

PERFORMANCES OF ARMENIA AND GEORGIA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

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In December 2019, novel coronavirus outbreaks were reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Due to the exponential spread of the virus, China took special measures, which, however, were not enough to control the epidemic in the country. The virus left China and spread around the world. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the rapidly spreading coronavirus outbreak a pandemic.

The recent increase in the number of cases of infection with the new coronavirus registered in Armenia has led to a vigorous debate. The situation in Armenia is comparable to that in Georgia, where the number of cases of coronavirus infection is significantly lower than in Armenia.

See details in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

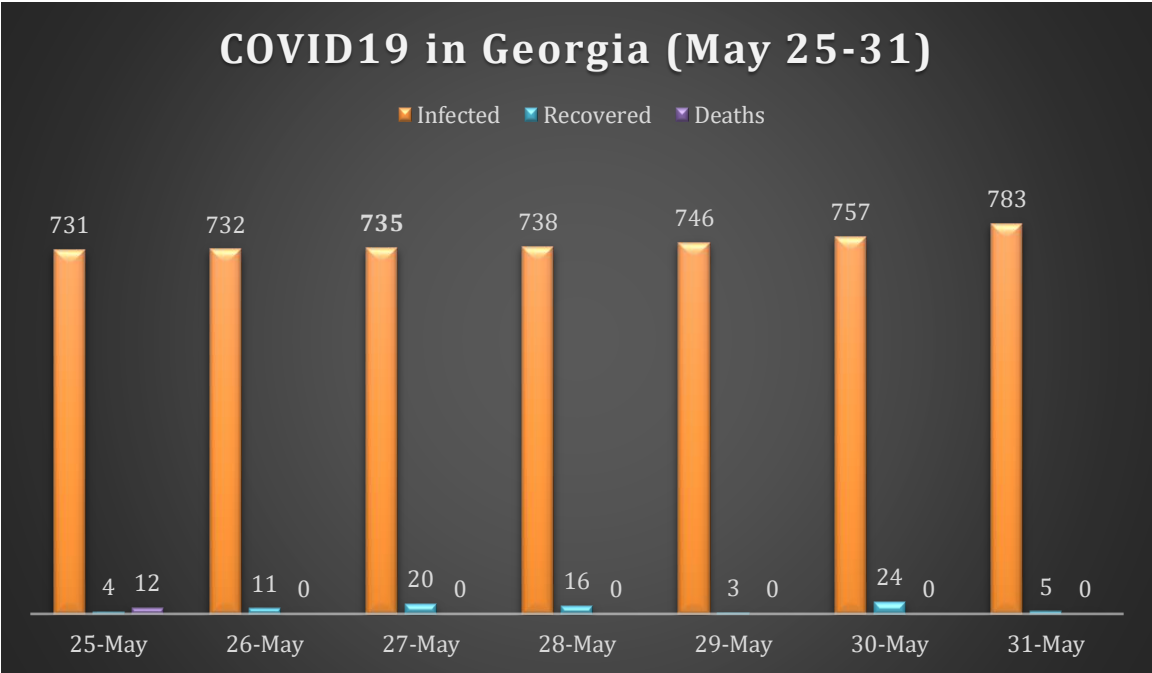


Fig. 1

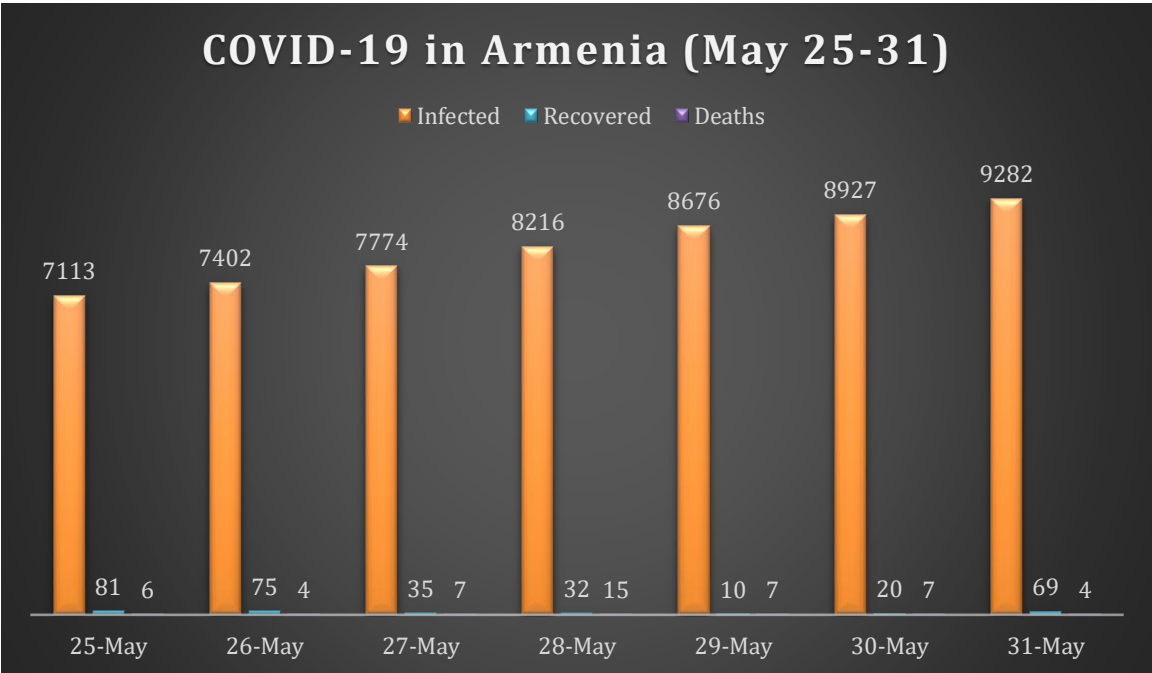


Fig. 2

In this article, we present the steps taken by the two countries in implementing coronavirus prevention measures, as well as the forecasts for the two countries' economies at the beginning of the year, and the current situation.

What preparatory steps were taken by Armenia and Georgia?

Thus, on January 30, by the [decree](#) of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, an interministerial commission headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinyan was formed to coordinate the activities to prevent the spread of coronavirus. On January 31, Minister of Health of the Republic of Armenia Arsen Torosyan noted that joint works with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were being carried out in order to obtain the necessary laboratory tests for the diagnosis of coronavirus. On February 2, it was [announced](#) that Armenia had received tests for laboratory diagnosis of coronavirus.

Georgia announced about the suspension of air communication with China on January 29, and suspension of air communication with Iran on February 24. It was noted that the travel of passengers from Iran to Georgia would be suspended, but Iranian citizens would have the opportunity to return to their country. Then all the passengers who had been in Iran were checked at the airports and at the border checkpoints. Passengers who had visited China underwent special thermal screening and other tests. On February 22, 34 Georgian citizens who came from China were taken to hospital to stay under medical supervision.

On February 24, the Armenian government also [decided](#) to limit land communication with Iran for two weeks, allowing only cargo to enter Armenia, as well as allowing citizens of both countries to return to their homeland by land and by air. The visa-free regime between Armenia and China had been suspended since January 31.

It should be noted that before the virus penetrated the country, Armenia had a certain number of imported tests and did not have a specially prepared hospital for potential patients with the coronavirus disease. On March 13, when 8 cases of infection were registered, the RA Minister of Health informed that "Nork" Infectious Diseases Hospital had been re-profiled and from now on will only serve patients with suspected and confirmed coronavirus disease. On April 3, Commandant Tigran Avinyan noted that increased number of testing is a priority and they are discussing the issue of their local production with the Institute of Molecular Biology. After approving the proposal, the government ordered the institute to produce **100,000 diagnostic tests**, allocating the equivalent of **550 thousand USD** from the state budget. It means that the interministerial committee, which was supposed to deal with the early arrangement of these issues, had failed.

The Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, which operates in Georgia, received test results within 4-5 hours, and a number of hospitals in the country were re-profiled before any case of coronavirus would be registered in Georgia. In addition, on February 26, after the first cases of the infection had been recorded, in 24 hours, each ministry [developed](#) a strategic plan to fight the coronavirus. Besides, by January 28, the government had developed a [strategy](#) to combat the virus and published it on the official website.

In Georgia, the responsibility for combating the coronavirus was taken over by health professionals and subordinate agencies, and in Armenia it was done by the government.

The first cases of coronavirus in Armenia and Georgia

The first case of coronavirus in Georgia was registered on February 26. The virus was confirmed in a Georgian citizen, who left Azerbaijan for Georgia on February 25. The first case of infection in Armenia was registered with a citizen who had come to Armenia from Iran on March 1. The infected person went to the doctor himself. Unlike in Georgia, when citizens from China were taken to hospital for quarantine, citizens who came to Armenia from Iran were not subjected to mandatory quarantine isolation.

What Georgia did

On February 28, Georgia stopped cargo transportation with Iran and Italy. On February 29, it was announced that all classes at all educational institutions would be suspended. On February 28, the second case of infection was registered in Georgia, and on February 29, the third case was registered. All three cases were detected at the border. Those with high fever were hospitalized without exception.

From March 1, public transport, theaters, cinemas and other public areas in Georgia began to be disinfected, the scheduled events were temporarily postponed, and on March 6, direct flights with Italy were suspended. On March 16, the border with Russia was closed, except for cargo and those who wanted to return to their country. **From March 18, all borders of Georgia were closed**, foreigners were not allowed to enter Georgia, travel by minibuses was banned (this also applied to taxis traveling from the regions).

Thus, from February 26 to March 21, before a state of emergency was declared in Georgia, the following was banned in the country:

- Communication with high-risk countries;
- Air communication with China, Iran, Italy, cargo transportation with Italy and Iran, import of animals from China;
- Prison visits, sending masks through mailbox;
- Mass gatherings, weddings and funerals;
- Accumulation of people, including in stores - no more than 10 people;
- Interregional transport.

Prior to declaring a state of emergency, Georgia had taken the following measures:

- All Georgian railway trains and stations were disinfected on a daily basis;
- Public transport was disinfected with special materials, disinfection and prevention works were carried out at border checkpoints;
- Citizens returning from France, Germany, Austria and Spain were quarantined for two weeks or presented a certificate that they were not infected with the coronavirus;
- The activity of sports halls and other similar centers was completely suspended, the shopping centers were closed, except for grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, postal and banking services;
- Strict inspections were carried out at all border checkpoints in the country. All citizens wishing to enter Georgia were screened, and in case of a little higher than usual fever, they were sent for examination, and quarantined if necessary;
- All the citizens of Georgia returning from any other country were subject to a mandatory quarantine.

Before declaring a state of emergency in Georgia on March 21, almost everything in the country was already closed. When the state of emergency was declared in Georgia, the following picture was observed in the country: 49 infected, 1966 quarantined, 259 under inpatient care, 1 recovered. And in Armenia, everything was following a normal course before declaring a state of emergency.

A general community quarantine was announced in Georgia on March 30, which banned the following activities:

- Leaving the house from 21:00 in the evening to 06:00 in the morning;
- people over 70 were not allowed to leave the house;
- Gatherings of more than 3 people in any public area except for pharmacies and grocery stores;
- Travel by public transport;
- Requirement to have an ID card when leaving home;
- Only passenger cars, including taxis, were allowed, but only if there were no more than three people in the car, including the driver, and only two people in the back seat.

What Armenia did

After the first case of coronavirus infection was registered in the country, no economic activity was banned, only restrictions were imposed on mass events.

During the period when the neighboring country, Georgia, was imposing restrictions in the country, the "Yes" campaign was taking place in Armenia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was urging citizens to avoid traveling to Italy, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. On March 10, the government called for ending the trips to Italy and returning to Armenia. The airlines themselves were announcing about postponing flights to Armenia before the first case was registered. Armenia had restricted communication with Iran and suspended the visa-free regime between Armenia and China.

And only on March 13, RA Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan interrupted his vacation, which he took to carry out the "Yes" campaign, and returned to work, as new cases of coronavirus were registered, reaching 8 in number, and a new source of internal transmission had emerged in the country (the well-known [case](#) of Etchmiadzin). Before declaring a state of emergency, on March 16, it was decided to suspend passenger transportation with Russia for two weeks, which did not apply to cargo transportation and citizens wishing to return to their country.

A state of emergency was declared in the country on March 16, which established the following:

- Transfer people who had come from countries where there was epidemic to the quarantine venue;
- Suspend the work of preschools, schools, higher education institutions;
- People who are not citizens of the Republic of Armenia were not allowed to enter Armenia from countries where there was a tense epidemic situation;
- A ban on rallies and strikes was imposed;
- The activity of the media was restricted; the media were not allowed to spread rumors contradicting the information provided by the government about the epidemic (later this restriction was lifted);
- Citizens of 16 countries were [banned](#) from entering Armenia: the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, South Korea, Japan, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Austria, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom. Citizens returning from these countries were required to self-isolate or quarantine for 14 days;
- On March 22, the activities of shopping centers (except for food, beverage and tobacco retail), bars, nightclubs, dance venues, casinos, bookmakers, film screenings were [banned](#);
- On March 24, engaging in economic activities was [banned](#) in the whole territory of the Republic of Armenia, with a number of exceptions;
- On March 24, a [decree](#) was adopted to restrict the movement of persons throughout the territory of Armenia, and mandatory self-isolation was established;
- On March 27, intra-regional, inter-regional and inter-state passenger transportation by buses and minibuses was also banned;

- On March 31, the operation of public transport was [banned](#), except for the railway. Taxis and private cars were allowed.

Before declaring a state of emergency in Armenia, the following picture was observed in the country: 694 coronavirus tests had been performed, 45 cases were confirmed, 87 patients were hospitalized.

Thus, after the first case was registered in Georgia, strict restrictions were imposed, the persons suspected of having been infected, those returning to the country, those with fever were subject to mandatory quarantine. And after the first case was registered in Armenia, the campaign continued, only the mass events were restricted. Five days after the internal transmission source in the country was revealed, a state of emergency was imposed, a call was made to self-isolate.

Georgia's Marneuli and Armenia's Echmiadzin. What happened?

On March 23, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia [announced](#) that in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus, a decision was made to close the Marneuli and Bolnisi regions, and the municipalities went into quarantine. The entrance to the above-mentioned municipalities was [restricted](#), all the facilities were closed, except for pharmacies and grocery stores. "Geo Hospital" clinic was also closed, where a middle-aged woman had been treated for coronavirus. Unable to find out the source of the woman's infection, this decision was made because the woman had gone to a funeral attended by more than 100 people. According to experts, the number of contacts of the woman's contacts had reached 1700. Barbed wire, reinforced concrete structures, and cameras were installed at the checkpoints. Two people were arrested in Marneuli for disobeying the rules and resisting. On March 26, it was decided to perform coronavirus rapid tests in quarantine zones. More than 150,000 people had been isolated in these areas.

And only on May 18 was it decided to lift the quarantine regime in the Marneuli region and completely restore access. Thus, the citizens of Marneuli and Bolnisi regions were under strict quarantine for about two months, which led to a slowdown in the internal spread of the infection.

On March 11, it became clear that there is a new source of coronavirus outbreak in the Armenian city of Etchmiadzin. The citizen, who was infected with the coronavirus, took part in an engagement ceremony on March 8, which was attended by 36 [citizens](#). On March 15, it was decided to close 27 access roads to Etchmiadzin, leaving 3 access roads, where people's temperature would be measured. It was also decided that the citizens with fever would be asked to self-isolate. Etchmiadzin was opened on March 18, and it was noted that the doctors would not be on duty anymore, as the cases did not go beyond the contact circle of the patient who was diagnosed with the coronavirus about a week ago.

Thirty-six citizens took part in the engagement ceremony on March 8, and the case was confirmed a week later. According to the information provided by the government, 49 out of 110 cases between March 11-18 were related to the Etchmiadzin source. If we consider that 36 out of 49 infected people participated in the engagement party, and each of the 36 people infected at least 1 person per day (school, workplace, friends) between March 8 and 15, then the number of infected people should have been at least 252 ($36 * 7$). In other words, it was unlikely that 13 infected people would be accepted as the contact circle of the 39 infected people. Despite that circumstance, the city of Etchmiadzin was opened on March 18, which, in all probability, contributed to the spread of the infection.

Differences between restrictions in Armenia and in Georgia

In general, the same actions were taken in both countries, the same restrictions were imposed, but the difference was in time management and in the governing bodies controlling the situation.

In addition, Arsen Torosyan [wrote](#) on his Facebook page on March 16 that there were 334 lung ventilators in Armenia, 15 of which were envisaged for potential coronavirus patients. Later, on May 12, he [noted](#) in an interview with “Hetq” that 205 ventilators were allocated for coronavirus treatment. The number of ventilators in Georgia is about 2000. Immunologist Bidzina Kulumbegov made this [statement](#) on April 5.

Thus, almost the same restrictions were applied in both countries, except for the following items:

Armenia	Georgia
<p>1. In case of moving in the city, all citizens were obliged to have an identity document and a movement form, which was supposed to indicate the time of departure, the address, the address of the place of visit, the name, the purpose of the visit and the expected time of return</p>	<p>1. Gatherings of more than 3 people were banned, except for pharmacies and grocery stores, where a social distance of 2 meters had to be maintained; from 21:00 in the evening to 06:00 in the morning, any kind of movement was prohibited in the whole country; only the pharmacies worked during the mentioned hours</p>
<p>2. No more than 3 people were allowed in private cars and taxis</p>	<p>2. No more than 1 person was allowed in private cars and taxis (refers to interregional minibuses too); the railway worked</p>
<p>3. Churches closed; ceremonies were broadcast online</p>	<p>3. Cemeteries were banned from visiting from April 17 for 10 days, but church services were held</p>
<p>4. Violation of the rules of isolation and movement was punished with a fine in the amount of 100,000-200,000 AMD, but if, as a consequence, another person was infected, the liability would become criminal, namely, a fine, arrest, and even imprisonment; and if a person died because of the violation, the punishment was imprisonment for a period of 2-4 years</p>	<p>4. For violation of isolation and quarantine rules, individuals were fined GEL 2,000, and legal entities were fined GEL 15,000, i.e. about \$ 5,000. Double violation was punishable by 3 years in prison.</p>

Chronology of lifting restrictions in Georgia

The Georgian government decided to gradually lift the restrictions set out in the framework of the state of emergency.

- On April 27, movement restrictions in Batumi and Kutaisi were lifted;
- From May 5, the country allowed work on car repair services, resumed work of all construction companies, suspended flights due to coronavirus resumed in late May (only Turkish Airlines will still have access to this privilege);
- Entrance and exit from Tbilisi were allowed from May 11 (curfew was still in force), light passenger vehicles, taxis, online shopping, delivery service of any product, open agriculture markets were allowed;
- The ban on gatherings of more than 3 people was lifted on May 18 (bans on presence of more than 10 people in one place, more than 3 passengers in the car were in force);
- Beauty salons opened on May 18, restrictions were introduced for restaurants, namely, placing tables away from each other, no more than 6 persons around one table, except for family members, single-use menus, online payment;
- From May 22, along with the end of the state of emergency, the curfew was lifted;
- Public transport, including the subway, resumed operations on May 29;
- From June 1, all kinds of shops were opened, including shopping malls;
- From June 8, long-distance transport will resume work;
- The domestic tourism season will start on June 15, and from July 1, Georgia will be ready to receive foreign guests, but not from all countries.

Chronology of lifting restrictions in Armenia

The Armenian government decided that the state of emergency [declared](#) on March 16 and [extended](#) until May 14 would continue until June 13, but the restrictions would be eased. Thus:

- The Republic of Armenia has been divided into 119 regions, in each of which one police officer and one employee of the Ministry of Emergency Situations must supervise control;
- Public transport, including subway and interregional transport, has been in operation since May 18, and the transportation of standing passengers in transport means has been banned. Except for vehicles longer than 9 meters, wearing masks and gloves has become mandatory;
- Kindergartens, trade facilities, including shopping malls, gyms, swimming pools, etc. have been opened;
- Public catering facilities have also been allowed to provide services in closed areas;
- From May 25, it has become mandatory to wear masks and gloves, not only indoors but also outdoors;

- Regular flights from the Russian Federation resumed on May 15;
- Regular flights Yerevan-Brussels-Yerevan will resume from June 27.

Forecasts for the economies of Armenia and Georgia

According to the World Bank's Global Economic Prospects Report [released](#) on January 9, Armenia ended 2019 with a 6.9 percent growth, and this year a 5.1 percent growth was forecast, and 5.2 percent in 2021 (the same in 2022). In June last year, the bank had predicted that Armenia's economic growth would be lower, namely, 4.2% for 2019 and 4.9% for 2020.

In the case of Georgia, the numbers were lower. Georgia ended the year 2019 with a 5.2% growth. It was supposed to end the year 2020 with a 4.3% growth, and 2021 with 4.5% growth, and the same in 2022. Moreover, the bank had reduced the projected economic growth rate for Georgia for this year and the year 2021 by a half percentage point. The previous report stated that this year Georgia should have had a 4.8% growth, and 5% growth in 2021.

According to a post on the World Bank's Facebook page on April 9, World Bank's [Europe and Central Asia Economic Update](#) has been published. According to the study, due to the pandemic, the economic growth decline in the region will make up from -4.4 to -2-8% in 2020. In 2021, due to economic policy measures, the economic growth index will be restored. This analysis is based on data as of March 19, 2020.

However, according to the World Bank's regional [forecasts](#) for May 2020, Armenia will probably not be able to avoid the economic downturn in 2020. The report states that the Central Bank announced that Armenia's GDP growth in 2020 will be 0.7%, instead of the previously projected 7.6%. The International Monetary Fund also noted that Armenia's GDP will decrease by 1.5% due to the coronavirus disaster. The latter also noted that the current account deficit of the government will increase from 1% of GDP to 5%. The IMF has agreed to provide Armenia with an additional credit of \$ 175 million for the fight against coronavirus, which, together with the previously provided \$ 105 million, makes up \$ 280 million.

The European Union will provide EUR 92 million to Armenia to overcome the coronavirus, which includes the previously announced support of EUR 51 million. The EU has stated that the money will be used to acquire medical supplies, provide training and assist small and medium-sized businesses.

According to the World Bank's projections for May, Georgia will be able to avoid the economic downturn this year, with 0.1% GDP growth in 2020. Earlier it was predicted that GDP growth would be 5%. Economists say a decline in Georgia's growing tourism industry will have the most

significant and biggest impact on the economy. The Georgian lari lost 15% of its value when the global pandemic broke out, despite the efforts of the Central Bank of Georgia. The European Union is allocating EUR 90 million to Georgia to fight the coronavirus. According to the Georgian Foreign Minister, the money will be spent on reducing the impact of the coronavirus and eliminating the socio-economic consequences. And on May 15, it [became clear](#) that Georgia will receive EUR 500 million in support from the EU and other international partners to overcome the coronavirus crisis.

In contrast to the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank has positive [forecasts](#) for Armenia, expecting a 2.2% growth in 2020, and a 0% growth forecast for Georgia.

Fitch Ratings has also made forecasts for the two countries' economic growth in 2020. According to the April 27 [report](#) of Fitch Ratings, Georgia's GDP growth for 2020 is projected at 4.8%, and the April 3 report [states](#) that Armenia will register only 0.5% growth in 2020.

See details in Figure 3.



Fig. 3

Summary

When comparing the situations with the coronavirus in Armenia and in Georgia, it is necessary to take into account how many coronavirus tests have been performed in both countries. Thus, according to the data published on worldometers.info, as of June 1, 58,668 coronavirus tests were carried out in Armenia, and 19,802 per 1 million persons. The total number of performed coronavirus tests in Georgia is 56,987, and 14,283 per 1 million persons. Given this data, we can suggest that if Georgia had tested more citizens, the numbers might have been higher, but the current figure for the number of infected people in Armenia (9492) is almost 12 times higher than in Georgia (794), which indicates that the virus is spreading rapidly in Armenia, and Georgia is able to control the situation.

Thus, summing up the article, it should be noted that, unfortunately, Armenia has failed in the fight against the coronavirus, and one of the reasons has been poor time management. The period between the registration of the first case of coronavirus in Armenia and the outbreak of new sources of infection (almost half a month) could have been used more efficiently to take the virus prevention measures. In addition, the citizens' disobedience to strict quarantine rules, poor police control, operation of the interregional transport route (Gyumri-Yerevan railway, taxis, private cars), incomplete use of government tools led to the rapid spread of the coronavirus.