities, districts, and regions to individuals engaged in agriculture[139].

“Easing of quarantine requires smart decisions,” said President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at a meeting of the Special Republican Commission to Combat Coronavirus.

Taxi services to resume their work within the allotted time starting April 30. Research
institutes can resume their scientific work in laboratories and departments[140].

On April 25, the Crisis-response Commission decided on the resumption of certain business operations. Construction materials markets, auto parts stores, major car services, insurance companies, and notaries are authorized to reconvene. All these entities must comply with public health and safety requirements under quarantine[141].

**Responses to the crisis**

Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree on April 27, approving new arrangements for business support. The current decree has extended the time for interest-free deferrals until December 31, 2020. Also, the relief payments for an employee are to increase from 4.22 to 7.5 times the minimum wage[142].

The head of state signed a decree on April 15 “on measures to ensure the sustainability of the state budget and timely funding of priority actions during a pandemic”. The priority areas for improved budget spending are the following: immediate actions, re-scheduling irrelevant projects, and expenses, the payment of internal and external state obligations, among others.[143]
On April 3, Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree on additional measures to support the population, the economic sectors, and business entities[144]. The document is comprised of 12 items, among them are the zeroing of tariff peaks for the import of selective goods, the payment of allowances to families with children, the suspension of income tax assessments, lower hurdles for gas and electricity prepayment, among others[145].

COVID -19: education

On April 30, at a meeting on quality education, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said that university final exams are to be held online[146].

On April 21, the Justice Ministry announced that the rest of the school year will be held remotely as part of the Online School project. The educators will continue their work online[147].

Stormwind

On April 28, Shavkat Mirziyoyev visited two districts in the Bukhara region that had been damaged a day earlier by a strong wind. The natural disaster has damaged 5300 buildings and 415 vehicles. It also caused 295 accidents in the gas supply system. 41 people were injured and 1 died[148].
Meeting with locals, the head of state said that the government will allocate all the resources necessary to restore the Karakul and Alat districts. The President also instructed the infrastructure repair and the population assistance provisions[149].

**EEU observer**

On April 28, the Legislative Chamber approved the proposal of the Government on Uzbekistan’s EEU participation as an observer. Out of 132 parliamentarians, 86 expressed their support, 32 opposed, and the rest abstained[150].

In early March, the Uzbek government recommended that parliament consider the proposal on Uzbekistan’s EEU participation as an observer. This matter is to be considered by the Senate as well.

**Presidential Public Chamber**
On April 16, Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree on the creation of a public chamber under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Fostering the institutionalized dialogue between civil society and the state will be of the chamber’s core activity. The Public Chamber will consist of 50 members.

The Public Chamber would qualify as a permanent advisory body. Its activities to be implemented by the staff of the chamber under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

**Decree on reforming the propiska (residence permit) system**

On April 22, Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree on measures to reform the procedure for permanent residence and registration at the place of residence. The purpose is to ensure the right of citizens to freedom of movement and choice of residential places.

The decree is to be implemented in two stages. The first step is to shift from a permanent residence permit to registering by notification. The second step is to cancel the discharge, stamping, defense commission attendance requirement, among others.

**A rise in the exchange rate**

On April 14, Uzbekistan’s commercial banks have appreciated the US dollar to over 10 thousand so’m. A day earlier, the dollar rate was about 9800 so’m in commercial banks and 9690 so’m in the Central Bank.

The Central Bank attributed the dollar appreciation to the internal and external supply and demand factors. The slowdown in trade and investment activities has reportedly led to a simultaneous reduction in import and export volumes while depressing the domestic currency market.

A sharp decline in remittances, along with the devaluation of the ruble and tenge, has a reinforcing tendency. These factors contributed to certain national currency forecasts. Therefore, there have been striking increases in foreign currency purchases by the population since early March.

**Mounting debt**

On April 24, the Uzbek government decided to review the foreign borrowing limit.

A limit of 4 billion US dollars was set in the state budget for 2020 while setting the
maximum delivery limit to 1.5 billion. The idea is to retain the debt ceiling below 50 percent of GDP. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the government will have to revise the debt ceiling for 2020-2021[159].

As of January 1, 2020, the total foreign borrowing amounted to 24.4 billion US dollars, of which 15.8 billion is the public debt, and 8.6 billion is the private-sector debt[160].

**An incident with a journalist**

On April 21, Marifat newspaper reporter Sharifa Madrahimova declared about exerting pressure from the khokimiyat of one of the Ferghana region’s districts. The journalist was detained in the interior department for filming a food fair[161].

On April 15, the Uchkuprik district administration announced the holding of a fair selling food at low prices. Curious about the pricing, the reporter tried to film the fair but was detained by the police officers allegedly to verify identity. According to Madrahimova, at that time vendors were already dismissed from the fair[162].

Having studied the incident with a journalist, the Information and Mass Communications Agency appealed on April 22 to the Prosecutor General’s Office requesting a legal evaluation of the actions of the district hokimiyat and police department[163].

**Foreign aid**

- On April 29, China sends a second batch of humanitarian aid, including 100 thousand test systems[164];
- On April 26, South Korea sends the first batch of humanitarian aid, including medical equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE) for 1 million US dollars[165];
- On April 25, the European Investment Bank expresses its readiness to allocate financial assistance for 130 million euros[166];
- On April 25, the World Bank allocates $ 95 million in emergency support. The funds will be used to support low-income families and improve the health care system[167];
- On April 23, Economic Development Minister Jamshid Kuchkarov claims the IMF’s readiness to provide a loan of $ 375 million[168];
- On April 22, Shavkat Mirziyoyev signs a decree on attracting 3.1 billion US dollars in the form of loans from international financial institutions. 277.5 million dollars will be allocated to support the health care, 700 million dollars – to support entrepreneurship, 300 million dollars – to utilities and energy enterprises. 1.8 billion US dollars will be allocated to the state budget[169];
• On April 20, the European Union expresses its readiness to allocate 36 million euros for the purchase of medical equipment[170];
• On April 17, a group of health workers from China arrives in Uzbekistan to help combat the spread of COVID-19[171];
• On April 17, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development allocates $ 150 million to three Uzbek banks to support local exporters and importers[172];
• April 16, the United States delivers $ 400 thousand-worth food aid for the vulnerable population[173];
• On April 9, China sends medicines and medical supplies[174];
• On April 8, the Islamic Development Bank allocates 17 million US dollars to purchase medical equipment for new clinics[175];
• On April 1, the Russian oligarch, philanthropist Alisher Usmanov sends $ 20 million to the Charity and Health Foundation under Uzbekistan’s Health Ministry[176].

Humanitarian assistance from Uzbekistan

• On April 20, Uzbekistan sends the first batch of humanitarian aid to Russia. A total of 5 million medical masks are to be sent[177];
• On April 15, Uzbekistan sends 500,000 medical masks to Hungary;
• On April 11, Uzbekistan sends PPE to the Republic of Belarus;
• Between April 1 and 9, Uzbekistan has sent PPE and food to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan.

CENTRAL ASIA

Strict quarantine rule

The Amnesty International referred to the repressive and forceful measures taken against the coronavirus spread in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. According to the human rights organization, these measures do not meet the countries’ human rights obligations[178].

Authors argue, “as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds in the region, many governments are interested in curbing dissent rather than protecting public health”. Authors stressed that country authorities use the newly introduced emergency powers to harass journalists and others attempting to share information[179].
Amnesty International said that any strict measures to prevent the virus spread should be temporary and proportionate and need to comply with human rights standards.

**Video Conference of EEU Countries**

On April 14, the EEU countries’ leaders met for an online working meeting. The online meeting agenda was comprised of only one matter: measures to combat coronavirus and maintain the economic sustainability of the EEU member states[180].

A joint statement outlined the countries’ willingness to cooperate further to address the negative impacts of the pandemic, maintain the integration and cooperation progress, and facilitate further economic development of the EEU[181].

Governments are entrusted with the implementation of coordinated actions to prevent and
combat the coronavirus spread, as well as maintain the stability of food market performance.

**Videoconference of the Turkic Council**

An extraordinary summit of the cooperation council of Turkic-speaking states was held by videoconference on April 10. The purpose of the summit is to consider enhanced cooperation in the fight against coronavirus[182].

The summit, chaired by the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, was attended by the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, as well as the Hungarian Prime Minister, Secretary-General of the Turkic Council and WHO Director General[183].

The participants shared the priority areas taken in individual countries to counter the pandemic. Several integrated programs were approved to ensure epidemiological monitoring in the Turkic Council’s member states, protect socially vulnerable groups, and
Beginning of Ramadan Fast

April 24 marked the beginning of the Ramadan month, the holy month for Muslims, in all Central Asian countries. In connection with the coronavirus pandemic, several Central Asian countries had to renounce collective prayers and iftars (evening meal, break of a fast)[184].

Only the Turkmen president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, made an exception to the general rule. This is evidenced by the mass celebration of the national Turkmen horse holiday. Also, mosques in parts of the country hold tarawih prayers (collective prayer in Ramadan)[185].

Meanwhile, each of the Central Asian republics contributed something special to the Ramadan celebration in isolation. For instance, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan organized online prayers in the Hazret-Sultan mosque. Muslims in Uzbekistan are also invited to read and listen to the Qur’an online.

The Muslim Board of Kyrgyzstan decided that believers should spend the first holiday week in complete isolation. In Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon called for the postponement of the fast for another time due to the global pandemic.

Homeless animals during the COVID-19

The beginning of quarantine marked an increase in the number of homeless animals in some Central Asian countries.

On April 10, Uzbek authorities warned citizens against contact with pets. Locals began to dump their pets to avoid the coronavirus infection[186].

Shelters for abandoned animals have been mightily challenged during the quarantine. Before quarantine, animal control officers brought up to 15 dogs per week to the shelter. Now the shelter accepts the same number of animals daily [187].

Kazakhstan animal rights activists said that since April 13, authorities halted the air traffic between the cities and free movement of volunteers. Since people cannot deliver food and other required assistance to the shelter, animals might starve to death[188].

It is important to recognize that COVID-19 is an airborne virus that is mainly transmitted from person to person. At present, the pet-to-humans transmission of the virus has not been
proven[189].

This material has been prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project. The opinions expressed in the article do not reflect the position of the editorial board or donor.


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