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CESS Centre for European Security Studies

Lockdown (dis)connect

Narrowing down the digital divide in Central Asian education and civil activism

2020 will go down in history as the 'lockdown year' amid the global covid-19 pandemic. Coincidentally, 2020 was also associated with aspirations for achievements in the digital, education, and civil society domains in Central Asia. Uzbekistan proclaimed 2020 as 'The Year of Science, Education and Digital Economy Development'. In Kyrgyzstan, the year was dedicated to 'Regional Development, Digitalisation of the Country and Support for Children', while Kazakhstan focused on good deeds, proclaiming 2020 as 'The Year of the Volunteer'. The global covid-19 pandemic put these aspirations to a serious test, forcing a rapid shift toward the online domain of all major activities involving human interaction. Among these activities were education, activism, and political campaigning.

All three levels of the digital divide – access, skills, and benefits – are relevant to Central Asia and require scholarly and policy attention. While the rising internet penetration levels are used as indicators of success in the digital domain by some states, it is important to look beyond mere coverage statistics and consider, among other factors, access to electricity, the speed and cost of internet, as well as the nature of device ownership. Indeed, mobile internet penetration may be on the rise, but receiving education or performing certain types of jobs on mobile phones can be a real challenge. For example, hourly electricity blackouts further impact the already shaky connection. Moreover, access is uneven between urban and rural areas. Even in Kyrgyzstan, which boasts of having one of the cheapest internet connections in the world, several areas beyond major cities are disconnected. In terms of skills, the pandemic revealed that digital literacy is an important premise to delivering online education or setting up remote offices or conducting online events. On top of this, going online also entails various cybersecurity risks, such as digital hooliganism, bullying, harassment, theft and dis/misinformation. These digital milieus are further intensifying offline discrepancies, be it economic inequality, gender biases or political power.

As such, the covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore domestic weaknesses and global inequalities in terms of access to knowledge. In some contexts, teachers and students found themselves in dire circumstances, with no technological solutions to organise virtual classrooms. Climbing on trees and sitting on rooftops in the hopes of getting a better connection, relying on expensive and slow mobile internet were the best option for some teachers and students in Uzbekistan, while others did not even have that. In this EUCAM Watch, Madina Ilmiaminova addresses the 'Achilles' heel' in Uzbekistan's education system that surfaced amid the necessity to deliver knowledge in new, different modes. To make education available in the country's most remote areas, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Education opted for both online and television-broadcasted lessons. These approaches were very demanding for teachers, who had to deliver lessons while at the same time restructure courses and learn how to use new tools.

Strict lockdowns also transformed approaches to activism, as public gatherings became restricted. In the new reality, civil society leaders had to seek creative solutions to continue with planned activities. While digital divides are certainly an issue for this domain as well, other risk factors come from the nature of online visibility. In repressive political and conservative

social contexts, online visibility may lead to shaming, stigma and, in some cases, severe legal consequences for activists. Yet, there are also opportunities, as online activities allow for connecting thousands of people and spotlighting issues with unprecedented audience coverage, sometimes counted in millions. Balancing between challenges and opportunities is a fine task that was experienced first-hand by Leila Zuleikha Makhmudova, co-founder of the Almaty-based feminist collective FemAgora. In this newsletter, Leila shares lessons learnt from the organisation of a Central Asia-wide online feminist festival. She elaborates on nuances related to resources, outreach practicalities, and security concerns.

With lockdowns in place, people relied on technology, not only for education and work, but also for news consumption and even political campaigning. Amid the new modes of delivering messages directly to followers on social media, without traditional gatekeepers on television, radio or in newspapers, populist politicians took the opportunity to spread their narratives. In Kyrgyzstan, a country that stood out in Central Asia as the home of a vibrant civil society, conservative sentiments are on the rise. Anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-feminist rhetoric is linked to anti-Western sentiments. International partners and donors, which are instrumental for the country' development processes, are increasingly framed as culturally alien and invasive powers. In response to these processes, Uluk Batyrgaliev concludes this EUCAM Watch by elaborating on online discourses in Kyrgyzstan and the demonising of domestic NGOs and Western partners/international donors amid a populist political rhetoric and a conservative social turn.

Internet penetration rates are important, but online connectivity goes far beyond. When governments announce ambitious digitalisation projects, it is important to consider the multifaceted realities of this domain. Digitalisation is not something that can be achieved as a static telos. Rather, it is an ongoing process, which needs to react to the constantly developing, shifting, and transforming realities. Undoubtedly, the covid-19 pandemic brought major challenges to the already troubled sectors of education, feminist activism, and NGO work. Yet, quite philosophically, these challenges came with a few important lessons. While educators and activists can rely on their inner communities for shared experiences and best practices, putting these lessons into practice is a professional responsibility of decision-makers.

***Rashid Gabdulhakov** is a PhD candidate at Erasmus University Rotterdam and Lecturer at the University of Groningen. He is an associate of the EUCAM programme at the Centre for European Security Studies, The Netherlands*

Table of Contents

Interviews

Different but real: Online visibility of feminism in Central Asia

Leila Zuleikha Makhmudova, co-founder, FemAgora Central Asia, Kazakhstan

Women's achievements and work often go unnoticed. To help change this in Central Asia, in 2018 we founded FemAgora, a collective of grassroots experts, activists, researchers and artists. Our vision is the multiplicity of local feminist realities, practices, and movements that are sustainable, resourceful, and interconnected in Central Asia and globally. With this in mind, we have committed to celebrating women's (all those who identify themselves as such) capacities and achievements through annual festivals.

The first two FemAgora festivals took place offline in Almaty in 2018 and 2019, bringing together more than 50 female experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. As the covid-19 pandemic restricted travel and public gatherings, like many others, in 2020 we had no choice but to go online. It was a tough decision, both in terms of logistics and in terms of reconceptualising the festival in a way that would maintain participants engaged through interactive and meaningful online sessions.

As co-founder of FemAgora and co-organiser of these festivals, I have learned a few valuable lessons from moving large events online.

Lesson one: Preparing online events cost time and money
Reimagining and redesigning the festival online required an additional five months of strategizing, thematic programming, technical and logistical preparation, outreach, mobilisation, and networking. As the festival is funded as a project, we worked pro-bono. We had to renegotiate agreements with old partners and connect with new ones. We had to reimagine the internet as not just a communications tool, but as an actual space in which we operate. Of course, covid-19 also impacted donors, who also had to adapt, which, in turn, influenced our work. Not all donors understood that unused funding from travel and accommodation was needed to develop a new format, which involves several different actors and requires significant personnel time and dedication. Organising events online is labour intensive if done properly.

Lesson two: Online can offer a boost in participation
Evaluation reports showed a tremendous outreach result: we welcomed 75 speakers from all over Central Asia, as well as from the diasporas living in Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Europe. They all joined in a 6-week programme of 19 online public events and creative gatherings that included poetry, cinema, and storytelling. In total, it attracted about 5,000 participants (or viewers) with up to an audience of two million that became aware of the events via Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. While offline meetings offer intimacy and safety, they still require visas, travel, and venue rental. In the online format, we not only crossed borders within the region of Central Asia, but we went far beyond. Instead of a 100 mostly local participants we usually have in the offline format, we

were able to engage a much larger number of people through online conferencing, live streaming and social media. However, we still recognise the digital divide as a real barrier, as not everyone has easy access and opportunity to join online.

Lesson 3: Online gatherings come with additional security risks
Such broad participation also comes with a risk – exposure of personal space when connecting from home, potential interception risks when connecting from a public place and the flood of sexist and misogynist comments during live streams are a few examples. These realities require new communication security strategies, infrastructure, and skills. While some material borders were crossed, other lines between public and private roles were not. Female speakers still had to juggle between home chores, breastfeeding, or employment-related tasks, in addition to having to find a comfortable corner for teleconferencing, while negotiating an urgent call or a visit at work. Grassroots experts also found themselves in a more vulnerable position, as there was no physical way of leaving the space after the event. Their everyday spaces became our virtual venues, which, together, literally revealed and mapped the feminist realities of Central Asia.

One year ago, it was almost impossible for us to imagine doing the FemAgora festival online. Today, this experience revealed new levels of connection through virtual outreach. As organisers, we were afraid that the digital mode would make us more distant and detached. And yes, there were dozens of speakers, moderators, and creative contributors to the festival with whom we missed having direct personal interaction. On the other hand, we saw dozens of other spaces which we could never have imagined as festival venues – kitchens, hallways, car seats, cafeterias and so on. These spaces automatically became welcoming due to the great trust and openness of our contributors. Now, we see people contributing with not only their time and expertise, but also by sharing their own spaces with us. After this experience, no one can say that only physical connection is real and that virtual is just a substitute. Virtual is real, but different.

Stressing the social and development role that civil society plays in Kyrgyzstan
Uluk Batyrgaliev, program assistant, Smart Zharan Association, Kyrgyzstan

Notoriously proclaimed an 'island of democracy' or the 'Switzerland of Central Asia', Kyrgyzstan has been engaged in cooperation with a plethora of international donors and partners over the last three decades. The European Union, the United States and several other countries and international organisations have been partners and donors of both the Kyrgyz government and its institutions, as well as civil society organisations.

It is the support to civil society organisations that is at risk now. As Kyrgyzstan goes through a volatile period of changes in power, rising populism, the emergence of patriotic and religious organisations, and the adoption of a new constitution that strengthens executive power, the role of civil society seems to have become marginalised. The Kyrgyz authorities and international donors should not forget the positive bearing that civil society has had on social and economic development in Kyrgyzstan. In the wake of rising conservatism, there is clearly a need for organisations that seek to foster positive exchanges, understanding and acceptance of different opinions.

But today's reality is that civil society is under threat, as broader society becomes less tolerant and more conservative. Activists that speak up and NGOs that defend the right of vulnerable groups are experiencing less freedom and more restrictions. Here are three unfortunate examples:

First, at the end of 2019 at the Feminnale exhibition held at the national museum, which used art to address the position of women and their day-to-day challenges, a scandal erupted around a nude performance by a Danish artist who wanted to raise the issue of safety of sex workers. Conservative groups demanded the removal of the performance and punishment for the organisers, as well as the dismissal of those responsible, including the Minister of Culture and the director of the museum. The organisers also received personal threats and were smeared on social media. Although the aim was to draw attention to sexual and domestic violence and to gender inequality, several mainstream media portrayed the exhibition as detrimental to Kyrgyz values and traditions.

Second, in March 2020, a march for women's rights was attacked by an unidentified group of men wearing masks and white kalpaks (the national men's headwear), right next to the police. However, instead of ensuring the security of the participants, the police detained the peaceful protesters and even passed a court verdict against the organisers of the march. Most mainstream media portrayed the march as a gay parade. This, in turn, contributed to negative public sentiment and decreasing public support for civil society organisations.

The *third* case concerns a peaceful protest in April 2021 against police inaction after the kidnapping and murder of a young woman. Protesters demanded the resignation of the Minister of Internal Affairs, but pro-government groups lashed out against protesters, threatening the lives of participants, and dispersed the demonstration. A Kyrgyz factcheck organisation was able to provide proof that the anti-protesters were supporters of the government and even included some ministry employees.

These examples demonstrate the existing tensions between conservative, nationalist and religious forces, and liberal pro-democracy forces. Often, the former group portrays the latter as Western agents who are against Kyrgyz culture and traditions. NGOs that have been seeking to promote justice and defend liberty are now often at risk. Kyrgyzstan is at a critical junction in-between the curtailing of freedoms and advancing its reputation of being an island of democracy. Civil society should be the glue between the population and the authorities, not the scapegoat of government fears and public grievances. Civil society will need to continue its work through research, awareness-raising and training to try to help overcome tensions in society. This is a responsibility of civil society itself, but it will need cooperation from the authorities and hopefully continued support from donors.

Education in times of covid-19: Uzbekistan's case

Madina Ilmiaminova, research analyst, Innovation Technology and Strategy Center under the Ministry of Public Education, Uzbekistan

In Uzbekistan, 2020 was proclaimed the year of 'Science, Education and the Digital Economy Development'. As it turned out, this was very appropriate, as the entire world was forced to move part of public life online, including education. Today, almost half of the Uzbek total population uses the internet; every year, the digital divide is becoming slightly smaller. The Uzbek government has prioritised digitalisation in almost every sector of the country. The education sector has been of particular concern, as the covid-19 lockdown forced authorities, schools, teachers, parents, and pupils to go online.

Initially, Uzbekistan opted for a mix of broadcasting lessons on TV and online learning for elementary education. This has not been without challenges. Students missed many classes, because of power disruptions, especially in remote areas, and a lack of digital literacy among teachers and school children. The rapid changes and shortcomings caused communicational and adaptation problems not only for educational administrations, but also for teachers, children, particularly those with disabilities, and parents. In talking with teachers, we learnt that the switch to online had downsides for them and for their pupils, but there have also been some upsides for Uzbekistan's educational system.

Among the many challenges, teachers mentioned the need to get used to the unfamiliar online classroom environment. At-distance education in Uzbekistan implied a combination of tools and platforms, from YouTube to Telegram messenger to television. Online platforms were problematic due to the lack of proper equipment and skills among educators to create, record, and upload educational videos. Using traditional television was not ideal either in bigger families with only one TV set.

On the recipient side, students too experienced numerous issues with connectivity. Moreover, with students learning from home-based classrooms, some parents took the opportunity to demand household chores from them, which took away the focus from the already problematic at-distance education. Teachers generally expressed concerns over the quality of at-distance education and have little faith in its ability to impart knowledge to students.

That said, some positive elements emerged. Among these is the time saved on the commute to school. Another advantage is the hundreds of hours of recorded knowledge in the form of video lessons that have been developed by those teachers who did have access to technology and possessed the necessary skills for content creation. These lessons can serve as teaching tools for years to come.

Uzbekistan needs to continue to work hard in reforming and developing its educational system, both from a teacher and a student perspective. More training is needed for teachers, especially in digital literacy. But the challenge goes beyond the educational system. Having access to hardware and electricity in remote areas are also issues that need improvement if we are to be better prepared for covid-like circumstances.

Seven pointers for the new EUSR for Central Asia
EUCAM Commentary No. 46, June 2021
Jos Boonstra and Fabienne Bossuyt

The position of European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia is key for EU-Central Asia relations. The EUSR plays a central role, not only as the primary point of contact between the Central Asian countries and EU institutions, but also as the embodiment of and main driving force behind the EU's strategy for the region. Ambassador Peter Burian has fulfilled this role in a positive and pro-active fashion.

The new EUSR, Ambassador Terhi Hakala, will have the opportunity to set her own priorities within the parameters of the mandate and the EU's strategy. To help the new EUSR get up to speed, EUCAM takes the liberty to outline seven matters that Ambassador Hakala might want to consider in the fulfilment of her mandate.

Delivering aid 'uphill'
EUCAM Commentary No. 45, June 2021
Farida Alibakhshova, Jos Boonstra, and Gulbara Omorova

The mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan present a set of specific development challenges and opportunities to inhabitants, local governments, and international donors alike. This commentary argues that there is a need for more inclusiveness and transparency in the relationship between the main development actors in the Naryn Region in Kyrgyzstan and Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan. It does so by briefly assessing two development matters: environmental risks and the position of people with disabilities.

EUCAM News

This EUCAM Watch issue is the result of the new EUCAM 'writing and outreach' course. The three-month online curriculum (March-May 2021) was aimed at civil society representatives from Central Asia. The group:
- followed interactive classes from inspirational speakers and practitioners;
- strengthened practical writing skills (policy papers, proposals, etc.);
- improved public speaking skills (becoming a trainer, presentations, podcasts); and
- expanded their network of European and Central Asian 'NGOers', think tankers, policymakers, and donors.

The curriculum consisted of 12 interactive group meetings and individual guidance on how to draft an article. The course concluded with a roundtable where participants and trainers presented their work for an audience of EUCAM associates and alumni fellows. CESS organised the course together with the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC).

We would like to congratulate the first group of participants for obtaining their certificates and publishing with EUCAM and ENC:
- Farida Alibakhshova, Tajikistan
- Ulukbek Batyrgaliev, Kyrgyzstan
- Madina Ilmiaminova, Uzbekistan
- Erkin Kamalov, Kyrgyzstan
- Naima Kimatshoeva, Tajikistan
- Assel Kurmantayeva, Kazakhstan
- Leila Makhmudova, Kazakhstan
- Gulbara Omorova, Kyrgyzstan

CESS and ENC plan to organise a second course from September 2021 onwards. Please follow us on www.eucentralasia.eu or via social media for course recruitment announcements.

EUCAM

Established in 2008 by FRIDE as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. As part of CESS, EUCAM will continue to raise the profile of European-Central Asian relations in general, and more specifically to:

• Critically, though constructively, scrutinize European policies towards Central Asia;
• Enhance knowledge of European engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research;
• Raise awareness on the importance of Central Asia and Europe's engagement, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
• Expand the network of experts and institutions from Europe and Central Asia and provide a forum for debate.

CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance political development, democracy, human rights and in particular security, by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges.

CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.

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