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Pandemic and Governance in Central Asia

Anita Sengupta

2022

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The pandemic officially emerged in Central Asia later than expected, given shared borders with China and the constant movement of goods and people across fluid frontiers. The first confirmed case was reported in Uzbekistan in March followed by cases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan recorded no official cases through the pandemic. For a society, largely dependent on remittances and revenue from energy, the economy became the first victim of the pandemic. A close second was access to information as the state imposed restrictions on information sharing including restricted access to social media, the internet and close monitoring of information related to the pandemic and its spread. 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 recognised 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.¹ Governments monopolised the pandemic narrative and emergency legislation was imposed, criminalising transgressions. In most cases, security services with little experience in handling health crisis were at the helm of the crisis management, leading to a securitised 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.

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, the illegitimacy of the government combined with mismanagement of the pandemic, defined public response to the government. President Sooronbay Jeenbekov’s regime was already unpopular because of the way the Covid 19 Pandemic had been dealt with but also because of allegations of corruption among the bureaucracy and an effort to usurp legislative powers.² This 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.

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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 channelled 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 centre 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.

The article begins with an examination of governance in Central Asia during the pandemic by first focusing on the institutionalisation of healthcare under the Soviet system and its reforms in the post-Soviet times before going on to analyse how this ‘re-constituted’ system withstood the test of the pandemic. It also examines the extent to which state support became both a necessity during the pandemic yet was also subject to criticism for its many failures at offering protection, the subsequent emergence of solidarity networks and the elevation of Sadyr Japarov as a populist leader in Kyrgyzstan. The final segment examines how the vulnerabilities faced by the migrants became a part of the discourse on change.

Institutions, Policies, Practices: From Socialised Medical Care to Health Insurance Scheme

Central Asian healthcare systems can only be understood in terms of an understanding of the socialised medical care that developed during the Soviet period in this region and has been identified as one of its redeeming features. The Soviet Union was the first state to pledge medical care to be made available universally and paid for socially so that it was free at the point of service. While the quality of service provided has been critiqued, this lifetime health security that was provided without the requirement of cash transactions had a significant social impact. The structure of Soviet socialised medicine was born in the background of epidemics and the typhus epidemic in particular with a clear understanding of the fact that the epidemic had to be contained if socialism was to succeed. Between 1918-28 Soviet socialised medicine was influenced by German hygienists who saw a link between social and economic conditions and illness and the solution was seen in combining health with maintenance, reflected both in the Russian term for health and the subsequent Commissariat that was established: *Zdravookhranenie*— combining health (*zdorovie*) and maintenance (*okhranenie*). It was assumed that as social imbalances were reduced, illness would be limited. However, after 1928 with the call for rapid industrialisation and collectivisation panacea once again became important.³

While health care was enshrined in the constitution, with centralised fund allocation, the emphasis was on solving immediate health issues rather than long term research or lifestyle medicine. The population was divided into medical districts which determined access to a territorially determined polyclinic. While this meant that each individual knew where to go for help, it also left very little choice. Industrial enterprises had their own healthcare facilities and there were a range of closed facilities for elites. The healthcare system had been effective in reducing

mortality and dealing with epidemics in the immediate post-war years however, by the 1960s as defence expenditure began to rise and fund allocation reduced, healthcare came under stress. By the end of the Soviet era, it suffered from an emphasis on quantity rather than quality, underfunding as a non-productive sector and an inability to deal with local requirements. For regions like Central Asia where medical equipment and pharmaceuticals had been supplied by Moscow in exchange for raw materials, there was the added problem of a lack of any local production to meet local needs. This meant that post-independence while the expectation for medical care remained high, the newly independent states often found themselves unable to meet the requirements for medical care, something that was often seen as a violation of a social contract.

In the immediate post-independence period, health was not a priority given the numerous other issues that the states faced, including economic recession, changes in production and allocation mechanisms, and a disruption in supply chains. For the health ministries, the most difficult issues were the decline in the supply of medical equipment, and the lack of medical knowledge and managerial skills as large numbers of Russians migrated from the Republics. In addition, the transition left in its wake, problems like an increase in non-communicable diseases but also communicable diseases like tuberculosis, diphtheria and malaria as well as mental issues associated with the transition and its economic impact. The healthcare system was inefficient, largely dependent on hospitals and long periods of hospitalisation and treatment protocols were outdated.⁴ While health care had been generally universally available and free at the point of service, certain deep-seated fault lines meant a search for a transition from the centralised Soviet model to more decentralised pluralistic models with a greater expectation for a more patient-oriented approach.

However, as supply chains dried up, there were inflation and payment-related problems and an inability to recover tax from the informal sectors. Health budgets suffered and the Soviet healthcare systems were no longer sustainable. All Central Asian states began to revamp their health infrastructure and discussed substantial changes in health care plans. However, healthcare reform was not easy, given the fact that most of the states lacked the skill sets for policy development and implementation as these had come down to them as directions from Moscow. The focus of the initial years was to find new ways to finance healthcare, allocating funds more efficiently and rewarding performance. The extent to which healthcare reforms in Central Asia have been successful in the post-independence years has been analysed by Healy, Falkingham and Mckee in terms of the three World Health Organization (WHO) aims that are sought to be attained—good health, responsiveness to expectations of the population, and fairness in financial contributions. They argue that while limited data from the Republics means that their ranking in the global health system must be treated with caution, it remains undeniable that they rank quite low.⁵ Most of the impetus for health care reform came from state efforts to look for finances and here most states saw health insurance schemes as a way to secure guaranteed finances. But given falling income this proved untenable and most states resorted to charging for medical services. While each of the five states adopted reforms, there were certain distinctive features in each.

In Kazakhstan, organisational and financial reforms were introduced through pilot projects in certain districts which were aimed at improving technology and enhancing the quality of medical care. There were also efforts at reducing hospitals and beds, and large-scale closure of rural hospitals. In Kyrgyzstan, legislation on health and medical insurance did not cover hospitals which are still regulated as per the Soviet era directives with staff and finance related to the number of beds. However, here also a revised health policy has been in the making with resources, reallocated to areas of particular need. In post-civil war Tajikistan, there were similar efforts at rationalisation of resources and launching of a private health care system. Turkmenistan followed a

gradual approach with an increasing process of hospital autonomy and the introduction of an audit system. In Uzbekistan rationalisation of the health care system has involved a similar system of closure of inpatient facilities which was compensated by day care and outpatient facilities.⁶

However, reform and restructuring was still ongoing process when the health infrastructure came under stress due to the pandemic. Along with the rest of the world, the Central Asian states faced a lack of medical facilities and equipment and funds to finance them with. The pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing problems in health care, increased mistrust in and magnified failures of the leadership. Erosion of medical facilities, offering herbal remedies and teas as the solution, the use of surveillance techniques to track and punish those who violated quarantine, and in general, the strengthening of state powers at the expense of the individual, which was feared would exceed the period of the pandemic, meant that state legitimacy was questioned. In Central Asia, the economic fallout of the pandemic was worse with states like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Tajikistan, with 30 per cent of its GDP dependent on remittances, has the least developed healthcare system in the region. Here, large-scale unemployment began with a strategy of denial as it did in Turkmenistan. Pandemic response in the region, therefore, varied with economic precariousness, determining levels of 'care'.

The Pandemic in Central Asia: Response and Nature of Post-Soviet 'Care'

Given the close economic relations between the Central Asian states and China, and the fact that they share porous borders that are easily transgressed by those inhabiting the borders, it was generally assumed that the pandemic would leave large numbers affected in the region. While correct data remains limited and in the initial stages of the pandemic, states like Tajikistan recorded unusually high deaths from pneumonia and not a single case of Covid, mortality and morbidity rates were low and healthcare systems were generally not overwhelmed by very large numbers of those infected with the virus. Only Kyrgyzstan registered significant deaths and an increase in infection rates after October 2020. It was in fact the economy that became the victim of the pandemic in Central Asia with debt sustainability, migration, job retention, private sector fragility and connectivity, emerging as the major challenges. The state of the economy had been precarious even prior to the pandemic with the reduction in remittances from migrant labours from Russia and the collapse in commodity prices of oil and gas. Strict lockdown measures limited the spread of the virus but regional growth was halted as trade was disrupted by restricted demand and connectivity. Consumption and investment declined as jobs were lost, and inequalities worsened with migrants and the urban poor mostly engaged in the informal sector and women being worst hit. All of these in turn impacted health and education.

Healthcare remained precarious with significant regional disparities in access and quality. According to an Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Report, Central Asian households have one of the highest out-of-pocket healthcare expenditures in the world, with the possibility of household pressure in the context of deteriorating public health and a failing economy.⁷ Reduction in migrant remittances and loss of revenue from extractive industries due to the closure of borders and reduction in international demands meant that even with the resumption of these in 2021, growth would remain sluggish and economies would contract significantly. The human cost of this economic contraction would be significant though once again it would vary depending on the dependence on migrant labour, levels of informality and urbanisation. Policy responses to this depended on the states' assessment of the health crisis and fiscal capacity.

While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan responded swiftly by imposing lockdowns, closing borders and offering supporting fiscal packages along with imposing sanitary measures, states like Kyrgyzstan reacted slowly but with more complex policy processes, and Tajikistan and Turkmenistan reported few or no cases and offered limited support.⁸ Recognising the effects of the lockdown on small businesses fiscal incentives like tax measures and simplified administrative requirements were offered along with support packages and rapid digitisation of services. Since restrictions affected employment, particularly in the private and informal sectors and unemployment figures increased, the government offered wage subsidies and short-time work schemes which were gradually wound down as restrictions were reduced. There was also an increase in social safety nets and in kind support to the most vulnerable. However, the pandemic meant a sharp reduction in revenues as commodity prices and remittances declined and currencies came under pressure. Debt ratios increased with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan faced the brunt of the distress. With the decline in trade VAT which constitutes about 33.6 per cent of the tax revenues of the Central Asian states saw a sharp decline.⁹

The impact of the slowing of business due to the lockdown was not the same in all sectors of the economy. Essential items and services like food and communication technology continued to operate. Other sectors of the economy like retail and construction became more vulnerable to the shutdown as people restricted activity in high contact areas. The service sector, informal employment and smaller firms faced greater problems and often opted to shut down. Informal employment, not covered by protection instruments and severance terms, and which formed the largest share in medium and small firms that bore the brunt of lockdown, faced layoffs and the possibility of long periods of lost income. The response of governments and central banks to this resulted in policy interventions including cash transfers. In Kazakhstan, direct social payments equal to one month's wage were instituted twice for the two months of lockdown. According to data from the Ministry of Social Protection, about eight million people applied for online transfers, a clear indication of the unemployment rates in the country as fallout of the lockdown.¹⁰ In Uzbekistan, the pandemic was followed by the collapse of a newly built Sardoba dam affecting citizens on both the Uzbek and the Kazakh sides. This, along with the reduction in energy prices, a drop in migrant remittances, the limitations of a debt-infested budget and spiralling inflation meant that Uzbekistan could not opt for direct cash transfer to mitigate the loss of income during the lockdown.¹¹ Economic assistance depended on humanitarian assistance from civil society and support from private entrepreneurs. The precarious nature of this assistance left possibilities of social tension.

The governments, however, claimed to have 'managed' the pandemic effectively with the leadership staking claim to having addressed the health crisis. This meant that in states like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan where the legitimacy of the government is based on addressing social issues, there were numerous initiatives. There was an attempt to mobilise pro-government youth organisations to raise awareness about the virus and the necessity of taking appropriate action. Similarly, the involvement of civil society and entrepreneurs in sharing the economic burden of the pandemic began with initiatives like pledging assistance by giving a month's salary to those in need, which began by being voluntary and then became compulsory with reports of the amounts being deducted without consent.¹²

In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Special State Commissions were instituted to deal with the pandemic and handle emergency situations. In Tajikistan, no lockdown was imposed. Instead, President Rahmon dismissed the Minister of Health for mishandling the situation and replaced him with Jamoliddin Abdullozoda, head of one of Dushanbe's largest medical institutions. There were also efforts to control the narrative surrounding the pandemic, with states like

Kazakhstan invoking articles of the criminal code that stipulated imprisonment for the dissemination of false information. Additions were made to the Uzbek criminal code to include violations of quarantine punishable by fines and imprisonment. A Cabinet decree allowed the confiscation of all equipment like phones and audio and video equipment belonging to the people infected with the virus to prevent filming inside hospitals. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, the Republican Coronavirus Headquarters criminalised the dissemination of false information and gave permission to only the state media to report on areas under lockdown. In Tajikistan, independent state agencies were blocked and Turkmenistan discouraged the very use of the word in the media.

The focus on managing the narrative instead of focusing on the pandemic meant that there were gaps in the state health and social care sectors. These were filled by civil society organisations that were already in existence and took note of the pandemic to adapt their social assistance to the needs of the time. Bakhrom Radjabov, in a study of two civil society organisations and two voluntary organisations, notes that the development of civic initiatives helped organise experts and volunteers during the pandemic.¹³ Ezgu Amal, an Uzbek charity foundation was established to provide medical assistance and, Peshraft a Tajik organisation with the aim to invest in the human potential in Tajikistan along with two volunteer groups in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan Never Sleeps and Together, were part of organising innovative services like providing oxygen at home and assisting those in need with physicians through social networking in platforms like Facebook and Telegram. There were also efforts at connecting with diasporas for raising funds for the purchase of masks, medication and food. During the pandemic, the governments showed a willingness to cooperate with community-based organisations and did not challenge the civic activism that accompanied it. Volunteers delivered food and medication and supported those who had lost their income and there was an acknowledgement of the fact that the traditional healthcare system had been unable to care for everyone.¹⁴ While this meant that there was disaffection with the system throughout the region, in Kyrgyzstan, the crisis led to the removal of the President and the emergence of a populist leader.

Crisis, Popular Politics and the Pandemic in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is one of the Central Asian countries most dependent on foreign remittances, particularly remittances from migrant workers in the Russian Federation. As such, the closing of Russian borders took a heavy toll on the economy. Suzy Blondin notes that Kyrgyz households, particularly from the mountainous regions of the country, whose family members worked in Russia, faced problems of mobility during the pandemic, which increased their vulnerability.¹⁵ Migrant workers were significantly more vulnerable during periods when travel was restricted and employment limited, and the World Bank estimated a 27 per cent reduction in income for countries of Central Asia and Eastern Europe.¹⁶ Along with this was a health crisis, a combination that Kyrgyz economists like Nurgul Akimova identified as a major factor that would contribute to a recession in the economy.¹⁷ The World Bank went on to report that the crisis would drive about 5.9 per cent of the population below the poverty line in the best case scenario and about 22 per cent in the worst case one. Since about 22 per cent or a quarter of the population is already below the poverty line as defined by the national poverty line in Kyrgyzstan, nearly 44 per cent, which is practically half the population, would be pushed below the poverty line.¹⁸ There were therefore clear indications of the need for appropriate interventions to alleviate the situation.

The pandemic also derailed the Kyrgyz state's fight against poverty. In Kyrgyzstan,

vulnerability to poverty has always been high with a large number of households just precariously above the poverty line. The possibility of a very high impact of the recession on these households would be inevitable without state support. Kyrgyzstan had taken early proactive measures to restrict the impact of the pandemic. While the closure of borders and suspension of airline traffic restricted the spread of the virus, it also led to isolation. Quarantine measures halted most economic activity with the exception of supermarkets and pharmacies. These measures also had social and economic impacts, including increasing domestic violence due to loss of employment and the prolonged periods of time that men were forced to stay at home. There were also layoffs, particularly in sectors that were unorganised, like garments, where most employees lacked employment agreements.

There were inevitable political fallouts of these economic impacts. In fact the previous macro-economic shock to Kyrgyzstan that had resulted from the Russian recession in 2008-9 with consequent fall in remittances being sent back home as well as the return of migrants to no income generating opportunities had resulted in 2010 in the overthrow of the Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. During the pandemic, the first to be affected was the financial market resulting in fluctuations in the value of the Kyrgyz Som, which resulted not just from the panic created in the international community by the health crisis but also due to the fall in oil prices. The pandemic also affected the repayment of foreign loans with China as the principal creditor. All of this contributed to a distrust of public institutions that was exacerbated by the health crisis. The Ministry of Health had already been at the bottom of 47 institutions that had been ranked according to their trustworthiness and was perceived as corrupt by most residents.¹⁹ On one hand, this led to a general disregard for the advice of the Ministry on Covid appropriate behaviour, and for norms creating conditions for the rapid spread of the pandemic and large numbers of fatalities. On the other hand, this also caused a reconfiguration of social relations and solidarity networks. As in many other parts of the world, youth organisations and non-governmental organisations became active in providing medical support with financial help from members of the community. However, a society that was dependent on local and often familial clan-based networks and support in times of emergency, now found itself getting increasingly isolated as the pandemic encouraged distancing. In Kyrgyzstan, social networking plays a significant part in access to resources and by limiting attendance at social events like funerals, the pandemic disrupted an essential aspect of social capital that impacted both social and economic life.²⁰ All of this contributed to social discontent that pointed, among other things, to the mismanagement of funds received by the state for infrastructure building during the pandemic as reflective of the crisis. When this was followed by the introduction of a bill that sought to limit access to information, there was significant popular backlash and the emergence of a populist leader. It is significant that Sadyr Japarov's supporters belonged to modest socio-economic backgrounds, salaried employees, small shopkeepers, labour migrants, unemployed people and suburban poor from informal settlements. In the weeks following the storming of the White House, they spoke about their lives in the 'speaking corners' around the Ala-Too Plaza. On the basis of participant observation during the protests, Asel Doolotkeldieva, describes, "Migrants spoke out publicly against their broken lives spent in migration; internal migrants shared their sufferings inflicted by lack of housing and jobs; residents of settlements spoke endlessly about their struggles against bureaucracy and corruption."²¹ During his exile in Russia, Japarov had maintained contact with the Kyrgyz migrants in Russia and the fact that many had subsequently returned due to the lockdown in Russia, created a sense of community. They hoped that Japarov who had faced similar injustice and lost close family members, would allow them a voice in the governance of the state and alleviate their problems. Stories of Japarov's personal sufferings at the hands of a corrupt regime were shared and this created a powerful connection between the protestors and their leader. Japarov

became a 'man of the poor', a 'protector of single mothers and orphans, and surrogate father to a million labour migrants who required but did not receive adequate state care.'²²

The appointment of Sadyr Japarov as Kyrgyz President in January 2021, at this juncture, has been analysed in terms of a crisis and a break in the 'normality' of the political process leading to the emergence of a populist leader.²³ Ivan Nokhrin argues that Japarov's populist discourse was built on the basis of antagonism between the 'Kyrgyz people' and the corrupt officials associated with former President Sooronbai Jeenbekov's government which was ousted in October 2020, following elections. Representing the conflict between himself and the Parliament as reflective of the conflict between 'the people' and corrupt officials, he was able to garner significant support, allowing him not just to become President but also make significant constitutional changes, substantially increasing his powers. Japarov resurrected the Soviet legacy of peoples' democracy to legitimise the constitutional reforms by instituting the People's Kurultai representing himself as a leader with 'people's origin' yet also an extraordinary individual.

Nokhrin goes on to argue that Japarov's designation as a populist leader challenges the basic tenet of populism as an alternative in a liberal democratic process, given the reality of Kyrgyz politics, though it does adhere to the state of anomie in the 1980s where, he argues, the roots of the present crisis is to be found. This was the period when there was a call to discredit the nomenklatura or Soviet bureaucracy and renew the rights and economic prosperity of 'the people'. This was followed by two decades when the first President's ideas of a 'common Kyrgyz' home was challenged by emerging ethnonationalism that triggered the first broad-based popular protests during the Tulip Revolution in 2005 and the first change of political guard. Kyrgyzstan's next President Kurmanbek Bakiev did not share President Akaev's position on interethnic unity and the next revolution, the Melon Revolution in 2010, was followed by large-scale ethnic violence in regions like Osh and Jalalabad. The next revolution followed elections to the Jogorku Kenesh (the unicameral Parliament) when President Sooronbai Jeenbekov resigned in favour of Japarov. The latter had been imprisoned when the 2020 Parliamentary elections were held and was released from jail to be appointed as the Prime Minister by the Kyrgyz Parliament and then to act as the President.

The populist platform on which Japarov ran his Presidential election campaign included bureaucratic delays and corruption involving a range of issues from cattle markets to renovation of schools and drainage systems, thus addressing a variety of popular concerns under a single banner of a conflict between 'the people' and 'corrupt officials', all the time representing himself as one of 'the people'. The 'peoples nationalism' that he instituted included deference to the kurultai, a platform where the common people had a voice. His swift transformation from a prisoner to the President reflected a lack of alternatives during a prolonged period of dissatisfaction among the people. It also showed that, at a time of global uncertainties, there was a search for stability that the Soviets had provided. Japarov exploited it by his own personal and social references to the Soviet past. Nokhrin argues that given the fact that there was not much space for political pluralism in the Soviet system, there was no reason to believe that Japarov's own legacy would be more democratic.²⁴ However, part of the success of his alternative populism was because the symbolic content of his rhetoric reflected the Soviet legacy and an era where social protection was the responsibility of the state. Social protection had been deemed as a basic right available to all citizens in the Soviet Union and this was recognised by Kyrgyzstan. However, the transition to the market economy and upheavals in the decades following independence undermined the feasibility of the old model. In 1990 nearly half of the population received social assistance in some form and expenditure on this was nearly 29 per cent of the GDP.²⁵ This was supported by transfers from the central government and became unfeasible after 1992. Kyrgyzstan developed a range of programmes

that cover social assistance and social insurance. However, these have evolved in response to particular demands and are not equally well developed. Liberalisation that followed also affected the nature of the economy and reduced employment in state owned enterprises which closed down. At the same time, spending on social protection declined and spending on pensions halved at a time when early retirement became a norm. Healthcare reforms and mandatory insurance entitled primary healthcare services free of cost and an additional drug package subsidised drugs through a network of pharmacies.

However, there are two groups of people who are excluded from social protection, unemployed youth and migrants working abroad. Employment opportunities for the young are mainly in the informal sector, which offers no social protection and labour migrants lack protection from the Kyrgyz labour protection system as well as from social protection systems in the place of their work, as in most cases they fall outside the legal framework and have no formal work contracts. They are also unable to access the informal social protection networks without returning to Kyrgyzstan. Since the availability of work is seasonal, most migrants come home during the winter months. Those who came home in the winter of 2019-20 were unable to return, as the borders were closed. The resultant decrease in remittances has meant a 4-5 per cent reduction in Kyrgyz GDP. Since in most cases they are the principal earners in their families, returning is never a permanent option. Similarly, the urban poor is excluded from these benefits.²⁶ The pandemic in Russia closed restaurants, non-food retail outlets, and construction work in Russia and Kazakhstan affected the migrant workers who generally work in those informal sectors. The temporary limitations of interstate and inter-regional mobility also adversely affected the migrants.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs along with the Embassy in Russia were primarily responsible for managing issues related to migrants. Their effort was to primarily provide aid to those in need and migrants stranded in Russian airports. A certain sum was allocated by the Kyrgyz state for distribution among the migrants in Russia and the UAE. However, given the large numbers and the undocumented nature of the migrants, this was not sufficient. Both the amount of aid, as well as the nature of their distribution and the corruption involved in the process, came up for criticism. There was also criticism of the lack of arrangements to bring the migrants home. Chartered flights and buses were organised for the purpose. However, the state advised that, since borders were closed and there was a better chance of employment in Russia, the migrants should not try to come home. There was, however, no state assistance for families of migrants either at home or abroad. The lack of coordination between the Ministries of Health, Economy and the Ministry of Labour and Social Development meant a lack of meaningful support for the migrants and their families in Kyrgyzstan.²⁷

Pandemic in a Migrant Society

Lack of employment opportunities across the states drives the large numbers of migrants who seek seasonal employment in Russia and Kazakhstan. This reduces labour market pressures on the home states and creates a corpus of revenue both for individual households and the states. Seasonal work as *gastarbeiter* becomes a necessity to support families and particularly families with growing children so that there is social acceptance of this necessity and its consequences. However, there is a complete lack of legal recognition of this numerically significant migrant group. Migrant workers remain unaccounted and invisible to state authorities due to a lack of appropriate legal framework and labour policies that doom them to an illegal and irregular status. Since most work

illegally, there are few correct estimates with numbers varying widely. About two-thirds are from Uzbekistan, some 25 per cent from Kyrgyzstan and the rest from Tajikistan and other CIS countries. At least half of them work in construction and in work that is shunned by the locals. Several others work in the expanding service sector, catering, transportation, delivery, retail and sales and the rest work as seasonal labourers in agriculture, tobacco, cotton fields, foodstuff packaging and processing.²⁸

The Central Asian migrant labour movement had traditionally been a seasonal one, where most travelled as unskilled labourers with no intention of settling.²⁹ While most of this movement was driven by economic issues, conflict situations in the post-Soviet states also led to a labour movement. The Tajik Civil War and the condition of the Tajik economy after the war remain the principal reason why large numbers of Tajik men moved to Russia and Kazakhstan. Similarly, in the aftermath of the conflicts in Osh and Jalalabad, Uzbeks no longer felt safe within the Kyrgyz Republic and this meant movement not just in search of security but also work. Migration is one of the ways in which the Uzbek minority in Osh and Jalalabad coped with the nationalist Kyrgyz policies and the negative propaganda that accompanied the conflict. Aksana Ismailbekov argues that sending young male family members to work in Russia was not just economically motivated but also a strategy to avoid conflict within the *mahallahs* and protect them from discriminating policies.³⁰ There are also rural-to-urban movements in states that then move beyond state borders. The general problems of a post-Soviet space with the breakdown of collective farming and opening of borders to trade also encouraged entrepreneurs from regions like southern and western Kyrgyzstan to trade in manufactured goods brought across the porous borders, in the markets in the state capital Bishkek. The Osh and Dordoi markets in Bishkek, therefore, became host to a large number of migrant traders from the southern regions who live on the outskirts of Bishkek and trade in a wide range of mass consumer products, home electronics and luxury commodities. The movement did not stop here. A significant number of them also moved further north to Almaty and even Moscow.

When borders were closed and economic activity in Russia and Kazakhstan was reduced, the opportunity to travel for seasonal work was affected and many had to stay on in the region. For those who were unable to return back home from Russia, the situation was equally critical. For both groups, the social and economic impact was severe. Compared to the local population larger numbers of migrants lost their jobs and were forced onto unpaid leave. Living conditions of undocumented labour migrants are always less than acceptable and during the pandemic, this was aggravated by the unavailability of healthcare. For many stranded in camps or temporary accommodation provided by the employers and denied benefits and salary, the situation was precarious. With fewer employment opportunities available, jobs went to national ethnic rather than the Kyrgyz, Tajik or Uzbek seasonal migrants. Similarly, all aid packages were limited to citizens. While cheap semiskilled labour is accepted as the reason for spurring growth in a number of regions, social perceptions about them have been negative. No official statistics or data are available on the role of migrant workers in the labour force or in the informal economy. It is evident that though the state authorities continue to combat illegal migration, regarding it as a security threat or as promoting criminal activities, they covertly allow influential recruiters or employers to hire the *gastarbeitery*. The only change is a December 2013 law that allows individual Kazakh citizens to hire foreign migrant workers with work permits. The law clearly states that it is intended to make it easier for Kazakhs to hire household help, not for profit by private businesses.³¹ The migration policy of the emerging Eurasian Union has also been the focus of attention. On January 1, 2012, an agreement on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers and Members

of their Families came into effect between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan as part of the Customs Union. The intention was to establish a legal framework necessary for the emergence of a common labour market within a single economic space supported by the Customs Union.³²

The Eurasian Economic Union treaty between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia came into force in January 2015, and Kyrgyzstan joined in May 2015. This agreement allows the free movement of goods, people, services and capital between the states where signatories will not be able to implement protectionist policies on workers coming from member states and workers can stay in the host country as long as they have a valid employment contract. However, these free labour provisions run counter to many of the provisions for controlling the labour market in Russia and Kazakhstan and the implementation of the EEU provisions will be a departure from a situation where labour market controls and legislation were primarily bilaterally determined. A potential point of control could be labour contracts. In December 2014, a whole new chapter was added to the Russian Labour Code regulating the work and contracts of foreign citizens where employment contracts are tied to the migration status of the foreign workers.³³ The focus on contracts itself is a departure from established practices where low-skilled migrant labour primarily operated in the shadow sphere. This meant that state or legal focus on the migrants was practically non-existent. In reality, very little has changed in terms of actual conditions or perceptions.

The Kazakh Migration Law of August 2011 identified three key directions and objectives of migration. First, facilitating repatriation, settlement and integration of the *oralman* (ethnic Kazakhs in the Kazakh language)³⁴ denoting an ethnonational vision. Second, the maintenance of national security and prevention of illegal migration, reflecting a ‘securitisation’ perspective. Third, management of internal migratory processes from rural to urban areas, particularly the resettlement of citizens residing in ecologically depressed regions to other regions, which addresses issues of social welfare and equal distribution. The law also includes a quota for highly skilled foreign labour. The quote is minuscule. It was set at 66,300 in 2009 but then reduced to a third in 2011. The law is however silent about the status of CIS labour migrants who can enter the country legally under a free visa-free regime, indicating that the purpose of the visit is ‘personal’ on the migration card. Such migrants are required to register within five days, may only remain for the authorised period of stay and cannot work. An ‘illegal migrant’, under Kazakh Migration Laws, is simply defined as a person who has ‘violated the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan pertaining to migration’. Migrants are routinely charged for violating the terms of stay, under Article 394, Part 1 of the Code ‘On violation by foreign citizens or stateless people of rules of stay in Kazakhstan’ and deported for repeated violations under Part 2 of the same code. The one month limit is normally negotiated by leaving the country to re-enter on a new migration card with a new one month period.³⁵ Many find it easier and cheaper to pay someone to take their passport for a new entry stamp. An entire informal industry has developed for acquiring documentation, though many simply overstay and pay the administrative fine of about \$100 giving them a 12-day grace period within which to leave the country. A complex web of personal connections, strategies and informal arrangements enables the migrants to acquire the relevant documentation to maintain their status as a ‘visitor’ and keep their real status invisible to the law. Every lacuna in the law and every restriction imposed by the law are dealt with by relying on informal connections and personal networks and resorting to quasi-legal practices. During the pandemic, this undocumented status meant that they remained unenumerated for any state benefits.

During the pandemic, states like Kazakhstan announced special packages called ‘anti-crisis package’ for citizens which included unemployment benefits. The benefits of the \$13 billion package that was about 9 per cent of the state GDP, however, excluded foreigners and

foreign migrant workers who constituted about 8 per cent of the total population.³⁶ It was reported that during the pandemic, Central Asian workers were denied testing and treatment as they generally did not have the relevant documentation required for the same. Negative social perceptions about migrants that had always prevailed meant that they were often identified as ‘unhygienic’ and ‘sick’ making it even more difficult for them to get help. Reflective of this negativity is a typical image of the migrant, “*Gastarbeiter* – an ill-shaven person with a pale look and the smell of cheap deodorant.”³⁷ Social perceptions like this meant that during the pandemic they were often forced to vacate their houses by landlords as they were identified as contributing to the pandemic. Most live in crowded conditions where isolation was impossible and for those who were ill, dismissal seemed inevitable. These perceptions prevailed even within Kyrgyzstan. When lockdown began in Russia, Kyrgyz migrants wanted to return. However, many were detained at the Russian-Kazakh border at Orenburg from where they would have entered Kazakhstan to travel overland to Kyrgyzstan. After a month of delay, the Kyrgyz government was able to negotiate their travel in closed transit trains. Once they arrived, they travelled back home and this was seen as one of the factors that spread the disease in the rural areas.

Conclusion

Lexical inventiveness contributing to the popular political lexicon is commonplace in Kyrgyz politics and there are two such phrases associated with the present President Sadyr Japarov, one of which paved his road to victory in 2020 and the other that he employed for corrupt officials as he endeavoured to fill the empty Kyrgyz coffers. The first one is a Russian phrase, *do konsta* which means ‘all the way to the end’. It was used during the rallies held by his supporters that eventually led to his freedom and electoral success. The second, a Kyrgyz verb, *kesturup*, which means to ‘puke up’, was used to induce corrupt officials to give up cash that they had hoarded to avoid persecution. As nationalist populism became the dominant political force in Kyrgyzstan in the midst of the pandemic, the terms reflected how a new political landscape emerged and gained momentum in Kyrgyzstan through a leader who claimed to stand for an open government, at a time when state capacity, that had been weakened by repeated political turmoil, was under stress due to the unprecedented demands on state support due to the pandemic.

Notes

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- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.
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- ¹³ Bakhrom Radjabov, “COVID-19 Outbreak in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Has the Time Come for Social Innovations?” *COVID-19 Pandemic and Central Asia: Crisis Management, Economic Impact, and Social Transformations*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia Programme, The George Washington University, 2021), 115-125, <https://www.centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Laruelle-ed-Covid-and-Central-Asia-2021-Final-1.pdf>.
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