

# Focus on Central Asia

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## Social Problems and Civil Society in Central Asia Introductory remarks

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*The present paper is aimed to present some introductory remarks for the seminar under the same title, to take place on May 27, 2008, in Warsaw, within the Focus on Central Asia project at the Stefan Batory Foundation.*

The accession to the European Union forced the increase in Central European states' involvement in development cooperation with other countries. Apart from the Global South, where the assistance takes mostly the form of aid programs, an interest in the former Soviet republics, existing for many years, has further strengthened. Within this post-soviet space, Central Asia remains one of the least penetrated areas, but at least in the case of Poland, the interest has been growing, accompanied by the development of the new EU strategy for Central Asia in 2007 and the intensification of political and economic ties with the region.

While Central Europe has only limited financial resources for cooperation with the five states of Central Asia, it retains some important advantages, especially its own twenty-year experience of social, political and economic transition from communism. In the context of developing the potential cooperation between the regions and the growing involvement of European NGOs and development agencies in Central Asia, there appears a need for a fresh analysis of the existing social problems in the region in their political and economic context. The focus of such analysis must be on both the social issues and the potential for actual cooperation with beneficiaries, basing assistance on local needs, and using it to strengthen local institutions, in order to ensure self-sustainability. Therefore, the analysis must be conducted in the context of civil society, in whatever form it takes in Central Asia.



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## Social problems

The fall of the Soviet empire forced the five Central Asian states to enter the difficult path towards independence. Some aspects of this transformation, or actually the birth of independent states, were the creation (basically from scratch) of the autonomous political, economic, security and social systems. With more or less difficulty, all those states managed to establish themselves as individual players in global politics, in extreme cases going through civil war (Tajikistan), and more generally through periods of utter economic crisis and the downfall of the general level of well-being.

With the much debatable exception of Kazakhstan, whose economic growth ranks it basically close to the new EU member states (in terms of GDP per capita) and life quality is certainly improving in many parts of the country due to high oil prices, the newly independent states of Central Asia could be in many ways described as failed states, not in the strictly political sense of the term, but with the broader social meaning of a state that does not fulfill its role towards its citizens, or, in fact, remains a burden to them rather than making their lives easier. (The example of Kazakhstan is often considered controversial due to limited scope political freedoms accompanying the economic growth, as well as unequal distribution of growth throughout the country.)

The general lack of public satisfaction with the governments, resulting largely from the neglect of economic and social reforms, has been controlled by several means, some softer, like propaganda of a better future (sometimes even of the great present), other harder, like police control over the society. Yet the possibility of violence outbreaks remains high, taking into account both the social discontent and regional conflict potential (the interethnic tensions in Ferghana Valley for instance). The mid-term political prospects for the region are also dim; with national leaders of the two key countries (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) ageing, there seems to be a great potential for inter-faction struggle for succession. Although the Turkmen case of power transfer after the death

of president Niyazov proved unexpectedly peaceful, it is hardly probable that Uzbekistan will follow a similar route; should president Karimov suddenly become unable to exercise power, clan fighting may easily spread down to Uzbek society, and with the country's central position in the region become a threat to neighbors' stability.

The present situation stems directly from the model of transformation undertaken by Central Asian states, being a struggle for influence between groups and individuals, rather than the effort to enter the path of sustainable economic growth. Although this cannot be considered a fully conscious choice, as there were few other options available and the national elites were part of the Soviet heritage, it remains the brutal reality one has to face when considering the potential for social development.

Due to the inadequacy of the state to the actual needs of its citizens, accompanied by extensive corruption and different sorts of informal systems of influence, people who were raised in the Soviet tradition, in which the communist state encompassed all areas of life, are forced to become independent of the state in order to survive, which obviously results in a major shock. There seem to be two key ways of obtaining such independence: job migrations to other countries and becoming involved in grey economy. While migrations disrupt the traditional social networks (starting with families), informal economic activity is often stressful and subject to pressure from state organs, depending on the present political conditions in the country.

This situation results in permanent stress and frustration caused by the uncertainty of tomorrow that many citizens of the region are subject to. The uncertainty of possessing a source of income and the ability to feed oneself and family is especially burdensome on men, traditionally responsible for maintaining the family well-being. In many cases this appears to lead to severe depression, whereas the lack of any predictable potential for changing this situation easily results in such social pathologies as alcohol or drug abuse

(thus further reducing the financial standing of the family), leading to further problems like domestic violence.

The general failure of transformation and the resulting weak or inadequate states, in the global context of economic crisis and the local context of social frustration, low life quality, insufficient and uncertain income, and many more, form an interconnected system of social problems, a vicious circle, where addressing just one of the issues does not necessarily lead to resolving the complexity of problems.

Obviously, in terms of dealing with the key social problems, the particular Central Asian states remain key actors, as they are the only institutions to control the whole complexity of law-making and executive instruments, as well as the possibility to allocate budget funds or obtain external funds for systemic reforms. And again, it is obvious that Central Asian governments must be encouraged to improve or reform the systems of social welfare, health care, develop the conditions for entrepreneurship and promote job creation and employment. Nevertheless, taking into account the frequent tardiness of those governments to introduce reforms, it seems crucial to study social problems and social development from the bottom, from the perspective of the region's inhabitants; to consider what they can do, and what can be done for them. With the growing interest of the new EU member states in Central Asia, it seems important to consider how their experience of post-communist transition and social development can be utilized in development cooperation with the five states.

## Civil Society

One instrument of dealing with social problems is the society itself. Regardless of different definitions, it seems clear that civil society is one, where the people are able to define their needs and stand up, work together, organize themselves to answer those needs.

After Central Asian states gained independence, there emerged a major interest of western donor and non-governmental institutions in

assisting the process of building democratic institutions and civil society. Yet, with the generally accepted notion that social self-organization needs to be implemented through the legal form of NGOs, most investment has been done in creating such organizations locally. Although this has influenced the society in positive ways, certainly raising civic consciousness and dealing with many local problems, the influence has not been sustainable and, according to many analysts, the departure of donors (voluntary or forceful) creates a threat that even the theoretically well-developed civic organizations (for instance in Kyrgyzstan) shall disappear or become very weak.

There remains, however, another aspect of society, one that could be, for the purpose of this consideration, called a *non-civil society*. The notion is supposed to describe more than just society, and yet not necessarily the traditionally understood civil society.

Neither Islamic nor local traditions in Central Asia describe the phenomenon of a citizen. It seems to be a result of traditionally perceiving the society as a community rather than a collection of individuals. Conventionally, it was the local communities in the whole richness of their forms that took care of their members' needs. The Soviet system, however, managed to destroy most of them in exchange for the central welfare system; when independence removed also the latter, no replacement has been provided.

Just as key social problems in Central Asia need to be reconsidered for better effectiveness of any external (and even internal) assistance, the natural forms of social self-organization need to be taken into account when planning long-term influence aimed at achieving self-sustainability in dealing with those problems. At present, it seems that we are facing an interesting phenomenon, with external donors building the civil society mostly from the top down, and grass-root Islamic organizations like Akramiya (mostly in Uzbekistan) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (throughout the region) gaining popular support by building *civil communities*, a *non-civil society* from the bottom.

## Challenges

Seventeen years into the independence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan there appears a need to reconsider the social, economic and political conditions on the most basic level, with the aim of providing international, as well as local, NGOs and development cooperation institutions with new visions and ideas for involvement in the region. The following four core principles seem to be crucial in this matter: (1) mid- (or possibly even short-) term local self-sustainability of most assistance projects; (2) basing on the local needs (first of

all the existing needs, but to the extent that it may be possible – also perceived needs) and locally accepted networks of self-organization and self-aid; (3) using the limited amount of money allocated to development cooperation with Central Asia effectively to transfer know-how and experience, as well as to strengthen locally developed solutions; (4) to the extent that it is possible, basing on the transfer or exchange of experience, rather than providing full-fledged solutions, i.e., as the old proverb goes, giving the rod an teaching how to fish (or maybe even just helping to build a rod), rather than simply providing fish to eat.

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