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EUCAM Watch



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CESS Centre for
European
Security Studies

Security matters

EUCAM course participants think security

The title of this EUCAM Watch – ‘Security matters’ – which is also the title of the Centre for European Security Studies’ newsletter (EUCAM’s patron organisation), is an appropriate title that is increasingly gaining significance, both in Europe and Central Asia. When the EUCAM programme organised its second ‘writing and outreach course’ last fall, we chose ‘security in Central Asia’ as the main theme. In our view, security should not only matter to governments, but also to (civil) society.

In Central Asia, security largely remains the realm of the state. NGOs and think tanks do little in terms of discussing security, raising awareness on threats to security or training civilians and specific groups on security issues. Recent EUCAM research on civil society in Kyrgyzstan, for example, has shown that few NGO representatives regard security as a priority for either NGO activity or for Kyrgyzstan as a country, with issues such as governance, education and human rights topping the list (see EUCAM Working Paper ‘Between praise and persecution. Civil society in Kyrgyzstan’, September 2021).

Security in Central Asia is often seen from the perspective of state security (with a focus on government and basic state functions) or regime security only (prioritising the survival of countries’ top leadership), instead of also human security (people’s safety and well-being). Moreover, attention is devoted to tensions among Central Asian neighbours and, of course, to the impact of developments in Afghanistan. Overall, hard security issues stand central in the region. The recent violent protests and uprising in Kazakhstan showed how regime security and human security painfully collided.

However, alike in other regions, Central Asian countries and populations face a variety of security risks. On an individual level, minorities and vulnerable groups suffer from discrimination, lack of basic rights, (online) aggression and, more recently, health risks due to the covid-19 pandemic. On a national and regional level, there are environmental risks, economic despair, which is closely linked to different forms of migration, tensions among neighbours (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in April 2021, for example), and geopolitical rivalries, for instance involving Chinese influence. Political instability and subsequent violence, remains a grave threat to all five Central Asian countries as recent events in Kazakhstan, and earlier Kyrgyzstan, showed.

Civil society organisations, ranging from the traditional NGOs and think tanks to online activism and pop-up youth movements, should have a role in addressing security matters. NGOs could help foster mutual understanding in and around the enclaves of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Universities and media should work along NGOs and the authorities to help Afghans in Central Asia or those seeking refuge from persecution. And civil society initiatives are needed to address corruption, which disproportionately affects the lives of vulnerable groups. Participants of the last EUCAM course, in the fall of 2021, have discussed these issues and their views on why security matters and what role can civil society play are presented below.

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Articles

Corruption as a threat to human security: A case for civil society activity in promoting safety and development of women

By Arina Efremova, Nozanin Homaidjonova, and Kamila Yessenova

The legacy of corruption is a difficult one to shake off as Central Asian countries advance in their state building path. It is rooted in all spheres of life, from admission to kindergarten to university grading, and from criminal justice proceedings to national elections. While corruption has been widely addressed by progressive politicians and debated by scholars, one of its key aspects seems to have been left out of the equation: corruption's impact on human security.

When skimming through local news, one regularly comes across stories of how the son or daughter of a high-ranking official escaped justice after a traffic accident or how a rich man escaped a domestic violence charge. Corruption is deeply embedded in Central Asian countries' security sectors, resulting in a weak rule of law in which the justice system and police often pose a threat to citizens instead of protecting them. This affects women and girls. On the one hand, women are barely represented in the security sector (judges, prosecutors, police officers, etc.), while on the other hand, women are often victims of violent offenses (domestic violence, rape, bride kidnapping, etc.).

Ambitious new action plans by Central Asian states to counter corruption, reform security sectors, and stop violence against women and girls are desperately needed. However, developments over the last decades have shown that there is little appetite among Central Asian political elites to embark on reform, while international donors seem to have had little impact in spurring development and change. In this context, civil society action is imperative in bringing governments, donors, and the people of Central Asia together around themes of security and human rights. So what options are available for civil society in addressing corruption as a human security threat affecting women and girls? Here are our individual takes and recommendations:

Arina Efremova:

People in Central Asia do not realise the power they hold over their leaders, while politicians underestimate the influence that the people can exercise, as events in 2020 in Kyrgyzstan showcase. The people, as voters or demonstrators, hold huge power; an understanding that emerging populist leaders understand all too well.

The role of civil society is in-between these politics and the people in promoting democratic values and tolerance, while countering corruption and disregard for human rights. Civil society needs to expand the demographics in which they operate (trainings, projects, etc.) to include audiences that have not yet crossed paths with NGOs; conservative populations, those of lower economic backgrounds, those that live in rural areas. By focusing on these beneficiaries, civil society could help raise a critical mass of people who do not condone corruption and violence against women.

Kamila Yessenova:

Harassment of women is on the rise in Central Asia. This ranges from casual catcalling to actively stalking; violators are not punished. Domestic violence is another widespread problem that many girls and women face every day and which is increasing. Some states in the region have introduced legislation to protect women from domestic violence, however, it is rarely enforced: the victim is often silenced by 'tradition', the perpetrator's family, or through bribes to police officers.

NGOs engaged in the protection of the rights of women and girls, in anti-corruption activism, or in monitoring political processes could be part of the solution. They should work together with communities by raising awareness and by empowering the victims of violence. First, NGOs should help develop and scrutinise legislation that counters corruption and promotes women's safety. Second, civil society should pay more attention to state budgets and financial decisions, raising its voice over the misuse of public resources. Third, NGOs need to take a lead in programmes that encourage women's participation in politics, governance, and public administration.

Nozanin Homaidjonova:

To strengthen women's security, we need to start with informing girls and women about their rights. Often, women and girls are not aware of their rights and accept physical and psychological abuse as normal. For instance, a 2016 study by the Tajik committee on woman's affairs in cooperation with Oxfam showed that, almost three out of four Tajik women believe that they must endure domestic violence in order to keep their family together. Awareness raising by civil society through training, workshops and festivals is an essential first step to help young women to understand and exercise their rights.

The next step is education, including in financial and digital literacy, as well as in foreign languages; practical skills that would boost women's independence and security. In many places in Central Asia, girls are still deprived of education. In Tajikistan, for instance, there are regions where girls' education stops at the fourth grade. Civil society, together with authorities and donor institutions, should work to guarantee equal education for boys and girls. More educational centres should be opened in areas that are lacking to combat prevailing stereotypes and ensure that girls can acquire the skills they need to gain independence and security.

Even though new measures and laws are being introduced to protect girls and women, the number of cases of harassment and domestic violence is increasing. Central Asian societies cannot accept this threat to women and girls. Besides legislation, good practice is needed. We believe that the answer lies in education, starting with women becoming aware of their rights. Here civil society plays a linchpin role that should and could connect different segments of society and governance.

Looking at Central Asian border disputes through the prism of education, media, and civil society

After gaining independence, Central Asian states faced a major problem in defining borders. The Soviet border delimitation process was marred by vague language and often contradictory documents, leading to disputes over roads, villages, towns, and enclaves. Over the past thirty years, border issues have caused violent clashes among citizens and among states' security forces, resulting in casualties, displaced people, and enduring grievances. In this contribution, the authors (and coordinator Rashid Gabdulhakov) from three countries that share borders and border issues – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – offer a critical look through a unique focus on media, education, and civil society.

Ikramidin Zhakypaliev, Media and border conflicts in Central Asia

The media plays a key role in the formation of public opinion on a diverse set of issues, be they social, political or economic matters, or conflicts. With the penetration of smart mobile devices and social media platforms, information dissemination has become easy, but the quality of this information and its potentially damaging effects are of high concern. As such, the recent battles at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border have also been subjected to media manipulation and influence.

First, there is the issue of fake news. There was a lot of disinformation, false and unbalanced news coverage in Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani media during the 28 April 2021 incident on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Among the reported fakes, for instance, there was news of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's resignation and Turkey's intention to send military support to Kyrgyzstan.

Second, there is a volume imbalance on traditional and social media platforms when it comes to strategic communication. Official statements and government press releases calling on the people to remain calm and abstain from nationalist rhetoric are tamed by social media posts filled with biased, unregulated, and fake news reports, escalating the situation.

In response to the threats that arise from disinformation, trilateral cooperation between the government, civil society, and the media should be established to counter fakes. To start, it is important to define which specific part of the problem each party should focus on in this cooperation. The government should work closely with the technical agencies of platforms such as Instagram and Telegram, to look at systemic and technical matters in countering disinformation and fakes in the information ecosystem. Meanwhile, civil society and media should focus on the content, with civil society assisting the media to produce high-quality content based on facts. Some NGOs, such as Cabar Asia and Internews, are already working on this issue by conducting workshops on journalistic ethics and fact-checking to media representatives in the region. This is a good beginning, but more should be done by both governments and media to counter disinformation.

Zinatmo Mamadsalimova, The impact of border disputes on student life and academic performance

One of the most severe problems in the enclaves close to the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is school access. For example, when the nearest school is located in the territory of another state, schoolchildren may have no opportunity to enrol, while attending a school in their own country may not be a plausible option due to distance. As a result, some children are left with no basic education at all.

Another pressing issue is enmity among schoolchildren. Border disputes and conflicts lead to the dissemination of nationalist narratives, which impact even young children. There have been cases of assaults and mass fights with the use of edged weapons and clubs by schoolchildren. Sometimes fights erupt over the language spoken by students, be it Tajik or Kyrgyz.

The border clash of April 2021 between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also impacted higher education on several levels. Tajik students studying in higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan were unable to cross the Kyrgyz border. As a solution, some courses were made available online, yet not all students have access to a stable internet connection to be able to follow such courses. Moreover, even students with stable connection faced issues, as not all universities, faculties and individual educators were willing to adapt the curriculum and offer online education.

Enmity and hostility among students risk perpetuating and accelerating border conflicts. Each state should take serious steps toward solving these problems. For instance, special permits could be issued to schoolchildren in situations where the nearest school is located across the border. In addition, governments should build more schools to reach students in remote areas and in the enclaves. Education should be a vehicle to establish international cooperation and coexistence, not a battleground for border disputes.

Dilshod Mir-Akilov, The role of civil society in border disputes in Central Asia

The involvement of civil society in border disputes remains coy in Central Asia. Border-related decisions are usually carried out at the level of the executive governments. Excessive and one-sided attempts to solve border issues lead to politicisation instead of constructive and peaceful solutions. To help depoliticise border issues, civil society should play a more visible and active role in peacebuilding and conflict prevention and cross-border security dialogue.

Civil society could and should focus on delivering training to different groups to develop a positive mentality that focuses on solutions instead of problems. In addition, through advocacy and outreach campaigns, civil society could inform decision-makers about the needs and problems of the local population at the borders. Such measures and activities could help prevent tensions and border-related conflicts. This would help to develop bottom-up solutions to the conflicts around enclaves.

Civil society could also assist in the creation and support of business initiatives to counter unemployment. Here NGOs could establish co-working centres to create joint economic interests between cross-border communities. Civil society could also help by organising cultural festivals, creating youth networks, and developing joint educational initiatives. These activities would increase the level of trust between cross-border communities. Lastly, NGOs could work with donor organisations to implement modern technologies in agriculture, animal husbandry, the use and management of water resources, and so on. These actions would help save natural resources that are vital for communities in cross border areas.

Civil society has several important characteristics that set it apart from other actors. First, their impartiality, while having a solid understanding of the essence of the conflict, its roots and causes. Second, the capacity to disseminate reliable information about border problems and the needs of the population. And third, the ability to establish dialogue between the government and the local population.

In conclusion, governments, local authorities, local populations, media, representatives of civil society, and international NGOs should act in close cooperation and coordination with each other. Such approaches could have a cumulative effect in solving border disputes.

Central Asian responses to security challenges in Afghanistan

The departure of United States and European forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's second rise to power in August 2021 affects Central Asia in different ways. It changes trade routes, regional cooperation, and security calculations. Cooperation between Central Asian and Afghan civil society has also changed, with the former now looking for options to help Afghanis where possible.

Three civil society experts from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and Central Asia expert Andreas Marazis from the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), have discussed Afghanistan-Central Asian security ties with a focus on civil society. Here they report on their findings through pitches on aid delivery, education, and refugee flows to Central Asia.

Dinara Abuova, Winter has come: Improving aid delivery to remote areas

In winter, the mountainous regions of Afghanistan are cut off from the outside world. Normally, donor organisations store supplies before winter arrives, but this year delivery has been difficult due to the Taliban's rise. Part of the aid to remote Afghan areas should go through Central Asian neighbours. Organising logistics well could save many lives.

Central Asian countries only play a small role in aid delivery. Most of the aid to Afghanistan has been operated by international aid organisations and their offices in Afghanistan. International NGOs such as InterAction, World Food Programme, Norwegian Refugee Council and Mercy Corps have been effectively delivering aid within the country thanks to their track record and networks throughout Afghanistan.

Unlike the US, Central Asian governments, despite their proximity to Afghanistan, still have a ban on cooperation with groups such as the Taliban, which are considered terrorist groups. This means that it is illegal for local Central Asian NGOs to deliver aid to Afghanistan. However, many Central Asian NGOs close to the border, such as Refugees or Children and Vulnerable Citizens (RCVC) in Tajikistan have been working for years with Afghan refugees helping them with their integration in Tajikistan. Another example is the Spotlight Initiative that has been supporting Afghan women's human rights.

Humanitarian support delivered by civil society is often seen as a duplication or unnecessary by Central Asian governments. However, Central Asian NGOs have experience and strong networks with Afghans in border regions. Their expertise and direct outreach can, at the very least, ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and contribute towards regional security and stability. Of course, that is entirely up to their respective governments, which currently, unfortunately, do not seem to have the appetite to consult local organisations on this urgent matter.

Shynar Sarikenova, Education dilemmas for Afghan and Central Asian researchers

Over the past two decades, Afghanistan had gone through a knowledge and information boom due to many education initiatives. However, now institutions and mechanisms are at risk. This includes cooperation between Afghan and Central Asian education systems.

Development projects within the past five years provided more than 30 universities and training centres across Central Asia and Afghanistan with opportunities to foster dialogue and exchange information on issues of common interest such as water management, climate change, and environment. For example, Kazakh National Medical University trained over fifty Afghan specialists in 2018.

Whereas cooperation between Afghanistan and its three northern neighbours –Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – has mostly focused on infrastructure and energy, cooperation with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has increasingly revolved around education. Despite not having a direct border, these countries' higher education capacity and expertise made them ideal partners to support Afghanistan's higher education system.

As things stand right now, cooperation between Central Asia countries and Afghanistan has been paralyzed. However, Central Asian countries are trying to help students continue with their education. During a recent meeting of the Shanghai Organisation for Cooperation, the President of Kazakhstan indicated that the 200 Afghan students who are currently studying in Kazakhstan can continue with their studies. The Kyrgyz government has also announced that it will extend visas to almost 500 Afghan students.

Ideally, Central Asian countries would remain a destination for Afghan students. Unfortunately, this seems unlikely as borders remain closed and the Taliban is strengthening its grip on the Afghan educational system.

Besides the help that Central Asian universities and authorities can render to current students (and in some cases alumni that are in Central Asia), there is little hope to continue welcoming future Afghan students in the short term. New, creative (hybrid and online) ways to reach out to Afghan students need to be developed to not leave Afghan higher education in the cold.

Ojarmyrat Gandymov, Are Afghan refugees welcome in Central Asia?

Since the Taliban takeover of August 2021, many Afghan citizens have tried to seek refuge abroad, including in neighbouring Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Up to November 2021, there were 5,600 Afghan refugees registered (UNHCR data) in Tajikistan. While there were none registered in the other four Central Asian countries, there are about 2,000 Afghans in Uzbekistan on short-term visas, 200 Afghan students in Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan has pledged to issue visas for 500 Afghan students.

Afghanistan hosted refugees from Tajikistan in the 1990s while the latter was entangled in a civil war, and so today Tajikistan can return the favour. While there were rumours that Kazakhstan would host up to 70,000 refugees (Eurasianet, 17 August 2021), public opposition made the government change its mind and announce that they would only help UN personnel who were trying to leave Afghanistan. At a Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation's (CSTO) meeting on 16 September 2021, Central Asian countries cited security concerns. It is likely that Russia's own concerns that Afghan refugees might use Central Asia as a gateway into Russia played a key role in the decision.

The Afghan refugee issue has not been widely discussed by local CSOs and media in Central Asia. There have been very few articles on this topic, and most reported on factual descriptive numbers of incoming refugees without taking a clear stance on the issue. There have been some reports about the difficulties faced by Afghans in Uzbekistan due to uncertainties regarding their refugee status since Uzbekistan is not a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention. In Tajikistan, there have been reports that Afghan refugees are not being allowed to live and work in the capital Dushanbe and, therefore, are experiencing serious economic difficulties.

Currently, the borders between Afghanistan and its three northern neighbours – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – are closed. Given these circumstances, it seems almost impossible for Afghans to leave the country. Therefore, access to credible information is needed for Afghan refugees to decide whether it is worth risking going to the borders. Here, networks of Afghans in Central Asia could be utilised through media and NGOs. More information is needed about the status and living conditions of Afghan refugees who already reside in Central Asian countries.

Winter has arrived

Afghanistan's winter and closed borders with Central Asia will cause severe humanitarian challenges to all involved. Swift action is necessary to deliver aid to Afghans in remote mountainous areas. Meanwhile, Central Asian states need to start planning its future cooperation with Afghanistan; a policy on refugees and looking into continuing to welcome students from Afghanistan should be part of that. Where possible, civil society should stand ready to do its bit in terms of aid delivery, education, and asylum.

Between praise and persecution: Civil society in Kyrgyzstan (also available in Russian)

EUCAM Working Paper No. 21, September 2021

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

Kyrgyzstan's civil society has been renowned in Central Asia and beyond for its influence and activism. But with the sudden rise of a new populist president, civil society's freedom and room for manoeuvre is becoming more and more limited. How does liberal-democratic civil society regard the turbulent political and social events that the country is going through? How does civil society see its own role in the development of Kyrgyzstan? And finally, what is civil society's view on cooperation with the international donor community?

The paper was discussed on 15 December 2021 during an online debate organised by the Central Asia Program of the George Washington University and the EUCAM programme of CESS.

EUCAM News

This EUCAM Watch issue is the result of the EUCAM 'writing and outreach' course. The three-month online curriculum (September-November 2021) was directed 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 to an audience of EUCAM associates and alumni fellows. CESS organised the course together with ENC.

We would like to congratulate the first group of participants for obtaining their certificates and publishing with EUCAM:

- Dinara Abuova, Kazakhstan
- Arina Efremova, Kyrgyzstan
- Ojarmyrat Gandymov, Turkmenistan
- Nozanin Homaidjonova, Tajikistan
- Zinatmo Mamadsalimova, Tajikistan
- Dilshod Mir-Akilov, Uzbekistan
- Shynar Sarikenova, Kazakhstan
- Kamila Yessenova, Kazakhstan
- Ikramidin Zhakypaliev, Kyrgyzstan

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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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