

GEORGIA`S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND ITS EFFECTS ON ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH: INTERVIEW WITH KORNELY KAKACHIA

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Introduction

In Georgia, the first case of coronavirus was diagnosed on 26 February. In the following days, the government already suspended several flights and halted all air traffic by 20 March. Already after the second Covid case, the schools and other educational institutions across the country were closed and a nationwide curfew was announced at the end of March. As of June 10th, Georgia had 822 total cases (690 recovered) and 13 deaths, which puts the country far behind the neighboring countries and has the lowest fatality rate in Europe (3 deaths per million people). However, the lockdown measures also accounted for a high economic price. The tourism field was hit hardest, which accounts for a considerable part of state economy – in 2019 the income from tourism comprised 8% of the total economy. From May onwards, Georgia slowly started to ease the lockdown: the curfew was lifted on 23 May and the shops and restaurants started opening. The partial opening of borders is planned from 1 July. However, schools and universities remain closed.

The first Covid-19 case in Georgia was detected at the end of February. What measures have been taken since then?

The first and very important factor for Georgia as well as for the other countries in the region was a relatively delayed appearance of the Coronavirus. They had their first cases of Covid-19 two weeks later than other countries. This delay and the examples of other countries, especially of Italy, not only bought the government some time but also prepared an informational basis. As a result, the government has met the first cases with already a good grasp of the problem and instantly imposed draconian measures, quickly closed down all the schools and ceased air and intercity traffic.

However, at the initial stages, the same did not apply for Georgian who not so much ready for such a challenge.

Have the measures been effective?

In principle, looking at the results, the measures were effective. Georgia has the least cases in the region and managed to contain the spread to its minimum. Of course, this outcome does not solely owe to the government officials. It was the medical professionals who the government designated to plan and lead the anti-pandemic process, with full state support. The timely and swift measures have played a huge role and luckily the pandemic did not transform into a disaster, which would have been unavoidable considering the condition of our healthcare system. The latter, lacking proper reforms, sufficient number of beds and generally suffering from various flaws, is in a devastated shape not only in Georgia but also in our neighboring countries. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated that Georgia needs urgent reforms in the medical field.

You mentioned that initially the Georgian society was not that supportive. Has this reaction changed later and generally, what was their reaction towards the imposed measures?

Slowly this attitude has also changed, however, not in all the segments of the society. The Orthodox Church remains such an exception. Despite some pressure from the government and the medical representatives, the church defied the lockdown restrictions and held Easter services throughout the country. The church also continued to use a single communion spoon for all the service attendees. We were just lucky to have come of period without a wide breakout.

In the beginning, the society was somewhat skeptical, especially in the rural regions. Some even upheld conspiracy theories. Since the virus did not spread so widely, people doubted about its existence, claiming that they had not encountered anyone with the virus; therefore it was a fraud by some groups just to make more money out of the situation. Later on, the exhaustion problem hit the society, finding it more and more challenging to stick to the rules. The government has responded with kind of a fear-therapy through media as it had some TV channels cover the rooms from the hospitals, full with Covid-patients. This had some effect for a couple of weeks. Afterwards, the slow easing of the lockdown has started.

In Germany, the pandemic has provoked debates on social topics, including on the low pay of the nurses. Did you observe such corona-related social and economic debates in Georgia?

Yes, same happened in Georgia. Debates over the wages of the medical staff also came forefront. Some groups even initiated private additional funding for medics during the pandemic. Another substantial issue, the condition of the Tbilisi hospital of the infectious diseases, has now become urgent. The pandemic has compelled the government to realize the importance of this hospital and a need to fix and reform it, now in a difficult condition, especially in terms of infrastructure. While little attention was paid previously, they have already started looking for a new building for the hospital.

Do you think that in general, the experience during the pandemic will bring changes in the Georgian society?

So far, this pandemic is perceived as a one-time thing. If we will have a second wave,

some changes will be inevitable. At least, the government will be compelled to introduce some adjustments, including presenting a long-term plan and a vision. For example, if we look at our current State Security Concept, all the including topics are rather outdated, pandemic is not even mentioned as a threat. As a result, the state was not ready for what was coming. This experience will shift the vision of pandemic and viruses from solely as a subject of the medical field to the security issue.

Let me ask you specifically about your field. How was academia, universities affected in Georgia?

Georgian academia was already struggling even before the coronavirus and the pandemic further challenged it. The university was at the verge of a collapse during the first three weeks, since our university system, especially that of the state university is based on Soviet traditions. The bureaucracy struggled to find a solution until some NGOs showed examples and gave an idea of online meetings, such as in Zoom. However, the academic personnel were not ready for online teaching, professionally as well as psychologically, since only few lecturers had a prior experience of online teaching. Older professors were especially struggling. These problems last until now. It took our university almost three months to purchase the Zoom program, without the license the lectures were interrupted three to four times during each class. Finally, they bought the license but now the teaching is almost over. The grading system was also confusing in the beginning, not knowing how to replace paper-based or face-to-face tasks. So overall this semester was not that successful. However, the university understood the need of online teaching.

What are the perspectives for the upcoming semester?

They will probably have a Plan B - to remain online, following the examples of the Western universities who decided for online teaching. But I don't think that much will change in technical terms because the bureaucracy is very centralized. The courses are weak in terms methodology and students are rather demotivated with online teaching. Even though it was different in the beginning, by now less students show up for online classes and their majority are either not interested in online classes or have no means of accessing them, especially those in the regions where internet is an issue. Hopefully, the current experience will compel university administration to develop a better methodology and adjust more efficiently to online classes.

How did the pandemic affect your work at the think tank?

We also had some problems but we were relatively quicker to adjust because we are an organization and also have more young people employed. We purchased online communication programs, learnt what Webinar is and we are experimenting a lot. It is of course challenging since we are not in one space, most of us are working from home which was a bit demotivating, especially in the beginning. Now we have become more familiar with such habits and understood that home office few days a week is also a viable option. It is a bit different for an administrative staff who more regularly go to the office. We also have to see how conditions develop and what new rules are voiced from the government.

From our work, research was less affected. However, the pandemic mostly challenged our training programs. Online trainings in the regions, where we used to send our trainers, are rather challenging. Personal meeting is a completely different experience

and the participants are less keen on online communication, even though we also organized internet connection for those who had no access.