Swinging policies in the process of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequence

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What if the swing breaks?

There is an obvious dichotomy between the two aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic: healthcare and economy. The subsequent actions of the Armenian government and the messages it communicates are therefore contradicting as well. At the early stage of the pandemic the key message was clear: "We need to overcome the pandemic together and only then shall we think of the economic recovery". The quarantine in Armenia did not yield the anticipated results. Thus, without addressing the first issue, we have already targeted the other priority, i.e. mitigating the economic consequences of the pandemic. However, currently, there is no relevant clear message, and the responsibility of dealing with the dilemma of healthcare and economy is essentially on an individual. Such a burden may be too heavy for an individual, and in the result, they will start ignoring (totally or partially) one priority at the expense of the other. At the moment, it seems that it is the pandemic that is being ignored, with all the consequent potential perils. In the future, in case SARS-CoV-2 spreads more, people will start ignoring the economy. Therefore, we are facing a huge risk of failing in both sectors.

Key to success is in social cohesion

The latest report by the US-based Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) identifies three pandemic wave scenarios, which map potential pandemic trajectories in the coming months. According to CIDRAP experts, the pandemic may be with us until 2022. They believe that it will not stop, until about 60-70% of the world population is immune to the virus, and this may take from 18 to 24 months. The worst-case scenario projects a new, larger wave of pandemic in the coming autumn and winter. The authors believe that the latter is also the most likely scenario and call on all the governments to get ready to withstand the new wave.

It is argued that one of the most effective pioneers to fight COVID-19 is South Korea. The South Korean government has done nothing extraordinary; it has simply consolidated effective management with technological advancements, and has engaged in an honest communication with its society, thus ensuring strong social cohesion. In parallel with the mass testing in South Korea, the government has introduced an effective tracking mechanism of COVID-19 tracing: once a new case of infection is detected, all potential people who have been in contact with the infected are sent a text message; they are strongly requested to stop their movement, and thus, with a joint effort, the case is successfully localized.

In Armenia we have a totally different reality. Movement was not restricted, and in order to find out any information about the presence or absence of COVID-19 around their immediate environments, people were compelled to rely on the resources available to them, specifically to social relations and social media, and rumours and information from medical institutions. Moreover, it appeared that the society is absolutely disunited, even when it comes to the pandemic. Meanwhile, cases around the world show that regardless of the type of governance, whether democratic or authoritarian, be it Germany or Iran, Switzerland or Vietnam, fighting the pandemic succeeds only in societies which demonstrate solidarity.

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Chaos in social behaviour and in public messages

The pandemic is a disaster, but unlike other disasters, it requires a specific social behaviour. For instance, during war, people are more easily mobilized: they stay home in the hope of staying safe from a stray bullet or bombing. During a pandemic, the risks are less visible and thus less tangible, and this is a grave challenge for social mobilization. One not only is not protected from a bullet, but becomes one, when they leave the house and thus 'hit' the others.

Thus, fighting a pandemic is above the capability of a conscious individual; it can be overcome only through adequate social behaviour. We shall repeat: social behaviour is the key to fighting the pandemic and overcoming the resultant economic challenges. It does matter how people behave, both as a socially responsible collective and an economic entity.

In Armenia the strategic messaging to the public is unclear and contradicting. This has resulted in people perceiving the following: "There is no coronavirus; let us work!" And because information and messages from the official sources are not clear, people feed their perceptions with information far from the reality. In the UK the media covers the tragic consequences of COVID-19 through personal stories. In Armenia we try to comfort people, we try to do anything and everything for people not to be afraid and panic, and this has led to people starting to take the risks of COVID-19 and the pandemic lightly and not seriously.

The authorities should address the public without manipulations, without depicting either a disproportionately dreadful or a comforting picture. They should be honest with the public, and the communication should be uninterrupted. The signals directed to the public are defective. There is not common perception of the issues and challenges, and people have started to deny everything and to distrust. This is the very real and present challenge in the fight against the pandemic. In order to influence the social behaviour, it is paramount that government officials and politicians demonstrate the proclaimed desirable behaviour publicly, for instance, to wear masks and keep social distance. Moreover, the masks should be of the kind that is available and affordable for the citizens. As of today, we have an extremely contradicting situation in this regard.

In an attempt to respond to the pandemic, governments often consider the cases of different countries, the responses and instruments they have used, whereas the success of one or the other response is strongly embedded in the given culture, in the social behaviour and values of a given society. In order to succeed, it is necessary to understand what values should underlie the desirable change in social behaviour, which messages and instruments can be used to target specific social groups in specific contexts. Vouchers may be effective in Lithuania, and personal stories of healthcare professionals may be effective in the US. However, in Armenia perhaps some other messages and instruments shall be the most effective. We need to seek for communication instruments that will help Armenians perceive the information we intend to convey, and the behaviours we want them adopt, in order to effectively respond to the challenges of COVID-19. We need to avoid simplistic imitation of the steps others have taken.

The policy brief is elaborated based on the results of the off-the-record online discussion "Economy and healthcare: The role of social behaviour in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic crisis", held on 11.05.2020 within the project "Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia". The online discussion brought together independent experts, state officials and representatives of the international development partners.

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