



## GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 pandemic and resulted lockdowns and border closures have significantly affected livelihoods of all people around the globe, resulting in a number of negative effects, such as COVID-19 related death and infection rates, economic crises due to closures of businesses and travel bans, school and university closures and as a result, lower quality of online education. One of the controversial effects of the pandemic is environmental impacts, as for the first time since the start of the industrial revolution we can witness some positive environmental changes to our planet. However, when talking about environmental impacts of COVID-19, it is important to be able to differentiate between long-term and short-term effects of the pandemic.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 19th century, air pollution has become one of the main environmental concerns. Even though there is some pollution caused by natural processes such as volcanic activity, natural forest fires and organic matter decomposition, the atmosphere is largely affected by human activity (anthropogenic effects). Annual increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions was 3% in the early 2000s. As a result of shifting from using coal as an energy source in developed countries, this number has decreased down to 0.9% in the 2010s. Unfortunately, Kazakhstan, as well as other Central Asian countries is yet to make the shift. Concerns are being raised about the air quality due to the introduction of various gaseous and particulate substances as a result of anthropogenic activities. High concentrations of gaseous and particulate substances in the air can have harmful effects for both human health and wellbeing and the environment. Poor air quality is linked to cancer, heart and respiratory diseases and stroke. Moreover, researchers have found that poor air quality has intensified the effects of COVID-19, which raises socio-economic concerns.

Small particles (PM<sub>10</sub> and PM<sub>2.5</sub> stand for particulate matter smaller than 10 and 2.5 micrometers, respectively) can be breathed in and be transferred to the bloodstream. PM concentrations are affected by human activities, such as agriculture, industrial production, residential cooking and heating. During the first lockdown measures in Europe, PM<sub>10</sub> concentrations were 30% less than expected in Spain, 26% less in Norway and 25% less in Italy. Even though people were spending more time at home, this decrease in PM concentrations is most likely due to the closure of workplaces.

Travelling is one of the main causes of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, especially carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>). Moreover, the studies have shown that NO<sub>2</sub> levels are correlated to noise pollution from traffic, which is a big problem for urban areas and can affect mental health, as well as wildlife. Lockdowns during the pandemic have forced people to work from home and travel less, including travelling for tourism, business travels and commute, and as a result, led to an increased air quality. Aviation is one of the sectors, which was most hit by the lockdown measures. While this has had negative economic impacts, it has also reduced the GHG emissions, proving to be beneficial for improving the air quality.

According to the European Environmental Agency (EEA), nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) levels have decreased significantly throughout Europe. For example, in April 2020, the levels of NO<sub>2</sub> emissions were 61% less than expected in Spain, 52% in France and 48% in Italy. In 2020, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have decreased by 2.4 billion tonnes or 7%. Despite the decrease, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions amounted to 39 billion tonnes, leading to an increase of total CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, as one should keep in mind that CO<sub>2</sub> remains in the atmosphere and oceans for centuries. Therefore, despite the drop in GHG levels, the current decrease in emissions is not enough and we should aim for zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Decreased GHG emissions and energy demand have had positive effects in terms of air quality in 2020, proving to be an effective short-term impact of the pandemic on the environment. However, in order to achieve long-term effects, the political measures should be taken globally to curb the effects of climate change. Unless policymakers learn some lessons from the change in air quality during lockdowns, rebound of GHG emissions in 2021 is unavoidable.

The pandemic has also created a new problem – plastic waste. In 2017, the United Nations made an announcement declaring plastic pollution a worldwide crisis. Moreover, in 2019, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal was amended in order to include plastic waste and was ratified by more than 180 countries. Emergence of COVID-19 has disrupted the development and improvement of plastic waste management.

Since the beginning of the pandemic there has been demand for single-use items such as personal protective equipment (PPE): gloves, hand sanitizers in plastic bottles and

masks. The World Health Organization has called for a 40% increase in production of disposable PPE. On one hand, use of plastic has helped to prevent more rapid spread of the virus. However, on the other hand, use of single-use plastic items have created a pressure on sustainability, exacerbating the issue of plastic pollution. Mismanagement of the use of PPE, could result in a global use of 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves per month.

Moreover, with closure of restaurants and cafes, came a surging demand for take-out meals, which usually come in single-use plastic containers and wrappers. Online shopping has also had a large demand, which requires wrapping products in plastic material. In this light, waste management should be an essential public service that will not only help to stop the spread of the virus but also protect the environment. The behaviour of use of single-use plastic during the pandemic will most likely have a long-term effect, changing the newly emerging perception of recycling and choosing environmentally sustainable products and offsetting recent achievements in social awareness.

The pandemic is reminding us that we have long neglected the environment. In this light, it is worth mentioning that COVID-19 is a zoonotic disease (the disease that is transferred from animals to humans). Nowadays, 60% of existing human infectious diseases have animal origin, while 75% of new such diseases are transmitted from animals to humans. Moreover, since 1940 50% of those diseases have emerged due to intensive domestic livestock farming, which brings us to a conclusion that the main reason behind the spread of zoonotic diseases is environmental degradation caused by human-animal interaction. Therefore, in order to prevent similar outbreaks in the future we should focus on environmental sustainability.

As the UN's environment chief, Inger Andersen, noted, "Nature is sending us a message with the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis," and if humans do not change their activities that cause climate change, biodiversity loss and as we can see spread of pathogens, we might face similar crises repeatedly. As the world gets out of the pandemic, governments should focus on a sustainable economy that is better for the planet. While many industries, such as tourism and hospitality, have suffered economic consequences of the pandemic, they should take on the opportunity to shift to sustainable development while recovering.

## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay received the Prime Minister of Azerbaijani Ali Asadov in Ankara. Vice President Oktay pledged to revive and rebuild the recently liberated territories of Azerbaijan ensuring that Turkey will continue to support Azerbaijan in developing those regions. Prime Minister Asadov expressed gratitude to the Turkish side not only for the support during the Upper Karabakh conflict but also for the help amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Aa.com.tr, 18.02.2021).
- The Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia announced his resignation due to differences of opinion with his own team over the detention of a prominent opposition politician Nika Melia. The chairman of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party Nika Melia, had been accused of inciting violence at street protests in June 2019, a charge he has dismissed as politically motivated. Due to this fact, the trilateral meeting of foreign ministers of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia scheduled for 18 of February has been postponed (Reuters.com, 18.02.2021).
- The Special Forces of Turkey and Pakistan's Special Services Group finalized a three-week ATATURK-XI 2021 joint military exercise. The closing ceremony of the drill was held at the Pakistani military's Special Service headquarters in Tarbela near the Afghan border. The drill focused on counter-terrorism operations, close quarter battle, fire and move techniques, helicopter rappelling, compound clearance and actions of hostage rescue (Aa.com.tr, 20.02.2021).
- The Senate of the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan and the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of Russia held the fifth online meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Commission on Cooperation. The participants expressed satisfaction with the progress made in the bilateral relations and discussed a wide range of issues. The parties particularly emphasized labor migration focusing on the joint solution of urgent problems in this area. The issues of cooperation in the field of the agro-industrial sector and tourism were also discussed in detail by the participants (Uzdaily.uz, 18.02.2021).
- The First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan Khusrava Nozir met with the Ambassador of Mongolia to Tajikistan Luvsan Battulga. During the meeting, the sides tackled issues of current bilateral relations, cooperation in the economy, agriculture and hydro-energy. The parties discussed the development of Tajik-Mongolian cooperation within the framework of international and regional organizations (Avesta.tj, 19.02.2021).
- The Secretary-General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg stated that the military alliance will not withdraw troops from Afghanistan "before the time is right". The final decision on the troops stationed in Afghanistan depends on President Biden's rejection or acceptance of the deadline that comes on May 1. Currently, the Pentagon is considering plans to stay, to leave, or gradually withdraw the troops. The deal and the final decision are being reviewed in the White House (Wionews.com, 15.02.2021).

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The Prime Minister of Mongolia Luvsan-namsrain Oyun-Erdene received the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Turkey to Mongolia Ahmet Yazal. Discussing the positive trends in the bilateral relations, the sides agreed to foster the development of bilateral trade and activating cooperation in tourism and air transport. The sides noted that the two countries plan to operate direct flights twice a month starting from April of 2021 and they also expressed their intentions to increase the trade of such commodities as leather and leather-related products. (Montsame.mn, 19.02.2021).
- Recently, the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Abdulaziz Kamilov visited Turkmenistan, where he had a meeting with the country's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. The parties discussed issues of cooperation in the implementation of infrastructural and transport projects in Central Asia. On the same day, Kamilov together with his Turkmen counterpart Rashid Meredov signed a program of cooperation between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the two countries for 2021-2022. The document aims to promote trade and economic integration in the region (Kabar, 18.02.2021).
- According to Kazakh Finance Minister Yerulan Zhamaubayev, the national budget deficit amounted to 2.2 trillion tenges (\$5.29 billion) in 2020. To finance the deficit, the authorities borrowed 3 trillion tenges (\$7.2 billion). Due to limited domestic market resources, the government issued ruble bonds worth 223 billion tenge. As of January 1, 2021, Kazakhstan's state debt reached 20.6 trillion tenges (\$49.5 billion) and accounted for 29.6% of its GDP. A share of the government debt in total state debt and GDP correspondingly equaled 80% and 23.9% (Kazinform, 19.02.2021).
- The Association of Leather and Footwear Producers of Uzbekistan reports that the country prepares to launch the production of Nike and Adidas footwear in the 4th quarter of 2021. Initially, the enterprise will produce 3 million pairs of sports shoes annually and the full capacity will be reached in the 3rd quarter of 2022. Investment costs of the projects are estimated at \$12 million. Uzbekistan plans to export 50% of shoes to Central Asian countries. The share of its domestic market will be 20% (UzReport, 20.02.2021).
- According to Ukraine's Ambassador to Turkey Andrii Sybiha, in 2020 bilateral trade between Ukraine and Turkey amounted to around \$5 billion and remained at pre-pandemic levels. The implemented pandemic-induced restriction did not affect the trade volumes. Sybiha mentioned that growth rates of trade were high and varied from 10% to 15% during the last 4 years. He also noted that expectations from the potential free trade agreement were promising. In particular, trade turnover can be doubled and quickly reach \$10 billion (Ukrinform.net, 19.02.2021).
- Recently, Azerbaijan's ADY Freight reported that freight traffic via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway increased more than 2 times in 2020 compared to the 2019 indicator. In particular, it grew from 110.2 thousand tons to almost 225 thousand tons. For the same period, a share of containerization increased from 76% to 77.5%. The railway started operating in two-way mode recently. It is planned that cargo turnover will be increased from the current 6 million tons to 20 million tons in near future (AzerNews, 17.02.2021).

## Society and Culture

- The Secretary-General of the Turkic Council Baghdad Amreyev met with the Vice President of Turkey Fuat Oktay. The sides discussed the current projects being implemented by the council with the participation of Turkey, as well as future plans such as the 2020-2025 Turkic World Strategy and 2040 Turkic World Vision, reports. The Secretary-general also gave detailed information about the informal summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States to be held in Kazakhstan on March 31 (Aa.com.tr, 21.02.2021).
- The head of the Committee on Language and Terminology of Tajikistan Olimjon Muhammadjonzoda announced that Korzhenevskoi Peak of Pamir mountains has been renamed Ozodi Peak and Ozodi Peak has been renamed Sangtalak. Korzhenevskoi Peak is the third highest peak in the Pamir Mountains and is one of the five "Snow Leopard Peaks" in the territory of the former Soviet Union. The peak was named after Evgenia Korzhenevskaya, the wife of Russian geographer Nikolai L. Korzhenevskiy, who discovered the peak in August 1910 (Asiaplustj.info, 17.02.2021).
- The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed the law on the ratification of the agreement between the government of Kazakhstan and UNESCO on the establishment of the International Centre for the Rapprochement of Cultures (ICRC) under the aegis of UNESCO. The center will promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different religions and cultures through building capacity in intercultural communication providing a platform for discussion and knowledge sharing. The center will also contribute to the effective promotion of Kazakhstan's initiatives at UNESCO and increase the credibility of Kazakhstan at the international level (Astanatimes.com, 16.02.2021).
- The Karaganda pharmaceutical complex completed the registration procedure of the Russian "Sputnik V" (Gam-COVID-Vac) vaccine against coronavirus infection on the territory of Kazakhstan. An expert organization under the Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan confirmed the safety, quality and effectiveness of the vaccine, having considered the materials of the registration dossier. The production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine was launched in Kazakhstan at the end of December 2020. It is planned to produce 2 million doses of vaccine at the initial stage of production (Iz.ru, 15.02.2021).
- The Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to Turkey Kubanychbek Omuraliev met with the Mayor of Kecioren Municipality of Ankara Turgut Altinok. Discussing the issues of bilateral relations, the sides noted the need to further develop cooperation in various fields between the municipality of Kecioren and the municipalities of Kyrgyzstan. The parties reached an agreement to establish a monument dedicated to Manas in the square in front of the municipality of Kecioren, as well as the allocation of space at the Center of Turkic Culture "Fortress Estergon" for the exhibition and sale of national products of Kyrgyz folk art (En.kabar.kg, 17.02.2021).
- The International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation organized a meeting between the president of the Foundation Gunay Afandiyeva, and the Charge d'Affaires of the Kyrgyz Republic in Azerbaijan Mukhamed Lou. The sides exchanged views on the prospects for further cooperation highlighting the large-scale activities of the organization aimed at promoting the rich material and cultural heritage of the Turkic-speaking peoples. The parties emphasized the importance of strengthening the partnership between the Foundation and Kyrgyzstan shared plans for the future (Azertag.az, 18.02.2021).