

**THE CRISIS IN KYRGYZSTAN:
THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
ON SOCIETY AND CULTURE
INTERVIEW WITH FLORIAN COPPENRATH**

Janny Hollstein

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It is the objective of the EUCACIS programme to provide intensive PhD research training for its participants to bring them closer to international standards, to support them until they submit their doctoral theses, and to help them establish their own networks with other young researchers in the target regions and in Europe. This will be achieved through four international conferences, four PhD schools, two research training stays and continuous online coaching.



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About the Author

Florian Copenrath is a PhD student in Central Asian Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin and Associated Research Fellow at the Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient. His research focuses on the local and translocal economy of hip hop in Kyrgyzstan. He is also co-founder of Novastan.org, the German-French online magazine on Central Asia. Since August 2019 he is conducting field research in Bishkek.

Editorial team

Publishers:	Prof. Dr Mathias Jopp, Head of International Programmes, IEP PD Dr Matthias Waechter, Director General, CIFE
Editors:	Dr Susann Heinecke, Programme Manager EUCACIS, CIFE Salome Minesashvili, Project Assistant, CIFE Janny Schulz, Project Manager, IEP
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Introduction

On 18 March, Kyrgyzstan confirmed the first three cases of the Covid-19 pandemic. The country has declared a state of emergency and closed its international borders. As of 30th June, Kyrgyzstan counted 5296 confirmed cases of Covid-19, 2370 recoveries and 57 covid-19 related deaths. A containment of the spread of the virus in the Central Asian country is currently not foreseeable.

Interview taken by Janny Schulz on 3rd June 2020

You were currently in Kyrgyzstan for a research trip when the Corona pandemic reached the country. Why did you decide to stay in the country during the lockdown?

The lockdown reached me about a month before the planned end of my research. By the end of March, when I would have had the opportunity to leave the country, when it became clear that there would soon be no more flights, I had arranged several important meetings, which is why I stayed there. The situation in Kyrgyzstan was also less critical than in Europe at that time. I did not want to expose myself and my relatives in Germany to the additional risk of infection from flying in an airplane.

The second possibility to leave the country was about two to three weeks ago, when the German embassy had organised two charter flights for EU citizens. At that time I stayed in Bishkek again because the announcement came on short notice and I did not feel ready to leave yet. As it is not possible to foresee how the international travel will be organized in the near future, it was also not clear when I would be able to return to Bishkek.

Moreover, being in quarantine in Germany is hardly different from being in quarantine in Bishkek. So the factors that argued for staying in Kyrgyzstan outweighed at that time. I do not

regret this until today.

As of March 1, the Kyrgyz government reacted with temporary entry restrictions for nationals of China, Japan, South Korea, Italy and Iran. What other corona-related measures have been taken since then?

Around 25 March, the restrictions on entry into Kyrgyzstan were extended to the whole world, and the country closed its international airspace. To put this in context: On March 18th, the first Covid-19 cases were reported in Kyrgyzstan, and on March 25th, a state of emergency was declared. Before that the state was called "emergency situation" and before that "state of alert", which are lower escalation levels. First of all, schools and kindergartens were closed. Under the state of emergency, public life was largely suspended, taxi services and public transport were suspended and only a small amount of shops remained open, such as pharmacies, medical services and important administrative facilities. Regional traffic within Kyrgyzstan was severely restricted. In a state of emergency there was a night-time curfew, during the day people were only allowed to leave the house for medical reasons or to go shopping and carry a self-declaration with directions. Since May there has been a gradual easing of the restrictions. Since 1 May the taxi companies have been back in service, and from 11 May businesses such as hairdressing salons and large shops were reopened. Since 25 May the escalation level "emergency situation" has been in force, public transport within Bishkek was resumed and since 1 June restaurants have been open again. At the beginning of June, domestic traffic is also to be resumed, including air traffic.

However, mosques and schools have not yet been opened, an early end of the school year is proclaimed on 30 May and the students are

on summer holidays. Kindergartens are to be reopened in June.

According to your observation, how did the population react to the measures?

During the first weeks most people behaved surprisingly disciplined, which certainly has to do with the fact that at that time the images of the crisis in Spain and Italy were very present in the media and it was feared that similar situations could arise in Kyrgyzstan. Parallel to the relaxation measures, the level of caution gradually declined. Each relaxation measure was disproportionately accompanied by relaxed behaviour on the part of the population. Although there were only a few illegal large-scale events, the population became careless in its social distancing behaviour. This also had to do with inconsistent official communication, for example with regard to the obligation to wear masks and penalties for violation. This led to resentment. I could also assume that the requirement to carry self-declarations and directions in written form when leaving the house was sometimes disregarded, although checks were carried out, especially in the centre. In public areas, hygiene rules such as the obligation for waiters to wear masks or to obey the minimum distance between tables are rarely observed. Although the restaurants and cafés were very full after opening.

How did the mood in the country change during the pandemic?

Towards the end of the lockdown there were some attempts to hold demonstrations. Although opposition members complained about the government's measures, the demonstrations had hardly any participants. All existing problems were publicly pointed out. There were also some very large donations to the government by individual businessmen,

which were seen as attempts to „greenwash“ companies. In the meantime, however, other political issues have entered the public discourse again.

In Germany, the lockdown measures have triggered social debates, e.g. on the low pay of care staff and the relapse into outdated family structures through homeschooling. Could you also observe corona-related social debates in Kyrgyzstan?

The pandemic brought the state of the medical sector into focus. The poor payment of doctors and the poor equipment of hospitals was also a public issue. A high proportion of medical staff have become infected with the corona virus. There was of course a case of very high public interest, when a doctor published a video message complaining about the masks provided by the hospital, complaining that they were too thin. It is suspected that pressure was exerted through unknown channels, such as security services, because the very next day the said doctor published an apology video. In social networks this led to much ridicule and brought the situation of the medical staff to the point.

A general mistrust in the government emerged, which, however, had already existed before and was not triggered by the lockdown measures.

A small section of the public also held debates on domestic violence. There were reports of children and teenagers committing suicide during the lockdown. Their number exceeds that of the officially recorded coronate deaths. Official figures on marital violence have also skyrocketed.

In the world of work, there was a great learning effect in regard to working from home. Some universities offer lessons via zoom, and there were also examinations via zoom. After a period of familiarisation, it was also used in other areas, such as public service. In many economic

and service sectors, however, this was not so easily possible.

In your research you focus on rap music in Kyrgyzstan. How do you see the situation of rap musicians in times of a pandemic?

Above all the cancellation of concerts and weddings has deprived the musicians of sources of income. On the other hand, the lockdown coincided with Ramadan, which is why there are few big cultural events during this time anyway. However, there are few rappers who live exclusively from music, most of them have several other sources of income. Their income structure depends on what jobs they have. For example, streaming has been common for a few years now, and although the use of streaming has decreased, this source of income does not disappear completely. Advertising on various social media channels has not disappeared either. In my estimation, it has affected them somewhat less than other professional areas, such as day labourers or marketers. That also has to do with the fact that rap in Kyrgyzstan is more of a middle class profession.

Has cultural life in Kyrgyzstan currently come to a standstill?

For two months there were no cultural events, except illegal and hidden. In the meantime it is taking place again within certain limits. Production facilities such as music studios have now reopened and music videos can be recorded again. Also during the lockdown there were a few online concerts, mostly for charity purposes, to position musicians and support those who are affected by the lockdown. For example, TV presenter and public figure Assol Moldokmatova organized charity events and food distribution and live evening programs in social media, like the “concert on the balcony”.

The rap musician Bayastan also took part in this.

In the meantime, there are some small live concerts again, and clubs are opening again to a certain extent. Larger cultural events are still prohibited, however.

How do you assess the situation of artists? Is there support from the state or from the population?

I am not aware of any state support, nor have private petitions or crowdfunding efforts been launched. However, there were also no public statements by artists about financial shortages. This is probably due to the fact that there are other areas that suffer much more from the lockdown measures and artists do not expect much financial support.

In general, compared to Europe, I estimate that the situation of individuals has deteriorated much less. On the one hand, compared to Europe, the income level is lower, and many Kyrgyz musicians have different sources of income. Corona rescue parachutes, as they were distributed in Germany by the federal states for the self-employed, were in the Kyrgyz media, but there were no Kyrgyz actions taken. There were tax breaks for the population, and some ancillary household costs were partially suspended or postponed. Some landlords also suspended rents. Food baskets were distributed with private funding. There was also a state-coordinated donation initiative for emergency aid and emergency aid from foreign institutions.

Based on current knowledge, do you think that the experiences during the pandemic will have lasting effects in Kyrgyzstan?

Basically, I see little room for lasting change here. I think the chances for a change in the world of work, such as through working from home, are very small. Also in terms of unemployment

figures, many people have not fallen very far, as working conditions were already precarious before the crisis and one is often cushioned by the family network and the attention of richer relatives. Small businesses that went bankrupt and the tourism sector have been hit hard. Existences have been destroyed by the crisis, but on average the contrast with the situation before the Covid crisis does not appear too big, at least in Bishkek.

The protest mood in the population is currently rising, which is also reflected in some pieces of music. Some protest rap pieces have been published, this was rather rare before. Their content deals with corruption and the private misappropriation of state funds during the crisis. Whereby the topic of corruption has been in the focus of public debate since November 2019, when a major journalistic campaign uncovered massive money laundering.

The crisis may also have an impact on the elections. During the lockdown, several local elections were to be held, which had to be postponed. Parliamentary elections are set for autumn. The lockdown has delayed the election campaign, and probably also made the electorate more critical of the current government.

How does the pandemic affect your own research?

Field research was impossible for almost two months. I also focused more on online research during that time, as there is a lot happening about social media in my research area. Music releases and music consumption did not stop during the quarantine. So I changed my focus a bit and did the work I would have had to do in Berlin, like transcribing interviews. Although part of my field research has been delayed, it wasn't a lost time.