

## Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

# Overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

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Date: 28 January 2021

The Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have each taken a different path since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, all have struggled in varying degrees to transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, and corruption permeates most areas of politics and government. The consequences of these modes of autocratic governance became obvious in 2020 as widespread corruption hindered the response of countries in the region to the COVID-19 pandemic. Health systems are struggling to cope, ever tighter restrictions have been imposed on freedom of speech and access to information, and there is an alarming opacity in the allocation of funds dedicated to the response effort.

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*The Anti-Corruption Helpdesk is operated by Transparency International and funded by the European Union.*



Please provide an overview of corruption and anti-corruption in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and consider the role of corruption in undermining effective and equitable responses to COVID-19.

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## Background

The landlocked countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan make up the Central Asian region. Prior to independence in 1991, they were all Soviet republics under the control of Moscow, leaving them with little experience of self-government and ill equipped to manage the transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one (VOA 2009). As a result, since the Soviet Union's collapse, the region has struggled to move beyond autocratic modes of governance, with some leaders in power since the 1990s (The Economist 2019).

Each Central Asian country's trajectory since independence has been different. While Kazakhstan has had a relatively stable government (Frost 2018), for instance, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed three revolutions (in 2005, 2010 and 2020). Indeed, as the result of a referendum

## Main points

- Corruption is rampant throughout Central Asia. The five countries average 26.6 out of 100 on the 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index, far below the global average of 43.
- Despite widespread anti-corruption rhetoric by political leaders, in practice nominal anti-corruption campaigns often target opposition figures and government critics.
- While corruption has hampered Central Asian countries' response to COVID-19, governments across the region have used the pandemic as a pretext to clamp down on political dissent.

on the 10 January 2021, Kyrgyzstan changed from a parliamentary form of government to a presidential system (Omelicheva 2021).

Post-independence, Tajikistan descended into a five-year long civil war from 1992-1997 (VOA 2009), while Turkmenistan's government is considered one of the world's "last remaining totalitarian dictatorships" (VOA 2009). In 1991, the

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Soviet-era Communist Party morphed into the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DPT) and is still in power to this day (Freedom House 2020d).

Until the death of Uzbekistan's long-time president, Islam Karimov, in 2016, the regime was highly autocratic and embodied Soviet political culture (BTI 2020e). Since Karimov's death there have been some reforms – dubbed the Uzbek Spring; however, there is some scepticism about the depth and longevity of these reforms (Frost 2018).

No international governance index considers any of the Central Asian countries to be a “full democracy”. Ranking 101 on The Economist's 2019 Democracy Index, Kyrgyzstan is considered a hybrid regime (The Economist 2019); all four other countries ranked between 139 and 162 and are considered authoritarian regimes (The Economist 2019). Turkmenistan is ranked 162, ahead of only Chad, Syria, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and North Korea (The Economist 2019).

Recent years have seen a number of anti-corruption campaigns and promises made by leaders across the region. However, commentators note with caution that anti-corruption campaigns in Central Asia are often used to redistribute wealth, particularly after a change in leadership. As Pannier (2020) observes, “new leaders have their own supporters and loyalty is often rewarded or purchased”.

## Regional framework

With its prime objective to support member countries to prevent and fight against corruption, the Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ACN) was established in 1998. The ACN supports states in their efforts to prevent

and counter corruption, exchange information and develop best practices (Civic Foundation Transparency Kazakhstan 2018).

The flagship project of the ACN is the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan that was launched in 2003. Upon its inception, the plan committed its members to “specific actions to increase integrity and transparency in public services, promote corporate responsibility and accountability, and allow active public participation in making reforms” (OECD 2003).

Under the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, participating countries undergo a peer-led, independent, periodic review of their progress in implementing anti-corruption reforms to assess the extent to which they are meeting their obligations (OECD 2018c). All Central Asian countries, except Turkmenistan, participate in the plan.

The first round of monitoring reviews under the plan were undertaken in 2006 and 2007, with the fourth and most recent round of reviews taking place from 2016-2019. In addition, evaluated countries provide a progress update at each ACN plenary meeting.

The monitoring review process under the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan serves to highlight challenges and achievements in measures to prevent corruption across the region. The most recent OECD regional update report published in late 2020 presents a mixed picture (OECD 2020a).

In most jurisdictions participating in the Istanbul plan, there remain serious institutional challenges. While some of the states have largely brought their legislative anti-corruption framework into line with international standards, actual compliance with

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these measures remains largely illusory. The OECD evaluators infer that most of the governments in the region are chiefly interested in the formal attainment of objectives established in the national action plans, rather than meaningful enforcement and implementation of anti-corruption approaches (OECD 2020a).

In general, most corruption offences in the region are reportedly in areas historically seen as being vulnerable to corruption, including public finances, natural resources, public administration, procurement, tax, customs, health and education. The most frequently detected offences were reportedly embezzlement of public funds, forgery and abuse of official authority (OECD 2020:314).

There have been a few bright spots, with progress made in certain countries on some issues. Generally speaking, transparency has increased, albeit from a low base. Official statistics on corruption offences have become publicly available in Kazakhstan, for instance, though this is still not the case in Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan (OECD 2020a:315-316).

Moreover, the use of e-government services is increasingly common in the region as a corruption prevention strategy, particularly in the area of procurement (HSE University 2020). In addition, risk-based approaches and a better use of data and evidence to inform anti-corruption work are increasingly evident, as are new information and educational initiatives (HSE University 2020). Other encouraging developments include the introduction of new provisions related to whistleblowing. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have recently introduced laws on whistleblower protection, while Kazakhstan has established

reporting channels. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have adopted legislative provisions for financial rewards for whistleblowing (OECD 2020a:79).

Nonetheless, severe challenges remain. In particular, anti-corruption enforcement actions targeted at high-level officials remain conspicuous by their absence. Crackdowns on petty corruption have not been accompanied by measures to curb grand corruption (OECD 2020a:15). Yet complex corruption embedded into high-level executive government remains one of the main problems across the region, alongside a notable lack of political will to deal with the issue.

Large enterprises are frequently controlled by “oligarchs, family clans, and corrupt politicians, criminal or other interest groups who continue enriching themselves by channelling public resources to their companies, foreign bank accounts and assets” (OECD 2020a: 161). As a result of this tightly knit business-politics nexus, the business environment in the region is plagued by risks such as legal uncertainty, selective enforcement, and inadequate protection of property risks (OECD 2020a: 161).

The OECD points to political integrity as “the main challenge in the region”, noting that most countries do not have codes of ethics for parliamentarians due to entrenched resistance from members of parliament. No country in the region is deemed to have effective mechanisms to enforce ethical behaviour among MPs (OECD 2020a:14).

Related to the absence of political support for meaningful action to address high-level corruption is the low capacity and weakness of law

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enforcement and specialised anti-corruption agencies to go after high profile targets. Starved of the necessary resources or instrumentalised to hound political opponents, these bodies also typically demonstrate low levels of interagency and international cooperation (OECD 2020a:15). For instance, information from financial intelligence units is rarely used due to the inadequacy of coordination mechanisms in the region (OECD 2020a:275).

Where high profile cases do come to court, the OECD notes that sanctions are often either disproportionately severe or excessively lenient, depending on the amount of political favour the defendant enjoys. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that most of the countries in the region “have yet to comply with the applicable international standards and ensure judicial independence and integrity in practice” (OECD 2020a:131). One particularly common issue relates to the widespread involvement of politicians in the selection, promotion and dismissal of judges (OECD 2020a:14).

Further complicating the effective prosecution of corruption in the region is the fact that some of the countries’ criminal law frameworks do not adequately cover certain offences. In Uzbekistan, there is an overlap between administrative and criminal sanctions, while trading in influence is not criminalised by any of the five countries covered in this brief, and only Kyrgyzstan criminalises illicit enrichment (HSE University 2020). Criminal liability of legal persons is also patchy, with only Kyrgyzstan having quasi-criminal liability and Uzbekistan’s draft criminal code foreseeing criminal liability (HSE University 2020).

# Kazakhstan

	Control of corruption		Corruption Perceptions Index	Global Corruption Barometer (citizens who paid a bribe in last 12 months)	UNCAC status	Presence on blacklists
	Score	Percentile Rank				
<b>Latest available data (year in brackets)</b>	-0.3 (2019)	43.8	34 (2019)	29% (2017)	Accession (18 Jun 2008)	NA

## Extent of corruption

Kazakhstan has improved its performance in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) over recent years and attained a score of 34 in 2019, making it the best performing country in the Central Asian region (Transparency International 2019).

According to Freedom House’s 2020 Freedom in the World index, Kazakhstan is “not free” but scores better than most of its regional counterparts with a score of 23, a marginal improvement from 22 in 2019 (Freedom House 2020a). Further, according to the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators, Kazakhstan’s control of corruption improved from 2018 to 2019 increasing from -0.5 to -0.3 (World Bank 2019).

Civil society has reported that, since 2015, the response to corruption has shifted from a purely reactive approach to a preventive one (Civic Foundation Transparency Kazakhstan 2018).

Despite these improvements, corruption in Kazakhstan remains endemic and permeates all

levels of government (Freedom House 2020a). Political corruption and nepotism are rampant (BTI 2020a), ranging from high-level embezzlement to street-level bribes (Putz 2018). While the constitution provides for freedom of the press, the media does not operate with a great amount of freedom. Most of the sector is controlled by the state or “government-friendly owners” and independent outlets frequently self-censor (Freedom House 2020a). Kazakhstan ranked 157 out of 180 countries in the world rankings in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index with a score of 54.11, moving up one place since 2018 (Reporters without Borders 2020a). In addition, political interference in the judiciary has caused low levels of citizen’s trust in the justice system (US Department of State 2020a).

Kazakhstan has only had two presidents since independence, with Nursultan Nazarbayev ruling for almost 30 years. Upon his resignation in March 2019, he stated that he wanted to help with the transition to “a new generation of leaders” (Lemon 2019). The reasons for his resignation are unclear

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but some postulate that it may be that he wanted to resign while still in good health, to enable a smooth transition (Lemon 2019). Others suggest that increasing socio-economic problems and discontent contributed to Nazarbayev's decision to step down (Stronski 2019).

Despite his resignation, a number of pre-planned changes allow Nazarbayev to retain considerable influence. In 2010, the constitution was amended to make Nazarbayev "leader of the nation" thereby protecting him, his family and their property from prosecution (Lemon 2019; Nurshayeva 2010). Changes to the constitution in 2017 made Nazarbayev chairman of Kazakhstan's national security council (which has the power to veto appointments, dismiss government officials and control policy implementation) and as leader of the ruling political party Nur-Otan (Gorst 2019).

The handover to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who assumed office on 20 March 2019 was carefully orchestrated (Stronski 2019) and appears largely superficial. In addition to the powers Nazarbayev holds through the security council, Tokayev is also obliged to seek Nazarbayev's approval for key appointments (Toqmadi 2020).

Tokayev was elected in the June 2019 elections with 71 per cent of the vote (US Department of State 2020a), although there were mass detentions of protesters who disputed the election result and an almost complete shutdown of the internet (Toqmadi 2020).

However, the transition did not go as smoothly as perhaps was planned. The transfer of power has been met with grassroots protests over socio-economic issues, unemployment, corruption,

poor social services and a widening wealth gap (Stronski 2019).

Some view the protests as a warning sign, and they have made the new government "jittery" (Stronski 2019). According to one commentator, the psychological shift caused by Nazarbayev's resignation is "irreversible" and changes at the popular level will be "hard to manipulate" (Lillis 2019). As a result, Tokayev needs to build his own legitimacy from both the elites and the public and is in a precarious position of "balancing populist measures to satisfy public demands and the pro-status-quo positions favored by elite interests" (Toqmadi 2020; Lillis 2019).

Kazakhstan's parliamentary elections were held on 10 January 2021. The elections, while prepared efficiently, were found to have lacked genuine competition due to a flawed electoral legal framework which falls short of international commitments (OSCE 2021a).

## Corruption cases

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of prosecutions of public officials for corrupt activities. As evidenced by state statistics and independent measurements by Transparency International Kazakhstan, over the past three years, the number of corruption cases in Kazakhstan has decreased (Qamqor 2020; Transparency International Kazakhstan 2019). For example, according to the results of a sociological survey on corruption experience (9,000 respondents across the country), only 13.4 per cent of respondents and 9.2 per cent of small- and medium-sized businesses reported that they had encountered corruption when contacting government agencies. The survey on the perception of the level of corruption showed that

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54.4 per cent of the respondents believed that the number of corruption cases over the past year in their village had decreased, 23.9 per cent believed that number had increased, while 21.7 per cent found it difficult to assess the changes. (Transparency International Kazakhstan 2019).

According to the results of the 2020 Transparency International Kazakhstan survey, there is a downwards trend in the perception of the level of corruption: the proportion of those who believe that the number of cases is growing in 2020 (15.4 per cent) is significantly lower than in 2019 (23.9 per cent) (Transparency International Kazakhstan 2019).

Despite this downward trend, the general perception of corruption in the country remains at a significant level. The share of those who believe that it is possible to resolve issues in the country without resorting to corruption (35.2 per cent) is one and a half times less than the total share of those who believe that corruption is an integral part of daily life (57.2 per cent) (Transparency International Kazakhstan 2019).

State polyclinics and hospitals, police, land relations departments, public service centres, state kindergartens and state universities were the most corrupt state bodies, according to the results of the survey. These six institutions account for two-thirds of all reported cases of corrupt interaction between citizens and government agencies (Transparency International Kazakhstan 2019).

According to the assessments and experience of business representatives, the most corrupt are: the department of state revenue (tax); management of land relations; firefighting service; district akimat apparatus; and management of urban planning.

The main motives for an informal solution to the issue remained unchanged: to speed up the process; to resolve the issue in your favour; there was no other way out; giving a bribe is cheaper than paying a fine; less red tape; to avoid delaying the registration procedure; obtaining an accurate, reliable result; convenient option; and extortion (Transparency International Kazakhstan 2019).

There have been several recent prosecutions for embezzlement, graft and abuse of office by high-ranking officials.

The healthcare sector in Kazakhstan has been the subject of corruption scandals for several years. In November 2020, the former health minister, Yelzhan Birtanov, was arrested for allegedly embezzling 526 million tenges (US\$1.2 million) that was to be spent on the digitisation of the health ministry (RFE/RL's Kazakh Service 2020; Kumenov 2020a). Birtanov's arrest follows the earlier arrest of the deputy head of the health ministry, Olzhas Abishev, who was alleged to have embezzled 500 million tenge in 2018 allocated for information systems (Kumenov 2020a; Putz 2020b).

In 2018, the former national economy minister, Kuandyk Bishimbayev, was found guilty of large-scale embezzlement (BTI 2020a). In 2018, "three deputy ministers for energy and a vice minister of foreign affairs were detained and the ambassador to Uzbekistan was suspended on graft and/or embezzlement charges" (BTI 2020a).

In June 2017, Talgat Yermegiyayev, who was in charge of organising EXPO-17 (an international exposition which took place from 10 June to 10 September 2017 in Kazakhstan), was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment for embezzlement (Freedom House 2017). Two years prior, in 2015, a corruption



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case targeting 21 former government officials, ultimately led to the conviction of former prime minister Serik Akhmetov on charges of bribery, embezzlement and abuse of office, although he was later released in 2017 (Putz 2015).

Worryingly, some commentators note that corruption may not have been the real reason behind these convictions but rather reflect political machinations and in-fighting between various factions among the ruling elite (Putz 2015). Further, Freedom House (2020a) notes that, although corruption cases may be prosecuted at the local and regional levels, charges against the political and business elite are rare, “typically emerging only after an individual has fallen out of favour with the leadership”.

## Anti-corruption framework

Kazakhstan became a party to the UN Convention against Corruption in 2008. It has been a participant of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan since 2004 and became a member of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) in January 2020.

In its progress update to the fourth round of monitoring under the Istanbul action plan, the OECD found that Kazakhstan was lagging behind on 9 of the 29 recommendations to the country. These areas included (US Department of State 2020a; OECD 2019a):

- the implementation of a holistic anti-corruption policy in the private sector
- ensuring independence of the anti-corruption agency
- producing detailed integrity rules for political officials

- guaranteeing independence of the judiciary and judges
- mandatory anti-corruption screening of all draft laws
- bringing the law on access to information in line with international standards
- effective and dissuasive liability of legal entities for corruption crimes
- ensuring the effectiveness of investigative and prosecutorial practices to counter corruption crimes

However, Kazakhstan was found to have made significant progress in relation to five recommendations: policy documents and monitoring, assessment of corruption, integrity in the civil service, public procurement and in the higher education sector (OECD 2019a).

In terms of participatory law making, in 2019, experts from Transparency International Kazakhstan calculated an index of citizens’ participation and influence on legislative activity in Kazakhstan, which showed that only 29 per cent of draft laws have responses from participants in public discussions (Shiyan 2019). Similar results were recorded in 2020 from a study of the budget of more than 1,000 local self-government entities in Kazakhstan, which, since 2018, have been given the function of self-approval of budgets (Transparency Kazakhstan 2020).

Kazakhstan’s 2015-2025 anti-corruption strategy aims to enhance efficiency of the state’s anti-corruption policies, engage society in the anti-corruption movement and to bring down the level of corruption (OECD 2017).

The criminal code provides for criminal liability and punishment for corruption while the law on

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countering corruption introduces broad definitions of corruption and stronger financial accountability measures.

However, the anti-corruption legal framework is flawed in many respects. In 2018, the then president signed a law making a number of amendments to criminal legislation decriminalising official inaction, reducing the amounts of fines for taking bribes and reinstating a statute of limitation for corruption crimes (US Department of State 2020a).

In 2018, legislation was introduced requiring journalists to verify the accuracy of information by consulting with relevant government bodies or officials, prior to publication, however, this law was ultimately not adopted (Freedom House 2020a).

The transfer of power to Tokayev saw a wave of political activism including public debate and a record number of citizen election observers. Protests continued throughout 2019 on a range of issues (Toqmadi 2020). Under popular pressure, President Tokayev made countering corruption a top priority (Toqmadi 2020). While it is not unusual for such anti-corruption rhetoric upon assuming high political office, there are some encouraging signs.

In June 2019, Tokayev split the public service and anti-corruption agency into two with the new anti-corruption agency directly subordinate to the president (Toqmadi 2020). The reforms provide the agency more autonomy as a standalone entity rather than subsumed within the Agency for Civil Service Affairs and Anti-Corruption (Toqmadi 2020).

In addition to joining GRECO, President Tokayev signed a law in December 2019 making ministers and akims (governors) responsible for corruption among their direct subordinates. The law

introduces amendments that will oblige ministers and governors to resign if the top officials in their institutions are found guilty of corruption (Khassenkhanova 2019). Tokayev also recently announced a policy whereby high-ranking officials and their families would be banned from keeping bank accounts abroad (Kohn 2020).

Further, towards the end of 2020, responsibility for corruption was sharpened. The possibility of early release of persons convicted of corruption was annulled and libel was moved to the category of administrative offences, although the criminal code still prohibits insulting the president and other officials (Freedom House 2020a).

Despite these positive changes, it remains to be seen whether these measures will be effective in curbing corruption in Kazakhstan.

# Kyrgyzstan

	Control of corruption		Corruption Perceptions Index	Global Corruption Barometer (citizens who paid a bribe in last 12 months)	UNCAC status	Presence on blacklists
	Score	Percentile Rank				
<b>Latest available data (year in brackets)</b>	-0.9 (2019)	17.3	30 (2019)	38% (2017)	Ratified (16 Sep 2005)	NA

## Extent of corruption

Since 2013, Kyrgyzstan's CPI score has been steadily improving, with a score of 24 in 2013 rising to 30 in 2019. Kyrgyzstan's Freedom in the World score classifies it as "partly free" with a score of 38, the same as in 2019 (Freedom House 2020b). Kyrgyzstan's control of corruption also improved slightly with a score of -0.9 in 2019 compared to -1.0 in 2018. Kyrgyzstan ranked 82 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index for 2020, an increase from a ranking of 98 in 2018 (Reporters without Borders 2020a).

Although comparatively less corrupt than many of its regional neighbours, corruption still prevails across politics, business and government (Freedom House 2020b; The Borgen Project 2020). The judiciary is especially corrupt, with attorneys in Kyrgyzstan claiming that bribes will ultimately determine the outcome of a case, regardless of how strong their legal argument may be (The Borgen Project 2020).

After Kyrgyzstan's independence, Askar Akayev was elected president with the stated aim of introducing a "pluralistic and competitive political playing field" (BTI 2020b). While Akayev introduced economic and political reforms, state-building was neglected.

As a result, people turned to informal negotiations and relationships allowing corruption and nepotism to flourish. State-building was ultimately connected to the interests of the president's family members (Engvall 2011). Over time, Akayev adopted an increasingly authoritarian style of governance characterised by endemic corruption (BTI 2020b) and corruption became accepted by political leadership as a method of control (Engvall 2011).

In March 2005, Kyrgyzstan witnessed its first revolution, named the Tulip Revolution, following disputed parliamentary election results and alleged corruption and authoritarianism by Akayev. As a result of the turmoil, Akayev fled to Russia.

The leader of the People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, won the

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presidential election by a landslide on 10 July 2005 and promised to curtail presidential powers and eradicate corruption and nepotism (Hiro 2010).

However, Bakiev failed to do so, and the Tulip Revolution of 2005 resulted in instability and increased suppression of the opposition and any media critical of government (BTI 2020b). Bakiev was quick to quell any dissent. Security forces silenced public protests and arrested opposition leaders (Baumgartner 2011). During Bakiev's reign, independent newspapers and broadcasters were either persecuted, suspended or shut down, and many non-state journalists were harassed and intimidated, with several fleeing the country. Three journalists were killed during Bakiev's five-year reign (Baumgartner 2011).

In 2010, Bakiev resigned and fled the country after violent social upheavals spurred by perceived corruption and cronyism in the Bakiyev administration, suppression of the opposition, and clampdown on the media.

Two months later, an inter-ethnic conflict between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan, with approximately 470 reportedly dead, thousands injured and hundreds of thousands displaced. Some observers point to the political vacuum following the revolution as the cause of the conflict (Tran 2010).

Following the second Kyrgyz revolution, the 2011 presidential elections saw the election of Almazbek Atambayev. In 2017, he endorsed Prime Minister Sooronbay Jeenbekov for president, who won that year's presidential contest and, in 2018, for the first time, the presidency passed from one legitimately elected president to their legitimately elected successor (BTI 2020b).

However, this was short-lived. In what some refer to as Kyrgyzstan's third revolution, in October 2020, Sooronbay Jeenbekov stepped down as president following violent protests over mass-vote buying and large-scale use of administrative resources, as well as attacks on journalists (Otobaev 2020; Turgunbaeva 2020). Sadyr Japarov, only recently acquitted and released from prison on charges of kidnapping, declared himself as prime minister and acting president (D'Anieri 2020).

On 10 January 2021, with nearly 80 per cent of the vote, according to Kyrgyzstan's election commission (although turnout was only 39 per cent), Sadyr Japarov was elected president. International observers noted that there was an imbalance in the outreach and visibility of candidates in the election and reports of public resources being misused (OSCE 2021b).

At the same time, voters supported a change from a parliamentary system of governance to a presidential one, thereby shifting more power to the president and away from parliament (Khurshudyan 2021). In one of Japarov's first statements after the election, he highlighted the need to counter corruption as a priority during his presidency (RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service 2021).

While the October 2020 protests toppled a government plagued by recurrent corruption scandals, any hopes of the new administration operating with much greater levels of probity appear to be misplaced due to concerns about Sadyr Japarov's alleged improper acquittal (Ovozi 2020).

## Corruption cases

In 2012, a new anti-corruption office within the State Committee of National Security (GKNB) was established. However, the office has primarily

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been used “to target the administration’s political enemies in the parliament and municipal governments” (Freedom House 2020b). Over the past year, the number of corruption related arrests against members of the opposition have increased (US Department of State 2020b).

In 2019, while Jeenbekov was in power, former prime ministers, Isakov and Satybaldiyev (who were aligned with former president Atambayev) were arrested and convicted on corruption charges in relation to the modernisation of a thermal power station (Freedom House 2020b).

In November 2019, Azattyk (the Kyrgyz affiliate of Radio Free Europe), the Center for the Study of Corruption and Organized Crime (OCCRP) and Kyrgyzstan’s independent Kloop news website published a series of investigations exposing mass corruption within the highest levels of the Kyrgyz state customs service. A former customs official – Matraimov – is alleged to have laundered smuggled or illicitly transferred US\$700 million out of Kyrgyzstan (OCCRP 2020; US Department of State 2020b; Pannier 2020).

However, since Japarov has taken power, he has declared that there is no need to arrest Matraimov. Japarov’s close friend and recently appointed chairman of the GKNB said that it would be sufficient if the money was simply returned (Pannier 2020).

In October 2020, the State Service to Combat Economic Crimes (known as the financial police) announced the discovery of a corruption network involving employees of the social fund and the state tax service that had cost the state about 9 million soms (about US\$110,000) (Pannier 2020). Not long after, the anti-corruption department said

it had discovered a network of top officials and representatives of foreign banks that had funnelled approximately US\$1 billion of credit out of the country (Pannier 2020).

However, investigations since October 2020 all relate to alleged wrongdoing that occurred either before or after Bakiev’s term as president (Pannier 2020). Japarov was a chief in the anti-corruption agency under Bakiev, a time where corruption was rampant across the country (Pannier 2020).

## Anti-corruption framework

Kyrgyzstan ratified the UNCAC in 2005 and joined the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan in 2004.

The GKNB’s anti-corruption branch is the only government body formally empowered to investigate corruption, although in practice, the financial police also investigate corruption offences as these relate to economic crime (US Department of State 2020b).

In the 2018 monitoring report for the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, the OECD found that “out of 26 previous recommendations, Kyrgyzstan did not implement four recommendations, was found to be partially compliant with 16 recommendations, largely compliant with four recommendations and fully compliant with none of the recommendations” (OECD 2018a). Lack of progress was noted in relation to anti-corruption policy and corruption prevention institutions, sanctions, immunities and statute of limitation and access to information (OECD 2018a).

The report noted that political instability has led to frequent legislative and policy changes, which has resulted in a system which is too fragmented or duplicative to effectively implement anti-corruption

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law and policy (OECD 2018a). The report also noted concerns in the ability to appoint personnel to the presidential administration without consideration of merit (OECD 2018a).

There are laws that criminalise active and passive bribery, with penalties ranging from a small fine to imprisonment (US Department of State 2020b). The law also provides for criminal penalties for public officials convicted of corruption; however, these laws have been poorly implemented, and public officials often act with impunity (US Department of State 2020b).

In 2019, legislation under which former heads of state can be prosecuted came into force. However, the law preserves immunity from prosecution for former presidents, unless that status has been stripped by parliament (for example, where suspected of “especially serious crimes”) and they lose their formal status as ex-president (Radio Liberty 2019).

Following an announcement in May 2020, a new anti-corruption strategy was developed at the end of 2020. While required to be published for discussion, to date, no such strategy has been made publicly available.

# Tajikistan

	Control of corruption		Corruption Perceptions Index	Global Corruption Barometer (citizens who paid a bribe in last 12 months)	UNCAC status	Presence on blacklists
	Score	Percentile Rank				
<b>Latest available data (year in brackets)</b>	-1.3 (2019)	9.1	25 (2019)	50% (2017)	Accession (25 Sep 2006)	NA

## Extent of corruption

Tajikistan’s score on Transparency International’s CPI remained the same in 2019 as it was in 2018, at 25. Likewise, Tajikistan did not improve on its Freedom in the World score, scoring a mere 9 out of 100 and therefore classified as “not free” (Freedom House 2020c). However, its control of corruption improved slightly with a score of -1.3 in 2019 compared to -1.4 in 2018 (World Bank 2019). Tajikistan ranks 161 out of 180 countries with a score of 55.34 on the 2020 Worldwide Press Freedom Index, dropping from 149 in 2018 (Reporters Without Borders 2020a).

President Rahmon has presided over an authoritarian regime since 1992 and severely restricts political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2020c). There are allegations of widespread corruption, and politics relies heavily on patronage networks and personal loyalties (BTI 2020c). The president’s family occupies key government and business positions, including the Tajik Aluminium Company, the largest employer in the country (Standish 2020). Ozoda Rahmon, the

president’s daughter, first worked as deputy minister of foreign affairs and more recently as a senator. Her husband, Jamollidin Nuralizoda, is the deputy head of Tajikistan’s National Bank (Orozobekova 2016). The president’s eldest son, Rustam Emomali, was appointed head of the state agency of custom services at the age of 25 (Orozobekova 2016). He is currently the chairman of the National Assembly, Tajik’s parliament upper house, placing him second-in-line to the presidency (Putz 2020c).

In May 2016, a referendum supported by 94.5 per cent of the votes, made the President Rahmon president-for-life (Standish 2020). Tajinfo (a foreign-based opposition portal) claimed that the real turnout figure may have been as low as 20 per cent, with electoral commission members being directed to hide the real numbers (Orozobekova 2016).

The referendum also made 40 other constitutional amendments, including lowering the age at which a person can stand for presidency, from 35 to 30, and banning faith-based political parties, which

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some claim were moves to consolidate the president's son as next in line for presidency (Orozobekova 2016; Eurasianet 2016).

There was limited information or public debate on the proposed changes in the lead up to the referendum (Eurasianet 2016). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did not comment on the referendum; however, the United States mission to the OSCE expressed its concerns about the potential consequences on democratic development because of the constitutional amendments and, in particular, the potential for the amendments to restrict choice in the democratic process (Eurasianet 2016).

## Corruption cases

Tajikistan's political system remains plagued by high levels of corruption and abuse of power, despite presidential announcements of renewed anti-corruption efforts (BTI 2020c). Like some of its Central Asian neighbours, corruption prosecutions happen almost exclusively at lower levels of state administration, and high-level elites are rarely penalised (BTI 2020c).

An investigation by the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) revealed corrupt practices in the distribution of land in Rudaki, with claims that the former district governor Rustam Akramzoda enabled his friends and relatives to obtain free land by fast-tracking their applications (Ahmadi 2020). Five days after the release of RFE/RT's Tajik's investigative report, Akramzoda was dismissed, although it is unclear whether his dismissal was due to allegations contained in the report.

Authorities regularly block access social media sites and news on the internet, including YouTube,

Facebook and Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of RFE/RL. Authorities also cut access to mobile and messaging services when critical statements about the president, his family or the government appear online. Journalists are frequently the subject of attacks with the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan recording at least 10 reports each month from journalists regarding threats and restricted access to information (Human Rights Watch 2020).

In 2018, a journalist – Khayrullo Mirsaidov – was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment on charges of embezzlement, misusing state funds and false reporting to police. The charges were brought after he had sent an open letter to the president and public officials, calling for them to address corruption by local authorities (OHCHR 2018). He was later released in 2018, but in 2019 was sentenced to a further eight months in prison for an “unauthorised departure” from Tajikistan in 2018 (Front Line Defenders 2020).

## Anti-corruption framework

Tajikistan is a member of the OECD Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia established to implement the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan. It acceded to the UNCAC in 2006.

In 2017, Tajikistan underwent its fourth round of review under the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan. Of the 20 recommendations issued to Tajikistan from the third round, the OECD found that Tajikistan did not implement fully any of the 18 recommendations assessed (OECD 2017).

Tajikistan provided a progress update in 2018 and was found to have lacked progress in 11 of the 19 recommendations (OECD 2018b). However,



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progress had been made in anti-corruption surveys, public awareness campaigns, business integrity and sanctions, among others (OECD 2018b).

Tajikistan adopted an anti-corruption strategy for 2013-2020 and has enacted anti-corruption legislation. However, its enforcement is politically motivated, and generally ineffective in countering corruption of public officials. The OECD noted that “there is a lack of political will and personal leadership of the heads of public bodies to meaningfully address corruption” (OECD 2017).

Freedom of expression, speech and the press are guaranteed by the constitution. In practice, however, it is restricted by government interference, self-censorship, a lack of independent financial support and criminal libel laws. The Bertelsmann Foundation reports that “the government owns most television stations and controls broadcasting facilities, leaving little room for independent news and analysis on television and on radio” (BTI 2020c).

Amendments to the law on public associations and other legislation – introduced under the guise of curbing money laundering, terrorism and financing of terrorism – has restricted the ability to set up civil society organisations without undue interference (The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders 2019).

# Turkmenistan

	Control of corruption		Corruption Perceptions Index	Global Corruption Barometer (citizens who paid a bribe in last 12 months)	UNCAC status	Presence on blacklists
	Score	Percentile Rank				
<b>Latest available data (year in brackets)</b>	-1.5 (2019)	3.8	19 (2019)	NA	Accession (28 Mar 2005)	NA

## Extent of corruption

In 2019, Turkmenistan scored 19 and ranked 165 out of 198 on Transparency International’s CPI, making it the country in the region with the highest perceived level of public sector corruption. Its control of corruption worsened slightly, with a score of -1.5 in 2019 compared to -1.4 in 2018 (World Bank 2019). Turkmenistan scored a mere 2 out of a potential 100 on Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2020 (Freedom House 2020d).

According to Freedom House (2020d) Turkmenistan is a “repressive authoritarian state” in which corruption is systemic and widespread, and elections are tightly controlled. Amnesty International (2019) and Reporters Without Borders (2020a) likewise report that Turkmenistan is one of the most closed authoritarian regimes in the world. It is ranked 179 out of 180 on the 2020 World Press Freedom Index followed only by North Korea (Reporters Without Borders 2020a).

## Corruption cases

Following a public confession on television to corruption related crimes, Turkmenistan’s minister of trade and foreign economic ties, Amandurdy Ishanov, was sentenced to an unspecified prison term (RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service 2020). Many believe that the public confessions were a staged performance to demonstrate the government’s apparent willingness to counter systemic corruption (RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service 2020).

Early in 2020, the tender for a construction contract worth \$2.3 billion was awarded to a company owned by the president’s brother-in-law, Annanazar Redjepov (ACCA 2020b), which is indicative of clear unresolved conflicts of interest and deep patronage networks.

## Anti-corruption framework

Turkmenistan acceded to the UNCAC in 2005. It has not been reviewed as part of the OECD’s Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan.

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Turkmenistan's legislative anti-corruption framework is undeveloped. Corruption is not defined in legislation, although the giving and accepting of bribes is a criminal offence (CIS Leading Counsel Network 2020).

Turkmenistan does not have any independent institutions tasked with countering corruption (Freedom House 2020d). Any prosecutions or enforcements related to corruption are selective and "related to conflicts within the ruling elite" (Freedom House 2020d). In 2019, the president signed a law excluding prisoners convicted of corruption from any state amnesties and pardons (Associated Press 2019).

# Uzbekistan

	Control of corruption		Corruption Perceptions Index	Global Corruption Barometer (citizens who paid a bribe in last 12 months)	UNCAC status	Presence on blacklists
	Score	Percentile Rank				
<b>Latest available data (year in brackets)</b>	-1.1 (2019)	14.4	25 (2019)	18% (2017)	Accession (29 Jul 2008)	NA

## Extent of corruption

Uzbekistan's CPI score has been steadily improving from a low base since 2013, rising from 17 in 2013 to a score of 25 in 2019 and moving up five places from the previous year (Transparency International 2019). Freedom House (2020e) scored Uzbekistan 10 out of 100 on its Freedom in the World Index in 2020, an improvement of 1 point from 2019, but states that the country is still regarded as "not free". Uzbekistan's control of corruption remained unchanged with a score of -1.1 for both 2018 and 2019 (World Bank 2019).

Uzbekistan ranked 156 in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, improving its position from 165 in 2018 (Reporters without Borders 2020a).

Reporters Without Borders notes that a "thaw" is underway following the death of president Islam Karimov in 2016 and the interim appointment (and subsequent election) of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as his successor. However, the election of Mirziyoyev was described by international observers as

neither free nor fair. The OSCE found that due to the limits on fundamental freedoms, the campaign for the 2016 presidential election was "devoid of genuine competition" (OSCE 2016). Media was severely restricted which, in turn, enabled the state to control the narrative provided to voters. In addition, election observers noted irregularities on election day such as ballot box stuffing and proxy voting (OSCE 2016). Uzbekistan's next presidential elections are due to be held in 2021.

Nevertheless, recent years have seen the release of imprisoned journalists, improved access to websites and easier media registration. However, surveillance, censorship and self-censorship are still present (Reporters Without Borders 2020a).

Despite the changing political landscape, corruption remains pervasive, with graft and bribery common among low- and mid-level officials (Freedom House 2020e). The State Crime Initiative reports that the government abuses the

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administrative and legal systems to extract payment, solicit bribes and extort payments, as well as misappropriate assets. It concludes that the government controls the “economy for the enrichment of government officials”, a good indication that grand corruption is rife (Freedom House 2020e).

There have been some reported reductions in the rate of petty corruption. Programmes such as the introduction of video surveillance and traffic cameras have apparently resulted in a reduction in corruption among traffic police and officials granting identification documentation and registrations (Freedom House 2020e).

## Corruption cases

In recent years, the number of cases of officeholders being arrested and prosecuted for alleged corruption is increasing, uncovering the deep entrenchment of abuse of office in state organs (BTI 2020e).

The office of the prosecutor general has been subject to a number of corruption allegations. In 2019, the former prosecutor general, Rashidjon Kadyrov was sentenced to 10 years in prison on charges of corruption in June of that year (BTI 2020e; Freedom House 2020e). In June 2019, prosecutor general Otabek Murodov was dismissed over accusations of graft. His predecessor, Ikhtiyor Abdullayev, was removed from his security post as head of the state security service and sentenced to 18 years in prison for crimes including bribery, extortion and for the use of illegal wiretaps to gain political influence (Freedom House 2020e).

Further, in 2018, the mayor of the Yunusabad district in Tashkent was detained for accepting a US\$400,000 bribe (BTI 2020e).

Demonstrative of the scale and nature of grand corruption in Uzbekistan, the eldest daughter of former president Islam Karimov, Gulnara Karimova, has been the subject of numerous corruption related allegations. In March 2019, the United States Justice Department named Karimova as part of a major international bribery scheme. She was charged with conspiracy and indicted “for allegedly using her official position to solicit more than US\$865 million in bribes from three telecommunications companies” (Reuters 2019).

In March 2020, Uzbekistan’s supreme court extended Karimova’s sentence for a further eight years, finding her guilty of extortion, money laundering, misappropriating the property of others and other financial crimes – crimes which are estimated to have cost Uzbekistan more than US\$2.3 billion (Moskowitz 2020; Radio Liberty 2020). A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Switzerland and Uzbekistan provides for the return of US\$131 million in confiscated assets from Karimova (Moskowitz 2020). The MoU provides that Uzbekistan will need to “develop good practices on asset return” as a “restitution in a transparent and accountable manner that satisfies the scrutiny of civil society and the international community” (Moskowitz 2020).

## Anti-corruption framework

Uzbekistan acceded to the UNCAC in 2008. In its fourth round monitoring review under the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan, Uzbekistan had partly implemented 10 recommendations, largely implemented eight, and fully implemented three of the 21 recommendations assessed, all related to

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anti-corruption research, anti-corruption education and awareness raising, public participation and business integrity (OECD 2019b).

The report noted several key anti-corruption policy reforms including the law “on anti-corruption” underpinned by national and departmental action plans to facilitate its implementation. In addition, government or joint-government and civil society anti-corruption awareness and training measures were favourably noted by the report. The introduction of e-government tools and technologies to increase access to services and information were also noted positively (OECD 2019).

In January 2017, the law on combatting corruption came into force, which sets out the framework for curbing corruption. The law establishes an interdepartmental anti-corruption commission, headed by the prosecutor general of Uzbekistan (Mannopov & Shamsiev 2020). This has since been transferred to the National Council of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Corruption Combatting. Since the passage of this law, a number of officials have been prosecuted on corruption related grounds, revealing the “vast scope of corruption that has pervaded the state and society” (BTI 2020e).

On 29 June 2020, the anti-corruption agency was established as a “specially authorised state body to develop and implement state policy in the field of prevention and fight against corruption” (Burkhanov 2020). The main tasks of the agency are to implement the internal anti-corruption control system and other international anti-corruption instruments and to analyse the effectiveness of the anti-corruption control system in public procurement, budget funds, loans from international organisations and foreign states and the sale of assets. While only in its infancy, it will

be interesting to see how the agency will fulfil its mandate in a challenging environment.

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## Impact of corruption on COVID-19 response in Central Asia

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic resulting from the outbreak of a new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). All countries in Central Asia, except

Turkmenistan, have officially reported COVID-19 cases (UNFPA 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on economies, lifestyles and health across the world. Across Central Asia, “existing social, political and economic issues have been exacerbated by the virus” (Putz 2020d).

### Confirmed cases and deaths as of 30 December 2020

Country	Confirmed cases	Deaths	Population
Kazakhstan	198,659	2,749	18.5 million
Kyrgyzstan	80,654	1,353	6.4 million
Tajikistan	13,182	89	9.3 million
Turkmenistan	0	0	5.9 million
Uzbekistan	76,907	613	33.5 million

Sources: World Health Organization, [Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Dashboard](#); The World Bank, [Population data](#)

### Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic first hit Central Asia in March 2020. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were all quick to acknowledge the pandemic and were proactive in their responses (OECD 2020). These countries implemented a range of measures, including announcing states of emergency, imposing quarantine or lockdown measures, and closing borders. Only after a visit by WHO representatives in May 2020 did the Tajikistan government start reporting cases.

Turkmenistan is yet to officially report any COVID-19 cases, even after the United Kingdom’s

ambassador in Ashgabat reported he had contracted the virus (Balakrishnan 2020). Further, by mid-2020, the main infectious disease hospital in Turkmenistan’s capital, Ashgabat, was reportedly overwhelmed with “pneumonia-like” cases, and the hospital was placed under quarantine (Human Rights Watch 2020c). Although access to the country is limited, WHO officials visited in July and reported that they were “aware of several sources reporting alleged COVID-19 transmission in the country and is concerned about reports of increasing acute respiratory infections and pneumonia” (Walden 2020).

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Despite Turkmenistan's denial of the presence of any COVID-19 cases within its borders, it has been implementing preventive measures and appears to have adopted some of the WHO's recommendations (Balakrishnan 2020). According to some commentators, Turkmenistan's COVID-free status is 'more likely a symptom of the country's repressive policies than the truth' (Walden 2020). Health officials in Turkmenistan, speaking anonymously, have reported numerous cases of COVID-19, including deaths. However, they also report that they are not permitted to register the diagnosis, nor talk about COVID-19 (Azatlyk Radio 2020).

Although most Central Asian countries are now reporting COVID-19 cases, the "lack of transparency and limited testing may have kept infection rates artificially low" (Stronski 2020). For example, in Uzbekistan, the number of patients presenting at hospitals with COVID-19 symptoms has raised questions over the government's official statistics, "suggesting that it either lacked the testing capacity to diagnose cases or was not prepared to present the real statistics publicly" (Goodwin 2020).

Further, lower number of infection rates initially could be attributed to the decision of Kyrgyz and Kazakh governments to exclude suspected cases of COVID-19, such as pneumonia, from official numbers and only reporting cases confirmed by laboratory testing. A policy shift in late July/early August 2020 saw pneumonia cases that showed consistencies with, or epidemiological links to Covid-19, were included in these countries' count (Human Rights Watch 2020b). As noted by Human Rights Watch (2020b), inaccurate representation of the true number of cases of COVID-19 may

have caused complacency among the population, further exposing them to the virus.

Across the Central Asian region, government responses to the pandemic have been hampered by corruption and opaque policy processes, which thus undermine basic human security (Stronski 2020). The pandemic has also been used by governments in the region to further reinforce their grip on power (Janenova & Fisher 2020), for example, through arbitrary and disproportionate quarantine measures (Human Rights Watch 2020a) and through the passage of laws which infringe on fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly (Transparency International 2020).

## Healthcare systems

Across the globe, COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities in health systems and public service delivery, and the Central Asian region is no exception (UNDP 2020). For a long time, healthcare systems across Central Asia have been weakened by underfunding and corruption (OECD 2020b). This has, in turn, stymied the response of Central Asian governments to the pandemic.

The onset of the pandemic in Kazakhstan saw overwhelmed healthcare systems, insufficient personal protective equipment, ventilators and supportive-care medications. As a result, thousands of people with COVID-19 symptoms were cared for at home (Balakrishnan 2020; Stronski 2020).

A spike in infections in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in early July 2020 left hospitals overwhelmed, with reports of people struggling to find a place in hospital for treatment (Human Rights Watch 2020b).



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Corruption within medical services and the sale of drugs has reportedly increased, with reports of healthcare workers selling negative coronavirus test certificates in Kazakhstan and overpriced drug sales in Kyrgyzstan (IDEA 2020a, Eurasianet 2020a).

In Kyrgyzstan, “the level of protection of doctors against COVID-19 is so low that the number of cases among medical staff is extremely high” (ACCA 2020a). According to data published in mid-2020, health workers account for approximately 16 per cent of the total number of infections in Kyrgyzstan, and 11 per cent of infections in Kazakhstan (Human Rights Watch 2020b).

However, attempts to raise concerns have allegedly been quashed. According to the Analytical Center for Central Asia, doctors in Kyrgyzstan who complained on social media networks about the lack of personal protective equipment were tracked down by the State Committee for National Security and pressured to publicly apologise or risk criminal prosecution (ACCA 2020a; IPHR 2020).

## Access to information and freedom of speech

More broadly, many Central Asian countries have sought to stifle discussion about COVID-19 and the government’s response to the pandemic and sought to control the media and civil society (Masood 2020).

In Kyrgyzstan, media are restricted from accessing information, press briefings did not have a question-and-answer session, officials were delayed in their responses, and for weeks journalists were not accredited to work in areas where the state of emergency was in force (IPHR 2020).

In Turkmenistan, any discussion related to COVID-19 is heavily censored and citizen’s lack of access to independent media has left them “in the dark” (Kashgarian 2020). Media covering Turkmenistan’s response to the pandemic were subject to cyberattacks and attempts to restrict access (Kashgarian 2020). Citizens were reportedly banned from talking about COVID-19 and could be arrested for doing so (Eurasianet 2020c).

In Kazakhstan, a human rights activist was sentenced to three years of restricted freedom and a ban on political and civic activism for five years for using social media posts to criticise the government’s handling of COVID-19 (Amnesty International 2020). A law was also passed restricting freedom of assembly (Kumenov 2020b; Transparency International 2020). In Uzbekistan, strict penalties have been introduced for spreading “false” information about COVID-19 (ACCA 2020a; Stronski 2020).

In Tajikistan, the authorities blocked access to kv.tj.info, a civil society website providing an independent count of the number of COVID-19 fatalities in Tajikistan (IDEA 2020b). The parliament also amended the administrative code to introduce a fine for disseminating misinformation about COVID-19 (Radio Liberty 2020).

## Fundamental freedoms

Some of the measures put in place by Central Asian governments to curb the virus are excessive and impinge upon fundamental freedoms (Janenova & Fisher 2020). There are concerns that measures introduced in response to the pandemic – such as new surveillance tools and emergency legislation – may be left in place permanently (Janenova & Fisher 2020). For example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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have enforced legislation prohibiting photo and video recordings in medical institutions and quarantine facilities (Janenova & Fisher 2020).

## Corruption cases

In Kyrgyzstan, there are concerns about corruption during public procurement processes to purchase personal protective equipment and ventilation equipment. According to an investigation by journalists, “when analysing the data of the Department of Public Procurement website, we found out that sometimes the amount of public procurement exceeded the market value of goods by 10 times”. The investigation uncovered a connection between a successful tendering company for the purchase of personal protective equipment and ventilation equipment with the Birimdik party, of which the president’s brother is a member (ACCA 2020a).

In Uzbekistan, the anti-corruption agency discovered that sanitary-epidemiological service staff within the health ministry had embezzled more than US\$171,000. The funds were destined to be spent on setting up medical centres and quarantine facilities and to support certain parts of the economy (Eurasianet 2020d; Masood 2020).

## Transparency and accountability

Across Central Asia, there are several concerns regarding the transparency and accountability of expenditure of funds earmarked for responding to the impact of COVID-19 with widespread claims that funds are being distributed in an opaque manner (Goodwin 2020). For example, in Kyrgyzstan, there is no detailed information on how US\$645 million flagged for COVID-19 response measures is being spent (OCCRP 2020). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, there is no information

about how the first tranche of budget funds for responding to the pandemic (approximately US\$8.5 million) were distributed (Sultan 2020).

In early April, the World Bank gave Tajikistan US\$11.3 million to establish approximately 100 intensive care unit places and to provide for cash transfers to those who needed it most. Several weeks later, the government announced cash transfers of 116 somoni (US\$11) to eligible families every quarter; however, this money was stated to come out of the state budget and made no reference to funds from the World Bank (Eurasianet 2020b).

## Post COVID-19 impact

In addition to the impacts COVID-19 has had on health systems across the world, the socio-economic impact has also been profound. Across Central Asia, economies have contracted, for example, due to a decline in oil income or from lower remittances.

Addressing corruption is a priority in times of crisis, a notion reinforced in a statement by the UN Secretary General: “[corruption] is even more damaging in times of crisis – as the world is experiencing now with the COVID-19 pandemic” (UNSG 2020). However, as noted above, Central Asian countries have sought to consolidate their authoritarian stronghold by further restricting fundamental freedoms, expanding their powers, cracking down on dissent and allocating funds under a veil of secrecy.

One commentator cautiously suggests that this increased authoritarianism may be short-lived and, post-pandemic, the removal of emergency restrictions will help “political parties, protesters, and grassroots movements to communicate their

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platforms and grievances to larger audiences”  
(Hamid 2020).

Nevertheless, existing vulnerabilities of weak governance and endemic corruption will hinder Central Asian economies’ ability to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. According to the World Bank Group (2020), institutional quality is one of the most important determinants of productivity growth, over the long term. This requires reducing corruption and illicit financial flows (OECD 2020). Further, according to the OECD, Central Asian governments need to “close the gap between the de jure requirements and the de facto implementation and step up their efforts in fighting corruption” through better legislation, digitalisation and implementation capabilities (OECD 2020).

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