



ENC ANALYSIS



Academic Life in Central Asia during Covid-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Collaborations¹

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Summary

Along with the implementation of e-learning, new opportunities for online academic collaborations have emerged in post-Soviet Central Asia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was facilitated by the introduction of new national regulatory frameworks for online academic life as in the case of the Kyrgyz government with the support of international organizations. Kazakhstani researchers have been engaged in new forms of intersectoral cooperation involving media and public voices as part of the initiatives *GYLYM* *FACES* and *MedSupportKZ*. At the regional level, new virtual networks were created such as the group 'Central Asian Academic and Analytical Writing Support Community' that enables scholars to informally discuss and work together on their current writing projects. At the same time, the Covid pandemic has boosted digitalisation of academic life in Central Asia (and beyond) and thus produced particularly favourable conditions for processes of knowledge decolonisation. Indeed, through the creation and strengthening of virtual networks and as well as a proliferation of online events organised by or with the participation of scholars and research institutions from the region, knowledge production and distribution has become more participative and balanced. Thanks to online communication tools enabling international exchange and engagement, virtual collaboration between scholars based in Central Asia and abroad has become essential for the latter to stay connected to the region of study, a region that they could not access for nearly two years now.

Key words: Covid-19, online academic collaboration, post-Soviet Central Asia, decolonisation of Central Asian studies, knowledge production

Introduction

In the past decades, an increasing interest related to the notion of research collaboration among researchers and within science policy circles has been registered (Katz & Martin, 1995, 1). Academic collaboration can take different forms – from general advice and insights to active participation in a specific piece of research – and can take place at different levels – between individuals, groups, institutions, countries (Katz & Martin 1997, pp. 1–3). Collaborations can be informal, as in the case of loose groupings of researchers who decide to work together on a problem of common interest, or formal within ‘government policy programs, [with] a fixed amount of funding and time, or other rules and guidelines delineating the scope of the research and the partners’ (Sabzalieva, 2020, p. 98). Academic collaboration is generally seen as ‘a good thing’ to be encouraged and supported for achieving scientific advancement by, for instance, pooling researchers’ knowledge with others and across disciplines towards fertilisation (Katz & Martin, 1997, p. 4).

A review of the literature reveals that there is no agreement of what constitutes an academic collaboration. For instance, for Katz and Martin (1997, p. 7), academic collaboration lies somewhere between two extremes: a weak definition including ‘as a “collaborator” anyone providing an input to a particular piece of research ... and a strong definition according to which only those scientists who contributed directly to all the main research tasks over the duration of the project would be counted as collaborators’. At the same time, authors such as Subramanyam (1983, p. 35) referred to the international research community as one big collaboration. This latter conceptualisation immediately runs into a problem since it might overshadow important power dynamics characterising processes of knowledge production at the international level between what has been – more or less arbitrarily – defined as ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ of the scientific world (Schott, 1998). As emphasised by Schott in this regard, ‘in the global networks of ties of deference, influence, emulation, and desire of recognition, there is an accumulation in the centre of ties.’ (Schott, 1998 as cited in Hwang, 2008, p. 106). Indeed, during the twentieth century, Western Europe and, especially North America, succeeded in attracting more deference and in occupying a central position in the networks, while other regions and their networks remained peripheral. In this framework, a coloniality of knowledge production has been identified by Silova et al. (2017) pointing out how non-Western and not-Western-enough scholars were socialised into the Western norms of thinking. Such socialisations were realised through scholarship programs, intensive academic studies and professional trainings offered by Western European and North American governments and foundations. At the same time and paradoxically these incorporations instead of recognising contributed to marginalising non-Western knowledge production processes (Silova et al., 2017, p. 82). For Hwang, it is in the processes of science-to-science transmission from centre to peripheries that the latter are confronted with scientific research problems and homogenous intellectual practices that do not necessarily serve their people and society (Hwang, 2008, p. 107).

The tension between scientific ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ of the scientific world has recently become evident also in Central Asian academic circles where a lively debate on the need of decolonising, recolonising and indigenising Central Asian knowledge has taken place. This theoretical debate has very often been articulated as a reaction to the ‘eurocentrism’ of current research and knowledge production processes that are seen as ‘grounded in western, secular, Eurocentric ontology, epistemology, methodology, techniques and methods’ (Niyozov, 2021, p. 6). At the same time, an unexpected window of opportunities for offline and online academic collaborations have emerged in Central Asia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic through which, as this paper argues, Central Asian scholars have contributed to making scientific relations more varied (and even equal). Indeed, while in the past 18 months Western academia has been affected by a mix of depression and lonely somnambulism², Central Asian academics have disclosed new forms of academic activism and effervescence through the development and strengthening of intersectoral and horizontal collaboration. As a matter of fact, although academic collaboration has been conceived as an intrinsically social process that requires human interaction and, especially, social proximity through which informal communication can occur (Katz & Martin 1997, p. 5), the Covid-19 pandemic has shed new light on the potential of social media and virtual communication for academic life in Central Asia and beyond.

This paper investigates new forms of online academic collaborations that have emerged in Central Asia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Central Asia in this paper refers geographically to the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. After having introduced the new regulatory framework for online academic life characterizing Kyrgyzstan, the article focuses on three empirical cases from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: (1) an informational platform for local medical doctors and workers in Kazakhstan called MedSupportKZ initiative; (2) the GYLYM FACES project for Kazakhstani journalists and scientists working in the country as well as abroad; and (3) an informal platform for Central Asians and Central Asianists known as ‘Central Asian Academic and Analytical Writing Support Community’ on Facebook and Telegram. Building on Katz and Martin’s (1995, p. 2) account, the paper focuses particularly on the questions of what research collaboration is, what motivates collaboration, what kind of knowledge is produced by whom and for whom while collaborating, and what are the implications for the periphery and the so-called ‘centre’ while being engaged in collaboration?

We will proceed with first examining the Kyrgyz case of building a national context in which online academic life and formal collaboration can take place to obtain an overview of state’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Central Asia. The second section of the paper presents two empirical cases of new online collaborative and network projects mobilising academics who live in Kazakhstan and abroad against

² See for instance the call for papers of the academic workshop ‘EMERGE! Countering Pandemic Somnambulism through Connectivities, Comparisons, and Collaboration’ organised on July 2, 2021 by the Shaping Asia network during which a first draft of this paper was presented.

injustices and disinformation in the country exacerbated by the global pandemic. In the third part, the paper shifts the focus to informal grass-roots digital academic communities and places them into a wider context of the ongoing academic and policy debate on decolonisation of knowledge production and consumption in a multi-polar post-pandemic academia.

Collaboration between state and academics in Kyrgyzstan: Challenges and opportunities

In Kyrgyzstan, within a state response to the Covid-19 a regulatory framework for online academic life was adopted. The formal collaboration between Education Sector Partners of Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic led by UNICEF was aimed to ensure continuous learning of all children from pre-school to tertiary education level by establishing various remote learning tools during school closure for the period of April – May 2020 and September – October 2020, as well as facilitating the safe reopening of schools and pre-schools³. On March 25, 2020, an *Order on Organising Educational Process through Distance Learning Methods in Higher and Secondary Vocational Educational Institutions* (hereinafter: Order)⁴ and *Anti-crisis Plan to Ensure Lifelong Learning for All Children and Successful Completion of the Academic Year (2019-2020) through Introduction of Distance Education Tools* (hereinafter: Anti-crisis Plan) were adopted. The Order and Anti-crisis Plan determined the general rules for using distance learning methods. According to the Order, the heads of educational institutions will daily monitor the organisation of the educational process using distance learning technologies and online courses, as well as providing academics with continuous methodological assistance and advice on the use of distance learning technologies⁵. The analysis of implementation of the Order in practice on the level of tertiary education revealed that each university developed its own local acts for managing distant learning.

On the basis of the Anti-crisis Plan, Education Sector partners of Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic led by the UNICEF prepared the DRCU Education Sector Response Plan to Covid-19 (hereinafter: Plan). As a result, 207 textbooks in total were digitalised and made available on the e-library on the MOES's site, 26.716 students of higher education institutions continued to learn via

³ *Covid-19 Response and Early Recovery Plan. March-December 2020. Annual Progress Report. Kyrgyz Republic.*

<https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/202102/Annual%20progress%20report.pdf>

⁴ <http://old.edu.gov.kg/ru/news/prikaz-ob-organizacii-distancionnogo-obucheniya-v-vuzah-i-kolledzhah/>

⁵ Ibid.

remote learning tools, and 250 teachers and local trainers of all educational levels built their capacity for providing and monitoring remote learning⁶.

However, despite the multiple actions done to decrease negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic to educational sector, several challenges such as tracking students' participation in distance learning and unfamiliarity of academics with digital technologies revealed⁷. Further challenges surfaced due to inconsistent access to Internet in rural areas caused by partial Internet infrastructure across the country. Overcoming these challenges could reach the overall objective of ensuring the accessibility of distance learning to all students.

Despite these difficulties, the Covid-19 pandemic also revealed new opportunities for academics, 'including the opportunity to develop new educational resources, upskilling ... in new technologies and long-distance collaboration' (Byrnes et al., 2020, p. 82). If we analyse the benefits of collaboration through the perspective provided by Katz and Martin (1997, p. 15), who state that 'the act of collaborating may thus be a source of stimulation and creativity', the case study examined here confirms that aforementioned formal collaboration contributed to developing IT skills of academics, dwell in into technological opportunities and enhance creativity needed for online teaching. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan video conferencing technology is applied to a range of academic activities, including teaching sessions, large group webinars, examinations, research meetings and academic conferences (Byrnes et al., 2020, p. 83). Academics use multiple online platforms such as Zoom, Moodle, Jitsi, Canvas, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Skype and WhatsApp, as well as learning game like Kahoot! However, there is no one single state approved online platform for online teaching. State actors urge for a flexible approach giving academics a freedom to choose among the online platforms that best fits their needs. However, not all universities provided digital capacity building trainings for online teaching for their staff. Thus, in first weeks of the state of pandemic emergency academics were left somewhat alone and faced with necessity to increase their digital capacity for online academic life by themselves.

From legal perspective, using communication and video conferencing technologies in e-learning environment is problematic because of privacy issues. Romansky and Noninska (2015, p. 71) argue that 'each e-learning environment should enforce strong policy for personal data protection to oppose corruption, loss or illegal using'. The analysis of Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Education (2003) and the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Personal Information (2008) revealed legal gaps in this field. For instance, the Law on Education does not contain legal norms

⁶ Covid-19 Response and Early Recovery Plan. March-December 2020. Annual Progress Report. Kyrgyz Republic.

<https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/202102/Annual%20progress%20report.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

regulating personal data protection collected by distance learning tools⁸. For these reasons, these legal gaps must be overcome to ensure personal data protection both for academics and students.

Thus, establishing the national framework in which collaboration can take place as a response to Covid-19 pandemic shows that state actors, academics and international organisations are working together to achieve a common goal (Katz & Martin, 1997, p. 7) – decreasing negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic to the educational field.

The MedSupportKZ initiative and the GYLYM FACES project in Kazakhstan

The Covid-19 pandemic has uncovered several political and socio-economic issues in Kazakhstan.⁹ However, the problems of great urgency have been specifically registered in the field of healthcare related to questions of poor working conditions, low salaries and insufficient quality of education of medical workers. In addition, disinformation and the use of various untested methods of treatment circulated by bloggers and influencers or even people of folk medicine via popular social media in the country has made the situation even worse. In other words, disinformation (especially, in the Kazakh language), a common distrust of state institutions and state mechanisms, and a lack of medical knowledge among not only ordinary citizens but also the local medical community have become the decisive factors that crucially shaped the motivation of collaborators in both initiatives we consider in this part.

In particular, the MedSupportKZ initiative and the GYLYM FACES project are online collaborations that emerged during the global pandemic and the protracted lockdown time in 2020 in Kazakhstan. At the very heart both cooperation ideas are not purely academic in their nature, but they were largely generated by researchers and scholars of various academic disciplines based in Kazakhstan and abroad. Another distinctive feature of these projects is the leading role and position of female researchers in forming new types of collaboration. What is also

⁸ Law of the Kyrgyz Republic 'On Education' adopted on April 30, 2003 № 92 (in Russian). <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/1216?cl=ru-ru>

⁹ See, for example, the calls for online discussions on the issue: PaperLab. (14 April 2021). *Vaktzinatzija grazhdan ot koronavirusa v Kazakhstane: ubedit' nelzija obiazvat'* ('Vaccination of citizens against coronavirus in Kazakhstan: can't be persuaded - to oblige'), <https://paperlab.kz/vakcinaciya-grazhdan-ot-koronavirusa-v-kazahstane>; and The OXUS Society for Central Asian Affairs. (19 May 2021). *The Public Health Disinformation and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Kazakhstan*. <https://oxussociety.org/public-health-disinformation-and-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-kazakhstan/>

important, one of the primary goals of Kazakhstani academics to promote and co-create such dynamic interventions is to change the public perception of science and scholarly knowledge for generating effective communication among the main stakeholders in the times of the pandemic crisis. Both empirical cases also serve as material evidence for an increasing trend of voicing the academic and public solidarity at different levels in the country: between Kazakhstani academics who live and work in the country or abroad, academics and journalists, scholars, state actors and private institutions.

The MedSupportKZ initiative was recognised as one of the large-scale and most popular online collaborations in Kazakhstan that was launched by Kazakhstani female academics in May 2020. The collaboration operates successfully until today offering a variety of online and offline educational events.¹⁰ Due to the weakness of public health management, a lack of systematic government support and reliable information at the beginning of the pandemic crisis in Kazakhstan, medical specialists have faced manifold challenges such as increased workload and insecurity to burn-out, frustration and stress. These challenges have triggered a few young female scientists from Nazarbayev University to initiate an informational platform labelled as MedSupportKZ which would inform local medical specialists about cutting-edge research and studies on Covid-19 from around the world in order to facilitate their know how.¹¹ Today, the portal also provides readers with some practical guidelines and treatment protocols from different countries which have been translated by volunteers from English into Kazakh and Russian.

In 2021, the online initiative has turned into a long-term project and it now positions itself as a multidisciplinary community that includes more than 100 scientific popularisers and volunteers from different areas, such as medicine, science, IT, design, journalism, and medical students.¹² The portal offers scholarly knowledge not only for medical specialists but also for people outside of medical profession. The main purpose of the platform is promoting information about health and raising the public trust in medicine and reliable information on Covid-19 and other serious diseases by combining online and offline formats for their outreach activities. For the community members, a regular list of tasks includes not only disseminating professional information on diseases and vaccination, but also producing some practical guidelines for the broader public. For instance, which vaccines are available in Kazakhstan and where people can get the vaccine, why are vaccines good, how to safely monitor a physical condition or when do people

¹⁰ The project team was recently included into the Forbes Kazakhstan rating 'Under 30-year-olds'. In 2021, the community members also received a state award from the Ministry of Healthcare of Kazakhstan for their great contribution to the fight against the pandemic.

¹¹ According to the official webpage of MedSupportKZ, the initiative members mostly use scientific material from around 10 highly respected and established sources, most notably, [nature.com](https://www.nature.com) or [thelancet.com](https://www.thelancet.com).

¹² The official webpage of MedSupportKZ 2021. <https://www.medsupport.kz/>

need to seek professional help are the issues they deal with on a regular basis. As the initiative founders mention in one of the interviews, the interaction during cooperation either with state institutions or individuals sometimes could be challenging and discouraging and ‘it requires patience and time’.¹³ They point out that the primary reason of these challenges lies again in a wide-spread public distrust in medical science and the urgent need of factchecking of both information and sources. Most of the community members work voluntarily; however, the project has recently received financial aid from Experts Hub Kazakhstan for translating and designing further publications and posts. Nowadays, their constant partners are the Ministry of Healthcare of Kazakhstan, UNICEF, USAID, World Health Organization and Experts Hub Kazakhstan.

Another successful online collaborative initiative is the *GYLYM* FACES project that was founded by two Kazakhstani women Assel Mussabekova – a biologist based in Strasbourg, France – and Anastasiya Gorbunova – an independent journalist and scientific populariser from Almaty, Kazakhstan – in November 2020. The project represents the ongoing digital cooperation between science and journalism on the one hand, and Kazakhstani young scholars and an independent analytical online magazine *Vlast.kz* covering political, economic and social issues in the country, on the other. ‘Gylym’ from Kazakh means literally *science*, and the project is aimed at introducing ‘faces and voices united by love to science and research’ to the public; that is the way the founders briefly describe the primary idea of their project.¹⁴

Broadly, the central motivation of this cooperation seeks to popularise the notion of scientific journalism and communication in the country for increasing awareness and preventing, for example, the spread of disinformation to the disease in social media emerged in the pandemic times. The collaborators also aim to address the need of elevating an image of academic research conducted by Kazakhstani scholars in the eyes of the broad public. Specifically, the project constitutes a series of interviews in the form of personal stories of young Kazakhstani scholars and researchers accompanied with their portraits always painted by the same artist. Each story narrates the scientific ideas and projects of the portrayed to show how their discoveries and publications might be useful and significant for people outside of academic circles. The full version of all the published *gylym*-stories can be found online on the official webpage of *Vlast.kz.*, one of the most respected media outlets in the country. In addition, there are regular posts about each story with a protagonist’s portrait, full name, the area of professional expertise and institutional affiliation circulated in the project accounts of social media (mostly, Instagram and Facebook). Like the MedSupportKZ, the current project team includes a few volunteers who have a wide range of tasks to perform, such as searching and contacting new participants to engage in the project, conducting and transcribing interviews, translating stories either into Kazakh or Russian, preparing material for publication, creating posts on finished

¹³ Romashkina, S. (17 May 2021). *Ubrat Paniku Iz Chatov* (‘Remove panic from chats’).

Vlast.kz. <https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/45018-ubrat-paniku-iz-catov.html>.

¹⁴ *Gylym Faces project*. Vlast.kz. <https://vlast.kz/gylymfaces/>

stories in social media channels, fundraising, and other administrative responsibilities.

As one can see, informal communication and links between the medical professionals are essential in developing collaboration with the aim of social transformation. The initiatives have grown from the basic type of ‘inter-individual collaboration between researchers’ into more complex and various forms of group collaborations (Katz & Martin 1997, p. 10) incorporating and involving state actors and private institutions, funding agencies, media personalities, activists and journalists. The pandemic crisis has created a space of cooperation, inspiration and collective action for medical professionals and experts in Kazakhstan who were forced to move out from their traditional academic world and actively engage with different stakeholders to build an open and empathetic dialogue for a more helpful and sustainable future in the country. In this situation, scholars of various academic fields suddenly had to develop into more public and visible figures and, perhaps more significantly, to learn how to redirect their knowledge production not only for their international and domestic academic colleagues but also for communicating medical knowledge and research without using medical jargon to the public. This type of ‘transitional’ collaboration, that emerged during the pandemic in the country, has gradually become a part of the current academic life for Kazakh mostly natural scientists. It also requires them to develop new skills and competences as advising, mentoring, new collaborative interactions, and communication with state institutions.

Informal grass-roots online communities: Central Asian academic mahallah

As the pandemic unfurled and affected all areas of social life globally, large parts of human activity that required social interaction have been forced to migrate online. With international conferences and research field trips getting cancelled, academics have sought to find alternative channels to communicate, collaborate, collect data, and debate. This global pandemic-related trend resulted in the creation of a unique digital space for Central Asian academics and those interested in the Central Asian Studies.

This section uses the case of a Central Asian informal online community (or *mahallah* in Uzbek) to explore a bigger picture of academic inequality, centre-periphery dynamics of knowledge production, decoloniality, and self-reflective practices in academic research. The term ‘academic mahallah’ was first coined by Mun and Salimova, Central Asian researchers (see Mun & Salimova, 2021). If one accepts Subramanyam’s (1983, p. 35) idea that any international research community is a large collaboration, the case study presented here is an unprecedented collective collaboration in progress, which might potentially lead to a major paradigm shift in the Central Asian Studies.

The group called ‘Central Asian Academic and Analytical Writing Support Community’ has emerged as doctoral students from Central Asia, as well as those

working on Central Asia, sought to organise collective writing retreats with like-minded peers (Mun & Salimova, 2021). Originally organised loosely around monthly writing marathons, the group has quickly evolved into an informal inclusive and polymorphous platform for Central Asians and Central Asianists. The founding group of people are Central Asian academics, who sought for networking opportunities beyond the boundaries of rigid institutional associations and eventually ventured outside conventional West-centric (or Russia-centric) academia.

The group has grown from the original handful of founders to an over a thousand-strong diverse community of students, academics and practitioners working in and on Central Asia and nearby. The group now runs crowd-organised free writing marathons, occasional seminars, monthly book discussions, mock presentations and viva voces, a mentorship scheme, masterclasses, and the *Kurultai* Café, a monthly discussion meeting to address larger epistemological issues of the Central Asian Studies field. During the group's activities 'heated debates on the topics of colonialism in Central Asia, epistemic injustice, writing from the Global South' took place, each contributing to both collective and individual transformation and self-identification of the Central Asian scholars (Mun & Salimova, 2021).

Post-Soviet Central Asia is an odd region if one tries to fit it into the centre-periphery or post-colonial debate, especially in terms of colonality of knowledge. Colonality of knowledge usually refers to the fact that 'all models of cognition and thinking, seeing and interpreting the world and the people, the subject-object relations, the organisation of disciplinary divisions, entirely depend on the norms and rules created and imposed by Western modernity since the 16th century, and offered to humankind as universal, delocalised and disembodied' (Tlostanova, 2015, p. 39). The post-colonial discourse, which has traditionally been quite developed with regards to other regions, e.g., former colonies of the British Empire, has only recently been mentioned regarding Central Asia. Until very recently 'the idea that Ukraine or even Central Asia were colonies of the Soviet Empire evoked furious resistance on both sides of the Iron Curtain' (Etkind, 2011, p. 249). The region has not dealt with its recent past neither politically nor academically. Yet, its formerly Russia-oriented academia had to reverse its sails and fit into the global political economy of education and knowledge production. Established Central Asian scholars had to retrain and learn a new language to be able to publish in Western journals and keep their jobs (Sultanalieva, 2020). This need to fit into the global knowledge production and distribution system might be indirectly responsible for the ongoing process of self-reflection and paradigm shift within the Central Asian academic communities at large.

It is interesting to see what has motivated the emergence of such a community. From our first-hand experience and personal impressions, the motivation behind such collaboration is many-fold. On one hand, there is an obvious lack of direct collaboration opportunities in the times of the global pandemic and closed borders. Beyond this superficial motivation there are deeper, more systematic reasons why the time and space have been right for this group facilitating the emergence of a larger regional movement. Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, globalisation processes in the region created a larger international

community of indigenous Central Asian researchers, who share identity and face similar struggles of fitting into the English-speaking global academic market or Russian-speaking regional academia. There is also academic solidarity of their international colleagues, who are aware of the ingrained inequalities and systemic injustices of the neoliberal West-centric academic systems. There is also a common search for one's place within the existing structures of knowledge production and distribution. There is also a universal disillusionment of precarious academics in the commercialisation of education and research, lack of funding provided to 'less profitable' social sciences and humanities, and many other frustrations with the imperfections of academia, which might have contributed to why non-Western academic communities are moving from post-colonial discourses into decolonial narratives and practices.

Decolonisation of Central Asian Studies might be in its nascent form. Individual indigenous researchers become aware of decolonial discourses, attempt to balance the previous academic collaboration inequalities, and mentor their peers, who might be less familiar with the Western knowledge production systems and its challenges. By doing so, they challenge their traditional role as the field or the source material and assume their role as equal knowledge producers.

Collaborators in this tremendous task are diverse. There are Central Asian and international doctoral students, early career researchers and established academics, who are keen to improve or move away completely from the old centre-periphery knowledge production paradigms. There are European and North American students and researchers, seeking access to the Central Asian research field in the time of border closures and general uncertainty. However, unlike their predecessors they are often more aware of their privilege and more willing to give space, voice and agency to their Central Asian peers. There is also the policy community that either seeks academic input or attempts to share their work with the academic communities across disciplines. Each encounter between multiple worlds within this small yet important virtual space of the Central Asian *mahallah* is an ongoing contestation, transformation and creation of new forms and new formats of North-South, East-West, centre-periphery, and academic-policy collaborations that might signify systematic changes in the global knowledge production paradigm. As one can see, the potential implications of this collaboration within an online informal community goes beyond immediate individual benefits and might be the beginning of a categorically new, unprecedented change in academia.

Conclusions

During the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals from around the world were forced to come together to face different challenges (see, for instance, Sitrin & Sembrar (eds.), 2020), giving rise to new forms of solidarity. This phenomenon has affected the Central Asian academic community as well where new regulatory frameworks for online academic life were introduced, for instance, by the Kyrgyz government with the support of international organizations such as UNICEF. The role of solidarity in academia has generally received insufficient attention from scholars of different academic fields (Bieliauskaite, 2021). This paper contributed to filling this

gap by shedding light on bottom-up academic collaborations emerging in the region that were characterised by mutual support, a participatory approach, and shared responsibilities (Bieliauskaite, 2021) as in the case of MedSupportKZ and GYLYM FACES. Born as a 'transitional' collaboration between young scientists and medical staff to respond to urgent needs in terms of reliable Covid-related information, in the past months the MedSupportKZ has developed into a unique large scale intersectoral platform bringing together different stakeholders including decision-makers and ordinary people. Similarly, the GYLYM FACES has fostered the exchange between scientists and regular citizens also thanks to the collaboration of volunteers that have popularised science by targeting the knowledge production process to the broad public.

Academic solidarity in the Central Asian context has gone beyond such issues as migration, political regime, refugees in the context of international collaboration (Biner, 2019; Löhr, 2014) and as mere 'humanitarianism' in terms of universal moral values, urgent aids and assistance in educational politics (Löhr, 2014). Indeed, it has rather manifested itself as 'solidarity research' (Brem-Wilson, 2014): i.e., a new form of academic-civic activism largely dealing with methodological and ethical considerations. This is well exemplified by the case of the 'Central Asian Academic and Analytical Writing Support Community' and its lively debates on colonialism, epistemic injustice and knowledge production in/from the 'Global South' which has brought to a new awareness and self-identification of Central Asian scholars. Reduced geographical mobility seems to have created new sensitivities among indigenous Central Asian researchers sharing the same struggle for recognition and for one's place within the existing structures of knowledge production and distribution, since the inaccessibility of the 'centre' has contributed to re-evaluating 'places' in the peripheries and their right to self-determination.

At the same time, the Covid pandemic has boosted digitalisation of academic life in Central Asia (and beyond) and thus produced particularly favourable conditions for processes of knowledge decolonisation. Indeed, through the creation and strengthening of virtual networks and as well as a proliferation of online events organised by or with the participation of scholars and research institutions from the region, knowledge production and distribution has become more participative and balanced. In the past, the organisation of events was mainly in the hands of established international and national associations and renowned research centres based in the West. Remarkably, event organisation costs have very often prohibited Central Asian researchers from joining these associations and from participating in these events (Sabzalieva, 2020, p. 103). By organising online conferences and seminars, by setting up framework and conditions for participation, by selecting the topics and speakers, during the pandemic Central Asian scholars and research institutions have exercised an active agency to pursue their goals and research interests. This has enabled them to take more ownership in the process of knowledge production and reclaim their 'positions as epistemic subjects who have both the legitimacy and capacity to look at the world from [their] own origins and lived realities' (Silova et al., 2017, p. 76).

In addition, collaboration between scholars based in Central Asia and abroad has become essential for the latter to stay connected to the region of study, a region

that they could not access for nearly two years now. The research collaboration has taken a virtual form but has not changed in its substance compared to the past. In fact, researchers still 'collaborate by sharing data or ideas through correspondence or discussions at [online] conferences, ... or by performing parts of a project separately and then integrating the results' (Katz & Martin 1997, p. 4). The only exception is represented by the lack of opportunity of visiting each other although, based on our observations, virtual contact has made the interaction more regular and intense since less costly and not conditional to the fact of being in spatial proximity. Finally, the use of technology has allowed the simultaneous collaboration between more scholars based in the region as well as abroad. One open question which surely deserves further investigation regards the extent to which multiple virtual collaborations affect the quality, duration and the commitment of international cooperative efforts.

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