



SHINZO ABE'S PYRRHIC VICTORY OVER CORONAVIRUS

In November 2019, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made history having become the nation's longest-serving prime minister: he surpassed Taro Katsura, Japan's prime minister in the early twentieth century. Abe had big plans for 2020 since the country was supposed to host the Summer Olympic Games, and the prime minister hoped that national feelings would arise, making it possible to realize his main election promise – to revise the Japanese constitution, especially its pacifist Article 9. However, the coronavirus pandemic intervened with Abe's plans, depriving the prime minister of political capital. Even though Japan lifted the state of emergency five days ahead of schedule and only had 900 coronavirus victims, which can be called an incredible success, Shinzo Abe has lost his popularity. What caused such a drop in his rating and calls for his resignation?

In general, the case of Abe can be called unique: typically, during challenging times, in countries with developed democracy, popularity of leaders is on the rise. Support is growing due to the fact that people unite to confront a common threat. Paradoxically, some world leaders who fought the pandemic less successfully than Abe see their popularity growing. Therefore, it is important to understand why Abe did not receive dividends from his successful fight against the pandemic.

By the beginning of April 2020, Japan was the only G7 country where the COVID-19 pandemic did not cause serious problems. This was strange, considering the country's population density and the fact that the first coronavirus cases were reported as early as in mid-January 2020. However, on April 7, authorities were forced to introduce a state of emergency. This was caused by the growing number of patients and the fear of serious consequences. Coronavirus poses a higher risk for older people, and in Japan, about a third of the population is over 65 years old. However, Shinzo Abe did not have a legal authority to declare the European model lockdown in the country. Therefore, he asked citizens to avoid contacts and restrict visits to public places, although people have been doing this voluntarily since January. Besides, the Japanese population has high standards of personal hygiene, as well as a developed fear of infectious diseases, and society has already practiced social distancing and

wearing masks. The speed of the coronavirus spread in Japan was also slowed by Japanese cultural peculiarities such as the use of bows instead of handshakes and the lack of a habit of visiting each other, as well as wide-spread loneliness. Therefore, Japanese society does not connect the successful fight against the pandemic with Abe's government.

The next negative factor that influenced the popularity of Shinzo Abe was the recent political scandal, which even led the Japanese opposition to demand the resignation of the prime minister. The scandal was around Tokyo chief prosecutor Hiroto Kurokawa, who was accused of gambling during the state of emergency. The problem is that Kurokawa was closely connected to Abe and was one of the main candidates for the post of the country's prosecutor-general. Minister of Justice Masako Mori also resigned, taking responsibility for the actions of his subordinate, but the prime minister did not accept the resignation. The scandal with Tokyo's prosecutor gave another cause to talk about cronyism, which has regularly been on display in the recent years of Abe's premiership. For instance, in 2018, a scandal erupted over the tampering with documents related to a land sale to an ultranationalist education organization with connections to Shinzo Abe and his wife Akie Abe. The investigation showed that Ministry of Finance employees altered 14 documents before they were given to legislators investigating the deal. This scandal almost led to Abe's resignation, but he managed to convince the parliament that neither he nor his wife had been involved in the sale and the document fraud.

Besides, one can note the general fatigue of the electorate from the incumbent prime minister. Shinzo Abe has ruled Japan since 2012. At the beginning, he was energetic and determined to jumpstart the Japanese economy, reform social relations and increase the role of Japan in global politics, but now there is no such energy, and the lack of visible reform results is disappointing Japanese people. Abe's government failed to achieve sustainable economic growth, substantially increase the share of foreign labor, and change the position of women in society. The political elite supported the prime minister in the hope that he would revise the constitution and protect Japan from China's growing ambitions. The Liberal Democratic Party, headed by Abe, even changed the internal rules to allow the

party leader serve as the prime minister for more than two consecutive terms. However, Abe has not achieved significant success in these directions as well.

Shinzo Abe's push for the constitutional revision in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic has not boosted his popularity. Since 2012, Abe has been searching for the best option to revise the constitution. As a result, Abe promised not to change the existing two paragraphs of Article 9, but only to add a new one, which would mention Japan's legal right to have self-defense forces. That is, even after this amendment, the constitutional ban on the use of military force in Japan's foreign policy will remain. However, this approach would allow legitimizing the existing state of things. Currently, Japan has ground, naval and air units, which are called self-defense forces. Moreover, the country ranks ninth in the world in military spending. However, amending the Japanese constitution is very difficult. First, changes should be supported by two-thirds in both houses of the Diet and then approved by a national referendum. Overall, the government has support in the parliament, but results of a referendum are difficult to predict. Opinions on the issue are not consistent across polls: Asahi Shimbun's poll found that 65% were opposed to amending Article 9, while Kyodo's poll indicated that 51% were supportive of the amendment. Over the past 70 years since the adoption of the constitution, Japanese society has been deeply imbued with the culture of pacifism and rightly considers it a national worth and an advantage in foreign policy. However, China's growing ambitions and Trump's statement that the United States will not pay for someone else's security provide Abe with strong arguments to convince Japanese society to think about ensuring security on its own. So far, however, his attempts to discuss the future of the constitution have had a negative effect on his image.

As a result, Shinzo Abe has been unable to take advantage of Japan's successful fight against the pandemic, which greatly complicates his future actions. The Olympics are now scheduled for 2021 when he will most probably need to resign, and the second wave of coronavirus may interfere with a constitutional referendum. Abe wants to leave his legacy by becoming the first Japanese prime minister to change the post-war constitution, but he has little time left to realize his historical mission.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation. The two leaders addressed issues related to the coronavirus pandemic and stressed the importance of gradual resumption of trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties. The parties also discussed in depth the developments in Libya and Syria and emphasized the need to expedite a political and diplomatic settlement of the conflicts (President of Russia, 10.06.2020).
- Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tileuberdi participated in a ministerial videoconference of the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament. Speaking at the event, the minister called other parties to support Kazakhstan's initiatives to rehabilitate the population and environment of the Semipalatinsk region, as well as to implement the provisions of the Universal Declaration on the Achievement of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World (MFA of Kazakhstan, 09.06.2020).
- The delegation of Kazakhstan participated in an open-ended extraordinary meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Executive Committee held via videoconference at the level of foreign ministers. The parties discussed Israel's declared plan to annex the Palestinian territories it occupied since 1967. Kazakhstan called on the conflicting parties to abandon unilateral steps and resume the negotiation process under the principle of "two states for two peoples" (MFA of Kazakhstan, 10.06.2020).
- Parliamentarians from the Central Asian states held an online meeting with OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) President George Tsereteli and Secretary General Roberto Montella. Regional legislators described recent developments in their countries, including the authorities' responses to COVID-19 in the fields of healthcare and economy. The PA leadership underlined the importance of regional connectivity, cooperation, timely exchange of information and dialogue among parliamentarians during this period (OSCE, 10.06.2020).
- The UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia convened an online meeting of deputy foreign ministers of the Central Asian states and Afghanistan. The parties shared their vision regarding regional challenges in the context of COVID-19 and ways to address them. While underlining increased cooperation and trust in the region during the pandemic, participants noted the need for enhancing existing crisis response mechanisms (UNRCCA, 11.06.2020).
- Foreign ministers of the five Central Asian states and High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell held a videoconference. The parties exchanged views on regional and international issues, including the implementation of the EU's Central Asia Strategy, repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic, and regional cooperation in Central Asia including with Afghanistan. Borrell reaffirmed the EU's commitment to intensify cooperation with the region in a number of fields (EU External Action, 12.06.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- SyryarkaAvtoProm, an automobile plant in Kazakhstan's city of Kostanai, began mass production of cars under the recently established partnership with Uzbekistan. The plant supplied its first Chevrolet cars to car dealerships in Kazakhstan and exported Cobalt and Nexia cars to Russia. Despite the crisis caused by the pandemic, cars are in demand because of their affordability and practicality. The plant plans to produce 26,000 vehicles by the end of 2020 and export half of them (The Astana Times, 12.06.2020).
- Based on data collected over an 18-month period, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Finance issued a statement accusing Kyrgyzstan of fiddling customs figures and abetting the proliferation of largescale smuggling from China. According to the ministry, over that time, Kyrgyzstan officially declared only one-tenth of the real value of goods sent to Kazakhstan. The claim is based on disparities between statistics of Kyrgyzstan's imports from China and its re-exports of Chinese-sourced goods to Russia and Kazakhstan (Eurasianet, 10.06.2020).
- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) held a ministerial-level online session to promote the restoration of the private sector in Central Asia. Officials of seven countries participating in the OECD Central Asian Initiative, representatives of the private sector and international experts discussed anti-crisis measures taken by the regional governments to support their economies and further actions to assist small and medium-sized enterprises (MFA of Turkmenistan, 10.06.2020).
- Uzbekistan plans to set up free trade zones in the Kungrad district of Karakalpakstan bordering Turkmenistan and in the Hojaabad district of the Andizhan region bordering Kyrgyzstan. The free trade zones are expected to facilitate cross-border trade, bolster development of modern forms of wholesale and retail trade, and promote logistical services in border areas. Businesses in the zones will be exempt from property tax, land tax, and water use tax (Spot, 12.06.2020).
- The Russian government will allocate 15 billion rubles (\$217 million) to the Russian Fund for Technological Development to promote the production of new high-tech and competitive products, including equipment for the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of dangerous diseases. Additional 16 billion rubles (\$231 million) in financial assistance will be provided to educational, scientific and medical institutions that were affected by the coronavirus pandemic (TASS, 11.06.2020).
- Belarusian Economy Minister Aleksandr Chervyakov and Turkish Ambassador to Belarus Mustafa Ozcan signed the terms of reference for negotiating a trade in services agreement. It is expected that the future agreement will create favorable conditions for the expansion of Belarusian export of services to Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, it will create additional incentives for Turkish business to invest in the Belarusian services sector (BelTA, 10.06.2020).

Society and Culture

- The Health Coordination Committee of the Turkic Council held its first meeting via videoconference. The parties exchanged information on best practices in the field of prevention, diagnosis and epidemiological studies of the coronavirus infection and agreed to hold online trainings and skill development programs for medical professionals. They also agreed to create a joint database and epidemiological monitoring system, as well as the Supply Chain Group to work on joint production of medical equipment and pharmaceuticals (Turkic Council, 08.06.2020).
- Tajik and Uzbek journalists shot a documentary film in the United States called "From Samarkand to Detroit". The documentary depicts cooperation of the Central Asian states with the United States and other global political and financial players aimed at the development of the region. It also highlights prospects of mutually beneficial regional partnership for solving common security and environmental issues and improving trade and economic relations (Avesta, 11.06.2020).
- Al-Farabi Kazakh National University advanced 42 positions up to the 165th place in the 2020 QS university ranking, becoming the first Kazakh university to enter the world's top 200 higher education institutions. This is the outcome of the comprehensive structural modernization carried out at the university in recent years. The introduction of the results-oriented management system facilitated the university's transition to a new level of quality of its educational and scientific activities (Al-Farabi KazNU, 10.06.2020).
- A research expedition to the Gobi desert, organized under the Kerulen joint project of the National Museum of Mongolia and the International Turkic Academy, discovered a previously unknown Turkic ritual complex in a place called Nogoontal in Mongolia's Dundgovi province. The square shaped complex with a size of 2.5×2.5 meters has a flat boulder decorated with horns and flowers and four vertical stones with a height of more than 2 meters (TWESCO, 08.06.2020).
- Mayor of the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality Mansur Yavas wrote on his Twitter account that he would like to memorialize famous Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov, "who shared the richness of Turkish culture with the world". Aitmatov is the third writer in the world by the number of translations after Shakespeare and Tolstoy. His works are translated into 176 languages and published in 128 countries with a circulation of more than 100 million copies (Kabar, 10.06.2020).
- Ambassador of Tajikistan to Germany Sohibnazar Gairatsho met in Berlin with representatives of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. The parties exchanged views on the implementation of the Green Central Asia initiative and its prospects in the post-coronavirus period. German experts work closely with their Tajik counterparts to study issues related to mitigating consequences of global warming in Central Asia, including the melting of glaciers (Khovar, 13.06.2020).