



Civil society in Central Asia: What role for the European Union?

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Introduction

Central Asian civil society is small and under constant pressure. Governments use various legislative or arbitrary means to limit the space and scope of civil society activities, and often criminalise civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights defenders. At the same time, funding for civil society is insufficient to sustain operations and sometimes even survival. While civil society faces common challenges across the region, there are in-country nuances in terms of CSOs' legal and operational space. Kyrgyzstan has a fairly open and free environment for civil society activities. In Kazakhstan, while it is also possible to operate, criticising government policies is risky business. In Tajikistan, over the past five years there has been a severe backlash against CSOs (and political parties), severely curtailing freedoms. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan is opening politically, which could offer opportunities for CSOs from all spectrums. Finally, Turkmenistan remains as closed as ever and does not have a civil society beyond a few social services-inspired organisations and dissidents abroad.

For the purpose of this paper, civil society is here understood as citizens that organise themselves independently from the state. This includes broad groups such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), religious organisations, trade unions, individual activists, and human rights defenders. Civil society can play different roles, from service providers to watchdogs monitoring government policies. The space for civil society partially determines the quality of a democracy and indirectly impacts countries' economic well-being. More openness usually translates into higher economic development.

This paper is not meant as an in-depth overview of civil society in Central Asia, nor does it claim to outline the EU's engagement in detail. Rather, it seeks to serve as a prospectus that can accompany the agenda of the *Strengthening civil society in Central Asia* conference, organised by the EUSR for Central Asia and the European Endowment for Democracy. The first part of the paper describes the main segments of Central Asian civil society and assesses how the EU can contribute to its development. The second part devotes attention to international civil society cooperation in the region and with the EU and examines EU civil society funding. The material presented here is partly based on earlier EUCAM publications.

1. Civil society

1.1 Activist movements

Central Asian societies are evolving quickly. The region's countries have only been independent for a quarter century and their leaderships are still seeking to develop their nations' brands. Alike their states, Central Asian populations are also young (over half of the population was born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991). National branding processes and demographical developments will have their bearing on these countries' stability. The Central Asian countries already face severe challenges in providing education and employment opportunities to the new generations. The majority of the Central Asian population is not actively involved in their countries' governance. Citizens' involvement in public affairs is very limited, partly due to repressive politics, and partly due to a lack of awareness. Meanwhile, public discontent is on the rise, as evidenced by Kazakhstan's land protests in 2016 or increased anger over urban planning in Central Asia's big cities of the last few years.

The EU should invest on society's challenges through its development cooperation efforts with respective governments and civil societies. It needs to pay attention to both urban and rural areas, as well as intertwined issues such as internal rural-urban migration, unemployment and the lack of public services (education, healthcare, infrastructure, etc.).

- *What are the local civic activist movements emerging in Central Asian countries (environmental, digital, services, etc.)?*
- *Can Europe help develop platforms where civilians can voice their concerns or be involved in policy processes?*

1.2 Pro-democratic reform NGOs

Organised civil society began to emerge in Central Asia in the mid- to late nineties. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have well-established, quasi institutionalised and professional NGOs. Given regional and global developments during the nineties, many of these NGOs have focused on democracy, human rights, rule of law, or institutional-building in their respective countries. As time evolved, it became clear that many Central Asian governments were not interested in democratic reform and viewed these organisations as a burden or threat to their leaderships. As a result, many governments began to stigmatise or criminally persecute civil society representatives. While there is no legislation directly forbidding foreign funding, there are several laws imposing disproportionately burdensome reporting obligations on NGOs, while different government agencies conduct impromptu checks and sometimes apply high fines to organisations for minor or non-existing administrative violations. Moreover, NGOs find it difficult to attract educated youth to join their ranks, as this sector is often seen as risky and not well remunerated.

While the EU has been and continues to be a supporter of this 'traditional' pro-democracy civil society, it could potentially expand its assistance, as many NGOs remain at risk.

- *What are the strategies that NGOs in the region need to adopt to maintain their legal and operational space?*

- *How can the EU help pro-democracy organisations survive and, at the same time, develop and innovate?*

1.3 Human rights defenders

While there have been some encouraging developments in Uzbekistan, foremost the release of several long-term political prisoners, there is still a lot to be done in terms of legislation and implementation throughout the region. Human rights defenders across Central Asia are subject to bureaucratic hurdles to register their organisations, and those that are active often face surveillance and intimidation. The human rights situation in Turkmenistan remains as critical as always, while it has deteriorated in Tajikistan, where human rights defenders remain under constant pressure. Meanwhile Kazakhstan witnessed crack-downs on government critics, including prison sentences on charges of ‘inciting national discord’. In Kyrgyzstan, where the legal operational environment is relatively open, several outspoken human rights defenders and journalists have suffered from smear campaigns or criminal persecution.

The EU is an important partner for Central Asia in the field of human rights. Apart from the UN human rights treaty body’s reviews and OSCE’s human rights and human dimension meetings, the EU is one of the few external human rights defenders and promoters. The EU Human Rights Dialogues remain an important bilateral tool that should be updated and strengthened in the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, as should the role of Central Asian human rights organisations, as participation is mainly limited to European organisations’ partial involvement through EU briefings. Here, the EU needs to more actively support local actors, while also seeking to increase the safety of human rights defenders by investing in early warning mechanisms ahead of potential crackdowns by the authorities.

- *How to best support human rights defenders in Central Asia?*
- *How to involve human rights defenders more closely in the broader EU policies towards Central Asia?*

1.4 Social services organisations

All five Central Asian countries have social services-oriented CSOs, which often receive some government funding. Even in Turkmenistan there is some space for non-politically oriented CSOs that deliver assistance to specific groups (people with disabilities, orphans, drug addicts, etc.). These organisations are present both in rural and urban areas, where, in many cases, they fulfil basic healthcare and other social services not covered by the state. Many organisations depend on one main figure and lack the capacity to attract new young members or to ensure financial sustainability.

The EU could step up activities in this area to help address the region’s social challenges, by including these small organisations in its broader programming in Central Asia, while also contributing to build a healthy relationship between civil society and the authorities.

- *Should the EU broaden the support to CSOs active on social issues, and if yes, in which specific areas?*

1.5 Supporting labour unions, employers' associations and business platforms

Civil society, often regarded as the 'third sector', not only plays an important role vis-à-vis the 'first (public) sector' (executive, legislative and judiciary), but also with regards to the 'second (private) sector' (business and companies). They fulfil an oversight role through labour unions and a coordinating role through employers' associations, and a potentially initiating role in organising business fora and platforms. Central Asia does not have a tradition of labour unions that function independently from the state, or employers' associations or CSO networks that can bring together businesses in a specific sector. This is a broad sector of civil society that is largely unexplored territory for democracy promotion and civil society development. The establishment of independent labour unions, in particular, would help workers to defend their rights.

Civil society should be an important partner in spurring local trade and business. The EU could enhance its work with civil society on the ground through the Central Asia Invest programme. Work in supporting Small and Medium Sized (SME) businesses and Business Intermediary Organisations (BIOs) such as chambers of commerce or tourist associations is valuable and should be continued. Civil society should be encouraged with EU funding to create jobs and business opportunities.

- *What (other) ways are available to the EU to help labour unions, NGOs and associations that seek to develop businesses or protect workers' rights?*

1.6 An anti-democratic and illiberal civil society

Whereas space for civil society is shrinking in many parts of the world, the rise of 'illiberal civil society' or movements with a conservative agenda is a common phenomenon across Europe, Central Asia, and elsewhere. In Central Asia, Russian-language media, and religious-based outlets, have become instruments to spread illiberal ideas, which use 'traditional family values' and 'national identity' to condemn progress, often related to the rights of LGBT, the role of women in society or different minorities. They also portray the EU (or the West in general) as a threat to traditional values and national identity.

To meet this challenge, the EU should continue to support the development of a vibrant civil society, including through support for local CSO campaigning and media literacy to help them better communicate to the broader population the values they promote. The EU should also help pro-democratic CSOs to counter hate speech, disinformation, and biased and fake views, by investing in education and training to spur critical thinking, especially among the younger generations.

- *What are the main drivers and sources of illiberal civil society in Central Asia?*
- *How to counter the growing influence of anti-democratic civil society groups?*

1.7 Media

The situation of the media varies sharply from country to country, ranging from Kyrgyzstan where outlets enjoy some independence to Turkmenistan where media is fully controlled by

the state. All in all, media freedom is limited across Central Asia. Most traditional media outlets are national and are under state control, and in some countries are subject to Russian influence. In Uzbekistan, where current changes are increasing the space for media freedom, this vacuum is being filled mostly by conservative or religious outlets. The younger generations rely mostly on digital media and social networks, which are more difficult for the regimes to control. Meanwhile social media too are plagued by conservative, illiberal views. An example of this was the publication of a song and video by Kyrgyz singer Zere, which was regarded by many as indecent and resulted in denigration and threats.

The EU is already supporting media initiatives in some Central Asian countries, by promoting for instance media freedom and assisting journalists under threat. Other initiatives worth supporting could be helping to develop journalism studies at some universities or improve professionalism to counter ‘disinformation’ (an issue that affects both Europe and Central Asia). The EU could also support local media initiatives in rural areas, where the population often depends on the radio – here also lies an opportunity to work with local grassroots civil society organisations.

- *Are there possibilities for the EU to expand its support to independent media development? If so, in what areas?*

1.8 Research and think tanks

Central Asia has very few think tanks that can inform local and international policy-makers, beyond some internationally-focused institutes under the presidency or foreign ministries of some countries. Policy-oriented research should be a part of civil society activities. From a European perspective there is an interest in learning more about Central Asia, especially in relations to security issues (often linked to radicalisation) and complex economic realities (linked to migration for instance). From a Central Asia civil society perspective there is interest in developing critical thinking aimed at reform and development.

The EU could increase its support for Central Asia’s research capacity. The current occasional work of some European and Central Asian think tanks, a short-term Horizon 2020 project on EU-Central Asia relations and academic networking, and the work of EUCAM do not suffice to fill the huge knowledge gap. Among other initiatives, the EU could invest in the establishment of a Central Asia-Europe think tank in the region, with institutional links with European think tanks to develop research that can inform policy-makers, while at the same time strengthen ties between Central Asian and European researchers.

- *Should the EU support a longer-term effort to help build policy-oriented research capacity in Central Asia? If so, how?*

1.9 Education and training

Universities make up an essential part of any civil society. They provide scientific knowledge that can be used for policy and planning. Central Asian universities are mainly focused on teaching, and are far from being innovative breeding grounds of knowledge. There are hardly any university-driven centres where academic knowledge can be transformed into information or projects that directly benefit the society. A few exceptions include

international or private universities, which have more international staff, more contacts or greater and better access to projects or events that fall outside of the purely academic domain.

Meanwhile, vocational education and training has deteriorated in Central Asia. Training and knowledge transfer are essential to educate populations. All different segments of civil society mentioned above (human right defenders, specialised social services CSOs, etc.) need well educated people specialised in relevant fields. A vibrant civil society cannot flourish or prosper without trained journalists, economists in trade unions, accountants in CSOs, or lawyers in human rights organisations. Neither can current civil society organisations develop without proper training in organisational and project development and implementation.

The educational system is an essential breeding ground for civil involvement in society. In this sense, the EU should consider increasing its support for training, exchanges, fellowships in Europe, and so on.

- *What role should universities play in civil society? Can the EU help universities to step beyond their primary function of providing academic education?*
- *Should the EU develop a training programme for civil society organisations in Central Asia?*

2. Cooperation and funding

2.1 Civil society cooperation in the region

Home-grown regional civil society cooperation in Central Asia is practically non-existent. This is not surprising, given the preoccupation with pressing concerns on a national level and the lack of funding available for regional initiatives. Foreign funding in concrete areas could boost locally-led regional cooperation. *First*, the creation of a research forum could provide a space to develop policy-oriented research based on local insights. Such a venture could be modelled on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Forum's (bi-) annual index on approximation of EaP countries to the EU. In Central Asia's case such an index could for instance focus on the region's economic development or energy/water-related matters.

Second, the region could benefit from a more structured cross-border cooperation on local trade. In this sense, the European border management programme BOMCA could focus less on border security and more on the trade facilitation function of borders. Local civil society groups and business fora could also be supported to boost border trade and lessen tensions in some border regions.

Third, students and young civil society actors could gather around concrete topics. Here, regionally-focused universities such as the OSCE Academy, the American University of Central Asia and the newly-established Aga Khan Central Asia University, with its campuses in three countries, could play a coordinating role with additional funding.

All the while, it is important to try to avoid unbalanced cooperation stemming from the risk that some countries' CSOs are not able to participate, while other countries might mostly send state-run institutions.

- *Should regional civil society cooperation be a priority of EU support?*

- *On what (other) topics could civil society organisations cooperate?*

2.2 EU-Central Asia civil society cooperation

Some have argued for an EU-Central Asia civil society forum similar to the Eastern Partnership's. However, the time is not ripe yet to organise this on a similar scale. There could be challenges to ensure meaningful and balanced participation. There is a risk that most European CSOs pay too little attention to Central Asian developments. Participation is probably limited to human rights organisations and, to a lesser extent, NGOs and think tanks working on the EU's EaP or on geopolitical issues that involve Russia or China. On the Central Asian side, there is a risk that too many state-initiated and funded CSOs and think tanks participate, with governments making it difficult for independent CSOs to join.

That said, there is still some potential for the EU to spur civil society cooperation between Europe and Central Asia. One possibility is to increasingly investigate projects involving the civil societies of Central and East European countries that have experience to share from the nineties and 2000s on how to build a civil society. Such cooperation could for instance also include regional integration examples from the Visegrad countries. Another avenue that has been tried before and could be given new impetus is including a civil society component in the Human Rights Dialogue process, while trying to limit government interference and ensuring Central Asian human rights defenders' safety once they return home.

In sum, cooperation between EU and Central Asian civil society should be promoted and funded around very concrete subjects of common interest, rather than as a holistic forum.

- *What, if any, format of cooperation would be useful and sustainable?*
- *How to spur interest among European civil society and how to ensure that genuinely independent civil society organisations from Central Asia can participate?*

2.3 EU funding

The EU has recently stepped up its support to civil society globally. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has new components that are more adapted to the current challenges facing civil society. These include long-term assistance, as well as immediate crisis response; some are aimed at protecting individuals, while others aim at organisational sustainability. The European Endowment for Democracy (EED), established in 2012 initially to cover the European neighbourhood, has also broadened its mandate to cover Russia and Central Asia as well. Boosting financial support to individuals and organisations in Central Asia should be prioritised. Under the recent EIDHR country-based support schemes, civil society in Kazakhstan received €600,000 in 2016, Kyrgyzstan €1.6 million in 2017, and Tajikistan €2 million in 2016. EIDHR funding for Uzbekistan has been on the rise since last year.

From 2021 onwards, EU funding for external action is bound to radically change. The current Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) – under which funding for Central Asia is provided – will cease to exist. The current European Commission proposal seeks to create a single instrument for external funding, namely the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). It is not clear yet how much funding will be

dedicated to Central Asia out of the overall €89 billion NDICI proposal (€68 billion envisaged for geographic programmes). Negotiations between the Commission, Council and the Parliament of the EU have yet to start. Meanwhile, under the Democracy and Human Rights Programme (current EIDHR) the commission proposes €1.5 billion and under the Civil Society Programme €1.5 billion, both globally. It will be important for European and Central Asian civil society actors to help the EU in this reform process by getting priorities right for the period 2021-28.

- *How should the EU channel funding to civil society in Central Asia under the new funding instrument from 2021 onwards?*
- *How to make EU funding on the one hand more responsive to urgent needs and on the other hand supportive of CSOs sustainability?*
- *Should the EU manage small grants to civil society itself through its delegations or should support be outsourced to other organisations with more capacity or more experience?*

Conclusion

While the EU needs to limit overall its priority areas in Central Asia to make an impact with limited means, this does not apply to its support for civil society. Even with modest means, the EU could support a broad range of organisations and initiatives. One part of its support should include civil society involvement (and thus funding) as part of larger programmes in which Central Asian ministries, agencies or local authorities also participate. Another part should consist of targeted support for civil society projects. In the latter case, the EU will need to make choices on what topics or what sort of civil society to focus. In any case, it would be beneficial if the EU had more staff available on the ground to work on grant-making and monitoring. In addition, further simplified procedures for CSOs to request funding, combined with adequate training on project development and implementation for civil society representatives, would be much welcomed.

While the EU can render support, Central Asian communities themselves need to take the lead. This will depend on the level of involvement of Central Asia's new generations, if they become innovative new actors or refrain from the public domain. In this sense, developing education and creating employment opportunities in Central Asia are at the heart of the development of a vibrant and influential civil society. Therefore, the EU cannot separate its efforts in education from its efforts to help build civil society in Central Asia.