

fight **pandemic** lockdown
unity **self-organization**
coronavirus activities **fines**
masks digital **contribute**
fact-checking **volunteering**

CIVIL SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN EURASIA

crowdsource **outbreak** gloves
self-isolation misinformation
resilience fake news
trust quarantine social media
engagement **restrictions** disease
webinars concealment **threats**

ABOUT STRATEG EAST



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INTRODUCTION

by Dr. Tomicah Tillemann,
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Unprecedented crises can force us to revisit long-standing assumptions. The coronavirus pandemic is inflicting devastating damage on lives and nations, but it also offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between civil society and the state.

During the four years I served as Senior Advisor for civil society to two US Secretaries of State, I worked in dozens of countries across Europe and Eurasia. The region has produced some of the world's most inspiring examples of civil society in action. Activists from the region have brought greater openness, accountability, and opportunity to tens of millions of people. However, in too many cases, the dynamics between government and the state across the region are still not what they could or should be. Too many political leaders suppress and silence voices from civil society. Conversely, in some cases, activists see themselves in permanent opposition to government regardless of how it operates, rather than seeking out chances to help the public sector serve the needs of citizens more effectively.

The pandemic, of necessity, has pushed leaders to reimagine how government and the social sector can better leverage their unique capabilities to foster resilience and mitigate suffering. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Europe and Eurasia have mobilized critical volunteers to provide transportation to medical workers, deliver essential services to the vulnerable and elderly, and distribute food to those in need.

CSOs are also embracing digital solutions as a core tenet of pandemic response. Many organizations have sponsored or participated in hackathons to develop apps, information hubs, and essential supply registries to properly channel resources, information, and help to address critical needs. These examples are showing how the civic sector can bring greater agility, creativity, and capacity to the task of public problem-solving. They are also highlighting the need for governments to open up to constructive engagement, innovation, and coaching from outside the narrow confines of officialdom.

These successes underscore a broader need for civil society engagement in developing the digital services and digital infrastructure that will increasingly power societies in the 21st century. The pandemic is rapidly accelerating timelines for digital transformation. Particularly given the speed at which these efforts are unfolding, ensuring effective involvement of and oversight by civil society will help preserve trust and drive better outcomes.

As they innovate, governments and CSOs should also seek to deliver greater transparency by building digital solutions with open source code. Creating open source solutions allows organizations to share and adopt digital systems that function with greater trust and facilitates scaling across other communities. Europe and Eurasia are already home to some of the world's best digital governance platforms, including Estonia's X-Road system, Ukraine's ProZorro e-procurement system, and Georgia's blockchain-based land registry. By leveraging the region's deep reservoir of technical talent and strong tradition of civil society activism, the region could become the Silicon Valley of open source digital governance solutions.

My organization, New America, has assembled the [Pandemic Response Repository](#),¹ a library of open source technology solutions that are helping communities meet the challenge of the coronavirus and enabling others around the world to benefit from their work. As the crisis continues, we look forward to highlighting additional solutions developed by government and civil society across Europe and Eurasia. We hope the pandemic will provide a needed wake-up call for governments that have historically restricted civic space and an opening for those that have turned away from engagement with CSOs to build a stronger, more constructive relationship with the social sector as the crisis abates.



INTRODUCTION

by Anatoly Motkin,
President of StrategEast

Over the last few decades we have been used to perceiving civil society in post-Soviet countries either as a fighter against the existing government, or at least as a check on government actions.

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society in this region has taken on a completely new role—though situational as the state's ally in the fight against a common enemy—the spread of coronavirus and force majeure economic circumstances caused by the lockdown.

The state and civil society worked separately, but their actions were aimed in the same direction and complemented each other. Anyone interested in the region could learn which measures have been taken by the Eurasian states from the international news. We present a report on how civil society has organized to combat the pandemic and its consequences in the Eurasian region. Experts and civil society leaders from each of the Eurasian countries were involved in this study.

StrategEast has been studying the correlation between the development of civil society and the digital transformation of the Eurasian states for many years. This topic is discussed, in particular, in our report “Changing Economy—Changing Society,” where we demonstrate how the growth of the digital economy contributes to the development of civil society. Therefore, one of the main subjects of this study of civil society activities in the Eurasian countries is what crowd-

generated digital solutions were developed in the region to combat the pandemic.

The outcome looks very impressive and it emphasizes the ability of civil society to raise social resilience, especially in authoritarian states. In authoritarian countries, civil society has perhaps been more effective than the state in the fight against the pandemic.

But even in freer countries, it has played a significant role in these efforts due to the trust that it enjoys among the local population, and which is often higher than trust in the state. Some measures, such as mask requirements or self-isolation at home, were perceived by the state as restrictive to individual freedoms. However when proposed by civil society and explained in social media, these measures became the subject of public consensus.

Speaking about digital solutions, it should be noted that one of the main results of the actions of civil society during the pandemic was digital transformation of civil society itself. Self-organization took place on digital platforms using the most advanced technologies, and representatives of local IT industries took an active part in various projects. We have no doubts—COVID-19 will disappear, but digital civil society will remain in Eurasia and will help the states of the region successfully undergo a digital and social transformation.

Executive Summary

This report was commissioned to examine the response of civil society actors to the needs of vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 outbreak in 11 Eurasian countries. The purpose of Civil Society's Response to COVID-19 in Eurasia is to study trends of civil engagement in addressing social and human rights challenges related to the novel pandemic in the countries of the region, as well as the role of civil society in transforming the region to a more transparent, modern, and Western-type one.

In this report, we have focused on three dimensions of civil society engagement in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic:

- defining civil society organizations active in meeting the needs arising from COVID-19 at the community level and the types of mutual assistance initiatives they provide
- type of assistance civil society provides to prevent the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus
- effective technological solutions to address social and human rights challenges caused by the COVID-19 outbreak
- to better understand the situation on the ground we have engaged local experts from each of the countries

The report demonstrates the following main findings:

- Civil society actors addressed people affected by quarantine and restriction of movement in most countries (with the exception of Belarus and Turkmenistan), such as those who couldn't walk out of their homes to shop for essentials, especially senior citizens who are more vulnerable to the disease or those who have been home-quarantined by state authorities. Civil society actors have concentrated on providing food and major essentials for such people, often using doorstep delivery. In Uzbekistan this was accompanied by difficulties, as volunteering was restricted by the country's authorities.
- Special aid was provided by volunteer movements to make available no-cost public access to personal protective equipment (PPE)—including face masks, medical gowns, gloves, and hand sanitizers, as well as production of models for 3D printing, provision of patterns for the production of workwear, and free meals and rides for medics (e.g., "Give Ride to a Medic" action in Ukraine).
- As for coronavirus disease situation reports, citizens of most countries have been relying on official data, rather than information from civil society. At the same time, fact-checking resources were active in Eastern Europe, but those resources were dedicated to materials that counter the spread of fake news in general, not specifically to misinformation about the coronavirus. Many media outlets performed the function of fighting fake news about COVID-19.
- However, in the Central Asian region the situation is different from that in other countries. In Tajikistan, civil society was

struggling with concealment of the real situation about the disease in the country. In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, civil society was not active as it is not institutionalized there. Moreover, the mere notion of COVID-19 is strictly prohibited by law in Turkmenistan. There are no NGOs in the country, and any civic activity is suppressed by the Ministry of National Security of Turkmenistan. The government of the country even forced the International Committee of the Red Cross to curtail its activities in the country with no explanation.

- In Azerbaijan, by contrast, civil society leaders have been trying to inform the public about the existence of the virus and its dangers as the population does not believe the coronavirus exists and quarantine rules are often violated; civil society actors often speak about it in the media and explain the potential threats of COVID-19.
- In most countries state authorities introduced special websites with the most current information about COVID-19. Civil society has been conducting anti-crisis webinars on how to organize work and communities in the fight against COVID-19, ensuring better communication between the authorities, businesses, and the community, organizing hackathons to develop ideas that tackle issues caused by the pandemic, and developing apps with the same purpose.
- Some countries, like Uzbekistan, are not that technologically savvy and use only social networks to find solutions to combat the consequences of the pandemic; some, like Moldova and Kyrgyzstan, used help from international organizations including UNDP, and WHO took the initiative in this regard and prepared online platforms and other digital solutions to help fight the spread of COVID-19.
- Various technological solutions have contributed to initiatives in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic by collecting information about the shortages of required items, such as PPE, ventilators, and healthcare facilities' needs. However, limitations and challenges faced by some countries include poor technology infrastructures, poor technological literacy, and lack of access to electronic devices.

Civil society actors have demonstrated a certain degree of unity during the pandemic. Thus, Belarus experts claim to observe "tectonic shifts" in the "person-society-state" relationship model. Coronavirus in Belarus acted as a catalyst for increased social responsibility, solidarity, and self-organization of society. Civil society in countries like Ukraine, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan was quite active from the very first days of pandemic, helping both citizens and doctors. However, civic engagement in a number of Eurasian countries has been limited (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) or nonexistent (Turkmenistan) during the COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, there is still room for improvement in its unity and effectiveness in assisting both society and the state while tackling the problems related to the pandemic. The advancement of technology-centric solutions can further rally civil society in Eurasian countries and considerably enhance its efficiency to address social challenges. Technological means can unveil numerous opportunities for civic activism, foster collaboration, mobilization, and information exchange.



Armenia

Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan,

President, Zargatsum (Development) social movement

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, misinformation about COVID-19 has two main sources in Armenia. First, the misinformation is based on the spread of popular international fake news stories about coronavirus (conspiracy theories, 5G, etc.)

Second, the misinformation is based on the Armenian context where the oppositional mass media and civil activists try to use the coronavirus misinformation to weaken the government by criticizing dramatically the antiepidemiological measures and its general anti-pandemic strategy in order to show that this government can't manage the situation.

For example, these kinds of activists can stand against wearing masks in public and say that they don't believe in coronavirus. On the other side, the government tries to uncover the strategy of the opposition and makes attempts to accuse the opposition of actions against national health security and criticizes the political actions taken by oppositional leaders during the pandemic—at the time, as presented by the government, that calls for unity against the common enemy. At the same time, there are not any specialized NGOs or groups of citizens who try to prevent the spread of misinformation. There are some experts from civil society, but they are just famous people who talk about the pandemic and related issues in general

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, from the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in March in Armenia, civil society started supporting the anti-pandemic strategy presented by the government. At that time, one of the problems was the inability of poor people to change masks as often as recommended. In a couple of days, groups of citizens came together and organized the production of masks for the needs of society, and afterwards these masks were handed out for free.

Another civil action was the formation of groups that have been visiting elderly people at home to support them by providing food and other necessities. But the main scheme of aid for old people remained the Armenian neighborhood phenomenon that means you should help your neighbor; for example, go to the store, take out their trash, and help with other typical tasks. Some philanthropists created fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) product packages and handed these out for free as an aid.

Unfortunately, there are not any famous aid initiatives for people with disabilities.

As for **effective technological solutions**, the Armenian government has created the "covid19.gov.am" website and the "COVID-19 Armenia" application² to tackle news and impose governmental measures against the pandemic. In addition, people in Armenia follow on Facebook and YouTube—the most popular social networks in Armenia—the Armenian prime minister, the minister of health and the commandant during the state of emergency. There is a #STOPվարակ (STOP virus) initiative organized by Zargatsum (Development) social movement aimed to support anti-pandemic measures, for example wearing a mask and gloves, using hand sanitizer, maintaining social distance, and also spreading of information such as wearing masks saves lives and helps to stop the virus.

Taking into account that the main problem in Armenia is the noncompliance with anti-pandemic rules set by the Armenian Government, I want to mention that there are groups of citizens who support the policemen and walk together with them through Yerevan down town districts to control wearing masks in public and prevent mass gatherings of people, especially during good weather. There are very few of these kinds of groups of citizens and their tactics are not very efficient.

Speaking in general, I have to say that civil society has shown limited activity and progress during the outbreak of COVID-19. The main actions are taking place at the governmental level and society supports these measures. Those who do not support these measures do so due to their political interests and speculate on the efficiency of the measures taken to lower the prestige of the ruling party.

Azerbaijan

Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu,

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As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, one of the difficulties faced in Azerbaijan during the pandemic is that the population does not believe in the existence of the coronavirus. Therefore, the majority of the population does not follow the rules of the quarantine regime. As a result, many citizens are fined for this reason. Civil society leaders are trying to inform the public about the existence of the virus and its dangers. That is why they often speak about it in the media and explain the potential threats of COVID-19.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, civil society institutions have provided in-kind

food assistance to the poor and unemployed. They helped older people, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups meet their needs.

As for **effective technological solutions**, there are no special digital activities and online platforms in Azerbaijan. One reason for this is the lack of experience and knowledge of digital tools among internet users, and another reason is the low quality and speed of the internet. The internet provider market in Azerbaijan is divided among oligopolistic companies and they strongly depend on the body implementing state policy in this area.

However, several times with the participation of NGO leaders, the traditional problems and current challenges of civil society institutions in the country were discussed. Video conferences on combating corruption and police violence amid the pandemic were organized with the participation of experts. All this was organized on Zoom and BlueJeans online discussion platforms.



Belarus

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As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, in response to demands for reliable information articulated by civil society, the Ministry of Health of Belarus has implemented the practice of publishing daily results of coronavirus-related statistics.³ Concurrently, there appeared a wave of public opinion leaders focused on the study of these statistics, identification of disinformation threats, and provision of this information to the public.

The main consequence of the pandemic in Belarus is a tectonic shift in the “person-society-state” relationship model. Coronavirus in Belarus acted as a catalyst for society to “grow up” and strengthen the social contract with increased social responsibility, solidarity, and self-organization of society. Facing the pandemic, Belarusian society demonstrated its ability to self-organize rapidly and efficiently, as evidenced by the stepped-up volunteer movement and its increasingly distinct institutionalization, as well as by private initiatives, the involvement of businesses, and public human rights structures in support and assistance campaigns.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, mainly all these mechanisms resulted in particular activities like sewing of masks and clothes, production of models for 3D printing, provision of patterns for the production of workwear, free meals for medics, etc. In particular, the fundraising initiative group #ByCovid19⁴ combines the nonprofit charitable media platform «Имена» (NAMES), the campaign for helping healthcare workers #ByCovid19, Hackerspace, and ODO Global Travel. In Belarus the fundraising is carried out through the MolaMola platform, while abroad—through PayPal, Revolut, and bank transfers. The #ByCovid19 initiative is financially and technically supported by commercial companies (Element 5, Crocs Belarus, Electrosila, Onega, E-Delivery, and AAA Cargo).

In addition to the volunteer movement, a notable feature of combatting the pandemic in Belarus has been the internal consolidation and self-organization of certain social groups, primarily healthcare workers, who unite in large numbers and



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share their experience and practices in combatting coronavirus and discuss optimal treatment methods. Being isolated due to the current working conditions (separation from families, self-isolation, etc.), healthcare workers are actually becoming an independent segment of society with a very high level of trust and support from the population.

Another social effect of the coronavirus is that the pandemic eliminated minor and artificially charged topics from public consciousness and the media space. Furthermore, a considerable part of media resources have focused on the agenda of social solidarity, thereby responding to the increased social demands.

As for **effective technological solutions**, the digital activity of Belarusian civil society aimed at the struggle with the pandemic mainly concentrated around: #ByCovid19—an initiative created by group of proactive Belarusian people who organized fundraising to support healthcare workers of Belarus; MolaMola—a crowdfunding platform that created a special branch on its website during the pandemic and has already completed about 60 micro-fundraising campaigns; and initiative of «Имена» (NAMES) magazine that created Telegram channel @covid19.imena to match those people who need help with those who are willing to provide such a support.

Georgia

Sergo Chikhladze,

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As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, as Georgia deals with both the novel

coronavirus pandemic and disinformation about COVID-19, it is crucial that people have access to reliable and accurate information in order to understand and respond to the crisis. However, a flow of fake news and misleading information is adversely affecting this process and undermining societal resilience during the pandemic. Conspiracy theories about links between 5G and the coronavirus or WHO's fabricated statements are being widely circulated through Georgian Facebook and other social media. The Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center in Georgia is a long-standing

target of Russian hostile propaganda, accusing the Georgian side of spreading COVID-19 in the region from the laboratory and funding “dangerous experiments” in the center. The state’s Data Exchange Agency, part of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia, has revealed that the sources of coronavirus fake news circulating in Georgian social media are located on servers outside of Georgia.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, Georgian civil society organizations (CSOs) are actively struggling with spread of COVID-19-related fake news. FactCheck⁵ is an innovative media project in Georgia working to verify the news, including COVID-19-related fake news disseminated on social networks/media outlets and provide the public with accurate information. The portal offers readers verified and evidence-based information in both Georgian and English languages. Myth Detector⁶ is another fact-checking portal developed by Media Development Foundation, which aims to contribute to the identification of COVID-19 fake news and communication of reliable information by means of fact-checking and raising the level of media literacy. The Atlantic Council of Georgia has contributed to the fight against fake news by organizing online discussions about COVID-19 disinformation in the Caucasus region and conducting surveys on disinformation, revealing falsehoods and fake news (Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab). The Georgian Strategic Analysis Center (GSAC) has been organizing online public lectures dedicated to COVID-19 fake news. GSAC also made educational clips on COVID-19 that aim to identify fake news and increase awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the most vulnerable during the crisis are the elderly, the sick and disabled, and those left without any income to support their families as a result of the quarantine measures and the economic downturn. Luckily, there is no lack of solidarity in Georgia. There are several successful examples of social solidarity. One Tbilisi man collected 17 tons of food in seven days.⁷ With four cars and a handful of volunteers, they have made hundreds of deliveries. Similarly, a Facebook group created in March 2020 called Let’s Help the Elderly⁸ already has more than 30,000 members and has reportedly raised more than USD 30,000 to provide food and other necessities to seniors. With USAID funding, Red Cross volunteers across Georgia have provided more than 40,000 vulnerable people with food and hygiene supplies. International and local Georgian companies created a platform Unity,⁹ to connect volunteers with those in need of help in this time of crisis. There are two registration forms: one to make a request for assistance, and another for volunteers wanting to help. The platform operators then connect the two. They also collect donations to directly assist the elderly, disabled, single mothers, and other vulnerable groups. Volunteers are involved in providing food, medication, and other essentials to vulnerable communities. Maintaining mental resilience during the crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 is no less important than physical health. From April 2020, free remote psychological services by phone and video have been provided with the support of the Open Society Foundation.

As for **effective technological solutions**, there are several digital platforms in Georgia developed by state and non-state sectors to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 16, 2020, a new application NOVID-20 became available in Georgia. Developed jointly by

by the Austrian NGO NOVID20 in cooperation with the highly innovative Austrian software company Dolphin Technologies and the Georgian government,¹⁰ this application was developed as an important tool for tracing contacts of COVID-19-infected persons and for preventing further spread of the virus, enabling its users to find out whether or not they have been in contact with COVID-19-infected persons. The application has two problems: first, its efficiency depends on the amount of people using it; second, it depends on the good will of the user to warn others about the infection; besides, it can hardly be regarded as a cost-effective digital intervention. In total, GEL 500,000 was spent from the state budget to develop the application. However, government officials announced that only 10 people infected with COVID-19 were identified using this app.

The Georgian government also created the digital platform stopcov.ge. The website provides a wealth of accurate information about COVID-19 including definitions, a discussion about coronavirus myths, answers to frequently asked questions, information about online and tele- services such as pharmacies and hotlines, and other relevant data.

Also, the recommendations from WHO and the National Center for Disease Control have been published on the website. [Stopcov.ge](https://stopcov.ge) is accessible in the following languages: Georgian, Abkhazian, Ossetian, English, Armenian, and Azeri.

Pepper—a semi-humanoid robot—was purchased from France by the Georgian government. “He will help us defeat COVID-19,” the minister of health said, adding that his capabilities have not yet been fully realized and details will be made public later. It is worth mentioning that the robot malfunctioned during the live presentation in the presence of the prime minister of Georgia and other government officials. The government did not disclose how much was spent from the state budget to purchase the robot.

Telemedicine hub (mydoc.ge) has added a COVID-19 division where citizens can check their symptoms and find out if they are infected. However, these results are informative only and there is no data on how many people have used it.

For prevention of the spread of the virus and for informing the public regarding distance services, a digital solidarity platform—<https://prevencia.ge>—was created with the support of CSOs. More than 100 companies are united around this platform. The users can choose the category they want and see a list of all the services and products they can get without leaving home. The platform also checks the accuracy of information about the pandemic.

Several business companies created a platform—<https://supportbusiness.ge>—to support small- and medium-sized businesses, where you can send information about your business problems and receive recommendations and solutions. Around 50 problems have already been solved according to information on the platform.

Better coordination among CSOs and between state and non-state institutions can improve Georgia’s capacity to fight fake news and create more efficient digital platforms for service or information delivery.



Kazakhstan

Andrey Grishin,

Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights
Analytical Center for Central Asia

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, civil society in Kazakhstan is practically not involved in the fight against disinformation about COVID-19. In any case, the general public knows nothing about this fight. In fact, Kazakhstan does not have special NGOs who fight the spread of fake news about COVID-19 (at least the general public knows nothing about them) and everyone relies on official reports. The only resource trying to somehow fight against fake information about coronavirus is factcheck.kz—a website created by Kazakhstani journalists and aimed at counteracting to fake news stories. During the pandemic, the resource published several articles refuting particular fake news.

As for the rest of civil society and activists, they are more engaged in the struggle against public authorities, trying to oppose amendments to laws about rallies, political parties, and adoption of the new Health Code.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, accordingly, civil society is not involved in the provision of assistance. Single cases of support for the poor during the state of emergency and quarantine does not count, as they are not happening at an organizational level. However, it is worth noting about them. Some Almaty activists initiated fundraising, purchase, and delivery of food and essential goods to single pensioners when leaving the house was strictly limited.

Moreover, Kazakhstani journalists organized fundraising for the purchase of food and hygiene products for Tajikistani journalists. USD 2,250 have been raised.

The biggest initiative comes from the state—the #bizbirgemiz campaign (we are together). However, in large cities there are small communities that provide help independently. They mainly buy (or receive from shopping malls) food and distribute it to poor people. In such cases, the lists of people who need such supplies are usually provided by local governments, but information is also obtained through social networks. In Almaty, this is done by the association, I am a person of Almaty,¹¹ which has announced an assistance campaign Who Else but Me. In small towns, assistance is usually provided either by ordinary people, but most often through government structures.

As for **effective technological solutions**, civil society was also not involved in digital solutions related to the pandemic. The only resource that appeared during the pandemic is <https://covid19live.kz/>. It shows in real time the number of people who have been infected, recovered, and died from the coronavirus. The resource was created and maintained by three organizations: the Scientific and Practical Center for Sanitary and Epidemiological Expertise and Monitoring, the National Center for Expertise, and the Kazakhstan Scientific Center for Quarantine and Zoonotic Infections named after M. Aykimbaev.

Kazakhstan has developed an application for monitoring and alerting the spread of coronavirus in Kazakhstan with [COVID19live.kz](https://covid19live.kz/) and it is also possible to report infection or contacts with the infected.

In early July, 2020 a new website <https://umytpa.kz/> was created by several online media outlets. It shows the number of people who have died from the coronavirus, as Kazakhstani society believes that the state provides wrong information about the mortality rate. Kazakhstan's hospitals are full (including the stadiums that served as hospitals), in drug stores there is lack of even basic medicines that can assist in the fight with COVID-19 (like aspirin).

Kyrgyzstan

Analytical Center for Central Asia

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, to combat inaccurate information about COVID-19, a national headquarters was created in Kyrgyzstan. The public was informed with reliable information about the disease on a daily basis through a telegram channel and regular briefings. In Kyrgyzstan, the UN launched a series of videos on what COVID-19 is, why it is dangerous, and how to protect oneself from getting infected.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, in Kyrgyzstan, to help people in difficult situations, the government opened three deposit accounts for voluntary fundraising: an account of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Bishkek City Hall. More information about receipts and expenses can be found at Help.covid.kg portal.

Moreover, businessmen and caring citizens organized volunteer movements and organizations that regularly help residents of Kyrgyzstan. They deliver food to those in need, provide dinner to government workers, and deliver medicines.

List of movements, which regularly help residents of Kyrgyzstan:

- people's movement "Assistance Office"
- volunteer movement "I'll Help (Jardam Berem)"
- public charity foundation "Hands of Good"
- The Red Crescent of Kyrgyzstan
- people's headquarters "We (Biz Barbyz)" on counteraction of coronavirus
- "Generation BEST!"
- charitable foundation "Guiding Star"

As for **effective technological solutions**, expert communities and government agencies actively used the Zoom platform to conduct online conferences and discuss relevant issues. Moreover, at the peak of the pandemic the platform <https://1312.tunduk.kg/> was launched to obtain permits for movement during emergency situations. (However, the application brought more problems than vice versa).

Also, the state-owned mobile operator Megacom developed a web platform to accommodate remote learning, which enabled pupils to finish their studies.





Moldova

Igor Girlea,
Analyst and Civic Activist

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, NGOs didn't change much in the way they work. Mostly, in order to prevent the spread of misinformation about COVID-19, they have been informing society about this virus, mainly: they promote via their communication platforms the rules and legal norms on how to prevent, identify, and treat COVID-19, and its influence on day-to-day life. Because of the complex impact that COVID-19 has on all social relations, each NGO has had to verify news stories about COVID-19. The biggest input in this regard was made by the website StopFals,¹² which is a project implemented by the Association of Independent Press. This project was implemented not specifically in the context of the pandemic, its aim has been to fight against fake news in all situations.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, some of the specialized NGOs concentrated on providing food and all the other necessary things for elderly people, people with special needs, people in quarantine, medical workers, etc. Unfortunately, it is hard to give examples of mobilization to help other people on the national scale. The paradigm of the material aid provided can be described as the following: small NGOs helping those in need of some

financially insignificant aid. As an exception, some initiative groups crowdfunded financial aid for medical workers, in order to motivate and help them to overcome the healthcare crisis.

It seems like during the pandemic, donors are still injecting the biggest flow of financial support to NGOs that specialize in governmental policies and political activities. The most visible (but not necessarily the most useful) aid provided to society has taken the form of reports and critical analyses on the actions and decisions taken by the government.

As for **effective technological solutions**, unfortunately, civil society didn't react in a prompt manner to the challenges that the pandemic brought. The state, with the help of the UNDP and WHO, took the initiative in this regard and prepared an online platform COVID-19 in the Republic of Moldova¹³ which would present updated statistics on COVID-19. Nevertheless, starting in mid-March, different types of online events were organized aimed at preventing and combating the spread of COVID-19. For instance, in March the Online Hackathon "Hack the virus"¹⁴ was organized. After this event, different types of online seminars were organized on the legal, economic, and social issues provoked by COV-SARS-2 through which civil society tried to identify and promote the best solutions to the problems raised. Unfortunately, civil society didn't create any widely known apps or websites, albeit they added some pages on their home websites, which provided relevant information.

Drawing the bottom line, I consider that civil society, overall, failed to promptly and efficiently assist society and the state in tackling the problems provoked by the pandemic; thus some can say that civil society failed to pass the exam of utility.

Tajikistan

Analytical Center for Central Asia

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, civil society in Tajikistan is actively involved in the fight against COVID-19. Special groups were created in social media to gather all information about the situation in the country. Health workers gave advice online in one of the Facebook groups focused on health-related issues of citizens, since the coronavirus pandemic resulted in the lack of health workers throughout the country.

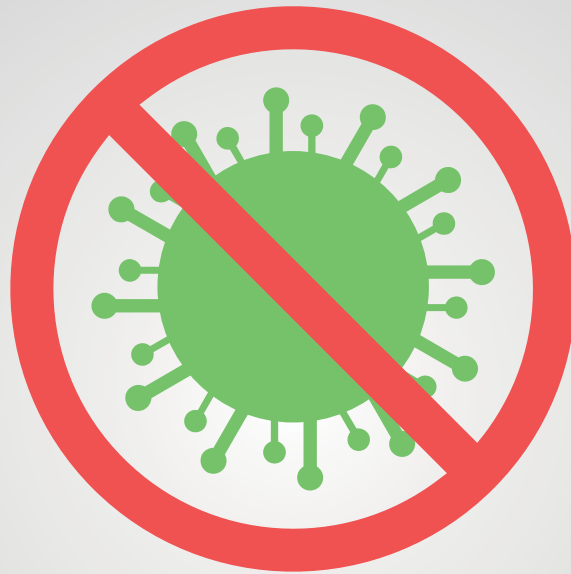
A number of NGOs, being members of the coalition against torture in Tajikistan, have also been actively gathering information. Jointly with our editorial group, a number of materials have been published about the deceit of public authorities and hiding accurate information about the situation.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, from the first days of the pandemic, civil society began to actively help both citizens of the country

and health workers. The community group PPE Operation has been systematically raising funds for the purchase of protective suits, masks, medicines, and food and provides them to all medical facilities making requests. The problem has been that public authorities have not helped health workers with protective equipment, and at present it is not known where huge batches of humanitarian aid from many countries has disappeared. Also, several public organizations and volunteer groups were involved in raising funds to help poor families with food. Funds were raised not only by citizens living in Tajikistan, but also by those who moved abroad long ago.

As for **effective technological solutions**, in addition to special groups on social media, Tajikistani activists have created a special website to gather alternative statistics of deaths from COVID-19, since public authorities have been hiding the real data. However, the website COVID-19 in Tajikistan¹⁵ was soon blocked in Tajikistan. Our editorial group created another platform containing this data and keeps statistics on the number of deaths jointly with activists. On this website you can also find all information about deceased health workers and the amount of humanitarian aid that arrived in the country.





CORONAVIRUS

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Turkmenistan

Analytical Center for Central Asia

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, there is no civil society in Turkmenistan, and the very name COVID-19 is strictly prohibited. There are no NGOs in the country, everything is strictly prohibited and any civic activity is suppressed by the Ministry of National Security of Turkmenistan. The government of the country forced the International Coordination Committee to curtail its activities in the country without explanations. All media in Turkmenistan is tightly controlled by the government and special services of the country. The media completely ignores and bypasses this problem, and the government claims that there are no patients with COVID-19 in the country.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, no one is helping anyone: the government and special services directed all their efforts to stop the leak of

information about COVID-19 from the country. Any initiative is suppressed under the penalty of criminal prosecution; no one in Turkmenistan receives help; in prisons the bodies of those who died from COVID-19 are taken out in garbage trucks at night and disposed secretly in an unknown location.

As for **effective technological solutions** in the country, the entire internet is under the control of special services. For example, the most powerful hurricane took place in the Lebap region at the end of April and, instead of helping people, they were prosecuted for distribution of videos about the hurricane. The internet is currently completely blocked in the Lebap region for two reasons:

1. to prevent the local population from reporting on the consequences of the hurricane;
2. to prevent the local population that suffered from the hurricane to learn that protests are held outside of Turkmenistan in support of the victims.

The country does not have any websites, online platforms, or anything necessary to help and support the local population under the conditions of the pandemic. The pandemic is prohibited in Turkmenistan, which means there is no pandemic at all.



Ukraine

Oleksandr Hnydiuk,
Civil Diplomacy Fund

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, many NGOs used their platforms to disseminate correct information about the coronavirus from official sources. This is perhaps the key tool that could be involved in this situation. It is also worth noting that major media outlets have been actively counteracting the dissemination of fake news.

For example, the international fund Renaissance¹⁶ launched a competition called Humanity and Mutual Assistance in the framework of which support was provided to many projects aiming, among other things, to inform the public about scientifically validated information about COVID-19. As part of this initiative, VoxUkraine launched the project Coronavirus Antifake Newspaper and On the Other Side of the Pandemic,¹⁷ where all dubious information regarding the disease was promptly verified and divided into three groups of materials: fake, manipulated, and true. The specific project involved collaboration with a number of other platforms that enabled the dissemination of information quickly and to a large audience.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, first of all, I would like to note that civil society in Ukraine has been very active over recent years in the context of assisting the state on a number of vital issues, starting

from support of the army. The situation of counteracting the spread of the coronavirus pandemic was no exception. Many volunteer and charitable organizations raised funds for the purchase of necessary protective equipment—antiseptics, masks, and protective suits, which were transferred to thousands of medical institutions throughout the country.

A number of initiatives have also been created to provide the necessary assistance to elderly people. For example, the project Social Assistance Service¹⁸ aimed to support elderly people. Volunteers brought them special food and antiseptic kits during the quarantine period. Organizations actively worked and provided support to homeless people, which included hot meals and basic medicines. In general, there were actually many similar initiatives, and this leaves reasons for optimism.

As for **effective technological solutions**, many civic organizations conducted online trainings and seminars on how to work efficiently (in case of remote work) and spend time with family in isolation, as well as on the ways of overcoming the effects of this stressful situation. This is very important given that most of our citizens had been in quarantine for almost two months.

It is worth noting a number of initiatives such as “Give a doctor a ride” initiative, in which people created groups on social media to organize the most comfortable delivery of health workers to their place of work during the quarantine. This initiative was popular in all regions of the country. In particular, the HelpMed¹⁹ application was developed in Kharkiv, which has become a profile analogue of BlaBlaCar. Using this application, health workers could file requests for being picked up, which thousands of people saw on their smartphones and often responded.

Uzbekistan

Analytical Center for Central Asia

As for **preventing the spread of misinformation and fake news about coronavirus**, in Uzbekistan, civil society is deprived of its institutional essence. According to available data, over nine thousand NGOs are functioning in the country. They include units of political parties, various foundations, the Youth Union, the Red Crescent Society, the Society of Disabled People of Uzbekistan, trade unions, and regional branches of NGOs operating at the national level. The activities of these public structures are monitored and directed exclusively by the authorities. Their role in the fight against dissemination of fake news during the quarantine is practically nonexistent. In Uzbekistan, the true representatives of civil society are small initiative groups formed by human rights defenders and media activists. Thousands of supposed NGOs essentially withdrew from civilian control, thereby confirming their incapacity.

As for the **activity of civil society organizations during the pandemic**, a volunteer movement to help people at risk, according to WHO, started to develop in the first half of March. Fundraising was announced through social media, and support groups were created to deliver necessary things to people in need. They were most widely represented in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Prior to April 1, spontaneous volunteer groups compiled lists, raised money to buy food, and provided

assistance on their own. And quite unexpectedly, the state represented by the Deputy Minister for Supporting Makhalla and Family, Elmira Basitkhanova, considered their activities as inappropriate. She said that “over the past five days, there have been about 200 complaints about the delivery of products to elderly and low-income people.”²⁰ She also mentioned 494 appeals from some conscious citizens about the violation of quarantine requirements by volunteers when delivering charitable assistance to elderly people.

After such actions by the government, the volunteer support groups had to significantly reduce charity amounts and ensure equitable allocation of humanitarian aid, which caused a surge of corruption among authorities.

To create a system of assistance for the population, the ministry has created sponsorship coordination centers in the regions. They exercised control and theoretically excluded corruption; in fact, corruption was observed when humanitarian aid fell into the local distribution structures.

Civil activists independently found people in need of assistance, raised alarm in social media, and called on state organizations and the prosecutor's office to provide assistance. Despite the prohibition of independent volunteer work, activists continued to raise funds and buy products according to the extended list, depending on the needs of elderly people, disabled individuals, and families with many children.

As for **effective technological solutions**, groups of civil activists have been conducting digital activities exclusively on social media and messaging platforms, mostly on telegram. No other digital tools have been used or created.



Authors' Biographies

- ◆ **The Analytical Center for Central Asia (Acca. media).** An independent human rights media project that reports human rights violations. The center has its own correspondent network in all Central Asian countries. The team includes journalists, human rights activists, scientists, and political scientists. The center successfully cooperates with human rights organizations in Central Asia.
- ◆ **Igor Girlea.** Analyst and civic activist. In 2013–2015 Igor was a board member of the NGO Students' Alliance of Moldova, an organization whose core aim is the promotion and protection of students' rights and also represents a national platform for all the NGOs in Moldova in this field. In 2014–2015 he was a chair of the Chisinau European Law Students' Association (ELSA), following the same goal of promotion of student's rights. Since 2016 he started monitoring the implementation of governmental policies at the national level, especially in regard to the implementation of the Association Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, as well as monitoring the implementation of the Association Agreement on the most important issues in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. He graduated from the FES Moldova Academy in leadership, and from the Regional Academies organized by the FES Regional Office "Dialogue Eastern Europe" on topics related to the implementation of the Association Agreement in EaP countries and participated in different analytical activities.

He is the author of a number of articles, including "Through hardships to Europe," "Unionism: A panacea or a weapon of destruction?" both of which focus on the internal political issues of Moldova and are published in ipg-journal.io.
- ◆ **Svetlana Aleynikova.** PhD in Social Sciences ("Sociology of Management"); author of three monographs ("Religious and ideological choice: personality, society, state," "'Russian World': Belarusian view," "The religious factor in modern political marketing") and more than 100 articles and studies. Research interests include socio-political processes, religious policy, and methodology of science. Currently, Svetlana is completing her doctoral study "National political marketing as a factor of integration processes" (based on the concept "Russian world").
- ◆ **Sergo Chikhladze.** MD, PhD—health policy and management specialist. Sergo graduated from Tbilisi State Medical University, having earned his degree in the Russian Federation, and continued his education in the US.

Sergo completed the prestigious Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program sponsored by the US Department of State. He worked in the US on cost effectiveness analysis of quality improvement interventions in healthcare for low- and middle-income countries. For that, he has been awarded the certificate personally by the US President and Secretary of State. He is a member of Georgian and international scientific and professional associations.

Sergo has over 10 years of experience in project and program management and has done consulting for local and international organizations in the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. His areas of expertise include healthcare system development, primary health, eHealth, HIV/AIDS, data collection and analysis, program evaluation, and others. Sergo has been actively engaged in teaching and public activities in Georgia.
- ◆ **Oleksandr Hnydiuk.** Civic activist and co-founder of the Civil Diplomacy Foundation (Ukraine). He holds a master's degree in political science from the Kyiv National Drahomanov University (Ukraine). Oleksander is the author of analytical research in the field of international relations, coauthor of the book "Contours of Russian Politics," and author of the study "The Republic of Kazakhstan: Transit Stages and New Challenges."

- ◆ **Andrey Grishin.** An employee of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law since 2005—the largest and oldest human rights organization in Central Asia. He is an editor of Bureau.kz's website, a journalist, and head of the Bureau's press club. Andrey is also a freelance journalist writing on human rights violations for several Kazakh and foreign media, an expert of the Office of the OSCE Commissioner on National Minorities, a trainer in journalism at the MediaNet school, and coauthor of reports on the implementation of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Kazakhstan.
- ◆ **Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu.** Political economist from Azerbaijan. He commenced his career at the Economic Research Center in 1999. He is a senior policy analyst for social and economic studies at Azerbaijan's Economic Research Center, a Baku-based NGO that promotes economic development and good governance.
- Gubad was a member of the Steering Committee of the EU Eastern Partnership Program's Civil Society Forum (CSF) and served as a representative of Eurasian civil society organizations to the international board of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) for 2013–2019.
- Gubad's research focuses on the politics of natural resources and revenue management. He was a researcher at the Higher Economic School, Warsaw in 1999/2000; the Central European University, Budapest in 2004/2005; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2008/2009; Duke University in 2015/2016; the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 2017/2018. For the 2018/19 academic year, he was a visiting professor at the Department of Economics of Rutgers University. Currently, he is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for European Studies of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA.
- ◆ **Vahan V. Yeghiazaryan.** Armenian public figure and manager. Vahan is the acting president of Zargatsum (Development) social movement. Since 2011, he has held positions in top management in corporate and social spheres, and in organizational committees of international forums.
- He has two higher education degrees: a master of business administration in strategic management and corporate governance from the School of Business Administration of the Higher School of Economics, Moscow campus, and a specialist degree in international relations from the Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University.
- The author of many analytical materials and two scientific articles in the field of international relations and political science, Vahan is also the main author of the handbook: "How to open business in Eurasian Economic Union".

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