

The Role of the OECD and NGO's in Central Asian Republics by Transforming Their Systems

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Central Asia is a region, containing five countries, serving as an important oil and natural gas exporter, being inbetween Russia, China, and Iran. This region has been a subject to several regimes and civiliazations. Latelly it is being transformed to liberal democracy, by the Western influence.

NGO-s bear one of the biggest role of injecting democracy to the Central Asia. Supported by the western governments and the support of international organizations such as the UN agencies and the World Bank. This article will talk about the difficulties and role these NGO-s, local and international, play in the democratization of the Central Asian countries, who for ages suffered from the isolation. This has neither been an easy job and nor a safe one. There has been a lot of difficulties but the foreign help in empowering the civil society, has succeeded on the spread of democracy.

Transformation from one system to another, in this case from communism to democracy, found these countries unprepared, and thus they needed tranings and preparations for the civil society leaders. In this article I will also explain the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union, in helping the civil society, NGO-s, to transform the country to further democracy, and also the role of these two important institutions in the foundation of democratic and liberal institutions of the Central Asia, like judicial, security, human rights, elections, etc..

ეკონომიკური თანამშრომლობის და განვითარების ორგანიზაციისა და არასამთავრობო ორგანიზაციების როლი ცენტრალური აზიის რესპუბლიკებში

სავაშ გენჩი

ფათიჰის უნივერსიტეტი

ცენტრალური აზიის რეგიონი, რომელშიც 5 ქვეყანა შედის, გაზისა და ნავთობის მნიშვნელოვან ექსპორტიორს წარმოადგენს რუსეთს, ჩინეთსა და ირანს შორის. დასავლეთის გავლენის შედეგად, რეგიონი გადაიქცა ლიბერალური დემოკრატიის ქვეყნად.

არასამთავრობო ორგანიზაციებმა უდიდესი როლი ითამაშეს ცენტრალური აზიის რეგიონში დემოკრატიის განვითარების თვალსაზრისით. მას მხარს უჭერდა დასავლეთის მთავრობა და ისეთი საერთაშორისო ორგანიზაციები, როგორებიცაა გაერთიანებული ერები და მსოფლიო ბანკი. ნაშრომი განიხილავს რეგიონში განვითარებულ სიმწველესა და ადგილობრივი თუ საერთაშორისო, არასამთავრობო ორგანიზაციების როლს ქვეყნის დემოკრატიზაციის პროცესის წარმართვაში. მრავალი წინააღმდეგობის მიუხედავად, უცხო ქვეყნების დახმარებით ჩამოყალიბდა და გაძლიერდა სამოქალაქო საზოგადოება.

ერთი სისტემიდან მეორეზე, ამ შემთხვევაში, კომუნიზმიდან დემოკრატიამზე გადასვლამ, გამოააშკარაა, რომ მზაობა ასეთი ცვლილებებისთვის არ არსებობდა. სტატიაში საუბარი იქნება უსაფრთხოების, ევროპასთან თანამშრომლობის და ევრო კავშირის შესახებ, რომელიც უდიდეს სამასხურს უწევს სამოქალაქო საზოგადოებას და არასამთავრობო ორგანიზაციებს სისტემის ჩანაცვლებაში. ასევე ნაშრომი განიხილავს ამ ორი ორგანიზაციის მნიშვნელობას, ისეთი დემოკრატიული და ლიბერალური ორგანოების ჩამოყალიბებაში, როგორიცაა უსაფრთხოება, ადამიანის უფლებათა დაცვა და არჩევნები.

Promoting Long-term Stability in Central Asia

Central Asia stretches from Russia in the north to Afghanistan in the south and from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Xinjiang province of China to the east. It is comprised of five former Soviet Republics that became sovereign in 1991: Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan; Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Central Asia, identified as the Silk Road and the home of Tamerlane, is

a turning point of great cultures and civilizations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world recognized the independence of all the former Central Asian republics, USA and EU supported their integration into Western organizations, and elicited Turkish support to counter Iranian pressure in the region.

Now they sit strategically between Russia, China and Iran and hold some of the world's largest resources of oil and natural gas. National and ethnic identities formerly suppressed now find appearance in language, religion, the arts, new international alignments and, irregularly, severe civil conflicts.

Since 1991 at least, it has been extensively used by the international community to promote transition in the former Communist countries, including of course Central Asia. International institutions, UN agencies and the World Bank are also making use of this concept, while it is by definition central to the Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) approach. Political scientists and anthropologists have already debated the relevance of such a concept. The existing hard economic conditions have also left a number of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries dependent on international aid. In most cases, willingness to support democratic changes in society is a situation for receiving aid. Most of these Republics are even now run by regimes with authoritarian tendencies, characterized by the hard control of society and the tolerance of very little political opposition.

The attendance of a strong civil society is vital to promote democracy as a mechanism for inspiring public pressure and forcing state institutions into becoming more responsible and answerable. NGO's play a basic role in the development and consolidation of democratic stability and pluralism in Central Asia. Their work to protect human rights, advocate legislative changes and voice the basic requirements of the population makes NGOs an necessary part of civil society.

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the construction of new States, confident and assisted by the international community to bring in democratic changes, helped underline the significant role played by active non-governmental organizations in the democratization process as potential intermediaries between the population and decision-makers. Different Western democracies, where civil society has regularly formed over many years, the new political environment and increased possibilities for international support have resulted in very quick development of the NGO sector, based on criteria which were quite different from what existed under the Soviet Union only a few years before.

NGOs in Central Asia

Democracy sponsorship was a central part of the post-Soviet transitions and led to the funding and realization of programmes promoting free and fair elections, the development of NGOs, judicial reform, civic contribution in political processes, and the development of independent media all over the countries of the former Soviet Union. The route of creating new political structures and adopting new legal frameworks in central Asian States, combined with international assistance to help establish democratic principles in the newly independent States, offered new opportunities and challenges to the emerging NGO community.

While in Soviet times differences in existing standards between urban and rural populations were not so clear, because the state provided free health, education and social welfare services, there is currently a pointed difference between city and village. More generally, society is getting more stratified, more polarized between rich and poor, with poor people comprising the tempting majority.

International organizations working in Central Asia have played a key role in the development of NGOs in the region. This has taken the form of providing education programmes and technical assistance as well as giving grants to local NGOs for the realization of social projects.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the important role played by active NGOs in the democratization process as latent intermediaries between the population and decision makers has become increasingly accepted in many of its successor States. At the same time, the new-found prospects for international support of NGO activities resulted in the fast establishment of many organizations all over the region, and many are now encountering problems in stressed to become self-sufficient. Also, in some CIS States, where political activities are still limited, a number of NGOs continue to be perceived as political opponents, and may suffer interference with their activities.

A number of international organizations offer training programmes for NGO leaders in such areas as preparation and management. However, much of this teaching is built on the knowledge of Western organizations, and is not always important or significant to local people, whose traditions, culture and values differ considerably from those of the West.

NGOs began to show in Central Asia in the transition era following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their numbers have increased fast in four out of five post-Soviet Central Asian states over the last five or six years. This would not have been possible without the sustain of international organizations and programmes. Even as civil society encompasses political parties, trade unions,

religious organizations, sports clubs and professional associations as well as NGOs, their role varies significantly. In some spheres they have a lot of influence; in others they are comparatively weak. The role of NGOs is established in social welfare but less so in more 'political' areas like human rights.¹

These very different roles reflect extensive differences in relations between the state and NGOs. At the very beginning of the transition era there was a lack of understanding during the region of the role of NGOs in the development of civil society – indeed, of their role in the development of society as a whole. There is an intelligence in which the Western conception of civil society has been artificially attached to society in Central Asia and to the transition process. Much time and effort will therefore be needed before the concept is engrossed and assimilated. Not amazingly, then, although NGOs are set up to help solve social problems, some governments in Central Asia tend to view them as anti-governmental organizations.

Democracy promotion was a central part of the post-Soviet transitions and led to the funding and completion of programmes promoting free and fair elections, judicial reform, the development of NGOs, civic participation in political processes, and the development of independent media throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union. While a vibrant civil society is recognised as an important element of democracy building, 'free and fair elections' and free media organs are seen as the most vital and basic factors in a democracy since they are the individual means of granting the government the authority and legitimacy to govern.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, transition towards democracy has been a slow development, which has in turn shaped a unreliable number of obstacles to the development of civil society.

The question of NGO governance – particularly, the reasons for creating a board of directors as the governing body – is causing heated discussions with NGO leaders at the moment. One problem is that the position and functions of governing bodies are not exactly determined in current NGO laws. All through Central Asia, a board of directors is usually associated with direct supervision – something which people who have recognized their own organizations generally do not welcome. This means that a board of directors often exists in name alone, just to meet donors' requirements.

The Role of Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

Assistance to promote civil society and support activities by the growing NGO community has been an increasingly important issue for the OSCE in recent years as a tool to further democracy and human rights in its participating States.

The basic idea is that democracy, human rights and a state of law are universal concepts, which assume a society made of free citizens, not bound by any corporate or communal links, entering freely into associations to work for the common good. The United States and EU has expectant the Central Asian states to become responsible members of the international community, supporting integrative goals through bilateral aid and through coordination with other aid donors. The stated policy goal is to discourage radical anti-democratic regimes and terrorist groups from gaining power. Some Western organizational ties with the region have suffered in latest years, in particular those of the OSCE, which has been criticized by Central Asian governments for advocating democratization and respect for human rights.²

The OSCE is possibly Europe's most comprehensive security organization in terms of both membership and areas of responsibility. Through the institutions diverse mechanism, its 55 member states including Canada, the United States, and most European and Central Asian countries address political, economic, and security issues. In the middle of the latter are initiatives to avert mass aggression, manage crises, and rehabilitate conflict regions. Like the European Union, the OSCE seeks to reduce political, economic, and social factors within societies that many consider donate to instability, radicalism and terrorism.

Assistance to promote civil society and support activities by the growing NGO community has been an increasingly significant issue for the OSCE in recent years, as a tool to more democracy and human rights in participating States. Support the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia in exacting continues to be a priority for the Organization.

In some transition countries local NGOs still depend seriously on the initiative and support of their Western donors. To increase their confidence, professionalism and independence, and thus finally help them design, present and realize their own professional projects, it is important for NGOs to create strong links with their partners in other regions, as well as with main NGO networks with many years of knowledge. OSCE missions and countryside activities are able to approach NGOs working in the related fields and notify them of future meetings, and assist them in obtaining visas.

The OSCE's leverage over its members derives mostly from its prestige. The OSCE recently opened field presences in all the countries across these regions, and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) has, since 1997, completed Memoranda of Understanding with all the States in which supporting civil society is a central section.

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the OSCE has dedicated bigger concentration to security issues in Central Asia. Its recent projects in the region

comprise reducing illegal trafficking in drugs and small arms, improving security components in travel documents, strengthening border controls, and countering terrorist financing and other terrorist activities. Another OSCE security priority in Central Asia has been humanizing police training, equipment, and control.³

As well preventing conflicts between or within member countries, the OSCE has long required to resolve already existing conflicts. For instance, the institution attempted to help end the 1992-97 civil war in Tajikistan, though it finally took Russian military intervention to secure the peace agreement. Since then, the OSCE has required to resolve the so-called-frozen conflicts in the former Soviet Union, as well as those in Georgia, Moldova, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Its progress in these cases has been minimal.

The Russian and Central Asian governments have tended to see the OSCE as extremely preoccupied with democracy and human rights rather than with attractive member's security and economic development. Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) allowed a statement criticizing the OSCE for interfering in the internal affairs of member states, employing a double standard that excessively focuses on abuses in CIS countries, and becoming overly preoccupied with human rights issues at the expense of managing new challenges and promoting member's security and economic well-being. The declaration also castigated the ODIHR and the OSCE field operations for overspending, making unwarranted criticisms of member's domestic political practices, and pursuing their own reform agendas.

The EU Central Asia Strategy

As the EU has become a more evident geopolitical actor, it has sought to improve its ability to respond to and prevent deadly conflict. The European Union is not living up to its potential as a geopolitical actor in Central Asia. The level of EU interest has been low, and Brussels is doing little to shape developments in a region that has mostly seen marked declines in its economic fortunes, political freedoms and social development in recent years but remains of extensive strategic significance. If this is to change, Europe must move away from largely ineffective policies, particularly the promotion of region-wide projects, and take on a more focused and active role geared to the separate characteristics of each of the region's five states. It needs also to raise the level of its representation, spend more money and stick to its political ideals if it is to have a positive impact.

Ensuring respect for human rights is of critical importance to the goals of the Central Asia strategy articulated by the German presidency and of the

EU's January 2007 Joint Discussion Paper on the Strategy for Central Asia ("the EU draft strategy"). The EU draft strategy states that the EU's overall aim is "The establishment of stable, independent and prosperous countries adhering to democratic values and market economy principles in Central Asia." It prioritizes supporting security and stability, escalation energy security, and enhancing trade and investment.

Since the January 2006 Ukraine-Russia gas dispute, energy security has risen to the top of the European policy agenda, with officials in Brussels and member-state capitals scrambling to decrease over-reliance on Russia. Too late, the EU has begun to realise Central Asia's potential importance. Its oil and gas reserves, which could be linked directly to Europe via the South Caucasus and Turkey, are seen as at least a limited solution to the need to diversify energy contribute.⁴

Raising human rights at the political level and establishing goals and benchmarks in human rights do not, as some in the EU have recommended, set back the EU's relationships with Central Asian governments with no consequence. In the case of Turkmenistan, for example, even in the absence of an interim trade agreement with the EU, contact and appointment with the EU continued at many levels. Particularly, several of the reform promises made by the new Turkmen president directly addresses EU parliament human rights benchmarks for incoming into an interim trade agreement with Turkmenistan.

EU assistance to the region has largely taken the form of technical assistance implemented through the program (TACIS) that was designed in 1991 to support transition to market economies and support democracy and the rule of law in the post-Soviet space. That program has included a number of large trans-national projects in transport, drugs, border controls and energy which show few consequences for the time and money invested. Even with some assistance given to combating drug trafficking, the potential for ill-gotten gains from the drug trade continues to weaken efforts.

Following the Soviet collapse in 1991, EU relations with the newly independent states (NIS) were basically conducted along the lines of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) signed two years earlier with Moscow. In 1991, the EU also launched the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program, modelled on its assistance program for Central and Eastern Europe.⁵ TACIS was planned to "promote the transition to a market economy and to reinforce democracy and the rule of law in the partner States". From 1991 to 2002, the five Central Asian states got some €366 million in TACIS assistance.⁶ As part of the reform of the entire EU development assistance system, TACIS programming ends in 2006. On the other hand, given the time-lag in implementing the yearly Action Programs for each country, TACIS-funded projects can be projected to run through 2011.

Conclusion

In a multilateral response to any most important domestic political crisis in Central Asia, the OSCE would soon be eclipsed by unilateral action or by more dominant security institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although these organizations have a weaker permission to arbitrate in member states internal affairs than the OSCE, their superior resources and less challenging dialogue with Central Asian governments gives these institutions greater opportunities to encourage these leaders to resolve internal differences that could escalate into major civil strife. Should actual fighting break out, one or more of these organizations will perhaps take the lead in organizing any resulting peacekeeping force. China and particularly Russia might effort to impose peace unilaterally, but other governments likely would feel more comfortable if any military intervention occurred under the auspices of an international institution. Most importantly, a multilateral framework would make the situation more transparent and give other actors a mechanism to communicate their own interests and concerns. Unfortunately, the OSCE has established itself largely unsuccessful at performing such functions.

As a result of international attention over the last decade, a large number of NGOs have been recognized to help implement international assistance programmes. Some of these have previously ceased to exist, but many others have acquired organizational skills and are becoming more and more self-sufficient. Moreover, the degree of civil society expansion varies significantly across the region. Governments in the Caucasus and Central Asia have, since their independence, arranged different policies towards NGOs, and some States have created more favourable conditions for the NGO community than others.

The OSCE has the essential elements in place to give important support to the development of civil society. The organization has a high degree of flexibility and an capacity to adjust to changing circumstances. Furthermore, the combination of presence in the field and the experience of the OSCE's autonomous institutions has the potential to offer targeted projects and ensure efficient implementation. The consciousness of governments of the role of NGOs is in various cases still influenced by the traditional Soviet definition. Under the Soviet system, grass-roots activities were mostly controlled and organized from above, principally to create support amongst the general population for the regimes' courses of action.⁷ The NGOs that took part in these endeavours could more exactly be described as GONGOs (governmentally organized NGOs). Changing this opinion is a long-term undertaking.

The aim of this paper is to give a general overview of the status of civil society and the role of NGOs in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and look at the lessons learned from international assistance to local NGO communities, as well as current OSCE activities. Nevertheless, the success of Operation Enduring Freedom is no guarantee of stability in Central Asia. Much work remains to be done on designing and implementing internal reforms not only in Uzbekistan, but also in Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states as well.

The NGO community is rapidly developing in a number of CIS States. As a result of international support possibilities, and the newly-learned skills on how to organize and qualify for these funds, new NGOs are established on a regular basis. Keeping track of this growth is difficult for small OSCE centres with few staff to monitor developments in all human dimension areas and even harder to follow the development of new NGOs. On top of this, the centres are increasingly involved in trying to apply local development projects.

Footnotes

¹ NGOs have, in particular, played an important role in raising environmental concerns, developing awareness of environmental issues and promoting sustainable development. The encouragement of public participation in environmental and social management through legislation in recent years has also enhanced the role of NGOs and Major Groups.

² U.S. House of Representatives. Committee on International Relations. Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia. Assessing Energy and Security Issues in Central Asia. Testimony of Steven Mann, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, July 25, 2006.

³ This initiative began in August 2003 as an agreement between the OSCE and the Kyrgyz government. It soon spread to other Central Asian countries. The OSCE's Special Police Matters Unit intends for this effort to bolster recipient government's ability to counter terrorism and other illegal activities, as well as curb corruption and other law enforcement abuses against citizen's rights and freedoms.

⁴ A new European Commission Green Paper on energy strategy was published on 8 March 2006, and was reportedly extensively revised after Russia cut off gas to Ukraine. See "Call for EU to boost energy security", *Financial Times*, 20 February 2006. The Green Paper is available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/energy/green-paper-energy/index_en.htm.

⁵ That program for Central and Eastern Europe, known as PHARE (Pologne, Hongrie Assistance à la Réconstruction Économique), was created in 1989, originally to provide economic assistance to Poland and Hungary. It was used to fund the pre-accession strategy for the countries of the region, and following the May 2004 enlargement, has been converted into the main aid mechanism for eight new EU member states (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) as well as soon-to-be members Bulgaria and Romania.

⁶ "European Commission Regional Strategy for Central Asia 2002-2006", 30 October 2002, p. 12, at http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/rsp2/02_06_en.pdf.

⁷ Some organizations which organized 'voluntary' activity in the past, like the 'Comsomol' (youth movement), have now lost public funding and institutional support.