



VACCINE HESITANCY ISSUES IN KAZAKHSTAN

As the novel coronavirus ravages through the world, reaching more than 6 million cases in total, people all over the globe wonder if the pandemic and its subsequent implications are to end anytime soon. Unfortunately, there is a consensus among experts that it is impossible to talk about the end of the pandemic until the “herd immunity” is built. Herd immunity is the concept that implies the reduction of the risk of infection among susceptible individuals in a population by the presence and proximity of immune individuals.

Herd immunity can be achieved in two ways: either through mass vaccination of the population or mass spread of a virus within the population. The latter option doesn't seem to be acceptable in modern societies, despite some previous attempts in Great Britain, for instance, as it may cause medical system overloads and thousands of preventable deaths as a result. Thus, vaccination is viewed as the only sustainable long-run solution. Consequently, such a discussion has brought another significant topic into the spotlight – high rates of vaccine hesitancy within some societies. This problem is especially acute in the CIS countries in general and Kazakhstan in particular.

Nowadays vaccines are considered to be one of the greatest global health achievements, averting 2-3 million deaths each year, reducing global child mortality rates, and preventing countless birth defects and lifelong disabilities. Moreover, vaccines are the main reason behind the eradication of smallpox and rinderpest. On the other hand, there are ongoing debates about the side effects of vaccines. However, there is an overwhelming presence of data supporting the position that the side effects of vaccines are either insignificant or that the harm they may cause is greatly outweighed by the harm that can occur as a result of vaccine hesitancy.

Nevertheless, there is still a strong anti-vaccination community all over the

world, both in developing and developed countries. It has grown to such extent that the World Health Organization listed vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten threats to global health in 2019, as it was recognized as one of the factors behind a 30% increase in cases of measles globally. In the wide-scale survey, which included more than 140,000 people in 140 countries, conducted by Welcome Global Monitor in 2018, Kazakhstan was placed among 24 countries with the lowest levels of reported vaccinating. Moreover, nine out of 24 countries on that list are post-Soviet ones. Furthermore, Kazakhstani citizens tend to trust vaccines less than people globally do, with approximately 50 to 60% of the local population believing in vaccine safety compared to 79% on average worldwide. Still, such level of trust is higher than in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and slightly lower than in other Central Asian states.

Several factors that should be taken into account are influencing local public opinion in terms of vaccination safety. These are fake news, previous negative experience, and overall distrust in government institutions and initiatives.

The fake news problem can be divided into two separate issues. The first one is fake news and misinformation from traditional and relatively trusted sources, such as some particular Russian Internet and TV media, actively broadcasting in Kazakhstan. It is worth mentioning that the European Commission has so far analyzed 80 different reports containing false or misleading information about COVID-19 published by official Russian state media sites as well as platforms and authors with close ties to the Kremlin. The disinformation was mostly of the conspiracy nature, claiming the artificial origin of the virus and downplaying the seriousness of the problem. The second issue is the spread of fake news through such popular messengers as WhatsApp. There were numerous fake news about different aspects of the coronavirus pandemic roaming

within local WhatsApp chats. At least eight criminal cases associated with coronavirus related fake news were opened in Kazakhstan since the start of the pandemic.

Another important factor affecting the situation is the overall distrust in governmental institutions. As revealed by the annual survey conducted by the Center for Strategic Initiatives, a privately owned independent consulting company based in Kazakhstan, more than 60% of respondents do not trust most of the government institutions, with an exception for the president. Such distrust creates a backlash among the population each time it faces any governmental initiative. Therefore, it is unsurprising that there was immediate negative feedback to the new legislative initiative regulating mandatory vaccination in Kazakhstan. That is especially relevant in the public health sphere as Kazakhstani citizens remember some widely recognized tragedies such as the 2006 case of the AIDS mass contamination in Shymkent.

A possible reason both for the lack of trust among people in state vaccination programs and excessive gullibility in fake sources and conspiracy ideas could be the low professionalism of those who implement these programs – vaccine manufacturers, medical personnel responsible for vaccination, and government officials who show incompetence when it comes to public safety. This is not about disbelief in science and medicine in general. Indeed, during the pandemic, hopes of all people turned to doctors, and the bulk of the population anticipates that medical workers and researchers will jointly invent an antiviral drug. As for professionalism, this is a matter of the quality of education, so we again return to the underestimated, underpaid, low-status, long-suffering sphere of education, which provides society with the product that the latter deserves.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev held a working meeting with the leadership of the country's law enforcement agencies. The heads of the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Security Committee, and the Security Council's Office presented reports on their activities in maintaining stability and the rule of law. President Tokayev stressed the role of the security agencies in protecting rights and interests of citizens amid the coronavirus pandemic (Akorda, 05.06.2020).
- During his working trip to the Fergana region, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated that the conflict in the enclave of Sokh should not affect friendship and cooperation between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples. The Uzbek leader also noted that Uzbekistan had solved many problematic border issues with neighboring countries in recent years. According to Mirziyoyev, the government plans to allocate 500 billion soums (about \$52 million) for the comprehensive development of the Sokh district in 2020-2022 (President of Uzbekistan, 06.06.2020).
- President of Kyrgyzstan Sooronbai Jeenbekov signed the law ratifying the inter-governmental agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia on cooperation in the military field, signed on June 12, 2019 in Bishkek. The agreement provides for cooperation in such areas as military-technical cooperation, defense industry, military science and technology, as well as peacekeeping (K-News, 05.06.2020).
- The OSCE and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime organized a three-day online training course to enhance the capacity of Turkmenistan in countering terrorist financing. The course, attended by experts and practitioners from the Turkmen law enforcement agencies, aimed at strengthening the country's compliance with international standards and improving its relevant national regulatory framework. The course emphasized the key role of inter-agency cooperation and importance of involving all stakeholders in combatting the financing of terrorism (OSCE, 03.06.2020).
- The Ministry of Defense of Georgia will obtain NATO-standard hardware to replace some of the equipment currently used by the Georgian Defense Forces. The replacement is caused by technical problems revealed during COVID-19 related lockdown efforts that involved the troops. Georgian Minister of Defense Irakli Garibashvili hailed "unprecedented and hard work" carried out by the military, in particular the disinfection of 1.7 million vehicles at checkpoints and the screening of 2.5 million people by military medics (Agenda.ge, 03.06.2020).
- During his first official visit to Belarus, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban held talks with President Alexander Lukashenko. The Belarusian leader thanked the Hungarian prime minister for the visit noting that "this is a bold step" which revives the format of live communication between European states. The parties discussed various issues of bilateral cooperation and the international agenda, including Belarus-EU relations and the Eastern Partnership (BelTA, 05.06.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Eurasia Invest, a company based in Kazakhstan's city of Karagandy, started to export powdered camel milk to China. The company sent the first batch of the milk produced under the brand name Saubota to Lanzhou and plans to extend its export to Beijing and four more Chinese provinces. Agreements on opening the Chinese market for Kazakh agro-industrial companies were achieved following the sixth Kazakhstan-China Business Council held in September 2019 (The Astana Times, 05.06.2020).
- The government of Uzbekistan will scrap the excise tax on imported cars, which will become the first step towards ending a de facto state monopoly existing in the country's car market. The vast majority of cars in Uzbekistan are Chevrolets produced by a local plant, which was initially set up as a joint venture with South Korea's Daewoo Motors, then taken over by General Motors and eventually acquired by the state. Despite the removal of the excise tax, Uzbekistan's car market remains protected by high import duties (Reuters, 04.06.2020).
- Russian farmers who are highly dependent on cheap labor force from Central Asia to harvest their crops are in a bind as the coronavirus pandemic lockdown has prevented hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from entering Russia. To save harvests, Russian officials and experts call on the government to consider bringing seasonal workers to Russia despite the lockdown. The current demand of Russia's agriculture sector is estimated at about 500,000 additional workers (RFE/RL, 04.06.2020).
- In order to expand capabilities of exporters and importers of Russian products, Eximbank of Russia opened the first correspondent account in Uzbek soums for Russian banks and several accounts in Russian ruble for Uzbek banks. This step aims at boosting international payments in national currencies and reduce exporters' financial risks. Eximbank already processes operations of Russian companies in Chinese yuan, Kazakh tenge, Indian rupee, Kyrgyz som, and Hungarian forint (TASS, 05.06.2020).
- According to Andrey Belyaninov, Chairman of the Eurasian Development Bank's Board, the bank is ready to consider financing import substitution projects in the Eurasian Economic Union. A focus in selecting proposals to be financed will be on major cooperative industrial projects with a strong integration effect that will create high value-added products. Today, industry accounts for about 22% of the bank's investment portfolio (Eurasian Economic Commission, 04.06.2020).
- In 2019, bilateral trade in agricultural and food products between Belarus and Hungary amounted to about \$17.4 million, up 12.3% compared to 2018. According to the Belarusian Agriculture and Food Ministry, the country's agricultural export to Hungary increased more than three times in 2019 and reached \$793,400. Belarus mainly exports various oilseeds and shellfish, while Hungary supplies the Belarusian market with seed corn, live poultry and vegetables (BelTA, 04.06.2020).

Society and Culture

- Public hearings were organized in Tashkent via videoconference on the national sustainable development goals for the period up to 2030. Participants of the event, dedicated to the World Environment Day, discussed ways to support activities of the UN Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region. They also addressed other issues related to environmental protection such as rational use of water resources and terrestrial ecosystems, as well as measures to mitigate climate change and its consequences (UzA, 04.06.2020).
- A large mosque that will accommodate more than 5,000 believers is built in the city of Turkistan – the spiritual capital of Kazakhstan. The mosque, the construction of which began in December 2019, is a gift from Uzbekistan supported by its leader Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The complex will also include a ceremonial building, a congress hall, a madrasah, a library, a dining room, a sports ground, and a parking lot for 500 vehicles (Kazinform, 02.06.2020).
- The Baikonur Cosmodrome located in Kazakhstan celebrated its 65th birthday on June 2, 2020. More than 2,500 space rockets with various cargoes and more than 130 cosmonauts have been sent into orbit from Baikonur since its foundation in 1955. Currently, Baikonur is the largest spaceport in the world implementing up to 80% of Russia's space launch programs (Aviation Explorer; Parlamentskaya Gazeta, 02.06.2020).
- The U.S. government committed an additional \$500,000 to support Turkmenistan's COVID-19 prevention efforts, bringing the total U.S. assistance to \$1.42 million. The funding will be provided through the U.S. Agency for International Development to the UN Children's Fund in Turkmenistan for use in such priority areas as promoting proper hygiene practices and training of frontline healthcare workers. Turkmenistan has not announced any confirmed cases of COVID-19 but has implemented measures to prevent its spread (U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan, 01.06.2020).
- UN Women and the government of Japan launched a project on protecting and empowering women in marginalized communities of Kyrgyzstan. The one-year project is aimed at improving women's access to livelihood opportunities, enhancing skills development and promoting gender-responsive policies for rural women affected by the COVID-19 crisis. A total of 845 people will directly benefit from the project, including 500 women from poor and vulnerable households in the Naryn, Osh and Jalal-Abad regions of Kyrgyzstan (Kabar.kg, 05.06.2020).
- The Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan announced the launch of the project titled "Creation of the Zagatala-Balakan Biosphere Reserve" that will be funded by Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The biosphere reserve will create conditions for the development of ecotourism and increase employment of the region's population. In particular, the project will help identify trails and observation points so that tourists can see beauties of nature without harming flora and fauna (Trend, 05.06.2020).