



INTERACTION BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POLITICS: CASE OF COVID-19

People tend to ask politicians and heads of state about causes of wars and political crises, doctors and scientists – about causes of pandemic outbreaks and climate change, and the Higher Forces – about causes of natural disasters. There are several versions of the emergence of COVID-19, including its artificial creation. However, hardly anyone today can reasonably prove at least one of these assumptions. At the moment, all doctors, scientists, politicians, or rather, all the people of Earth are more interested in finding the most effective means of combating this virus.

It can be said that this crisis tests the strength of political and economic systems, healthcare structures, law enforcement forces, information and communication technologies, and, finally, human relations and behavior patterns. It is very important to have something or someone to what or whom people can fully trust. It would seem that high-quality scientific research, reliable evidence, and data should provide stability and hope for overcoming the crisis. This happens when governments and politicians listen to and hear scientists, who do not create embellished reports with expected and politically biased, ideologically loyal or commercially viable conclusions, but produce real results and substantiated forecasts. However, interaction between science, society, government, and politics is still carried out on the basis of subordinating the former to the rest.

As it turned out, over the years, scientists and public health experts have pointed to the inevitability of a serious pandemic. But either because of the reluctance to spend on the necessary research, or because of distrust of scientists, or the presence of other priorities, the governments of almost all countries did not fully appreciate and ignored those warnings. Thus, globally, the world has not been prepared for a new pandemic.

Perhaps forecasts are not the most difficult part of scientific and practical activity. To convince governments, one needs to have tools for use in emergencies, such as effective ways to establish transnational cooperation in crisis times and receive collective expert advice, technological solutions, and, finally, sustainable channels for communication between science, society,

and politics. The already complex situation for scientists is compounded by the fact that there are no reliable data on the actual prevalence of the virus among the population, the degree to which people develop immunity, and seasonal behavior of the disease. Besides, asymptomatic cases of the spread of the virus have not been studied, and the search for an effective vaccine or medicine is still underway.

Admittedly, in previous years, science has demonstrated its potential in identifying and treating SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), BSE (mad cow disease), FMD (foot-and-mouth disease), H1N1 (swine flu), EVD (Ebola virus disease) and several others. Today, we witness unprecedented efforts to fight coronavirus worldwide. Dozens of projects in specialized laboratories – VIDO-InterVac at the Canadian University of Saskatchewan, the Department of Immunology and Microbiology at the University of Copenhagen, teams at the universities of Queensland and Oxford and others – are testing new drugs at an accelerated pace. Similar studies are conducted in Russia at the Pharmzashita Research and Production Center. U.S. research centers have suspended all projects to focus all efforts and funding on COVID-19. Tens of thousands of articles and reports on coronavirus are open for free access by reputable academic publishers in European countries.

However, we cannot be sure that scientific expertise is fully used to justify decisions made by government agencies. An example of such a disregard for the opinion of the scientific community can probably be the “herd immunity” policy adopted by the British government at the first stages of the pandemic. The essence of this policy was not to take any emergency measures, but to allow as many people as possible to get sick for immunity.

Now, when countries and peoples are paralyzed by fear resulting from the scale and speed of the spread of coronavirus, a unique situation arises that requires, in the opinion of scientists, the mobilization and involvement of a much wider community, including practitioners, members of academia, politicians, economists, media representatives, managers, and analysts.

Together, they need to develop theoretical and practical approaches to the use of scientific data, substantiate policies at all levels of government, and exchange experience of crisis planning and management.

Such functions could be taken over by the International Network of Government Scientific Advice (INGSA), formed in 2014 on the initiative of the International Science Council in Auckland, New Zealand, as a result of a series of discussions by world leaders in science from more than 40 countries. Distinctive features of the INGSA are the development of interaction between research results and policies; scientific advice, especially in developing countries; crisis and emergency analysis; maintaining strong links with various scientific and political communities in different countries and between jurisdictions around the world. Not so long ago, the INGSA launched a website to identify mechanisms that ensure the effective use of evidence in politics and practice – what was done well, what was done poorly, and what the results and lessons were. Similar communities of scientists exist in other regions of the world, for example, the ASEAN Public Emergency Center for Emergency Situations in Public Health (ASEAN EOC). Moreover, it can be assumed that the presence of scientists and specialists in the highest echelons of power, such as in Taiwan, where the president has a PhD from the London School of Economics and the vice-president is a well-known epidemiologist, explains why this country is successfully coping with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scientific advice and political choice may not coincide. However, those who make decisions should be fully informed of all the results and recommendations of scientific research in various disciplines that are directly or even indirectly related to this situation. This is exactly where initiatives such as the INGSA, which accumulate a variety of scientific opinions, can help. Moreover, decision-makers should inform the population about reasons and motives for their activities, explaining strategic and tactical steps they undertake clearly and readily. This will make citizens of their countries well-prepared and thinking participants in this battle for survival.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union member states held a working meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council via videoconference to review cooperative actions to prevent the spread of coronavirus and maintain economic stability. The parties adopted a joint statement on the COVID-19 pandemic, expressing readiness to continue joint work to eliminate its negative consequences and preserve the achieved level of integration cooperation (Eurasian Economic Commission, 14.04.2020).
- The Russian State Duma adopted a law simplifying Russia's citizenship procedures. According to the law, to obtain a Russian passport, adult stateless persons are no longer required to reside in Russia for five years, if they had Soviet citizenship and did not receive citizenship of other states that were part of the USSR. Moreover, citizens of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine will be able to apply for Russian citizenship without observing the term of residence in Russia if they have a residence permit (State Duma, 17.04.2020).
- Mayor of Dushanbe Rustam Emomali, the eldest son of President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, was elected the chairman of the Majlisi Milli (National Assembly), the upper house of the Tajik parliament. In a secret ballot, senators unanimously approved his nomination, officially making Rustam Emomali the second person in the country's hierarchy after the president. Thus, in case of Emomali Rahmon's resignation, death or incapacity, power will pass to his son (Fergana, 17.04.2020).
- Turkmenistan and Ukraine held bilateral political consultations via videoconference at the level of deputy foreign ministers. The parties discussed priority areas of relations of the two countries in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. They also reviewed a cooperation program for 2020-2021 that focuses on the trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian fields, as well as prospects for the restoration of partnership in the energy sector (MFA of Ukraine, 15.04.2020).
- An exchange of detainees between Ukraine and Russia-controlled parts of eastern Ukraine took place in the "all for all" format. The Security Service of Ukraine swapped 14 prisoners for 20 Ukrainians, mainly civilians, held in captivity in the self-proclaimed "Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics". According to President Volodymyr Zelensky, new talks with Moscow are underway to return people imprisoned in Russia-occupied Crimea and Russia itself (UNIAN, 16-18.04.2020).
- President of Moldova Igor Dodon held a working meeting with Bashkan of the Gagauz Autonomy Irina Vlah. The parties discussed the socio-economic life of the region, including measures taken by local authorities to prevent the spread of coronavirus. According to the head of Gagauzia, the situation in the autonomy is under control and the population is aware about risks and consequences of violating the restrictive measures introduced during the state of emergency (Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 15.04.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Kazakhstan supported a compromise deal reached at the OPEC+ meeting in Vienna to cut the global oil production by 9.7 million barrels per day (bpd), one of the largest collective cuts in the history of the global oil industry. As a result, the country's Ministry of Energy will decrease the domestic oil output in May-June 2020 by 390,000 bpd and reduce the oil production plan for 2020 from 90 million tons to 84.5 million tons (Kapital, 13-14.04.2020).
- In response to criticism of its initial response to the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus outbreak, the Russian government promised extra funding to regional authorities and small and medium-sized businesses. As announced by President Vladimir Putin, the support package will include 200 billion rubles (\$2.7 billion) for Russia's regions, more than 23 billion rubles (\$311 million) to the country's airlines, and direct funding of businesses for salary payments at the upper level of the minimum wage (Reuters, 15.04.2020).
- Due to the decrease in economic activity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a significant drop in oil prices, many Tajik migrant workers returned home from Russia and Kazakhstan, which account for more than 90% of their number. The Economy Ministry of Tajikistan estimates that the total damage to the economy from the coronavirus crisis and other external factors will reach \$650 million. To mitigate consequences, the government considers tax breaks for local businesses and tax reforms to protect and create jobs (Reuters, 17.04.2020).
- In an open letter to the Cotton Campaign, Minister of Employment and Labor Relations of Uzbekistan Nozim Khusanov requested the organization to lift a boycott on Uzbek cotton. The measure was introduced in 2006 over a state-supported system of forced and child labor. According to the letter, since the beginning of the coronavirus-related lockdown in the country, nearly 150,000 people have lost their jobs and more than 200,000 have fallen below the poverty line (Al Jazeera, 16.04.2020).
- During a session of the Turkmenistan-South Korea Business Council held via videoconference, officials and businesspersons of the two countries addressed prospects for expanding trade and economic cooperation. Representatives of South Korean companies made new specific proposals on joint projects in the fuel and energy sector. Moreover, the South Korean side expressed interest in equipment supplies for the merchant fleet of Turkmenistan and in the construction of a water treatment plant on the Caspian Sea (Turkmenistan Today, 17.04.2020).
- According to the telecommunications operator AzerTelecom, Azerbaijan starts to deepen the digitalization of its economy. Digital reforms are implemented through large-scale public and private programs, in particular, the Azerbaijan Digital Hub program. As part of this program, major content providers such as Facebook, Google, Netflix, Amazon, Alibaba, and Tencent work with Azerbaijan to meet traffic needs of Asian countries, which creates an opportunity for the country to become a regional digital center (AzerNews, 17.04.2020).

Society and Culture

- Books published by the International Turkic Academy are now freely available online. More than 100 books written in the Azerbaijani, English, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Mongolian, Russian, Turkish and other languages can be accessed in the "Books" section of the academy's official website. The publications include studies on the history of the Turkic world, its rich literary heritage, historical and written monuments, Turkic languages, ethnography, folklore and traditions (TWESCO, 17.04.2020).
- In an effort to provide economic support to the country's neighbors amid the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev ordered to provide humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The assistance includes 5,000 tons of flour worth more than \$3 million for each country. The decision was made following the official appeals of the Kyrgyz and Tajik sides to help in ensuring uninterrupted supply of food to the population (MFA of Kazakhstan, 16.04.2020).
- A group of Chinese medical consultants and experts arrived in Uzbekistan from the city of Nanchang, the capital of the Jiangxi province, which has the highest number of patients who recovered from COVID-19. The 15-member team, consisting of virologists, epidemiologists, pulmonologists, therapists, surgeons and infectious disease specialists, delivered humanitarian aid with necessary medical supplies worth 2 million yuan (about \$290,000) (Sputnik; Podrobno.uz, 17.04.2020).
- The World Health Organization (WHO) donated 64 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) systems to Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Health to conduct 6,720 tests for the diagnosis of COVID-19. This is the third time the WHO provided humanitarian assistance to the country after delivering 2,600 PCR test kits to the country in February and March 2020. In addition, the International Atomic Energy Agency provided Kyrgyzstan with diagnostic kits for real-time PCR tests and other medical supplies worth €64,000 (24.kg, 17.04.2020).
- President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed a number of orders aimed at expanding cooperation of relevant government agencies with international organizations in the field of environmental protection. In particular, the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection was ordered to sign the working plan for 2020 of the project "Ensuring Climate-Related Socio-Economic Stability of the Population Engaged in Agriculture in the Arid Regions of Turkmenistan" with the UN Development Program (Turkmenportal, 14.04.2020).
- According to the Statistics Committee of Kazakhstan's Ministry of National Economy, as of March 1, 2020, the country's population reached 18.67 million people, which is 1.3% (over 240,000) more than a year ago. The urban population is 10.93 million (58.5%), and the rural population is 7.74 million (41.5%). In the reporting period, the largest population growth was registered in the cities of Almaty and Nur-Sultan, as well as in the Turkistan region (Kazinform, 16.04.2020).