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## COVID 19 LIBERAL VIEWS AND RESPONSES FROM DEMOCRACIES

WEDNESDAY WEBINAR SERIES BY CIVIC IDEA IN PARTNERSHIP WITH FNF — SOUTH CAUCASUS APRIL - MAY' 2020

#### June, 17, 12:00 Tbilisi Time Join our Zoom Webinar Live COVID 19: LIBERAL VIEWS AND RESPONSES WORLDWIDE CENTRAL ASIA AND SOUTH CAUCASUS



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#### **DISCUSSION #9** NEW SECURITY CHALLENGES BROUGHT BY COVID-19: LIBERAL VIEWS AND RESPONSES WORLDWIDE: CENTRAL ASIA AND SOUTH CAUCASUS

#### **SPEAKERS**:

Dr Farkhod Tolipov Director of the non-governmental Research Institution "Bilim Karvoni" ("Caravan of Knowledge"), Tashkent

Tatiana Sedova Member of the EITI National Stakeholders Council in Kazakhstan; Board member of Zertteu Research Institute

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Dr Stepan Grigoryan Chairman of the Board of the Yerevan-based Analytical Centre on Globalization and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC)

Ani Kintsurashvili Lead Researcher at Civic IDEA, Georgia

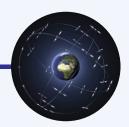
#### MODERATOR:

Tinatin Khidasheli Chairperson of Civic IDEA, Former MoD

Civic IDEA continues the series of webinars on liberal views and responses to COVID-19 crisis. The ninth panel was devoted to the South Caucasus and Central Asia and comprised such topics as, China's growing influence in these regions, debt trap policies and conspiracy theories/fake news campaigns. The invited experts highlighted the importance of the webinars in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, as this initiative is the timely opportunity for different individuals or entities to discuss different challenges, exchange the information and share it with the audience worldwide. Below we will review the cases of particular countries from these regions, in order to understand the overall picture of China's supremacy during and before the crisis.

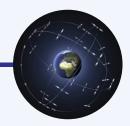
#### COVID MYTHS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The discussion started with the evaluation of specific COVID myths spread in the South Caucasus and Central Asia during the pandemic. This challenge seems to be greater and more serious than expected from the beginning. Particularly, in Armenia, the information warfare has taken on such a massive face, that prime minister Nikol Pashinyan himself decided to fight against conspiracy narratives and spread anti-COVID information in public. "The conspiracy theories like "COVID-19 does not exist" have been so intensely rooted within the population, that prime minis-



ter has to deliver speech every day, claiming that this disease represents a serious problem, that it exists... It seems that this has heavily influenced our people, this is information warfare... The prime minister himself asks people to wear the face-masks and they agree on that, however, they say that they are doing this because of their respect towards Pashinyan, while in reality, people believe that there is no coronavirus. "- Stepan Grigoryan. Indeed, the majority of the local population does not believe in the existence of this virus, while Armenia itself is the worst-hit country in the region. Moreover, Bill Gates has become the main target of fake news campaigns in Armenia. Myths like "Bill Gates plans to use the coronavirus vaccine to implant microchips in people" have become extremally popular in Armenian population.

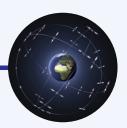
Henceforth, information warfare is seen as a new threat that affects the national security of the country. The world needs to explore the origins and the main actors (those who benefit from the crisis) behind the COVID-19 disinformation campaign, in order to stop its spreading and effectively prepare for its containment. "Our nations should understand that simultaneously with the health crisis, there is the information warfare going on in the world... Basically the coronavirus was supposed to unite us in the fight against the pandemic, however, with all this information warfare, it seems that somebody wants the coronavirus to be spread worldwide"- Stepan Grigoryan.



However, even the state security institutions find it difficult to gather the precise statistics regarding the amount of population trusting such conspiracy theories. Generally, there are diverse/contrasting views regarding coronavirus in Armenia, unlike in Uzbekistan. The latter considers conspiracies as less destructive for national security. There, people pay more attention to the countering of the health crisis, rather than to fake news and propaganda campaigns. "On tv and in Mass Media, we follow the huge official campaign directed towards the explanation of this abnormal situation to the citizens, particularly, how to stay safe, how to wear masks and take this issue more seriously" - Dr Farkhod Tolipov. According to statistics, in February, Uzbekistan, likewise other Central Asian states, has witnessed less infected people. Only since May 2020, the coronavirus cases have been significantly increasing.

### "Why are these conspiracy theories regarding, Bill Gates, or Soros so popular particularly in Armenia?" - asked Farkho Tolipov.

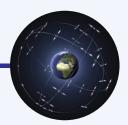
This occasion could be associated with the pre-Corona events in Armenia, particularly, with the changes of the local government. "The new political party came into power, nevertheless, the previous ruling forces have not left the country and they started using the methods of defamation, methods of the fake news spreading... All this was done against the civil society organizations, against the Armenia-EU cooperation policies and I believe that with the emergence of the



COVID-19, all their methods have intensified."- Stepan Grigoryan. Indeed, the media sources that are still influenced by the previous government, spread the disinformation and encourage the population that wearing face masks is dangerous for their health. Moreover, Armenia is a small state and therefore, information spreading appears to be easier here. Even in the US or in Europe, there were protests against the heavy lockdown measures. This occasion has triggered the thought that the virus does not exist. Overall, we can find many reasons why would information warfare flourish in the pandemic world.

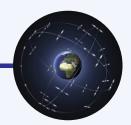
As for Georgia, there are many conspiracy theories regarding the non-existence of the coronavirus and the attempts to install microchips in people. Moreover, we hear a lot of myths related to the correlation between 5G technology and COVID-19. For instance, according to one of the conspiracy storylines, 5G is spreading coronavirus through the radio waves. Therefore, the Georgian population is affected by the disinformation and fake news campaigns. However, everybody agrees on the fact that masks are principal and recently, the Georgian parliament passed the law, obliging the people to wear face-masks, while being inside the building.

"The United States announced a huge alarm regarding 5G and Huawei and the government limited the performance of Huawei inside the country, the United Kingdom did the same. As for the European Union and particularly Germany and France, that are the most powerful states within the Union, they were not so skeptical regarding the 5G, Huawei and China's other tech-giants. So, my question is are there any concerns regarding this issue also in your countries?" - asked Ani Kintsurashvili.



Kyrgystan is more impacted by Russian disinformation campaigns that likewise touch on the issue of 5G technologies even if the latter is not still available in this particular country. The similar conspiracy theories regarding the 5G radio waves and microchipping have been effectively echoed in Kyrgystan. Even IT engineers and experts (mostly people over 50) who are aware of the technology and the physics believe in these notions. "I agree that there is information warfare going on, but it is unknown for what purposes. Maybe it is a launched mechanism which is impossible to stop."- Bakytbek Satybekov.

Bill Gates and microchipping were popular topics in Kazakhstan as well. Disinformation and fake narratives have less negative impact here than in Armenia or Kyrgystan, but at certain point, they still change the national policy scenarios. "There exists such joke in Kazakhstan saying, all the political scientists have become virologists during the pandemic. It refers to people who think they know or understand everything and their explanations can lead us to the American elections. The myths like, 'coronavirus was launched, because some forces do not want to see Trump winning the elections' influence the public opinion"- Tatiana Sedova. The recent rise of the number of infected cases (approx. 1000 per day), makes people believe in the existence of the virus. The government of Kazakhstan has allocated \$13.5 billion for fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, people, mostly civil societies, question and monitor the transparency of its expenditure. "On June 6th, the opposition wanted to hold a manifestation in Kazakhstan regarding the existing economic situation during the crisis. However, the process was halted by the government under



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the excuse of disinfection works on the square. The main medical doctor/expert addressed to the population to not to attend the demonstrations... Overall, we saw the politization of the virus. Of course, it is necessary to take protective measures, nonetheless, the authorities use this situation to stop the manifestations or gatherings of the opposition parties"

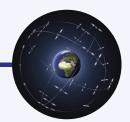
- Tatiana Sedova.

In conclusion, we notice that there is a diversity in the dynamics and in the leverage of disinformation campaigns and COVID myths. The South Caucasus has been more affected by conspiracy theories, than Central Asia. Nevertheless, all the experts agree that information warfare is a new challenge which is intensified by the pandemic and requires constant monitoring.

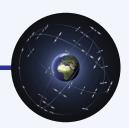
#### CHINA'S DEBT TRAP POLICIES AND CORRUPTION CASES

Debt trap represents one of the biggest challenges for Central Asian countries. We all agree on the fact, that China tries to expand its economic influence worldwide, especially in the developing states. Hidden Debt policy is one of the effective tools used by Beijing, to gain privileges in the state's local economic environment. "It would be interesting to learn more from you about this problem, especially about the debt trap policies associated with China and its financial institutions, China development bank, Exim bank, or all those money trap organizations that try to manipulate with the business environment"

- asked Tinatin Khidasheli.



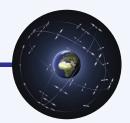
During the past 10 years, China's economic influence has dramatically grown in Kazakhstan. This occasion was instigated by the fact that 10 years ago, the Kazakh population did not pay much attention to Chinese companies inflowing the local market. Slowly, these entities started to monopolize the Kazakh business sector (including the transportation, communication and infrastructure sectors), by replacing European and other investments. Nowadays, even though Europe is still ahead of China with its capacity, the latter has the increasing nature, which might lead to the total substitution of Europe's role in the Kazakh economy in the nearest future. "The point that both China and Kazakhstan are the members of the Eurasian Economic Union, likewise contributes to their growing influence not only in this country, but in other member states as well. As for the number of Chinese investments, by 2016, they equaled to \$70 billion in Kazakhstan. Every day, there are new contracts signed between these two parties and new debts are being formed. In 2019, the People's Republic of China borrowed us (Kazakhs) the money worth of ¥2 billion for the modernization of 9 highways and one railway track in Kazakhstan. Many Chinese investments are allocated for Horgos customs at China-Kazakhstan International Border, for Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan railway project and several large initiatives."- Tatiana Sedova. China's BRI initiative has been very attractive for Kazakhstan at the beginning, as it provided many opportunities and the diversity of infrastructural projects. Last year, the Center for a New American Security, has published a report regarding one Kazakh official's secret correspondence with the American diplomats, where they were expressing their discontent and concerns about China's growing investments in the country. Nowadays, Kazakh people openly discuss these



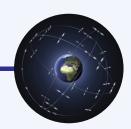
issues and question the transparency and the productivity of Chinese economic actions. They believe that this ambiguity of their deeds might lead (and has probably already led) towards the rise of internal corruption cases. The Kazakh population is against Sino-Kazakh close economic ties and they often organize manifestations in order to protest the developing processes.

"As for the particular financial institutions, China Development Bank, as well as Exim Bank are very active in Kazakhstan mostly financing infrastructural projects. For instance, China development bank is financing Beineu-Shymkent Gas Pipeline project worth of \$1,8 billion. Moreover, the same bank lent Kazakhstan \$12.2 billion for the construction of Asia Gas Pipeline. The huge amount of debt money is either accomplished as a syndicated loan, meaning that it represents the pledge of property, or adopted as a tied loan- the borrower is obliged to purchase goods or services from China..."- Tatiana Sedova. Indeed, at the beginning, Chinese companies seem very reliable, well-organized and respective towards the local laws. This image creates an impression that Chinese investments are not so infertile. However, everything changes totally once the official deal is signed between two parties. While bringing their own workers/employees and equipment, their activities become entirely obscure for locals and international organizations. "This is a slow expansion, which contradicts our national interests, which is not financially profitable for us, which does not respond to local economic needs."

- Tatiana Sedova.



As for Georgia, there are several well-known Chinese companies (Sinohydro, TBEA Co., Ltd. or china railway 23rd bureau group co.) operating and building infrastructural projects here. We can review the recent example of Sinohydro in Georgia, the company that carries a very bad reputation worldwide and is accused of many corruption cases. "Sinohydro has the claims worth of 37 million GEL against the Georgian government regarding the unaccomplished highway. The mentioned company is well-known for its bad reputation worldwide and has been blacklisted by the world bank, African development bank and many other international or regional units. Apparently, Georgian government has not done any investigative research or was not interested in doing one, as long as its leaders are accused of having corrupt schemes with this concrete company. Moreover, on a question about why they chose Sinohydro as a tender-winner company, the minister of infrastructure, assessed the work of the company, as fast and with high quality. Nevertheless, the reality shows us, the Kobuleti bypass road project which was supposed to be finished by 2016, but has not been accomplished by today."- Ani Kintsurashvili. Indeed, what Georgians face nowadays is the lack of due diligence of the authority, which basically contributes to China's growing presence in the country. There are other companies that have close ties with current Georgian officials, such as, CEFC, where the latters serve as advisors and policy experts while extracted from the government. Therefore, it is not surprising if we dig deeper and find out many corrupt dealings between Georgian Officials and Chinese entities.

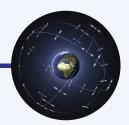


There are no well-revealed internal corruption cases in Kyrgyzstan related to Chinese companies and their activities. However, Kyrgyzstan has also borrowed money from the China Exim Bank for its infrastructural projects. Thus, one cannot exclude the existence of potential bribery/fraud incidents during the accomplishment of these initiatives. "South Caucasus should learn from the lesson of Central Asia and avoid China's debt trap realized through its financial institutions, like Exim Bank... We need to investigate the reasons of dislike campaigns towards Chinese companies coming from the population... Big Western companies implement CSR, meaning that they assist civil societies in putting alarm and monitoring the government deals. That is why, it is interesting to understand why conflicts emerge regarding Chinese investments. We need to conduct research both in social and business contexts. Transparency, corruption exposure and anti--corruption actions are important, but the attitudes of the society is also crucial"

- Bakytbek Satybekov.

Armenia, likewise develops close economic ties with China, alongside active cultural and educational cooperation. For instance, China is responsible for the construction of the North-South Road Corridor in Armenia.

"Crossing Armenia from south to north (Meghri-Kapan-Goris-Yerevan-Ashtarak-Gyumri-Bavra), the corridor from the south joins the Georgian road leading to the Black Sea ports of Poti and Batumi and on to Russia, the CIS countries, and the European Union. The North- South Road Corridor is also part of the AH 82 international road linking the Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan."<sup>1</sup>

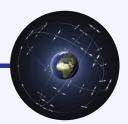


China has its strategic objectives regarding this project. The money allocated for this project is not Chinese, but the Chinese company is leading its realization. "This project needs to be explored further since we do not want to substitute Russian corruption deals with the Chinese ones. There are always scandals around railways and other infrastructural projects where Russian companies (like Gazprom) are being involved. Transparency represents a significant challenge. We are planning to send the official letter to our government and demand the explanation"- Stepan Grigoryan. Furthermore, Beijing is also involved in copper mining industry in Armenia, which indicates their interest towards the natural resources of the country and this issue needs to be further monitored as well.

Overall, China debt trap policies have been mostly intertwined with its infrastructural projects in these regions. Apparently, compared to Central Asia, South Caucasus has less dramatic condition regarding the economic dependency. Nevertheless, Beijing's presence has the growing nature there in frames of China's BRI initiative. Therefore, both in South Caucasus and Central Asia, people and the civil societies need to monitor the transparency, corruption cases and reliability of the on-going Chinese projects and of those different parties implementing them.

#### CHINA'S MILITARY OBJECTIVES IN ARMENIA AND TAJIKISTAN

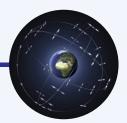
During our previous meeting, we have mentioned the existence of China's military base at the Tajik-Afghan Border playing the key role in changing the world scenario and the perceptions about



China. It seems that Tajikistan and China have even closer bilateral military cooperation, as long as the Tajik government is buying military equipment (weapons and drones) from Beijing. "Because of that, Tajikistan has strengthened military ties also with Russia since the latter realizes China's growing position not only in Tajikistan, but worldwide and does not want to be substituted, especially in Central Asia"- Muslimbek Buriev. Additionally, local Media sources in Tajikistan are very passive in broadcasting these issues, while foreign and particularly, Russian media facilities, like Sputnik, are becoming more and more popular, spreading their own narratives regarding China's military expansion through the whole country. "In the ideological context, Russian sources are trying to contradict China's rising military influence in Tajikistan. Many people say that in reality Moscow is cooperating with Beijing"- Muslimbek Buriev. While there are approximately 50 Chinese companies registered in Kazakhstan, their number equals to 300 in Tajikistan. China uses these investments to justify its military presence in the country. Chinese authorities claim that the base itself aims to protect their economic assets in Tajikistan. It is the turning point in Sino-Tajik relations, that we have not seen in other Central Asian countries.

During these discussions, and also globally, Russia's actions are being assessed more in the security context, while China is perceived more as an economic power. This precedent of China's military base in Tajikistan basically changes the world dynamics."

- Ani Kintsurashvili.



Also, it becomes important to understand Sino-Armenian military cooperation. Armenian army soldiers (including officers) are visiting China for military trainings and similarly to Tajikistan, the state is buying military equipment from China. Armenia's army collaboration with China is not as large scale as the one of Tajikistan, but there still exist certain concerns among the Armenian experts related to these issues. China's embassy has even assigned military attaché in Armenia which shows us the growing nature of this cooperation.

In conclusion, of course, each great power has its own interests in the developing states. In response to the US, building embassies in these regions, China tries not to fallback and builds the big embassies as well. The South Caucasus and Central Asia should not fear the further cooperation with different states. However, their civil societies always have to monitor the situation and crave for the transparency.