

## THE PANDEMIC AND GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

It has been widely assumed that the pandemic offered opportunities to 'suppress dissent, test strategies of public control and strengthen authoritarian norms in Central Asia'. It was argued that while most of the states recognized the spread of the virus to garner international assistance, there were attempts to hide the extent of the infections, forbid doctors from talking about hospital conditions and restrict individuals from spreading 'false' information. Governments monopolized the pandemic narrative and emergency legislation was imposed criminalizing transgressions. It was, in most cases, security services with little experience in handling health crisis who were at the helm of the crisis management leading to a securitized approach to what was essentially a public health crisis. Response to the crisis varied across the region with some states imposing lockdowns and others continuing business as usual. While the style of crisis management differed each government claimed to be effective in 'managing' the crisis with initial efforts to compensate for income loss through cash transfers to the most vulnerable sections of society, though prolonged transfers were soon restricted by fiscal capacity. This background is generally used to examine the extent to which popular state initiatives were effective in gaining public trust in the region. However, this article looks at Parliamentary and Presidential elections and public protests in Kyrgyzstan in 2020 and early 2021, followed by constitutional changes to argue that structural factors, in this case illegitimacy of the government combined with mismanagement of the pandemic, defined public response to the government. The crisis of representational government led to the emergence of a populist leader Sadyr Japarov, in the midst of the pandemic, whose idea of a strong Presidential government proved more attractive in terms of ensuring accountability and reflecting the voices of the people. Mistrust in public institutions had existed even prior to the pandemic, particularly its healthcare system. Fragile at best the healthcare system collapsed under the strain of the pandemic. This led to significant reconfigurations of solidarity networks in the course of the pandemic, mostly directed by

the youth who provided alternatives to the collapsing medical facilities and created a vibrant civil society that supported the emerging populist political landscape. Popular discontent channeled through these social networks focused on the mismanagement of funds received for developing health infrastructure from abroad. In a remittance dependent economy, already under stress due to closure of borders, lack of access to healthcare and employment in Russia and at home and a non-existent intersectoral collaboration between migrants and their families became a challenge. Though migration was not at the center of political debates during the elections and the popular movements the deepening of existing vulnerabilities of both migrants and those left behind became embedded in the discourse around the demands for change. Populism had economic roots in Kyrgyzstan and the new political landscape gained legitimacy through a leader who claimed to stand for an open government free of corruption.