



# Tashkent COVID-19 Video Conference Calls for International Cooperation

*By Gregory Gleason, Pal Dunay, and Robert Baumann*

## *Executive Summary*

The COVID-19 infection spread rapidly through the Central Asian states in early 2020. Political leaders in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan were quick to adopt containment and mitigation policies to counter the spread of the disease, announcing national emergencies, establishing quarantines, ordering commercial and public institutions to temporarily close, and restricting road, rail, air, and maritime transport routes. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, in particular, swiftly took steps to implement restrictions, impose curfews, and initiate sheltering-in-place measures. The neighboring Central Asian states of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, meanwhile, instituted a number of counter-infection measures but did not acknowledge instances of COVID-19 infection.<sup>1</sup>

The Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, a leading foreign area studies center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, conducted an international video-teleconference on the topic of the coronavirus pandemic on April 22, 2020. George C. Marshall Center professors Dr. Pal Dunay and Dr. Gregory Gleason were invited as presenters at the international video conference. Also invited as a presenter was Dr. Robert Baumann, the director of graduate degree programs for the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth. The Uzbek Academy of the Armed Forces was included in the video conference. Marshall Center alumni also participated and actively contributed to the discussions.

The key questions facing the crisis caused by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic were introduced by Gulchekhra Rikhsieva, Uzbekistan Senator and Rector of Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies. Professor Rikhsieva opened the video conference, describing the seriousness of the dangers presented by the spread of COVID-19 in Uzbekistan and other countries. She called upon the fifty-three video attendees of the conference to use the opportunity to meet the challenges of the crisis objectively and realistically. She called upon the attendees to identify international cooperation measures that could augment Uzbekistan's state policies in reducing the risks inherent in this and other potential subsequent pandemics.

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<sup>1</sup> The medical data reported by international medical organizations such as the World Health Organization, WHO, is supplied by national sources. The WHO initiated a "COVID-19 Situation Report" in January 2020. As of the date of the Tashkent University of Oriental Studies video conference on the COVID-19 situation (April 22, 2020), the WHO Situation reported no cases of COVID-19 in both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. See: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports>.

The two-and-a-half-hour conference included eighteen brief video presentations, surveying and comparing the current state of affairs in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other countries. Professor Rikhsieva concluded the discussion with remarks regarding the challenges and opportunities inherent in addressing public policy issues of international cooperation in the context of the video format.

### *Unprecedented Crisis in Central Asia*

The Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies (TSUOS) is a forerunner in foreign policy and international studies, particularly as concerns the Orient, South Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> TSUOS regularly sponsors conferences, symposia, seminars, and round tables of contemporary public policy significance. All public institutions in Uzbekistan shifted to distance-based operations with the announcement of the emergency situation on March 19, 2020 caused by COVID-19. This was the first global video-conference undertaken by TSUOS. The proceedings of the conference will soon be made publicly available on the university website.<sup>3</sup>

### *Survey of the Scope of the COVID-19 Crisis*

Following the video conference opening remarks by Senator Rikhsieva, a general description of the thematic orientation of the presentations was provided by Vice Rector Nodir Abdullayev and international relations Professor Sayfiddin Juraev. The first session of presentations was introduced by Mjuša Sever, the Director of Regional Dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Sever described the COVID-19 situation in its current stage and introduced Bojana Beović, who holds both an MD and Ph.D. in infectious diseases. Dr. Beović holds a position at the Medical School of Slovenia University and is affiliated with the Slovenian government coronavirus crisis response team. Dr. Beović noted that the coronavirus spread quickly in the first week of March in Slovenia as it was apparently transmitted during the holidays from a neighboring country. Dr. Beović provided a medical specialist's brief introduction to the nature of the virus and the COVID-19 disease, which the SARS-CoV-2 virus produces, as well as its transmissibility, and the effectiveness of public health policy measures—both in general and in Uzbekistan—for containing, mitigating, and defeating the disease.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The forerunner of the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies was established in 1918, making it the oldest institution of graduate-, level training in Central Asia in modern history. For many years, the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies served as a premier training institution with particular expertise in the countries of the Middle East, South Asia, and the Orient. On April 16, 2020, Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev issued a decree increasing the responsibilities and authorities of the institute, also renaming it as the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies. Other leading institutions of higher learning in Uzbekistan include the Armed Forces Academy (the higher educational institution of the Ministry of Defense), the University of World Economics and Diplomacy (the higher educational institution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and Tashkent State University.

<sup>3</sup> The Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies website is maintained partially in three languages, Uzbek, Russian, and English. The conference, “International Cooperation in the Context of Fighting the Coronavirus Pandemic: Uzbekistan and International Experience” [Международное сотрудничество в условиях противодействия пандемии коронавируса: Узбекистан и международный опыт], took place on April 22, 2020. See: <http://tashgiv.uz/en>.

<sup>4</sup> “Regional Dialogue” is a non-governmental organization devoted to collaborative approaches to promoting understanding between people and regions with a specific focus on Central Asia. Regional Dialogue maintains an office in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. <https://www.regionaldialogue.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> The virus which causes the disease has been named SARS-CoV-2. The virus infection is known as COVID-19. General information is provided by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC. “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#Coronavirus-Disease-2019-Basics>.

Mjuša Sever called attention to the fact that while more administratively centralized countries may demonstrate an advantage when implementing and enforcing lock-down measures, they may face difficulties responding to some challenges at a later stage in the spread of the disease. Mjuša Sever pointed out that reliable, objective, and factual communication is essential in combatting the spread of infection. Instances of bureaucratic red-tape, Sever argued, need to be cut through in order to take timely decisions.

Mjuša Sever also introduced Professor Nazakot Kasymova, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, to survey the current COVID-19 situation in Uzbekistan. Dr Kasymova emphasized that medical authorities in Uzbekistan responded very swiftly and effectively as soon as the beginning of the pandemic crisis was recognized. The first case of COVID-19 in Uzbekistan was identified on March 15, 2020. Just days later, an anti-crisis fund was established by Uzbekistan's Ministry of Finance. Support to small and medium-size enterprises to counter the disruption of normal commercial activity was introduced promptly. Within a few additional days, the initial government action plan was issued. The first quarantine measures were put into effect with an expected termination date of at least April 20, 2020; measures were later extended until May 10, 2020.

Dr. Kasymova pointed out that the initial government measures helped to contain the spread of the virus; some areas of the country remained unaffected by COVID-19 thanks to these precautions. Professor Shukhrat Yovkochev from the International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan amplified Dr. Kasymova's remarks, providing additional insight into the current aspects of the social and political implications of the COVID-19 influenza in Uzbekistan. Mjuša Sever also introduced Zhulduz Baizakova, lecturer in international studies at Kazakhstan National University in Almaty, to survey the current COVID-19 situation in Kazakhstan. The first COVID-19 case appeared in Kazakhstan in early March 2020, possibly as a result of transmission from abroad. It has been hypothesized that the first virus transmission was from Germany, with a possible second wave of transmission through arrivals of air travelers from Russia and Turkey.

At the time of this video conference, the number of COVID-19 cases in Kazakhstan had reached a total of 2,050, with nineteen deaths. The virus presented a particular problem in view of the fact that by the time of the conference at least 425 medical personnel had been reported to have tested positive for the infection. The medical personnel from the state emergency fund received emergency health payments of two million Tenge (Kazakh national currency). It was announced that the families of those who lost their lives in medical service would be compensated with a payment of ten million Tenge. As of March 19, 2020, the Kazakh government-imposed containment restrictions, partially closing borders and suspending international flights as well as terminating various other activities that would have involved public gatherings. The Kazakh government organized the repatriation of national compatriots abroad who desired to return home.

Dr. Baizakova noted that officials in Kazakhstan anticipate that borders can be reopened soon to prevent greater disruption of trade relations of the country. Dr. Baizakova noted that the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic presented a *double crisis* for Kazakhstan, insofar as COVID-19 has also caused an unprecedented decline in production of—and thus the price for—oil. This is of great significance insofar as oil is a major export commodity of Kazakhstan and a major source of government revenue. The Kazakh Tenge immediately lost value and was stabilized at 425 Tenge to the U.S. dollar (as of April 21, 2020). But the Tenge remained under

pressure. Dr. Baizakova described the current economic situation, noting that Kazakhstan had benefited from external assistance. For instance, Dr. Baizakova noted, the U.S. provided much needed medical supplies such as masks and gloves. At the same time, Kazakhstan turned to its regional neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, providing monetary assistance in the range of six million U.S. dollars.

### *Perspectives on International Cooperation*

Dr. Pal Dunay and Dr. Gregory Gleason of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies offered their observations on the pandemic and its current and long-term implications. Dr. Robert Baumann of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth also offered his analysis of the current pandemic. Dr. Andrei Korobkov, professor of political science at Middle Tennessee State University and a specialist on international migration, provided insight into the current conditions and trends produced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Pal Dunay stressed that already in this early phase of the COVID-19 situation, we have recognized that countries are responding to similar challenges but managing them quite differently. Dr. Dunay argued there is no reason to suggest that autocratic systems manage the problems of a health emergency better than democracies, although they do employ different means. In order to understand the situation, Dr. Dunay argued, first we have to take into consideration the social context, the social traditions, the ways people interact, and also the level of trust or distrust in their government's capacity to act rationally and responsibly. Some democracies have managed the situation in light of societal cohesion, a high level of discipline, and trust in the government. In this respect, Dr. Dunay argued, we need to take into account a factor other than the cleavage between democracies and dictatorships, on the one hand, and crisis management by populist and non-populist leaders on the other. Populist leaders typically make attempts to belittle the importance of the influenza problem and hence do not allocate adequate resources in a timely fashion. Due to this tendency, populist leaders have often exacerbated the damage caused. Dr. Dunay argued there is one important major difference between democracies and autocratic regimes. Populist leaders in democratic systems sooner or later face accountability that results from an open society, free press, and political opposition. This reality has the effect of mitigating the damage otherwise caused by neglect or hesitation of otherwise unresponsive leaders.

Dr. Dunay pointed out that many political commentators are currently speculating about a fundamental change in international relations following the COVID-19 pandemic. If we take a close look at the arguments, Dr. Dunay asserted, we should not expect a paradigm shift in the international system. Dr. Dunay claimed the same major national players will remain decisive, their relationships will continue to shape international relations, and we can expect only marginal variations in the prevailing system. China can be expected to continue taking advantage of the relative decline of some other major actors, although some of the shortcomings that characterize the prevailing situation will remain visible. The fabrication of data to fit "political reality," the silencing of critical voices, and supplying partners with often substandard products can be expected to prevail.

Dr. Dunay noted that the most recent major world financial crisis in 2008 occurred just twelve years ago. Most of us, Dr. Dunay argued, still have fresh, living memories of that economic crisis and the changes it brought about. The way various large actors reacted to the crisis then, he

argued, may provide us with some ideas about what the effects will be and what policies will be pursued this time. As in the last crisis, Dr. Dunay contended, U.S. political officials will be inclined to let market forces prevail, calculating that adjustments can take place in the context of large and flexible labor and capital markets. EU member-states will seek to use extensive mitigation measures that “flatten the curve” in the economy, as well, thus averting problems that exert too high a burden on international economic relations. This may result in a somewhat slower recovery. It now appears that the policies of the Russian Federation, in order to preserve socio-economic stability, may tend toward EU *rapprochement*.

The policies of the three players involved most saliently in the ongoing “Great Power Competition”—the U.S., China, and Russia—are highly visible both nationally and internationally as far as contributing to the pandemic mitigation efforts of other countries and regions. The EU has remained largely invisible, in the respect that it does not necessarily play a major role in the global power competition. However, it is necessary to take into account a number of considerations. First, health matters do not belong to the competence of the EU; healthcare is a national competence of the member states acting individually. Second, as far as help in mitigating the economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic is concerned, the EU is actively committed and focuses its strength in the form of foreign economic support and assistance. And third, the efforts of EU states are not clearly visible and widely recognized. For instance, German hospitals are treating Italian and French coronavirus patients and the costs are covered by the German state. In addition, evacuation flights help citizens of other European states to get home to Europe. Little of this is reported in the international media, which tends to focus on other more sensationalistic issues. Fourth and finally, it is a problem for most European democracies that some EU member-states have taken advantage of the coronavirus crisis to weaken their democratic order unnecessarily. The EU is apparently unable to effectively step up in order to enforce its own declared values. This may be a problem of growing importance for the EU in the future.

In his comments during the video conference, Dr. Gregory Gleason stressed his highly positive evaluation of the swift and effective response of medical and law enforcement authorities in Uzbekistan in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Gleason argued that the most important aspect of the COVID-19 crisis for Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states is the aspect of human security. Dr. Gleason said this pandemic represents a major security crisis: a human security crisis. Noting the importance of Professor Rikhsieva’s statement regarding the unprecedented risks produced by COVID-19, Dr. Gleason stated that this video conference was very important in bringing together medical specialists, public policy specialists, and analysts in international relations for the discussion of the ways forward in this time of crisis.

Dr. Gleason claimed that infectious disease was not new to Central Asia. Since at least the time of Alexander the Great and the great historical campaigns of Tamerlane, plagues and infectious diseases have played a pivotal role in the geopolitics of the Central Asian region. The COVID-19 virus, Dr. Gleason argued, is extremely dangerous today. This virus spreads without any regard for form of government, religion, ethnicity, or level of wealth and education. Dr. Gleason argued that many microbiologists see viruses as not truly “living things,” rather as more of a chemical process than a biological organism. Because many biologists see the virus as not truly alive, but as parasitic genetic material mechanically moving from one opportunistic situation to the next, the challenge is not to “kill” the virus, but to disrupt, neutralize, and stop it. This requires taking the correct steps in the correct order.

The pandemic challenge to all societies is essentially the same. The COVID-19 challenge is in three stages. The first is the stage of immediate medical emergency and the saving of lives. The second or mid-term stage concerns addressing the public, economic, and social measures to contain the spread of the virus and then to mitigate the effects of the virus that has been dispersed. Containment implies isolation, contact tracing, and quarantine. Mitigation implies isolation, curfews, reduced interaction in shops, schools, public institutions, and in public areas, as well as intervention in road, rail, and air transportation.

All of these steps require the ability to employ medical and law enforcement capabilities. All of these steps are necessary and all entail major economic and social consequences in terms of the effects of the disruption of trade, as well as reduction in revenue to households, enterprises and governments, labor movement, and remittances. Moreover, all these steps involve greater government outlays, both immediately and in the mid-term. Containment and mitigation of the virus can only be successful if the government can act swiftly and effectively to stop the point-to-point spread of the infection. As the curve is flattened and the transmission of the influenza is reduced, the government can ease the restrictions. At some point, governments will need to return to economic recovery and normal post-pandemic functioning.

Dr. Gleason maintained that at present we do not know how long the spread of COVID-19 will continue on present trajectories. We do not know how virulent the virus strain will prove in the long term. While everyone would like to retreat from the front line of battle with COVID-19, it is not clear we can be assured that a present retreat would not be followed by more intense and more damaging waves of confrontation in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic requires our continuous attention.

Dr. Gleason agreed with Dr. Kasymova in her observations that the immediate steps of the Uzbek government were very successful in Uzbekistan, but Dr. Gleason cautioned that the long-term economic and social effects caused by the pandemic are only now emerging. The economic costs of the pandemic are just now on the horizon. Wealthy industrially advanced countries, Dr. Gleason asserted, have a variety of innovative instruments to promote economic stimulus at their disposal such as that illustrated by “quantitative easing” to facilitate greater liquidity. Smaller states do not have the luxury of many of these financial instruments. Central Asian states risk the instability of their national currencies given the current terms of trade. In the mid-term, raising revenue to meet present commitments may entail either financing by means of future budget deficits or borrowing from foreign financial sources. Both may be unavoidable. It is already time to begin the discussion of how these issues will affect international relations and security concerns.

Dr. Robert Baumann stressed the importance of effective public communication during the crisis. Noting the importance of public trust in the information provided official sources, Dr. Baumann observed that effective scientific communication is an emerging area of specialization. Particularly in light of the amount of misinformation circulating online, it is crucial that authoritative sources convey their points in a manner that can be understood by non-experts, for whom medical terminology often seems like a foreign language. Effective science communicators can serve as valuable intermediaries between researchers and citizens. Also, higher educational institutions, particularly universities and institutions of higher education such as the military academies, might need to incorporate public health awareness courses into their curricula. A model could be the Yale University Program on Climate Change Communication, which places emphasis on effective communication of scientific information.

Andrei Korobkov of Tennessee State University, an internationally known specialist on migration studies, explained the recent status of migration flows on a global basis with particular emphasis on the massive impact of closing borders and the disruption of air and rail transportation routes. This is a topic of exceptional importance to Uzbekistan, a country which by last reliable measures had more than 500,000 migrant workers in the Russian Federation. Uzbekistan is the most populous state in Central Asia, with a population of roughly thirty-three million people. The other Central Asian states have proportionally comparable migrant situations. Some sources indicate a very high degree of economic dependence on labor migrants in Central Asian countries. For instance, UNDP estimated recently that as much as 50 percent of the national GDP of Kyrgyzstan was estimated to result from Kyrgyz remittances.<sup>6</sup> The effects of the pandemic on livelihoods in Central Asian countries can be expected to be of growing significance.

### ***Perspectives on International Cooperation from Other Conference Participants***

The video conference included presentations of participants from a number of Eurasian countries as well as other countries, including Egypt. The conference also featured participation from highly visible and influential public policy specialists from the Russian Federation, including Vladimir Boyko, Sergei Pritchkin, and Nikita Mendkovich. The Russian participants stressed the importance of international cooperation in the face of the current crisis, emphasizing the existing international organizations that actively function today in the Eurasian space. Some presenters expressed the view that Italy and Spain had been abandoned in the pandemic, without financial and technical support from Brussels. Some observers expressed the view that the effect of recent policy will be to generally reduce the importance of EU membership. This image of the pandemic crisis in Europe was juxtaposed, by these observers, with the assertion that one-hundred thousand virus tests were provided by Russian medical authorities to Central Asian partners. Particular emphasis was placed on the concept of the Eurasian Economic Union as offering unique opportunities for economic assistance and recovery plans regarding the disruption in trade and commerce. Russian observers made no reference to the current contretemps between Belarus and Russia on major economic issues. One suggestion was raised that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) would be prepared to provide a capable platform for security cooperation throughout the former Soviet geographical space. A suggestion was made that the CSTO is currently preparing a new protocol on biological weapons, which would secure dangerous information related to infectious disease. It was argued that the CSTO proposed to ensure that information on biological research be restricted to collaborating parties and that third-party countries be excluded from access to the information on influenza in order to ensure security control.

### ***Recommendations from U.S. Video Conference Participants***

It is important to maintain a high level of transparency and openness in the discussion of common risks and opportunities presented by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Maintaining high standards may be facilitated by a few concrete steps:

- 1) Keeping focus on factual information and data by incorporating technical specialists into all important areas of the policy dialogue. Medical knowledge of infectious diseases in Central Asia provides the basis for understanding the fundamentals of the needs of

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<sup>6</sup> *Labour Migration, Remittances, and Human Development in Central Asia*, Central Asia Human Development Series. UNDP (2015): p. 8. <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbec/docs/CAM&RHDpaperFINAL.pdf>.

containment and mitigation, as this disease progress through its natural life cycle. Many things about this SARS-CoV-2 are not yet fully understood. The principal vectors of transmission, for instance, are based upon the experience of SARS-CoV-1 and the preliminary SARS-CoV-2 data, which has been collected over only the past three months. Prudence in public policy calls for error on the side of risk-mitigation. Steps such as the deceleration of containment and mitigation policies at some point will be necessary, but should not be artificially accelerated. For example, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have suspended their previously successful policies of visa waivers. The time for reinstating these policies should be based on careful consideration of the data.

- 2) Preventing tidal waves of digital information from swamping the careful assessment of policy options is critically important. The digital revolution and the emergence of new electronic transmission devices has vastly increased the ability of medical practitioners to collect, store, and transfer data that is critical to the protection of public health. At the same time, however, the ability to misuse information channels and even news reporting has made it difficult to sort through the large amounts of information to find the data that is key to decision-making. Imposing artificial constraints on the flow of information in this crisis is not helpful. Authorities in Turkmenistan have been treating any reference in information channels to the term “epidemic” as illegal. Politicized constraints on the flow of information is counterproductive.
- 3) Encouraging greater international cooperation through video exchanges in view of the present crisis is an important and low-cost way to collect, discuss, and sort through information that is important to Uzbekistan and the other states of Central Asia. The Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies video conference was a very important first step in the useful exchange of information. It would be useful to establish such video conferences on a continuing basis.

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