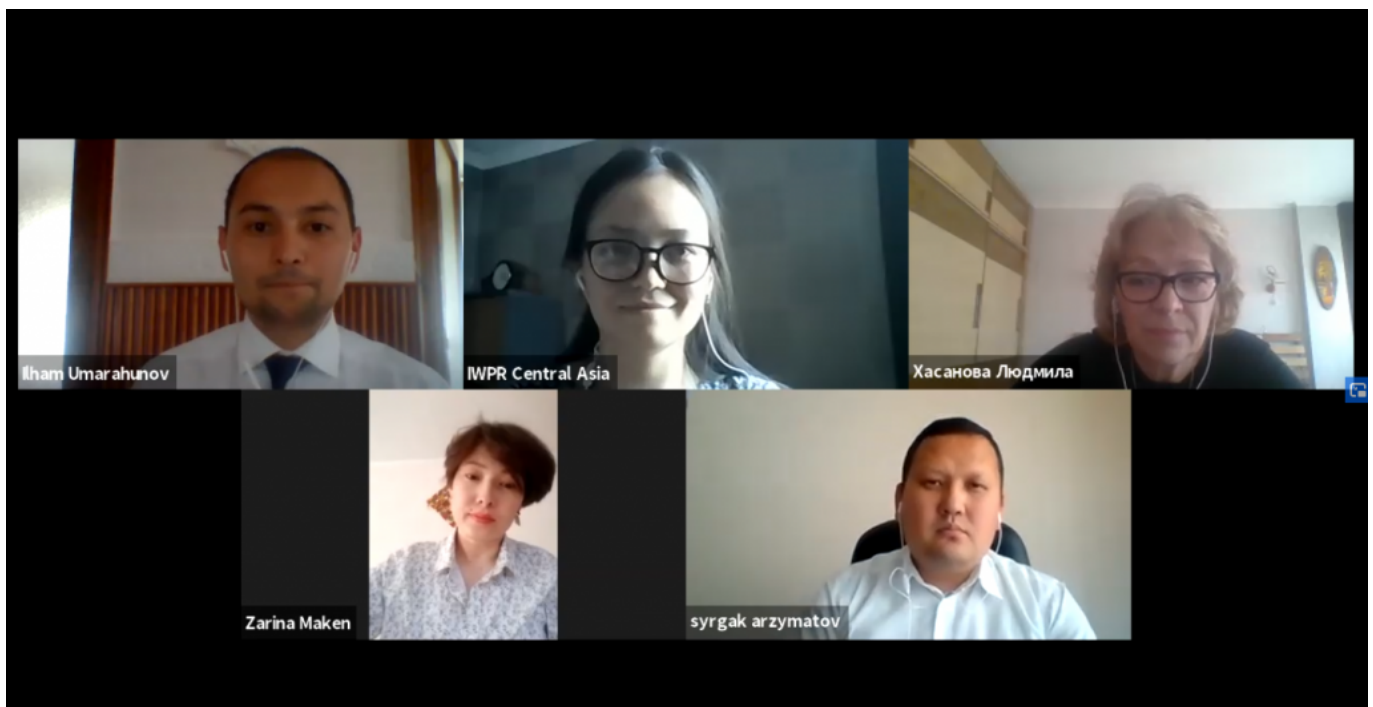


On July 17, 2020, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in Central Asia (IWPR CA) held an online discussion on public administration efficiency amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Kyrgyzstan. The event brought together Kyrgyz experts from various areas.

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The discussion moderator **Ilkhom Umarakhunov** opened the conversation and gave the floor to the first speaker, **Dr. Lyudmila Khasanova**, Associate Professor at the Management Department of Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University. She discussed how the state failed to contain the spread of the coronavirus, emphasizing the concept of “bureaucratic alibi” and sharing her views on actions the authorities need to take to address the problem.



*Lyudmila Khasanova*

Offering the World Bank dataset, wherein the quality of governance in Kyrgyzstan is ranked among the lowest in WGI (Worldwide Governance Indicators), Khasanova defined what an effective state is. An effective state is the following two: 1) a state that meets public expectations and 2) a state that makes the best use of resources.

In her words, the public's foremost expectation from the government was for the latter to contain the spread of the virus and save lives. To that end, the authorities had introduced quarantine by late March, but containing the spread of the virus turned out to be the only goal the state set for itself. The state did not provide for other prerequisites to overcome the outbreak. Most of the decisions taken had been shaped by a "bureaucratic alibi", i.e. the one that talks about the problem but does not solve it. In making the ex-post pronouncements (finding the remedial, not a preventive solution), the state actions anchored in stiff administrative and regulatory practices of "prohibit" & "restrict". The decisions were also formulated in a vague and abstract manner. International experience was not considered, and there were no arrangements to facilitate, execute, and control.

Hence, the "bureaucratic alibi", psychological traps disguised by the authorities (underestimating danger, overestimating possible success, etc.), low public confidence and corruption led to the decision-making of low efficiency and increased risk of the virus spreading.

Khasanova also shared her views on the measures the authorities need to take in the current situation. The state needs to assess and predict possible scenarios, bet on preventive solutions, and embrace a proactive approach. The state must emerge as a transparent and accountable partner not an opponent to the civil society.

The second speaker, **Zarina Maken**, a consultant and civic activist, talked about civil society initiatives. Maken made the presentation on the mobilization of the society and business and the initiatives to cooperate with the government.

Zarina Maken said that in her volunteer experience, this is the first time she witnesses a large-scale social mobilization. If during the [spring] lockdown civil society had been targeting the food distribution, today it has shifted towards helping doctors, equipping hospitals, facilitating the medicine delivery and home visits; a huge fundraiser is underway.



Zarina Maken

Apart from the formal volunteer movements in the Kyrgyz Republic, organizations, and celebrities that fundraise, there are also a lot of people who directly assist those in need. Compatriots abroad demonstrate the support. Many Kyrgyz doctors who work in other countries had arrived in Kyrgyzstan to help.

Regrettably, there has been no commendable cooperation between civil society and government due to the eroded credibility. Instead, civil society, the population and business have joined their efforts. I should mention that in some areas, civic activists are working closely together with local authorities. While the central government is not heavily engaged with civil society, the work of activists resonates and gets supported at the local level.

Maken added that the confrontation between the government and civil society is also fueled by the third parties that suppress information and media freedom.

The expert's presentation also contained recommendations in these events. First, both government agencies and civil society neglect awareness. They must join their effort to inform and raise awareness of the population. Second, the issue of what to do with the humanitarian aid (equipment) after the epidemiological crisis reaches its peak is already echoing in the society. We can't let the state representatives maintain a list of the equipment, but we need to find a way to use them for the people's benefit.



Azamat Akeneev

**Azamat Akeneev**, economics and finance expert at the Business Development and Investment Council under the government of Kyrgyz Republic, discussed the state actions to revive the economy amid a pandemic.

The expert said that according to the semi-annual results presented by the National Statistical Committee, the decline in Kyrgyzstan's GDP growth is estimated at more than 5% and at 7% if you take away the Kuntor revenues. The earlier projections that the economy will start recovering in the latter half of 2020 did not come true, while a high number of coronavirus cases is only a push to an economic decline. By the end of the year, the country might experience the same or even greater drop in GDP. Historically speaking, Kyrgyzstan experienced the decline that lows in the early 1990s, when people were in a "survival mode".

Azamat Akeneev, however, disagreed with the view that the government made many mistakes or malpractices. Based on his experience, the expert says that government agencies responsible for the economy are attempting to address the situation; it's just that the public administration itself was not prepared for a crisis of this magnitude. The government cannot really influence the economy. The country's budget is a "survival budget", and most of it is spent on the operation of state agencies, budgetary institutions, and social payments. The government has no reserves and levers to support the business. It is, therefore, not surprising that this crisis has become a stress test for the public administration system of Kyrgyzstan.

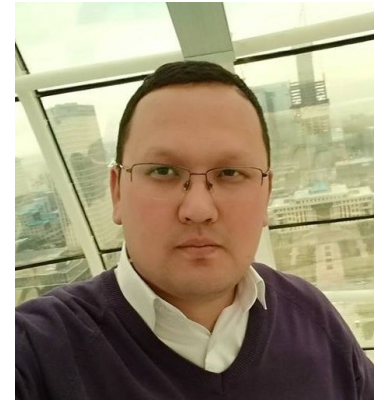
The expert argues that the country's national bank was the only state body that was able to do something. The Bank has resources and reserves, and most importantly the arrangements to govern the financial sector. Wish we could say the same about the Ministry of Economy or the Ministry of Finance.

So what can be done in a realistic assessment? Akeneev says that, first, the government needs resources to mitigate the economic crisis. And since Kyrgyzstan does not have any, it must borrow funds. The government should appeal to the international market and try to inject resources into the economy, even if this might affect the sustainability of the Kyrgyz Republic's debt. Otherwise, an "economic collapse" could ensue. The state should make the maximum use of all reserves. It also must seek a framework and, with political will, use part of the National Bank's reserves to support the economy. Also, the expert believes that the

state has no other choice than to fully or partially use Centerra Gold's asset to support the economy.

And finally, **Syrgak Arzimatov**, the board member of "The Association of Lawyers in Kyrgyzstan", discussed the resulting of the pre and post lockdown and evaluated the need to reform the civil service.

The expert identified two stages: the lockdown and the phase that followed after. The state of emergency has highlighted such problems as the uncoordinated governmental agencies that lack in the organization and had failed to quickly respond to the crisis. At the same time, the stage following the relaxation of quarantine measures revealed the problems of the health care system, the funds and donor assistance distribution issues. So why did this happen?



Syrgak Arzimatov

Arzymatov believes the problem traces back to the country's long-living erroneous personnel policy. The expert does not believe that absolutely all civil servants stand idly by but says that "there was not an inadequate number of skilled professionals" that could predict risks and engage in prompt decision-making. The pandemic brought to the surface a reluctance of the personnel and managerial staff: the country's economic standing had definitely had its impact, but all these issues in Kyrgyzstan are rooted in the human factor.

Syrgak Arzimatov also mentioned that the total number of state and municipal employees in the country is 27,232 people. This makes you reflect on the quality of so many employees. The expert believes the country needs the public administration institute to prepare the skilled civil servants, deploying the education system for the required department and the necessary qualifications, as the "society is ripe for reforms."

Moderator of the event Ilkhom Umarakhunov concluded the expert meeting, thanking all the participants for their presentations and expressing hope that the recommendations voiced would be conveyed to decision-makers.

Watch the full video recording of the expert online meeting:



If you have found a spelling error, please, notify us by selecting that text and pressing *Ctrl+Enter*.