

WORKING PAPER

By Pixabay



Jos Boonstra (ed.), Begimai Bekbolotova,
Aizhan Erisheva, and Irina Kulikova

Between praise and persecution: Civil society in Kyrgyzstan

Between praise and persecution: Civil society in Kyrgyzstan ¹

EUCAM Working Paper No. 21

Jos Boonstra (ed.), Begimai Bekbolotova,
Aizhan Erisheva, and Irina Kulikova

Authors

Jos Boonstra is EUCAM coordinator at the Centre for European Security Studies in the Netherlands
Begimai Bekbolotova is a EUCAM alumna research fellow
Aizhan Erisheva is a EUCAM alumna research fellow
Irina Kulikova is a EUCAM alumna research fellow

¹ Along the introduction of Ernest Zhanaev's chapter in Adam Hug (ed.), 'Retreating rights: Examining the pressure on human rights in Kyrgyzstan', The Foreign Policy Centre, March 2021.

Table of Contents

- 4** Introduction
- 6** Kyrgyzstan's turbulent developments
- 11** The position of civil society
- 18** Civil society and funding
- 23** Improving donor support
- 26** Conclusion

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is going through turbulent times. In addition to the covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, the country held parliamentary elections in October 2020 that turned into protests, followed by street brawls, leading to the resignation of then President Sooronbai Jeenbekov and the sudden rise of Sadyr Japarov, who was confirmed as president through snap presidential elections in January 2021. The new president pushed through a referendum on a new constitution that brought back a presidential system, the most common form of governance in Central Asia. At the same time, the country is immersed in an economic crisis and is becoming increasingly dependent on labour migration and natural resources that are exploited by external companies and local elites. The recent non-democratic power change is a recurring development in Kyrgyzstan. The country witnessed similar – even though more violent – power changes in 2005 and 2010. Over the past five years, respect for human rights has been waning, while negative attitudes toward civil society have been on the rise, all of which seem to be intensifying. In July 2021, the new president approved legislation directed against non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Later that month, a Law on Manipulation of Information was approved, allowing the authorities to block websites and social media accounts.

The role that **civil society** plays in Kyrgyzstan is unique in the region. Kyrgyzstan boasts numerous NGOs and think tanks, pressure groups, human rights activists, investigative journalists and so on. Besides offering a critical voice of the country's governance, civil society plays a leading role in various social and humanitarian activities through aid delivery, information campaigns, training, education, and research. Until recently, there was an unwritten understanding between civil society and the state, whereby the former had the freedom to operate, often fulfilling social tasks, while the latter could go about governing the country without too much interference from civil society. At the same time, both civil society and the government could tap into donor funding, which is essential to keep Kyrgyzstan afloat. However, over the past few years, this understanding has been shifting, as the governing elites are moving from co-existence with and occasional praise of civil society to portraying NGOs as close to a decadent Western culture as well as outright persecution.

Meanwhile, **international donors** are rethinking their strategies towards Kyrgyzstan. While they have been keen to highlight the country as a success story and an 'island of democracy' in Central Asia, they are now naturally concerned with recent political events and the rapid change of the constitution. The European Union (EU) is on the verge of ratifying an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) that should further expand and cement relations with Kyrgyzstan, including on democratic reform. Plus, the United States (US) under President Joe Biden could also become more forthcoming again in development cooperation. Both should, however, carefully assess if the new Kyrgyz government shows interest in democratic reform. A new constitution that has increased presidential powers and speedily pushed through laws that seek to strengthen control over civil society and media seem to indicate otherwise. Meanwhile, international donors need not doubt the role that civil society plays and seeks to continue to play in Kyrgyzstan: delivering education, training, and direct support to Kyrgyz citizens on a host of pressing social issues.

This paper offers **eleven suggestions** on how donors can improve their support to Kyrgyzstan. These can be grouped into three broader arguments. First, large Western donors need to de-link their overall support to Kyrgyzstan that is mostly directed to the government from the much smaller budgets meant for civil society. Second, they should further fine-tune their support delivery via grants to be able to support those who deserve it, by being open to new initiatives while assuring continuity of proven work. And third, they need to help civil society in overcoming stigmatisation in society and persecution by the authorities, by offering the means to civil society to find their own way through adversity.

Suggestions for donors of civil society (full description in part 4)

1. Prepare to help defend civil society from persecution
2. Provide more funding, not less
3. Assess the balance between support to state and civil society
4. Consciously mix continuous support with short-term projects
5. Strengthen knowledge transfer between Western and Kyrgyz civil society
6. Understand that civil society actors need income
7. Push back (further) on bureaucracy
8. Do not push your own short-term agenda
9. Encourage innovative ways of positive civil society visibility
10. Work more in local languages
11. Provide more (regional) training, education, and exchange opportunities

This paper seeks to offer donors and policymakers, as well as civil society actors, researchers, and other interested readers a view of what Kyrgyz civil society finds important. **The paper is structured** in three main parts and a concluding recommendations' section. The first part discusses civil society's view on the country's developments and what the priorities should be. How did civil society react to covid-19? How was it involved (or not) in political change? The second part outlines the functioning of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and the challenges it faces. How is civil society seen by the population? What is its relationship with the authorities? And what challenges do NGOs face in doing their work? Third, the view of civil society on donor support and their relationship with the donor community is discussed. Who are the key donors of civil society in Kyrgyzstan and how do civil society actors regard their cooperation with them? The paper concludes with suggestions for donors to improve their support to civil society in Kyrgyzstan.

We have chosen a **narrow approach of civil society** in Kyrgyzstan. This means that we mostly look at liberal democracy-oriented and socially-focused NGOs, think tanks, human rights defenders, and activists. In our research, we regarded this civil society as aiming to 'help and support people' (assistance), 'inform and educate people' (training) and 'monitor and analyse developments' (research). We understand that this only comprises a small, even though vocal and institutionalised, part of civil society. We have not emphasised academia or media and have excluded anti-democratic and illiberal civil society groupings, business platforms,

religious civil society as well as broader civil society concepts such as mosques, labour unions or communities.

The paper is based on an **online survey** that was sent to civil society representatives in Kyrgyzstan after a targeted mapping. We received over 50 completed surveys (see the tables featured in the chapters below). Next to this, we held 25 structured **interviews** with civil society actors and a few donors, either online or in-person, in Bishkek, Batken and Osh. The authors thank all interviewees and survey respondents for their valuable insights. We are also grateful to five (anonymous) Kyrgyz and European civil society representatives who provided valuable comments and suggestions to our draft policy recommendations. Lastly, we thank the Open Society Foundations and the European Endowment for Democracy for their support in making this research possible.

1. Kyrgyzstan's turbulent developments

Civil society's reaction to the **covid-19 pandemic** is a case in point. It showed how quickly Kyrgyz citizens can organise themselves through existing NGOs and new (online) initiatives with a view to delivering information and aid to those in need. This stemmed from a lively tradition of civic involvement and activity that has included training, awareness-raising and other civil society activities. Where the state was able to install and enforce a lockdown, it was not able to render healthcare and social services to its citizens; here, civil society activity was and still is indispensable. One civil society representative argued that 'covid-19 uncovered systemic problems. We suddenly realised that we did not have a system; the healthcare system did not work. As a result, people just began organising themselves and civil society responded quickly to all these issues and took on an organisational and coordinating role'.² NGOs and volunteers worked on many different aspects to curb infection rates and help people. All over the country, volunteer groups sprang up and did what they could. They coordinated with civilians, authorities, businesses, and healthcare facilities; they helped to buy medical equipment and protective gear; they informed citizens and sought to counter disinformation; they raised funds for those in need and delivered meals and necessities that were scarce.³ When asked what they emphasised in their response, almost half of our survey respondents mentioned providing practical assistance, while monitoring functions became less prominent in times of crisis.

Figure 1: In our reaction to covid-19, we emphasised...?

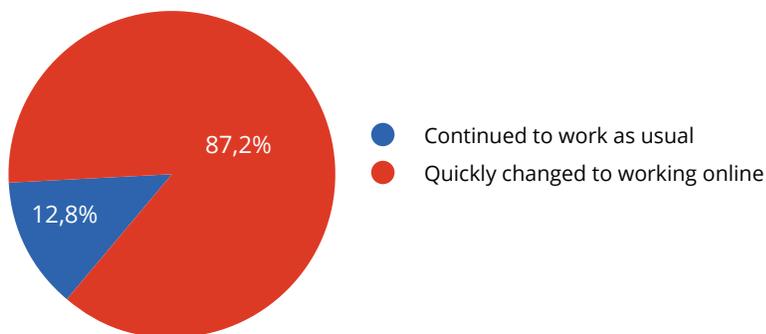


² Interview civil society representative, Bishkek, 17 February 2021.

³ For more on civil society and covid-19 in Kyrgyzstan see: Azizjon Berdiqulov, Muslimbek Buriev, and Sergey Marinin, 'Civil society and the covid-19 governance crisis in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, IEP, July 2021.

Whereas new, mostly temporary, groups quickly mushroomed, existing **NGOs needed to adapt** to new circumstances. Organisations had to go online to continue their projects. Alike everywhere, organisations struggled, especially those NGOs (and their recipients) that did not and still do not have good access to the Internet, which is often the case in rural areas. The organisations that were able to move their work online – often training – noticed the limits of online training and saw how their recipients were quickly overwhelmed with online commitments. In most cases, donors were flexible with recipient NGOs that encountered delays in implementation. Many organisations faced financial problems, as no implementation could mean no income for staff. Moreover, many organisations were affected as fundraising efforts largely came to a halt, also because donors encountered the same problems as their recipients in moving their work fully online.

Figure 2: During the covid-19 lockdown we:

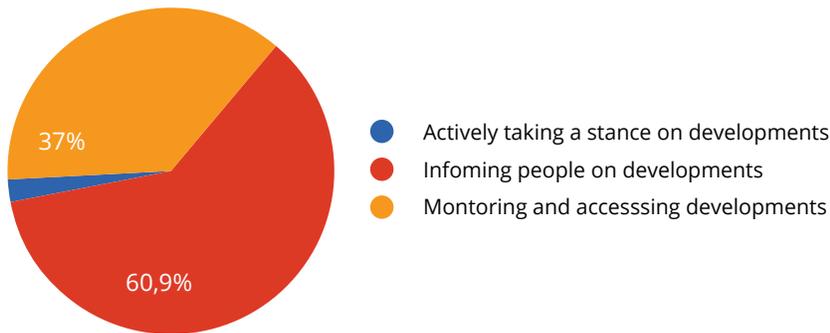


While Kyrgyzstan was fighting covid-19, it was confronted with another deep **governance crisis**. Here, civil society’s response was different from the healthcare-related action it undertook. After the 4 October 2020 parliamentary elections and subsequent protests, most NGOs continued to avoid direct political involvement. As one witness stated, ‘On 5 October everything happened so quickly; I was at the rally, and even though myself personally and the people who were there with me were not against the government, we wanted to see a cancelation of the election results. In just one hour, the number of people increased, mostly guys from other regions than Bishkek’.⁴ When the protests became grimmer, most civil society activists stopped their involvement, sometimes also at the request of their employers/NGOs. In times of political crisis, most NGOs in Kyrgyzstan see their contribution as ‘informing people’ and ‘monitoring and assessing developments’, and much less so in ‘actively taking a stance’ (see figure 3). The protests and power change, where civil society were just a bystander while the broader public supported yet another strongman, also impacted civil society activists who had been working in the hopes of seeing democracy mature among the population and ruling elites. One NGO representative said that ‘after the events of October, our organisation conducted a therapy [for staff]. Some employees were demotivated while others became even more motivated to reach young people’.⁵

⁴ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 25 March 2021.

⁵ Interview with civil society representative, Osh, 24 February 2021.

Figure 3: In reaction to political changes, we emphasised:



The **street protests** brought Sadyr Japarov to power. This showed that liberal-democratic civil society and the support for democratisation of the Kyrgyz government and oversight structures had little influence on the actual power balance between the country's factions and regions.⁶ At the time of our interviews, in the spring of 2021, the sudden rise of the populist Japarov was witnessed by civil society activists with suspicion, but seldomly with full out rejection. Many respondents had a 'wait and see mentality', given previous revolutions and sudden power swaps in 2005 and 2010. On the one hand, there was grave concern about the freedom to operate (see figure 4). While on the other hand, there was also some hope that civil society and government would keep abiding to the unwritten rules of co-existence and positive trade-offs.

Doubts about the intentions of the new Japarov government towards civil society are fed by the **new constitution**, which includes articles on financial transparency by civil society and on moral and ethical values related to youth that could potentially be misused to limit NGO activity. Civil society has had some influence on the new constitution, as an early draft was revised after international concerns and weekly protests every Sunday during the runup to the referendum, in combination with petitions and complaints.⁷ This was not the case with the amendments made to the Law on Non-Commercial Organisations and the Law on State Registration of Legal Entities in July 2021, which directly affect the functioning of NGOs, and the introduction a few weeks later of the Law on Manipulation of Information (or 'law on fakes'⁸, which could potentially curtail freedom of speech. In both cases, the amendments and laws were hurried through parliament and approved by the president with no preceding warning or opportunity to discuss the draft texts. These Russian blueprint laws had already been proposed by the previous government but had been successfully stopped through pressure from civil society and international organisations. With the new legislation, the new government has two new tools to silence NGOs and free speech.

In addition to the new constitution and legislation, there is also evidence of increased **pressure and harassment** of civil society. There have already been cases in which critical voices, including academics, have been questioned by the authorities. Almost three in four

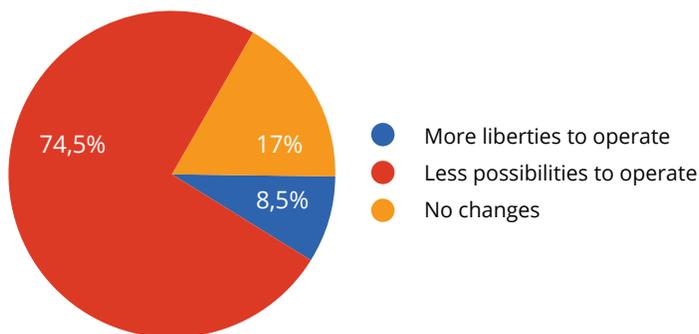
⁶ For a detailed account of the October 2020 power struggle in Kyrgyzstan see: Asel Doolotkeldieva, 'The 2020 Violent Change in Government in Kyrgyzstan Amid the covid-19 Pandemic: Three Distinct Stories in One', in Anja Mihr (ed.), 'Between Peace and Conflict in the East and West', OSCE Academy, 2021.

⁷ Interview with civil society representative, Osh, 24 February 2021.

⁸ Bermet Talant, 'Kyrgyz Parliament sneaks through "fake news" law with president's blessing', Eurasianet, 29 July 2021.

civil society representatives surveyed expressed that they expect civil liberties to decline (see figure 4 below). However, sometimes the pressure does not come from the government, but from within pro-democracy circles. One respondent explained that research they had carried out ahead of elections showed that two thirds of the population supported Japarov; this was ill-received on social media by their followers and not accepted by a few pro-reform media outlets.⁹ Here, civil society increasingly runs the risk of becoming a victim of populism, whereby a government uses populist rhetoric against perceived enemies of the people while civil society fortifies itself in views that the government is portraying false support for its policies.

Figure 4: As a result of the recent political changes, I expect:



Besides covid-19 and political change, Kyrgyzstan is confronted with other urgent dossiers in which civil society also plays a role. Because mountainous Kyrgyzstan is prone to climate change and environmental risks, civil society plays an active role and incorporates wide expertise on **environmental matters**,¹⁰ including natural resource management, air quality control, and investigation of environment-related corruption schemes. For example, NGOs monitor pollution levels in Bishkek and raise awareness among the public about the high risks of pollution. Along the same lines, civil society is involved in monitoring the exploitation of natural resources. Activists were able to achieve the signing of a law banning the extraction of uranium and thorium in Kyrgyzstan.¹¹ However, with regard to the high-profile case of the Kumtor gold mine, fewer results have been achieved, mainly due to the fact that ownership of the mine became political, resulting in a reluctance of NGO representatives to become involved.

Civil society has also been playing a visible role in the **aftermath of conflict** in Kyrgyzstan. After the ethnic conflict and tensions of 2010 in the south of Kyrgyzstan, around Osh and Jalal-Abad, civil society organisations continue to actively try to bring Kyrgyz and Uzbeks together, encouraging tolerance and reducing tensions. Donor attention to these causes has been substantial over the past decade, however, with only modest results as communities in the south barely interact, tensions persist, and nationalist rhetoric continues. An initial problem was that donors sent too much funding too quickly and NGOs did not have the capacity to manage such funds and implement meaningful projects. Another problem that became more persistent later on was that local NGOs were seen as biased, sometimes making 'external' civil society from the capital more effective in the south of the country.

⁹ Interview with civil society representative, online, 26 February 2021.

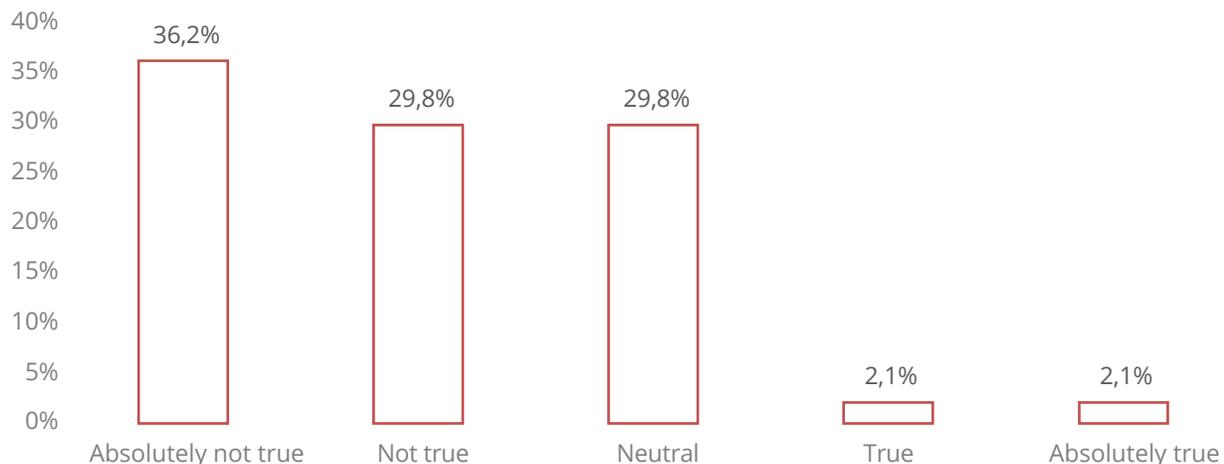
¹⁰ Farida Alibakhshova, Jos Boonstra, and Gulbara Omorova, 'Delivering aid "uphill". Discussing development cooperation in the mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan', EUCAM Commentary No. 45, June 2021.

¹¹ Interview with civil society representative, Osh, 29 May 2021.

Such issues also came to the fore after the **border conflict** in Batken between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in April 2021. One of our commentators argued that there had been criticism of the seemingly lack of impact of earlier donor funding and NGO activity as conflict persisted. ‘While this is partly true, it is in essence a state responsibility, and the outcome could have been worse without civil society activities.’¹² Meanwhile, NGOs have been delivering humanitarian aid and offering psychological help to the victims of the violence. NGOs are also involved in human rights monitoring and are collecting data on the conflict with a view to preparing for (international) law cases.¹³

Overall, civil society is pessimistic about the **position of Kyrgyzstan**, as figure 5 shows. Whereas civil society reacted quickly to covid-19 and delivered an active contribution to society, it was largely a bystander in the political processes that followed in autumn 2020. That said, the decline in freedoms and tolerance, and the lack of institutional development and reform, started much earlier, under the previous government.

Figure 5: Kyrgyzstan is in a better position compared to 5 years ago.

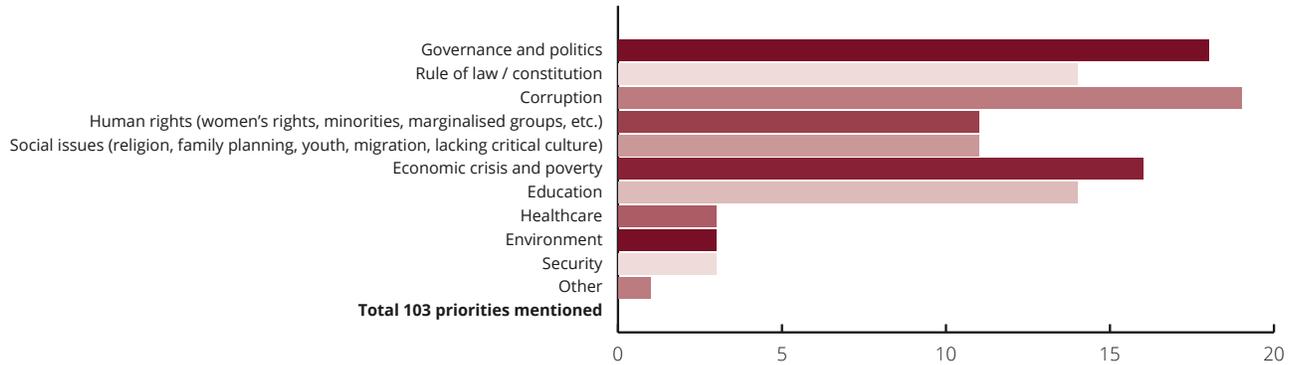


The **priorities for Kyrgyzstan** defined by liberal-democracy-driven NGOs are extensive and broad. In the table below, we see that many respondents believe that the main problems facing Kyrgyzstan relate to democracy, including governance, the rule of law, corruption, and human rights. The second concern is of a mixed socio-economic nature, affecting families and communities, such as poverty, unemployment, and social tensions. Education is a third concern. Notably, there are fewer references to security, regardless of the conflict in Batken or persistent tensions in the south of Kyrgyzstan; or to environmental issues, although mountainous Kyrgyzstan is prone to climate change risks. This is surprising as Kyrgyz NGOs play a visible and sometimes impactful role in both security and environmental matters.

¹² Interview with civil society representative, Batken, 18 May 2021.

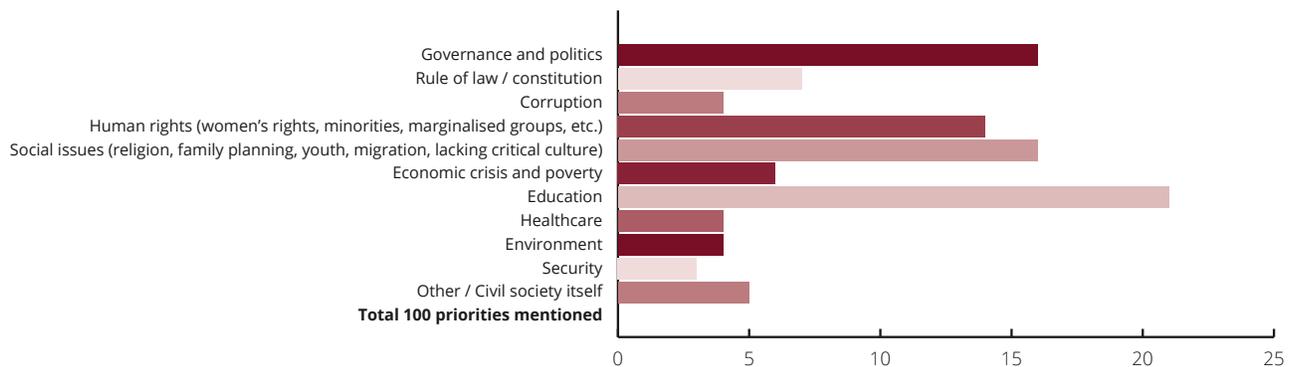
¹³ Interview with civil society representative, Osh, 26 May 2021.

Table 1: What are the top-3 priorities for Kyrgyzstan?



When asked what **civil society prioritises** to address themselves, there are three main differences. First, from the table below we see that within the area of politics and governance, there is less interest in addressing juridical issues and corruption compared to governance and human rights. One reason could be that Kyrgyz authorities have somewhat accepted criticism on human rights from local civil society and monitoring from foreign human rights watchdogs, while corruption issues are considered off-limits as they directly affect the ruling elites. Second, within the socio-economic domain, there is more interest in investigating social issues of families and communities than in addressing economic issues like unemployment or working with businesses. Not many NGOs seem to have an economic outlook. Third, there is increased attention to education, most likely because NGOs are so active in training and education of youth and specific groups in society.

Table 2: What are the top-3 priorities for civil society?



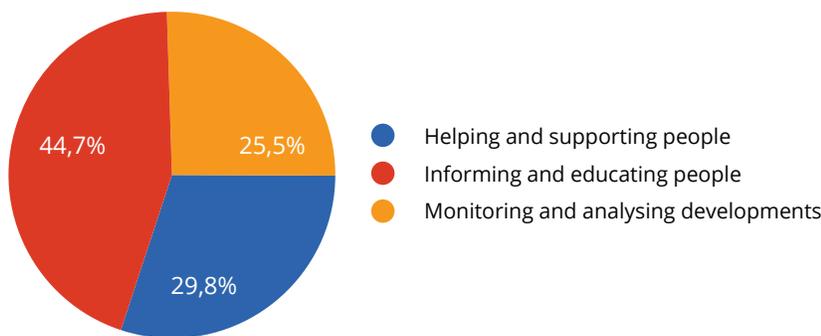
2. The position of civil society

The **average NGO** in Kyrgyzstan has about seven employees, is based in a small, rented office, and receives short-term project funding from international donors which is occasionally topped with small crowdfunding efforts, support from businesses or small consultancy work. Employees normally manage different tasks, from project management to research, and from active community outreach to training. Because NGOs are small, there is little separation of tasks, except for the positions of director and financial officer.

If larger projects come about that demand specific expertise, NGOs have strong networks of colleagues and consultants with whom they can work. On the upside, NGO actors feel that they work for the betterment of society and have some freedom to steer the direction of their work. On the downside, fatigue has set in among many civil society actors who are frustrated with the lack of positive development.¹⁴ Moreover, working in civil society offers little job security and often irregular income. Lastly, there may be a personal risk factor, as freedom to operate is shrinking fast.

The **activities of NGOs** can be divided into three broad strands (see figure 6). First, there is support to the population. Here one can think of the NGOs that acted in response to covid-19 through fundraising for those in need or seeking to arrange and distribute protective gear. This strand would also include organisations that render legal assistance to labour migrants and women. A second strand of civil society work consists of ‘monitoring and analysing developments.’ This aspect of civil society work consists, for instance, of corruption monitoring or providing input to parliamentary oversight, carried out by think tank researchers, human rights defenders, and freelance investigative journalists. The largest grouping consists of ‘informing and educating people’, as many NGOs have developed training capacity that can be applied to different groups (often youth) and subjects (often social issues). This strand also includes broader information campaigns to inform the public on specific issues, such as changes to the constitution. Of course, the three stands are closely interlinked. For example, the distribution of contraceptives (strand one) is linked to sex education (strand three) and efforts to propose new approaches to the authorities (strand two).

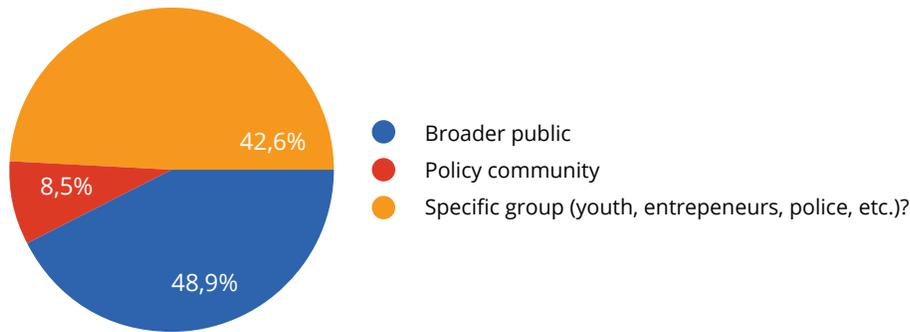
Figure 6: The work of your organisation can be best described as:



Because the largest share of work is geared towards informing and educating people, the foremost **target groups** consist of the broader public or specific groups. The figure below shows that not much priority is devoted to addressing policy communities through advocacy, training or otherwise. Here, there are two sides of the same coin: on the one side, the government and authorities that have little interaction with civil society and, on the other side, the civil society that largely ignores the policy community and draws its own plans for their work in society.

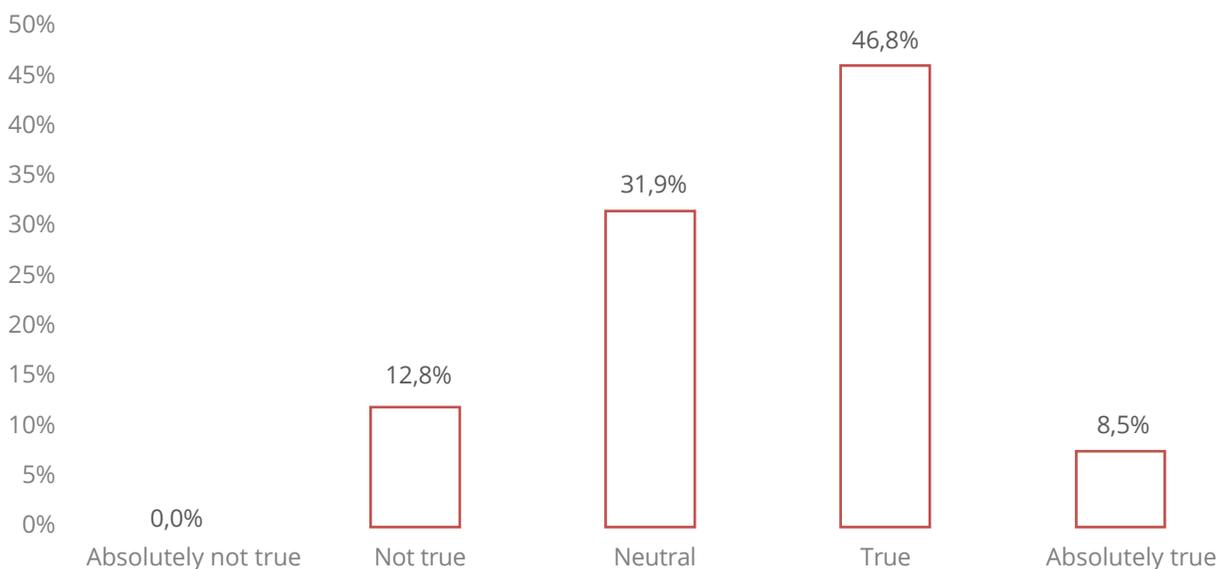
¹⁴ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 18 February 2021.

Figure 7: What is your main target group / recipient?



There are different ways to categorise liberal-democratic civil society in Kyrgyzstan. The two most-often used civil society categorisations are **traditional and new civil society** and urban-rural based civil society. The two figures below show that civil society (for a substantial part Bishkek-based) sees itself as innovative and vibrant, but there is certainly room for improvement, as less than 10 per cent is fully convinced. In this sense, the question about civil society being traditional and old-fashioned (figure 8) mirrors the former question (figure 7). One civil society representative explains the difference: ‘We can divide [civil society] into two main categories: old and new generation. The old-school civil society, with a Soviet temperament, is very honest, but at the same time, they do not want to accept new things. They have a lot of experience, and they are professionals in their field, but, for example, they do not know how to use Word or Excel. And there is a new generation that is ready to conquer Mars; they have a lot of ideas, but they are not responsible and sometimes it is hard to work with them.’¹⁵ There are several differences that civil society actors see between the old and new guard of civil society. Concerning initiatives on the rise, one commentator argues that ‘they do not promote social values that clearly, but rather the political ambitions of their founders or leaders, and these organisations are used as a platform to promote their ideas’.¹⁶

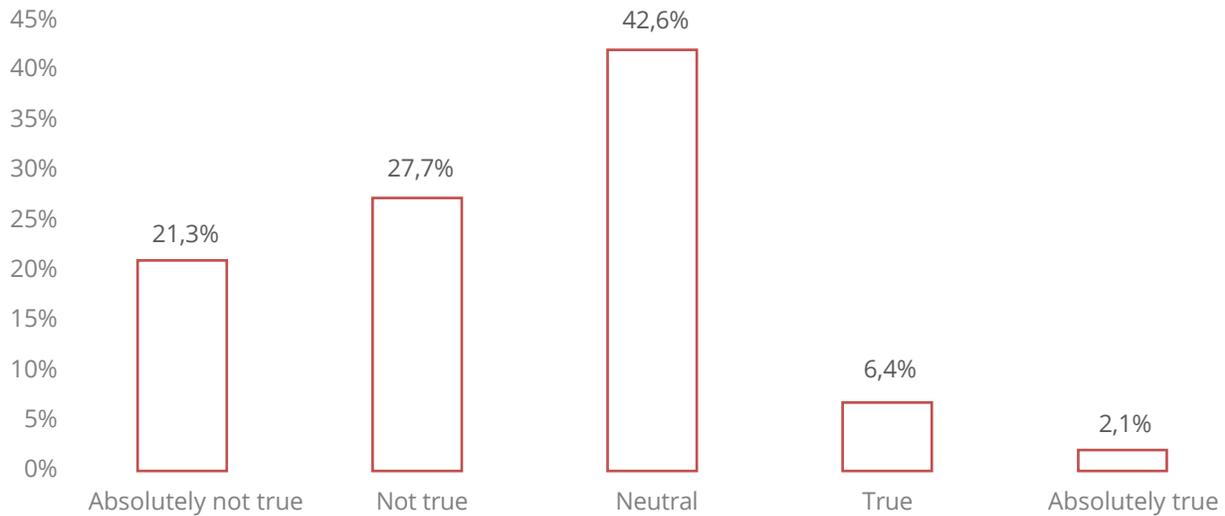
Figure 8: Civil society in Kyrgyzstan is innovative and vibrant.



¹⁵ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 2 June 2021.

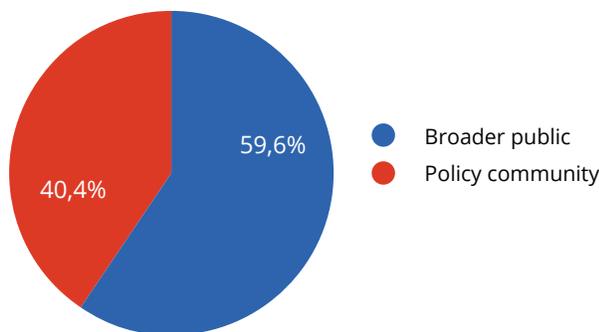
¹⁶ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 13 March 2021.

Figure 9: Civil society in Kyrgyzstan is traditional and old-fashioned.



Another distinction exists between **rural and urban civil society**, as one correspondent explained: 'I think that the first group is progressive urban civil society, mainly representatives of Bishkek, and mostly Russian-speaking. They are quite progressive, have visited other countries and have international experience through study or work. And the second group is probably the group of active citizens from the regions, from the village; they are predominantly Kyrgyz-speaking and have their own vision of civil society. Their involvement is different, mainly through aggressive forms of participation.'¹⁷ Whereas there is definitely a distinction, the picture becomes a bit more blurred when considering that some of the bigger NGOs have small offices in another city (often Osh) or in different regions. These broader, often education and training focused organisations, increasingly need to work in Kyrgyz (and sometimes in Uzbek) to attract the new generations in the countryside who do not speak (fluent) Russian. And, indeed, as one commentator argued, 'we often see the results of projects in the form of progressive youth, even in remote areas of Kyrgyzstan'.¹⁸

Figure 10: Where are you primarily active?



There are, however, other ways to **characterise civil society** today. One NGO representative explains: 'Until 2015, there was a strong view that the NGO sector is the civil society. The business community, political parties, and media organisations did not see themselves as institutions of civil society. From 2019 onwards, when all parties came out for the Reaction

rallies, which were brought about by a journalistic investigation, civil society began to form in a different way.¹⁹ The Reaction rallies (three in total) brought peaceful protesters together against corruption and in favour of free speech. The rallies did not only include concerned civil society activists, but it was a much broader civil society in which journalists played a key role and where middle classes and students also participated. Whereas traditional NGOs will remain a solid basis for Kyrgyzstan's civil society, there is clearly more fluidity of initiatives and gatherings, often online, bringing different strands of society together. As one commentator argued: 'In recent years, a lot of civil society activists have appeared. These people do not associate themselves with the NGO sector, but they actively speak out and express their opinions. I don't think new civil society activists will be able to replace the NGO sector, because the latter still has a huge experience and methods of lobbying.'²⁰

The relationship between the state and civil society has regressed over the past five years. As one commentator recalls: '2016 was the last year of Atambayev's presidency, and that year was characterised by the harassment of NGOs, lawsuits against NGOs and, in general, the rhetoric and discourse aimed at describing NGOs as Western American spies and so on, to contrast NGOs with true patriots and national heroes.'²¹ Under President Jeenbekov, this narrative was less actively pursued, but it was not defused. This 'live and let live' posture seems to be changing now under the new president that came to power on a populist agenda, using nationalistic rhetoric and citing traditional morals and values. As one respondent notes: 'Now, civil society in Kyrgyzstan does not develop but survives, not only under pressure from the state, the new authorities, but also under persecution by criminal groups. This seems to be done as an act of intimidation so that the whole country knows what will happen to people who disagree with the current policy.'²²

Concerns among civil society have risen since the introduction in July 2021 of the amended laws by which NGOs have to submit additional documentation on income and expenses. Already before such amendment, one commentator argued: 'Of course we are worried, because just in 2020 they tried to pass a discriminatory law on foreign agents and on additional accountability of NGOs. In my opinion, the NGO sector is the most transparent, because we submit reports to various government agencies, hand them over to donors, write annual reports, show the balance sheet, and pass annual and quarterly audits. At the same time, NGOs continue to be accused of opacity and creating destructiveness in society.'²³

In the interviews and survey (before the new legislation), we found that some respondents had witnessed clear increasing repression by the authorities (sometimes accompanied by bad press from state media), while others still hoped that there would be continued co-existence with the state. The uncertain relationship with the state is clear from the **hesitant response** to the question of civil society impact on government and the dependence of government by civil society (figures 11 and 12). Clearly, the more traditional and institutionalised civil society stays away from seeking to impact government, while the latter has left civil society to do social work without too much interference. Many civil society actors abide by this status quo and had hoped the new Japarov government would respect the activities of NGOs without suppressing them or further scapegoating their work.

¹⁷ Interview with civil society representative, online, 2 March 2021.

¹⁸ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 12 March 2021.

¹⁹ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 2 March 2021.

²⁰ Interview with civil society representative, Osh, 29 May 2021.

²¹ Interview with civil society representative, online, 18 February 2021.

²² Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 18 March 2021.

²³ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 9 March 2021.

Figure 11: Civil society has a strong impact on government policy.

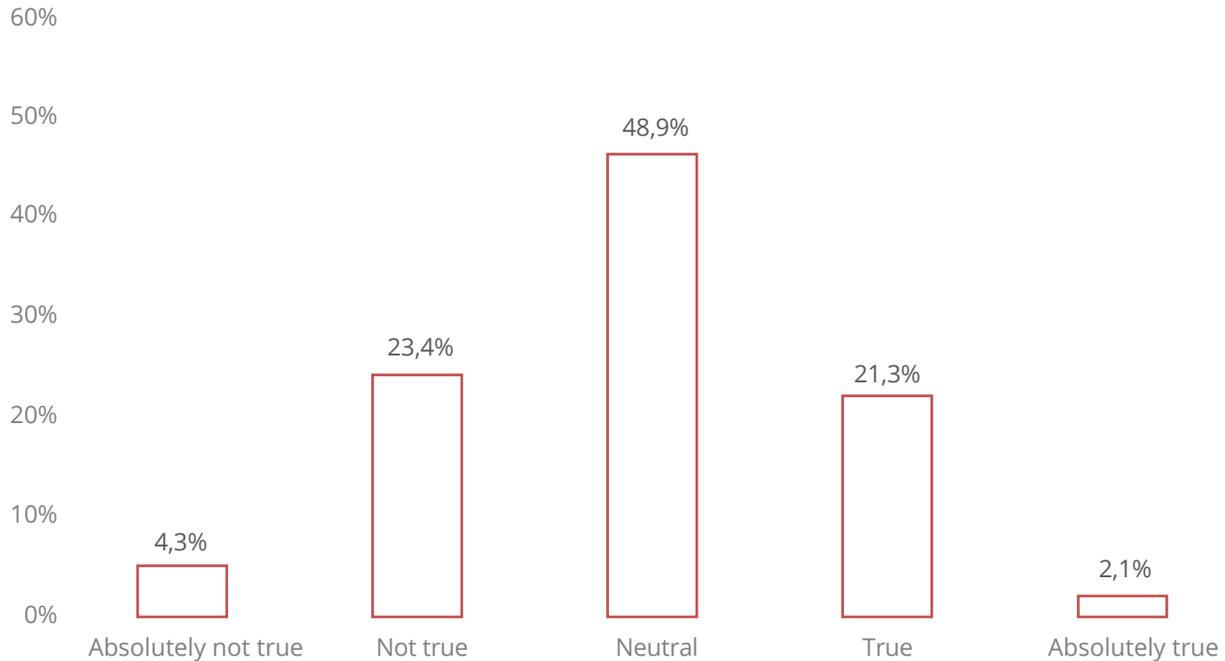
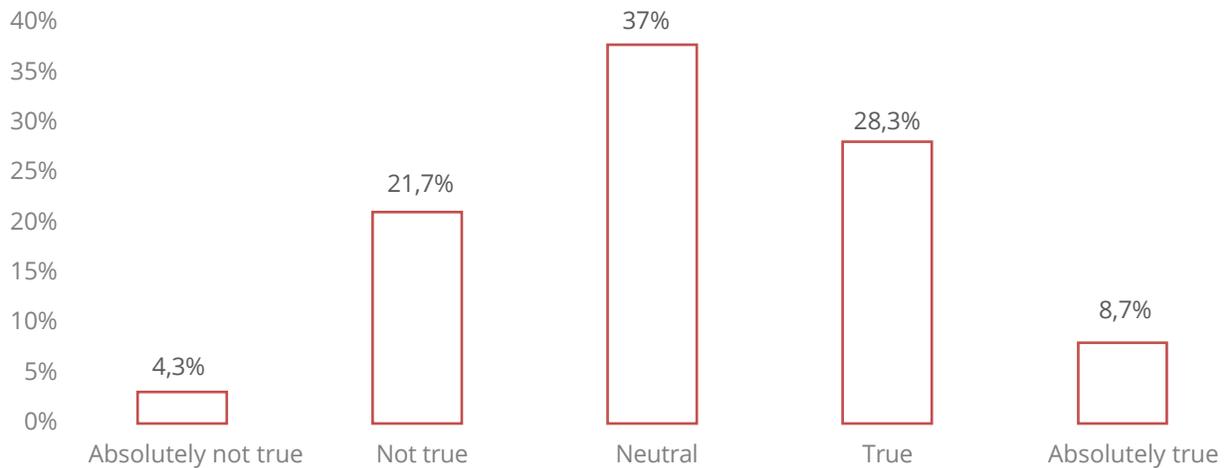


Figure 12: Civil society is dependent on the willingness of the government



The **relationship between civil society and the public** is regarded more positively by civil society respondents. From figures 13 and 14 below, one can assess that, to some extent, civil society sees itself as a mouthpiece of the public. Also, many civil society actors believe that they have some bearing on average people’s views. This, however, seems to contradict with the substantial support for a strong president. In this sense, civil society seems more adapted to the few well-educated middle and upper classes than to the average Kyrgyz living in Bishkek’s suburbs or the countryside. As Kyrgyzstan is affected by populism, nationalism and traditionalism, NGOs can be easily used as a scapegoat by the authorities, sometimes in conjunction with state media.

Figure 13: Civil society has a strong influence on Kyrgyzstani citizens.

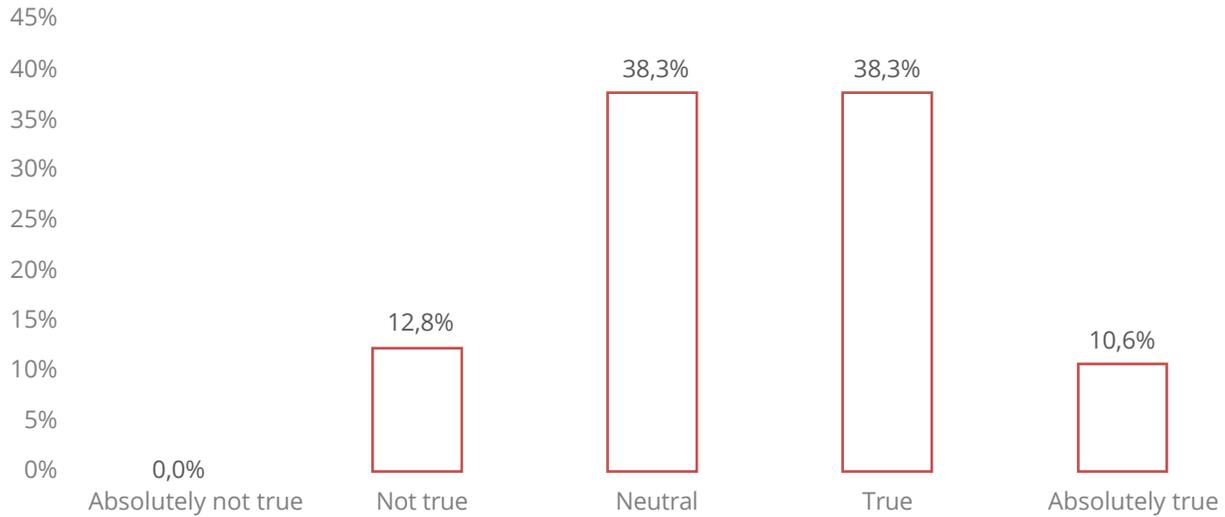
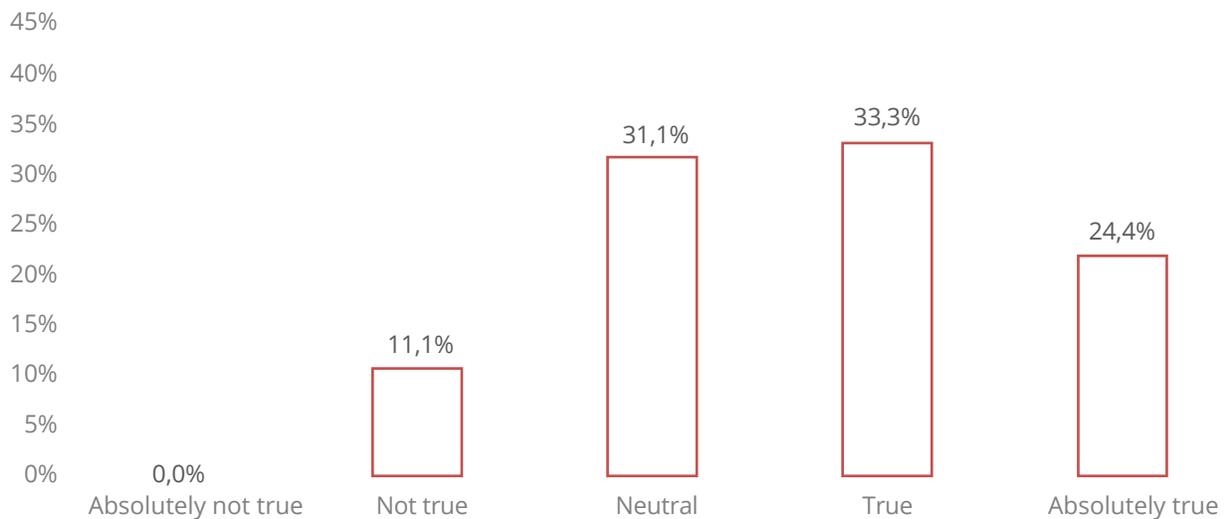


Figure 14: Civil society is the mouthpiece of the people in Kyrgyzstan.



Whereas a **negative portrayal of civil society** by government and its media channels impacts the population’s views, it becomes different for those who have received help or have worked with civil society organisations. ‘In general, there have been no major changes in these five years. There is, of course, hostility and distrust from the government’s side, and misunderstanding about the work of NGOs from the population’s side. People have quite different views about the work of NGOs. Someone who has received help will naturally say that they are good. People know little about the work of CSOs’.²⁴ On the one hand, most of the average population is not that aware of the work of civil society. While on the other hand, the idea of civil activism is growing, especially in Bishkek, where it is easier to speak up compared to smaller towns and villages.

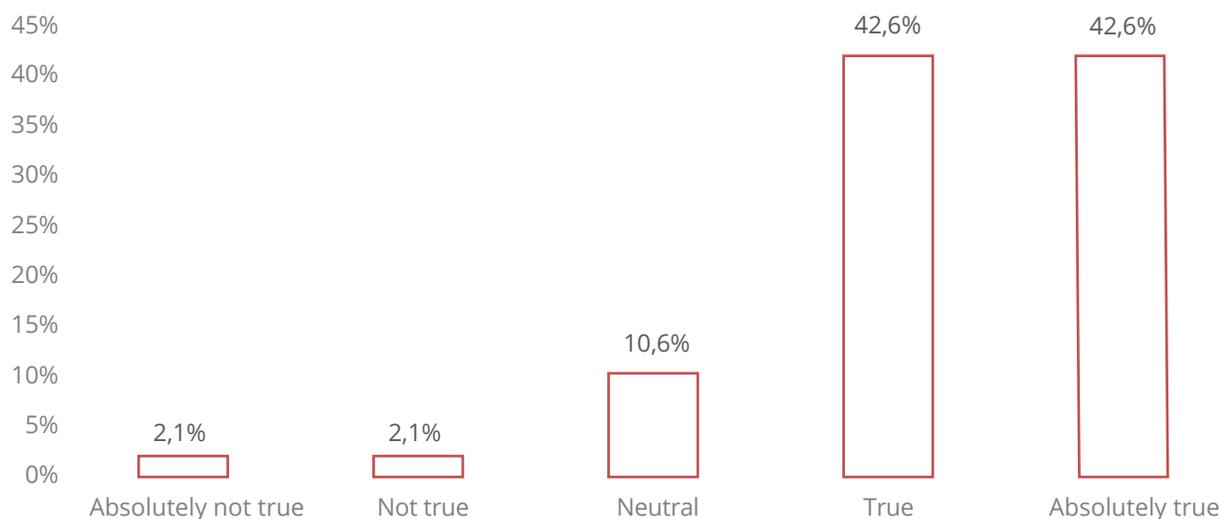
²⁴ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 18 February 2021.

3. Civil society and funding

One civil society commentator argued that: ‘Civil society in Kyrgyzstan is totally dependent on donor funds. We do not have local patrons or government programmes that could support civil society institutions. Compared to the years before 2015, civil society is now in a worse position. The donor community’s interest in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia has decreased in recent years. This can be seen even in the number of active NGOs. If earlier, there were about 7,000 NGOs officially registered and about 130-150 organisations active, now, in my opinion, there are only about 50 active organisations in all of Kyrgyzstan. The influence of civil society on policy decision-making has significantly changed. Unfortunately, today, in 2021, there is no partnership between civil society and the state.’²⁵

Indeed, almost **all NGOs are dependent on funding** from donor countries and foundations (figure 15); about three fourths of the funding is provided through donors that have a presence in Kyrgyzstan (figure 18). Support from Kyrgyz businesses and private individuals is limited, and Kyrgyz government support to civil society was almost non-existent among the civil society representatives surveyed (one can apply for a State Social Order that can provide a grant of around €1,000). More than three fourths of the funding of NGOs is delivered through short-term project funding (figure 17). Almost half of the surveyed NGOs work with less than three donors each year, and half of the NGOs function on a budget of between USD 10,000 and USD 100,000 (figures 16 and 19). This makes traditional and institutionalised liberal-democratic civil society very dependent on international support.

Figure 15: Civil society is dependent on foreign funding.



²⁵ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 18 March 2021.

Figure 16: The annual budget is:

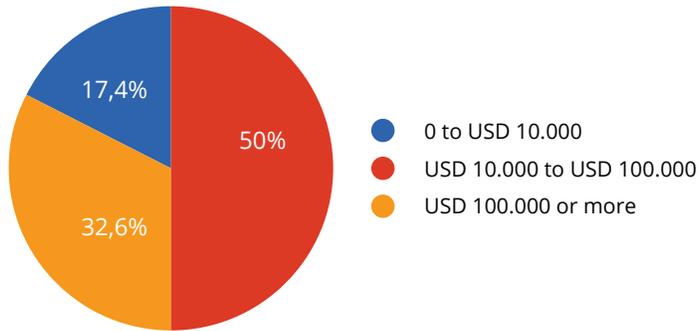


Figure 17: The funding can be described as:

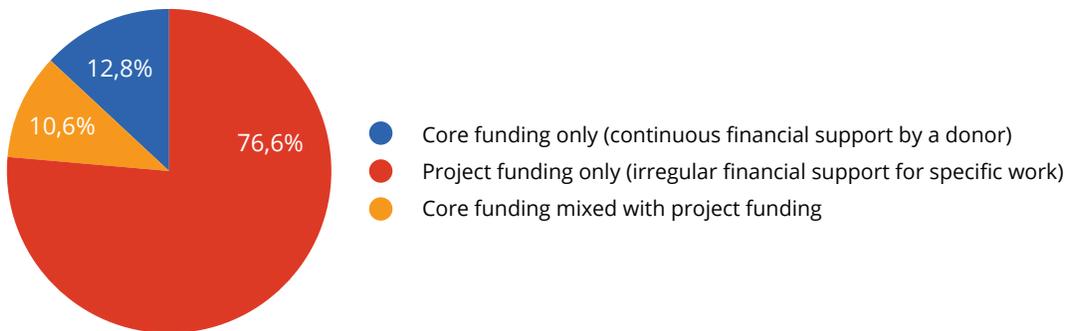
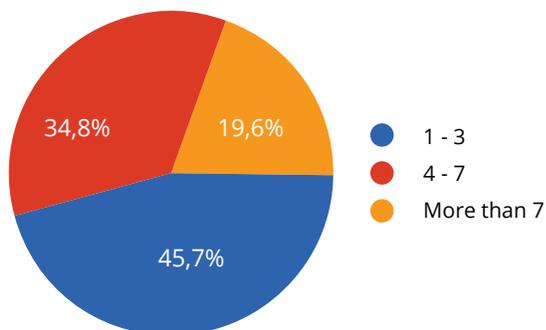


Figure 18: Where does the majority of funding come from?

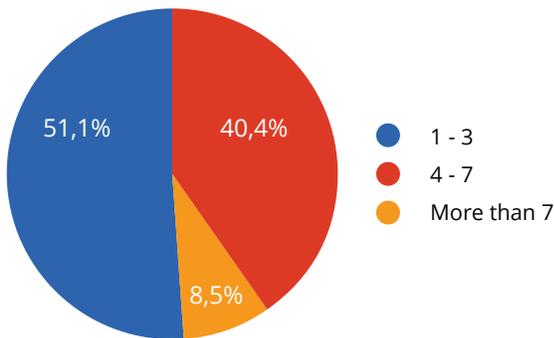


Figure 19: Number of different donors over the last 5 years:



Regardless of the disappointing impact on democratic reform and social cohesion, our correspondents remain reasonably optimistic about **donor plans** for continued and even increased support for their work. Some of our interlocutors, however, aired concerns about donors deciding to leave, already before 2020. One commentator argued that ‘some donors are already leaving Kyrgyzstan; for example, USAID has changed its policy and reduced funding. Many organisations have begun to diversify their finances and seek to generate income through, for example, social enterprises.’²⁶ The recently amended legislation that demands increased reporting duties by NGOs is a very worrisome development in this sense.²⁷ Like in Russia and other East European and Central Asian countries, it is likely to be a major step in government control of civil society and eventually a first step toward shutting down NGOs.

Figure 20: What support for civil society do you expect over the coming years?



Several international donors of civil society are **present in Kyrgyzstan** and able to carefully assess to whom to give grants (local foundations and international/regional organisations). The most notable foundations based in Kyrgyzstan are the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) and the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan (SFK). The OSCE, UNDP and other UN agencies, with their local offices, are important international/regional civil society supporters with a presence in Kyrgyzstan. A few donor countries also have presence and capacity in Kyrgyzstan, most notably the US embassy with its small grants programme and USAID, as well as Germany’s international cooperation agency GIZ.

There are also **donors that are not present or have only a modest presence** and have thus less capacity or possibility to identify recipients (many donor countries and the European Union). The EU has a Delegation in Bishkek but uses centralised programmes to distribute funding to civil society via the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Non-State Actors / Local Authorities (NSA/LA) programme. Several countries (and their respective development agencies) are also active such as Canada, Japan, Finland, Korea, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Not continuously present but occasionally active in civil society support in Kyrgyzstan is the European Endowment for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy, and several German foundations such as the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; the latter has a small office.

Another distinction is between **public and private donors**. Public donors – EU, US, Western countries, and international organisations – regard support to civil society as part of their broader development cooperation objectives. Whereas they sometimes have specific programming that supports civil society, they also often regard support to civil society as

²⁶ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 15 February 2021.

²⁷ Bermet Talant, Kyrgyzstan tightens control over NGOs, taps anti-Western sentiment, Eurasianet, 12 July 2021.

a percentage of overall aid that, for a large part, flows to the recipient government and its agencies. Private funders such as AKDN and SFK work primarily with civil society – often in a broad manner by also supporting academia and businesses – and are more familiar with local civil society. Several interviewees noted that the distance that public funders have to civil society has advantages of impartiality but also disadvantages of being less adapted to local needs. They also noted that private donors mirror these advantages and problems, being more adapted to local opportunities and constraints, but also showing a preference for familiar recipients.

Donors have different practices regarding **applications, monitoring and reporting**. Some donors are known for being able to provide quick and flexible grants, allowing NGOs to react to urgent needs. They do tend to be more involved, and exercise greater scrutiny during implementation. Sometimes donors on the ground run the risk of becoming compromised in clientelist networks themselves, as one commentator argued, ‘it’s not a secret that friends give grants to friends; there is corruption in local headquarters where some local staff provide intermediate services to relatives and friends.’²⁸ Donors that are less present can have more complicated and lengthier application processes, especially the European Union. When NGOs can obtain funding from larger, more distanced donors, they normally have more freedom to implement their projects. There are, however, few NGOs that have the expertise and resources to access these grants that are complicated and time-consuming to prepare. Often, it is not cost-effective to apply to these grants: too much time and investment are needed to apply (which is also needed to implement an organisation’s core tasks), while the chances of winning are rather low. Only a few organisations have mastered the art of the application process and are able to benefit from larger donor funding.

Figure 21: Which of these donor groups is the most active in civil society support in Kyrgyzstan?



There are several **bureaucratic hurdles** for NGOs to acquire international support. One hurdle is the demand by some donors to provide official audit reports that are expensive to obtain for organisations that work solely on small project grants; this is especially a problem for NGOs in the countryside.²⁹ Concerning EU funding, several commentators argued against the EU’s demand to have a percentage of project funds allocated through other means. This demand makes it impossible for most organisations to apply, as they rely on project funding and have little to no access to core funding. Also, it lays a burden on local grant foundations that are asked to cough up the remaining percentage of a grant that the EU is unwilling to provide. Fortunately, Kyrgyz NGOs can sometimes team up with Western (international) NGOs.

²⁸ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 15 February 2021.

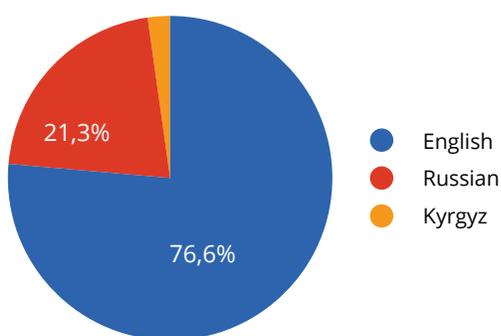
²⁹ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 18 February 2021.

Whereas this is much appreciated, in some cases Kyrgyz NGOs feel that they have little say on what they are implementing and that they acquire only limited expertise.

Donors provide essential possibilities to NGOs, but also present a series of challenges. One commentator summed up three top ***grievances***: 'first, financial and programme reporting takes up 70 per cent of my working time, leaving only 30 per cent for project implementation. Next to reporting, we need to respond to the donor's comments. It would be great to soften the formats of financial and analytical reports. Second, we normally submit applications with ideas that the donor wants, and not with what our organisation itself wants. We try to explain and provide information about the situation on the ground, but sometimes we must deal with the donor and their wishes. Third, the choice of a recipient is not always clear. Sometimes donors choose the same organisations because it is convenient for them, even though your organisation's idea was better. It would be good if the grantee selection process was more open.'³⁰

Unfortunately, support from many international donors is still out of reach for smaller, often non-capital-based organisations, as they do not have the capacity to pursue grants. One major issue is the ***language*** of communication with the donor. Of course, it is understandable that donors seek to communicate in English and sometimes Russian as the main languages, as it is probably the most often spoken by donors' quickly rotating international staff. Alike the bigger NGOs from Bishkek, which are making efforts to increasingly work in Kyrgyz, so should donors. As one commentator argued, 'I believe that donors need to talk to people who work on the ground and not with representatives of large and well-established NGOs, because they work well and perform their civic role, but they have been heard and have had an opportunity to have their say for the past thirty years. It is time for donors to expand their social circle and talk to people who may not speak English or even Russian. This should be the main priority, that is, to get to those corners of civil society that they have not encountered before.'³¹

Figure 22: In what language do donors usually communicate and expect project reports?



Lastly, several respondents expressed concerns over the fact that many ***donors have little knowledge*** of what is going on in the country, even those that have a local presence. Many want to address very specific issues and do not provide the flexibility to shift to issues that recipients find timely and important. Also, NGO respondents are frustrated with the amount of funding that public donors spend on supporting corrupt state institutions and on Western consultants that do projects with little impact on local circumstances or donor policies. In the latter case, an additional irritation is that civil society organisations are often used as a

³⁰ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 15 February 2021.

²⁹ Interview with civil society representative, Bishkek, 20 March 2021.

³¹ Interview with civil society representative, online, 4 March 2021.

source of information by international consultants without decent payment or the prospect of continued cooperation or transfer of expertise. Civil society actors in Kyrgyzstan understand, however, that broader donor strategies are not determined in local offices in Bishkek but often in capitals in Europe or the US.

4. Improving donor support

In Kyrgyzstan, it takes three to tango regarding civil society. International donors are expected to provide funding; Kyrgyzstan's authorities need to ensure freedom to operate; and civil society is responsible for addressing the right development needs in society. Whereas we hope civil society will continue to evolve and innovate in contributing to Kyrgyz society, and that government will revoke recent NGO and Internet laws, while constructively cooperating with civil society, our **recommendations** are aimed at donors. We took the arguments and ideas from our survey and interviews and moulded them into eleven suggestions that should be of use to international organisations, donor countries and grant-making foundations.

1. Prepare to help defend civil society from persecution

The relationship whereby civil society largely stays out of politics while government gives space to civil society to operate is at risk. The Japarov government is quickly tightening the screws on civil liberties through amendments to legislation on NGOs and a new law on information. Next to international pressure by the EU and US, all donors should prepare practical support options for their recipients, which could become victims of persecution. This could include trainings for NGO staff on how to respond to questioning by authorities; psychological support to civil society representatives who are increasingly pressured and who are already working in difficult circumstances with vulnerable groups; or local legal assistance in case of need.

2. Provide more funding, not less

Several donors are considering scaling down development cooperation to Kyrgyzstan (or have already done so). This seems to be the result of the continuous non-democratic changes made by the government and the lack of reform results, combined with decreasing respect for human rights. It is civil society that is keeping the country's open character and many social initiatives and support programmes afloat, despite growing pressure from the state. Civil society work should be judged on its own merit, for instance, its quick reaction to covid-19 healthcare shortages. Supporting civil society activity remains a solid development aid investment that yields concrete benefits for Kyrgyzstan.

3. Assess the balance between support to state and civil society

Support to civil society is only a small part of the aid that large state-driven donors, foremost the EU, European countries, and the US, render to Kyrgyzstan. Often, support to civil society is a percentage of the overall development cooperation delivered. A decrease in development aid to Kyrgyzstan would thus mean less support to civil society. If development cooperation through Kyrgyz authorities is generating little to no results, and if lack of reform, political will and corruption by politicians and civil servants continue, donors should re-assess the

recipient side of their efforts. This could lead, for instance, to ending the practice of budget support. Donors should de-link cooperation with the state from work with civil society, as the latter should not suffer from an unwilling government.

4. Consciously mix continuous support with short-term projects

Civil society that can count on continuous support can become complacent, while NGOs that can only obtain short-term projects have no time to deepen or renew their work as fundraising and reporting becomes too time-consuming. Donors should constantly be aware of these dynamics and carefully manage them by seeking to support those that have always delivered good work while being open to new actors with bright ideas. Donors helping to increase sustainability of NGOs is a good thing, but automatic support for organisations with no concrete output should be avoided. Meanwhile, donors with local offices should avoid automatically favouring the 'usual suspects' or family and acquaintances of local staff. Of course, mixing continuous support with short-term projects should not apply to work that needs continuous support to be effective, such as human rights monitoring or running a shelter.

5. Strengthen knowledge transfer between Western and Kyrgyz civil society

A part of development cooperation funding stays in the donor country through the involvement of Western (international) NGOs. They do important work in Kyrgyzstan, but sometimes offer too few longer-term benefits to local NGOs that are often the main implementers on the ground. Donors should consider, for example, including budget in the projects of Western NGOs and think tanks to fund internships/fellowships or training-of-trainers so that local Kyrgyz NGOs not only cooperate in a project but also gain in-house knowledge. Meanwhile, large donors should be aware that Western consultancies (businesses, not civil society) that also do capacity-building projects – next to assessments and evaluations – with European and American (or other) funding, regularly use local civil society expertise, but have little ambition to continue working in Kyrgyzstan or establishing genuine partnerships that are beneficial to local civil society.

6. Understand that civil society actors need income

During the covid-19 pandemic, NGOs could not spend money on direct costs (travel, hotels, per diems) but did need to pay the indirect costs of personnel wages (short-term and fixed contracts). Most donors have been flexible, coming up with solutions together with recipients on reporting and project implementation. This will also hopefully serve to create a better understanding among donors that NGO representatives need an income; projects cannot, for the larger part, consist of direct costs that until recently were considered to generate the best visibility benefits for donors (high-level conferences for instance). Also, donors need to make sure that they provide for overheads in budgets so that organisations can work on becoming more sustainable. Ideally, donors would look into the possibility of recipients using unused funds from projects to increase their own reserves.

7. Push back (further) on bureaucracy

NGOs are often small, and their employees want to focus on the issues that they find important or are passionate about. They are less keen on spending considerable time on bureaucratic

formalities. A project proposal needs to be clear, but often the requirements of public calls for proposals are so demanding that many NGOs do not risk investing time in these as it takes attention away from their real objectives. Complicated procedures or demands of percentages of co-funding (as the EU sometimes still does) have no purpose and are limiting the work of donors and recipients alike. Reporting procedures can also be excessive. Proper financial reporting is essential to make sure that taxpayers in donor countries get their money's worth, but donor demands for expensive external audit reports and annual financial overviews should be thought through before demanded. Where in-depth (financial) reporting duties are requested by public donors – that can have a positive effect on the sustainability of NGOs – donors should provide for training, compensation, and assistance in meeting these requirements.

8. Do not push your own short-term agenda

Whereas donors have the best intentions, their perceived needs sometimes deviate from the actual needs on the ground. Setting broader priorities on focus areas is important to donors (especially public donors) as a guide, but these should not be translated into short-term objectives for handing out grants. To generate impact, NGOs need some freedom to manoeuvre within subject areas. Ideally, donors would welcome project proposals on a broader subject (security, human rights, migration) without detailing what exact issue needs to be tackled. This gives civil society leeway in determining what issue is appropriate and timely to address without too much donor interference. This would also help NGOs to be seen less of a donor vehicle. Increased freedom for NGOs to determine their focus areas would also help organisations to become more sustainable as it would allow them to deepen their expertise.

9. Encourage innovative ways of positive civil society visibility

Civil society is often negatively portrayed by the authorities and state-oriented media in Kyrgyzstan. Donors could consider supporting NGOs in working together with independent media outlets. As the above point suggests, civil society will need to develop their own narrative and projects on how to counter negative publicity and showcase the work they do. Here it needs funding, not direction, to try to also reach conservative parts of society. Donors could also join forces with civil society organisations to investigate how to boost digital literacy and the use of new media so as to bring their message across to a new generation of activists and civilians. This would help civil society to respond more actively to dis- and misinformation (including about civil society itself).

10. Work more in local languages

Most donors work in English, with an option to communicate in Russian. It would be good if donors invested more in using Kyrgyz as a language of communication so as to give opportunity to (new) NGOs and initiatives in rural areas and young people that sometimes are less versed in Russian. In the south of the country, donors would ideally also consider Uzbek as an option next to Kyrgyz and Russian. One could start with small grants for individuals, with minimal reporting requirements. Next to donor-recipient relations in local languages, it would also be good to provide funding for interpreters on the ground and for translation of written material into Kyrgyz and Uzbek in rural areas.

11. Provide more (regional) training, education, and exchange opportunities

Whereas liberties in Kyrgyzstan are under threat, Kyrgyz civil society is still the biggest and most active of its sort in Central Asia. One way to help safeguard Kyrgyz civil society from persecution is international recognition. Bishkek fulfils a regional hub function, where donors and civil society actors from Central Asia meet with counterparts from the EU, US, and other places. This is especially the case for civil society's involvement in education and training of young Kyrgyzstanis and youth from neighbouring countries. The experience of Kyrgyz NGOs is valuable to counterparts from other Central Asian countries. Opportunities for experience-sharing via (online) exchanges, education and training should be continued and further encouraged by donors, also in making sure local authorities and communities understand the value of their civil society to Kyrgyzstan and far beyond.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan has been **regressing on democracy** over the past five years. With a populist president in power, a new constitution that strengthens the powers of the executive, and laws aimed at curtailing NGOs and online freedoms, democracy is further backsliding in Kyrgyzstan. Whereas mature democracies have strong institutions that often can withstand populist and authoritarian tendencies, Kyrgyzstan only has its liberal-democratic civil society and a bit of donor leverage that stands in-between relative freedom and outright authoritarian rule. Donors, foremost the EU and US, should act swiftly in telling the Kyrgyz government that curtailing freedoms in general, and possibilities for civil society to operate in particular, will have severe consequences for the country in terms of political support, financial assistance, and trade. Meanwhile, all donors that have been supporting civil society should step up their efforts in making sure that the government cannot ignore its own civil society.



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.



Supported by grants from the Open Society Foundations and the European Endowment for Democracy.