The Curious Case of Political Party Assistance in Central Asia

Max Bader
Research and Teaching Fellow
OSCE Academy, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
April 2010

Introduction

Following the demise of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, international actors moved into the region to help the post-communist states and their societies with the introduction of democracy. The provision of assistance to political parties by a number of specialized western organizations has been one of many forms of democracy promotion that have been carried out throughout the former communist world. Whereas most party assistance, especially in the early 'transition' years, flowed to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the European former Soviet republics, some party assistance has also been provided in the countries of Central Asia, except Turkmenistan. Specifically, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), affiliated with the Democratic Party in the United States, works with parties in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and previously in Tajikistan as well, while the International Republican Institute of the Republican Party works with parties in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

From the moment party assistance was being wrapped up in the countries of CEE that have joined the EU, there has been an elevated interest among organizations that provide party assistance to start up or intensify programs in Central Asia. Drawing on a discussion of political parties and party politics in Central Asia, this paper questions the rationale behind party assistance in the region. It argues that the environment for international party assistance in Central Asia is a highly adverse one and that, for this reason, party assistance in Central Asia is ill-positioned to make an impact. The discussion of party politics covers the former Soviet republics in Central Asia except Turkmenistan, which has not seen multi-party politics until recently.

Political party assistance after the third wave

As can be gleaned from a collection of policy-setting documents issued by the funders and providers of assistance, party assistance principally aims to contribute to the development of stable, representative, and democratic parties, which are envisaged to constitute the elements of an emerging party system in a democratic polity.[1] The quintessential and by far most common activity in party assistance are educational seminars to party representatives. Next to seminars, typical components of party assistance programs are consultations with individual or several party leaders, and study trips of party representatives to western democracies. Seminars aimed at promoting the stability and viability of parties focus, for

---

[1] See, for instance, Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 'A Framework for Democratic Party-Building'; Saxer, Marc, 'Parteiförderung als Element der Demokratieförderung'; United States Agency for International Development, 'Political Party Development Assistance'; United States Agency for International Development. 'USAID Political Party Assistance Policy'.

instance, on the expansion of regional party organizations and the establishment of a grassroots constituency. To enhance the representation of parties, seminars often address program and message development and voter outreach. Seminars that seek to stimulate democratic values and practices within and among parties, finally, address the importance of mechanisms of internal democracy in parties and of interparty dialogue.

The scope and goals of party assistance are well reflected in how NDI and IRI report about their work in Central Asia. The IRI program in Kazakhstan, for instance, in its own words 'provides intensive assistance on party building in the areas of message development, issue-based party platform development, grassroots outreach strategies, voter contact, party image improvement and the creation of regional-level party structures', and 'assists regional party offices to identify and incorporate into their platforms issues that are important to the electorate'. NDI in Uzbekistan 'works with Uzbekistan's major political parties to assist them in their efforts to be more participatory and responsive to citizens' needs' and 'discussions with political parties have focused on sharing international best practices for reaching out to the public developing legislative policy agendas that are informed by public opinion, and creating systems to communicate more effectively with citizens'.

The practice of party assistance is influenced by a number of self-imposed norms and prescriptions. Two norms that are endorsed by all major providers of party assistance dictate, first, that party assistance should avoid interference in the domestic political affairs of recipient countries, and second, party assistance should consistently be at the service of the goal of promoting democracy (e.g. USAID 1999: 2). With respect to the selection of parties that are to receive assistance, the first norm instructs providers of assistance, individually or through combined efforts of several providers of assistance, to work with a set of parties that collectively are representative of the democratic sector of the party spectrum (USAID 1999: 20; Doherty 2002: 4). The second norm instructs to only work with parties which meet the minimum requirements of viability or durability (e.g. Doherty 2002: 4; USAID 2006: 27) and adherence to democratic values (e.g. KAS 2008: 76; USAID 2003: 9). The reasons behind these criteria for party selection are evident: if recipient parties only represent one or some parts of the political spectrum, party assistance runs the risk of being accused of interfering in domestic politics; if unstable parties are selected, the assistance is likely to turn out to be ineffective; if, finally, providers of assistance work with undemocratic parties, the purpose of promoting democratization is lost. As will be demonstrated later here, meeting the criteria for party selection is excessively difficult in many environments, including that of Central Asia. Besides, providers of assistance in

practice are not always committed to meeting the criteria, especially with regard to the equal representation of the main political forces (Bader 2010).

The foremost actors in party assistance are the two aforementioned U.S. party institutes, political foundations that are affiliated with the main national political parties of Germany, and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). These organizations are non-governmental but attract the vast majority of their funding for party assistance programs from the U.S., German, and Dutch governments respectively. Alongside party assistance, the U.S. and German providers of assistance also engage in a range of other activities in the area of democracy assistance.

There is widespread skepticism among scholars about the ability of party assistance to have a considerable impact on parties. In the only book-length treatise about international political party assistance, Thomas Carothers finds that assistance to parties 'rarely has transformative impact, despite the hopes and sometimes beliefs of its providers' (Carothers, 2006: 162) and 'is unlikely […] to produce decisive changes in the basic organization and operation of parties (idem: 218). Gero Erdmann (2006: 1) similarly notes that 'transformative effects' from political party assistance have hitherto been seldom observed, while Peter Burnell (2000: i) argues about political party assistance that 'the effects are likely to be modest, the consequences marginal to political development'. Andrew Reilly, finally, observes that the assistance has 'limited impact, rarely if ever transforming the fundamental organisational and operational characteristics of recipient parties' (2008).

Skepticism about the effectiveness of party assistance is fuelled by the realization that most of the sixty to eighty countries where assistance is provided today do not, or not obviously, undergo a transition to democracy. As the third wave of democratization has ground to a halt, most countries previously believed to be part of the third wave are stuck in a political gray zone: they are neither liberal democracies nor closed autocracies (Diamond 2002), and most are neither becoming significantly more democratic nor are they moving backward (Carothers 2009). Moreover, whether in Africa (Basedau and Stroh 2008), South East Asia (Ufen 2007), or Latin America (Sanchez 2008), political parties and party systems are often characterized by chronic underdevelopment. In many areas, in short, the odds are against a successful party assistance effort. One such inauspicious area for party assistance is Central Asia. The next two sections will argue why this is so.

Party politics in Central Asia

Party assistance, being one element in the broad palette of democracy promotion, aims to contribute to the development of democratic parties for a democratic party system. The regimes of Central Asia, however, are consistently and unanimously classified as undemocratic and not free by leading indices of democracy, with no sign of positive change. It is believed moreover that the leaders of the Central Asian states are actively interested in sustaining the undemocratic regimes despite rhetoric that points to the contrary.Most obviously, presidents in all Central Asian states discussed here have sought extensions of their presidential terms. In the one case where presidential succession has taken place, Kyrgyzstan, the new president's increasingly undemocratic and corrupt regime culminated in its violent overthrow in April 2010.

The implication of the absence of a serious degree of political competition for party politics is a highly uneven playing field. The uneven playing field in party politics in Central Asia is reflected in the dominance by regime-loyal parties of the legislature. In Kazakhstan, only the party of power Nur Otan is represented in the lower chamber of the parliament. In Kyrgyzstan, Ak Zhol occupied 71 out of 90 parliamentary seats until parliament was dissolved following the April 2010 events. The People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan takes up 55 out of 63 seats, with only four seats in the hands of the opposition. In Uzbekistan, finally, all four parties represented in parliament support the president and his regime.

While single-party dominance itself is not yet evidence of an uneven playing field, the regimes in Central Asia have all taken measures aimed at thwarting a full degree of competition. First, the regimes have been involved in setting up so-called parties of power and satellite parties, discussed in the next section, which in electoral contests benefit from access to state resources that other parties lack. In the practice of electoral contests, this typically means that these regime-near parties have at their disposal incomparably bigger budgets than opposition forces, are able to mobilize state workers, and have privileged access to state-controlled media. These parties can also be helped by the regime if it undertakes targeted spending campaigns to attract votes from specific groups. Second, the regime may instigate changes in political party legislation and electoral legislation to increase the likelihood of a big win for the regime-sponsored parties. In Kazakhstan, for example, the bar for political party registration was substantially raised in 2002, weeding out a number of opposition parties. In 2005, an amendment to the electoral code was adopted banning electoral blocs, thereby creating a disincentive for smaller parties to continue operating. Finally, the relatively high electoral threshold of seven per cent in Kazakhstan, keeps smaller parties out of parliament, and increases disproportionality at the

benefit of the party of power. Third, state control over the most important media is used to nudge public opinion. The main national broadcast media in Central Asia are overwhelmingly controlled by the authorities (see FH NIT reports). Fourth, the regime can take resort to the direct removal of the threat that opposition forces pose. In all Central Asian states discussed here, parties at different moments have been barred from registration on dubious formal grounds. Actions to defuse the threat from opposition parties can also be directly targeted at their leaders. Finally, when the above measures are not enough yet, election procedures provide further opportunities to achieve convincing victories for regime-sponsored parties. Elections in the Central Asian states are consistently assessed by OSCE as falling short of being free and fair. The low quality of elections concerns different stages of the election, with the period preceding an election being no less important than election day itself.

The uneven playing field makes for a dynamic that is fundamentally different party from politics in democracies. To a large extent, political competition in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is foremost a matter of the regime against the rest. While the regime is occupied with maintaining power, the main focus of opposition forces is to remove the regime. There are a number of reasons why the existence of a highly uneven playing field in party politics can contribute to impede the development of stable and representative opposition parties in many undemocratic states. First, since the main concern of true opposition parties is to bring an end to the incumbent regime, these parties have a short time horizon and a narrow issue focus which forestall their development into durable and representative forces. Second, if the regime is perceived as strong and likely to remain in place for a long period, political party entrepreneurs from the opposition lack the incentive to invest in party development, because they realize that opposition parties will at most play a marginal role. Third, party entrepreneurs are further disincentivized to invest in parties when they sense that the regime may at any time frustrate the operation of their parties by banning those parties, arresting their leaders or otherwise.

Even if opposition parties in Central Asian countries are allowed to operate freely, are there still factors which would militate against stable political party development, let alone party system institutionalization. Both executive-legislative relations and electoral legislation, and especially in conjunction, have rendered political parties relatively inconsequential organizations. While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in formal terms have all had semi-presidential systems since independence, the actual distribution of power as well as the practice of politics have overwhelmingly favored the presidency, putting them firmly in the 'highly presidentialized' category among semi-presidential regimes (Elgie 2005: 102-5) With regard to political parties, it has been argued

that there is an "inverse relationship" between presidentialism and party strength (Shugart 1998). In 'highly presidentialized' regimes, the relevance of political parties is diminished as a direct consequence of the way powers are distributed, giving political entrepreneurs a stronger incentive to invest in gaining (access to) the presidency than in setting up and developing parties. In these regimes, moreover, politics tends to revolve more around individuals rather than around political forces per se.

In terms of electoral system, the four Central Asian states discussed here have utilized either a purely majoritarian electoral formula or a mixed system, with (generally) a minority of parliamentary seats being contested through nationwide party-list voting, and the remaining seats contested in single-member district (SMDs) races. The main reason SMDs depress viable party development is straightforward: individuals, rather than parties, are elected. The winner-takes-all principle of SMD races moreover is more likely to lead to one-party dominance and with that, although not necessarily, to a markedly uneven playing field. The problem of a mixed system for party development is that the SMD provides an alternative route for parties and individuals into parliament, holding back parties from merging into bigger, more viable forces and keeping individuals from seeking party affiliation. The problem is further exacerbated when parties have the opportunity, as has been the case in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to join with other parties in electoral coalitions.

Party types

Typologies of political parties devised for pluralistic settings have limited applicability in relation to authoritarian settings with an uneven electoral playing field. Parties in authoritarian states are not primarily distinguished by ideology or by type of linkage between voters and the party.

Since party politics in Central Asia, as noted, essentially revolves around the struggle between the regime and the rest, the key distinction between parties in the Central Asian authoritarian regimes concerns the origin of the party – from within (or affiliated with) or outside the regime. The former group comprises parties of power and satellite parties, while all parties that were born outside the regime make up the latter group. In Uzbekistan, all five registered parties are affiliated with the regime. While the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan counts as the party of power because it is led by the president, the other parties are stacked with officials and both support the regime and are endorsed by the regime.

A significant distinction among parties that originate from outside the regime in turn is whether they are relevant for the political life of the country or not. In Kazakhstan and

Tajikistan, where regimes have a strong grip on the playing field, few if any are. In Kyrgyzstan, there was slightly more pluralism under Bakiev, though the party of power Ak Zhol acquired the bulk of seats in the 2007 parliamentary elections, effectively marginalizing all other parties.

Regime-sponsored parties

Parties of power are distinguished by the combination of three features: they benefit extensively from direct access to state resources, are affiliated with the president - irrespective of whether the president does or does not have a formal role in the party - and, unlike other regime-initiated parties, are created with the purpose of becoming dominant on the political party spectrum. Parties of power ultimately serve to help regimes survive. Contributing to that goal, they fulfill at least three separate functions. First, if parties of power succeed to gain a majority of the vote and to dominate parliament, this signals to the opposition and potential contenders of the regime that engaging in opposition party politics is unlikely to be met with success. Besides other possible obstacles for opposition parties in an uneven playing field, the success of parties of power, consequently, deters independent political party entrepreneurs to enter party politics. Second, successful parties of power are an effective means to bind different elite representatives to the regime who in the absence of a party of power might engage in competing political activity. Parties of power are successful in binding representatives of political and economic elites to them by assuming the functions of a patronage network. Through the patronage network of a party of power, different types of perks (jobs, contacts, economic benefits) are dispersed to the members of the network. Exclusion from the party of power, accordingly, entails exclusion from those perks. Third, the electoral success of a party of power helps to legitimize the regime. If the party of power receives a majority of the national vote, then the regime apparently rules with the consent and the approval of the population.

In a highly influential article, Strom (1990) distinguishes between three 'models of party behavior': policy-seeking, vote-seeking, and office-seeking. In the words of Steven Wolinetz (2002: 149-50), "a policy-seeking party is one which gives primary emphasis to pursuit of policy goals, a vote-seeking party is one whose principal aim is to maximize votes and win elections, while an office-seeking party is primarily interested in securing the benefits of office—getting its leaders into government, enjoying access to patronage, etc." The party of power displays a vote-seeking logic: taking into account that electoral fraud is costly for a regime, it needs votes more than anything else to fulfill the legitimacy function and to signal regime strength. Because parties of power pursue votes rather than policies

(the regime already implements the policies) or office (already occupied by regime representatives) they employ a catch-all electoral strategy and therefore do not associate themselves with a specific ideology that would be unattractive for large section of the electorate.

A second type of regime-sponsored party that exists in the Central Asian states are satellite parties. These parties are set up either in addition to a dominant party of power, or, more rarely, in place of a dominant party of power. Like parties of power, satellite parties are created at the instigation of the executive branch and benefit from access to state resources. However, satellite parties, although they do support the government, are less closely associated with the president and are not supposed to grow into dominant forces. Regimes use satellite parties principally to appeal to parts of the electorate that, for whatever reason, are not prone to vote for the dominant party of power. If voters are induced to vote for satellite parties, the effect is that a larger part of the electorate ends up giving its vote to parties that are controlled by the authorities. As for parties of power, the operational logic of satellite parties is vote-seeking.

The five parties that are registered in Uzbekistan are in a way all satellites, since they "hardly differ from one another and are 'government-friendly' parties, which have been created on the President's initiative." (Yalcin 2001). Among the five parties, the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan is the primus inter pares because it is led by the president, but the party is not a dominant force. Two political parties that were set up in Tajikistan in 2006, the Agrarian party and the Economic Development party, have been characterized as 'essentially two branches of the governing party' (Hamrabaeva 2010). A typical satellite party in Kazakhstan was Asar, which was led by president Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga, and which merged in 2006 with Nur Otan, the current party of power. An example of a satellite party in Kyrgyzstan was Alga, headed by former president Akayev's daughter Bermet.

..against the rest

With respectively five and six registered parties registered, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have considerably narrowed the playing field. None of the five registered parties in Uzbekistan can be credibly said to be in the opposition to the regime. In Tajikistan there are a few opposition parties, but they are largely irrelevant forces with no or at most a few seats in parliament. The number of parties, including opposition parties, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, is bigger. While these parties are allowed to operate and to participate in elections, their weight in the political life of their countries is very limited. This circumstance

is made worse by the high degree of fragmentation of the opposition political party spectrum. Most opposition parties in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are essentially political clubs which revolve around a single and typically unchangeable leader. Like the regime-sponsored parties, opposition parties are hardly rooted in society. While being in opposition, their raison d'être is largely determined by their struggle against the regime. Accordingly, there is little attention to party development with a longer-term view or the formulation of elaborate programs.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (under Bakiev) a distinction is sometimes made between 'constructive opposition' and 'radical opposition'. The 'radical opposition' moniker is often used to criticize parties for their irresponsible position which supposedly is only aimed at overthrowing the regime. 'Constructive opposition' parties, on the other hand, are accused by the 'real opposition' of playing in the hands of the regime. Satellite parties, in some cases, may guise themselves as constructive opposition, while tacitly supporting or contributing to regime survival. In Kazakhstan, Ak Zhol in sometimes labeled as 'constructive opposition' and contrasted with the 'radical opposition' party True Ak Zhol. In Kyrgyzstan under Bakiev, the Communist Party, the third biggest force in parliament after the 2007 parliamentary elections, was widely seen as being conducive the ruling party's agenda.

Implications for party assistance

The above suggests that in the Central Asian countries hardly any parties are available that meet the usual requirements that make parties eligible to receive assistance and that, consequently, the environment for party assistance in Central Asia is highly adverse. The regime-sponsored parties are the most relevant parties around; the interests which drive the operation of these parties, however, are incompatible with pluralist politics. These parties do not represent well-identifiable groups in society, they are stakeholders in the unbalancing of the political playing field, and, most fundamentally, they were not conceived to be or to become elements in stable, democratic party systems alongside other parties. Parties that are not propped up by regimes, on the other hand, generally lack relevance, and their continued existence and operation is at the mercy of undemocratic regimes. Moreover, it may be that many of them are not more democratic with regards to their internal operation and their attitude to other parties than regime-sponsored parties, and, like these parties, may not be interested in developing into representative organizations.

In the context of the Central Asian states, in brief, it is impossible to select parties for assistance programs that are simultaneously viable, democratic, and collectively representative of the political party spectrum. If providers still choose to work in the region, they have to sacrifice at least one of the usual criteria for party selection. The track record from other parts of the former Soviet Union informs that providers of assistance have often had little qualms about working with parties of power (Bader 2010). Since these parties are not truly interested in becoming more democratic and representative, however, assistance to these parties is likely to be of no effect.

To help balance the playing field, providers of assistance may opt to concentrate their efforts on working with parties that are not directly affiliated with the regime. The problems of working only with these parties should also be obvious. First, since regimes in the region generally do not allow real contestation, the effects from assistance to these parties is likely to be minimal. The provision of outside assistance to opposition parties moreover can induce more repression from the part of the authorities. Second, if assistance is aimed at only one part of the political party spectrum, it violates the commitment to provide assistance to a representative cut of the party system. If party assistance is seen as interfering in domestic politics in the form of trying to manipulate electoral outcomes by assisting only a certain part of the party spectrum, can this bear negative consequences both for the providers and for the recipients of the assistance.

In light of these observations, it is remarkable that NDI and IRI maintain that party assistance in Central Asia can be meaningfully provided. The following section points to a number of pathologies in the practice of party assistance which help to explain why providers of assistance have remained active in Central Asia.

The pathologies of party assistance
Party assistance is not just an inherently problematic effort in Central Asia. As noted, there is widespread skepticism about the overall chances of party assistance to leave a notable imprint. There are relatively few independent evaluations of party assistance programs. Existing evaluations of party assistance generally indicate that party assistance in the former Soviet republics is fraught with obstacles. In one evaluation of party assistance in Armenia, it has been plainly commented that 'the political environment in Armenia is not conducive to political party building assistance' (Nelson and Katulis 2005: 27) and that '[t]he assessment found little impact from donor assistance to political parties. Parties characterized USAID-funded assistance as well-meaning but better suited for a more democratic context. The assessment team agrees and believes that more of the same type

11

of assistance is unlikely to provide meaningful results' (idem: vii). It was advised to scale back party assistance in Georgia in 2001 primarily because 'limited interest exists within the major political parties to transform themselves into well-structured democratic organizations presenting the public with credible, differentiated policy platforms' (Black et al. 2001: iii). A 2006 evaluation of party assistance by Dutch party institutes commented that, despite years of assistance, '[p]olitical parties actually hardly exist in Georgia. Political movements are in fact more or less loyal clans around individuals' (Verheije et al. 2006: 59). Likewise, an evaluation of USAID-funded Democracy and Governance programs in Georgia in 2002 noted that 'Georgia's party system remains weak, inchoate and unstable. Parties and parliamentary factions form, transform, and quickly disintegrate […]' (ARD, Inc. 2002: v).

Similar grim assessments of party development can be found in documentation of the providers of party assistance in Ukraine. A work plan for 2006 of the International Republican Institute in Ukraine remarks: 'Though almost 100 political parties are registered in Ukraine, few are anything more than personality-driven organizations' (IRI 2005: 4) and '[…] few political parties have developed into well-defined ideological forces that could guide the country's path' (idem: 2). A 2008 publication by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung argued that, prior the Orange Revolution, parties in Ukraine had only 'peripheral significance'. Moreover, 'The parties of Ukraine still contain many features of projects. They are first and foremost personality-centered networks, which are strongly interwoven with the economic interests of their leaders' (KAS 2008: 32). An evaluation of U.S. party assistance in Kyrgyzstan, finally points out that institutional arrangements and the political context have long blocked opportunities for successful party assistance (USAID 2007: x).

Some evaluations that have been carried out suggested that assistance programs may be suspended. A 2001 civil society assessment with respect to Georgia by USAID advised that 'party development efforts not be given priority among the areas of D/G program emphasis' and even more directly that 'the political party program could be scaled down' (Black et al. 2001: 17). An assessment of USAID's DG program in Georgia, commissioned by USAID, one year later similarly advised that 'USAID should reorient its party work away from attempting to build national party organizations to building or sustaining support for specific reforms or to blocking roll-backs of enacted reforms' (ARD Inc. 2002: 48). Assessments of party assistance in Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, where the environment for party assistance has been comparable to that of Georgia and Ukraine, have in similar terms suggested that existing party assistance programs could be decreased (Nelson and Katulis 2005: vii; Roberts 2001: 30).

Apparently disregarding the evaluations, party assistance in Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan has not been suspended. The skepticism about the purpose of party assistance in Armenia particularly may with good reason have been extended to most other former Soviet republics. It is, in brief, not evident that there has been a sufficient justification to continue party assistance in the region, including in Central Asia. It is a separate issue why providers of assistance persist in working in countries where the effects from assistance have consistently been depressingly limited. The fact that they do persist points to a gap in accountability on the part of the providers of assistance.

In their annual reports and promotion materials, providers of assistance describe their work in upbeat terms. After the Orange Revolution, for instance, an IRI program director claimed that '[t]he International Republican Institute contributed to the triumph of democracy in Ukraine by educating its people and political parties on the values and practices of democracy since 1992.' (Nix 2005). Success stories as they are claimed by the funders and providers of assistance are rarely corroborated by independent case study investigations. In addition to the finding that providers of assistance are not often held accountable or let themselves be held accountable for their work, they receive little valuable feedback that could help improve their activities. The most natural source of feedback, recipient parties, tend to report positively on the assistance that they have received, even if they do not expect that the assistance will have much effect on their organizations. As in much of development aid, party assistance lacks a 'market feedback' that provides a potential check when assistance goes awry (see Easterly 2006). An obvious reason why such a market feedback is missing lies in the asymmetrical relation between providers and recipients of assistance and in the fact that the effect of assistance is not subject to measurement with clear indicators. Effects from assistance, on the other hand, can be spinned to make the effort seem more successful.

The widely held contention that democracy promotion is compromised by a limited knowledge of local conditions (e.g. Carothers 1999: 261) seems to apply in equal measure to political party assistance. Limited understanding of local conditions induces copying of programs from one recipient country to the next. Methods and strategies in party assistance are often not unlike those used in a host of other countries, foremost other post-communist states, and conform to what can tentatively be called a 'standard method' (Carothers 2006: 112-41). An implication of this unreflective 'one size fits all' approach is that some topics in party assistance are not directly relevant to the local context, while topics that were omitted would have been more required. An independent evaluation of USAID-funded party assistance, for instance, suggests that the focus on women participation in many party

seminars is ill-positioned to battle the underlying reality of gender inequality in local politics (USAID 2007: B6).

Party assistance programs should be underpinned by an informed assessment of party (system) development and the environment in which parties develop. With regard to parties, providers of assistance often too easily assume that adjustments that are made in party organizations are more than merely cosmetic. Also frequently misunderstood are the true incentives which drive the operation of parties. In Central Asia, as in many other places, parties may not be committed to multi-party politics in a democratic level playing field. Interestingly, A USAID report (2007: iv) argues that providers of assistance should understand 'the real incentives of parties and politicians', while a NDI report (2008b: 3) acknowledges that 'parties have a fundamental interest in winning or maintaining political power' and that NDI should 'build the incentives for internal reform by shaping its programs around these interests'. Finally, concerning the setting in which assistance programs were implemented, providers of assistance sometimes fail to grasp the undemocratic leanings of political regimes, and how this less-than-democratic regime context contributes to invalidate the party assistance intervention.

Conclusion

When party assistance was launched in the post-communist states, an implicit assumption was that there was a genuine interest in those countries in democratization, and a genuine interest among recipient parties to transform into truly representative and democratic forces. Recipient parties were seen as constituents of a stable and democratic party system that would crystallize in the not too distant future as the transition to democracy would progress into consolidation. In much of the post-communist world as well as in many other countries outside the post-communist world where party assistance is still carried out, however, regimes are not in a state of transition toward democracy, and it is doubtful that most parties which receive assistance are really interested in internal reform.

In many places both in and outside the post-communist world, party assistance encounters considerable obstacles to achieving success. In most cases, this has to do either with endemically low levels of party system institutionalization or with efforts by regimes to skew the electoral playing field, and often both of these ills at the same time. Central Asia is one region where the conditions for party assistance are particularly inauspicious. In this most authoritarian region of the world bar the Middle East (Swedberg and Sprout 2008: 32), regimes do not allow genuine political competition to flourish, and take a range of measures to shut off the possible development of a democratic multi-party system. Even if

a level playing field would be in place in the Central Asian states, the environment for party assistance would still be far from an ideal one: informal practices and formal institutional arrangements among which foremost highly presidentialized executive-legislative relations render political parties largely inconsequential, and therefore few incentives would exist for the development of strong parties. Substantial changes in the environment in which political parties develop would be needed for party assistance in Central Asia to generate effect. Depending on how events the situation evolves, the political change in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 may provide a new chance for party assistance in the country. If the new leaders are committed to democracy and if political parties will become more relevant, as the constitutional draft promises, then there may be a good argument to engage with Kyrgyzstan's parties. Elsewhere in Central Asia, the rationale for continuing party assistance remains distinctly missing.

Bibliography

ARD, Inc. 2002. *Democracy and Governance Assessment of Georgia*. Washington, D.C.

Bader, Max. 2010. *Against All Odds: Aiding Political Parties in Georgia and Ukraine*.
    Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Basedau, Matthias, and Alexander Stroh. 2008. *Measuring Party Institutionalization
    in Developing Countries: A New Research Instrument Applied to 28 African
    Political Parties*. Hamburg: GIGA German Institute of Global and Area
    Studies, Working Paper no. 69.

Black, David, Susan Jay, and Michael Keshishian. 2001. *Georgia Civil Society
    Assessment (Including NGO Development, Media & Political Process)*.
    Washington, D.C.

Burnell, Peter. 2000. Promoting Parties and Party Systems in New Democracies: Is There
    Anything the International Community Can Do? Paper presented at the 50th annual
    conference of the Political Studies Association, 10-13 April, in London, UK.

Carothers, Thomas. 1999. *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*. Washington,
    D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

----------. 2006. C*onfronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New
    Democracies*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

----------. 2009. *Stepping Back From Democratic Pessimism*. Democracy and Rule of
    Law Program, Carnegie Paper nr. 99.

Diamond, Larry. 2002. "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes". *Journal of Democracy* 13
    (2): 21-35.

Doherty, Ivan. 2002. *Promoting Democracy in Difficult Settings*. Paper presented at
    CEPPS Roundtable, April 29, Washington, D.C.

Elgie, Robert. 2005. "Variations on a Theme". *Journal of Democracy* 16 (3): 98-112.

Erdmann, Gero. 2006. *Internationale Parteienförderung – neue Agenda und ungelöste
    Probleme?* Paper available at: http://www.giga-
    hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_global_0608.pdf

Hamrabaeva, Nargis. 2010. *Tajikistan: More Parties Don't Make Pluralism*.
    http://www.iwpr.net/report-news/tajikistan-more-parties-don%E2%80%99t-make-
    pluralism

International Republican Institute [IRI]. 2005. *Ukraine Work Plan 2006*. Washington, D.C.

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung [KAS]. 2008. *International Parteienzusammenarbeit der KAS.*

Globales Engagement für Frieden und Demokratie. Berlin.

Nelson, Sue, and Brian Katulis. 2005. *Armenia Political Party Assessment*.
Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development

Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy. *A Framework for Democratic Party-Building*. The Hague, 2004.

Nix, Steven B., 2005. *Remarks by Steven B. Nix, Regional Program Director Eurasia, International Republican Institute At The Heritage Foundation's "Helping Ukraine to Reach the Safe Shore"*. January 27.

Reilly, B. 2008. "Introduction". In B. Reilly & P. Nordlund (Eds.), *Political parties in conflict-prone societies: Regulation, engineering and democratic development* (pp. 3-25). Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

Roberts, Sean R. 2001. *Evaluation of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Kyrgyzstan, February 23- March 10*. Washington, D.C.

Sanchez, Omar. 2008. "Transformation and Decay: the De-Institutionalisation of Party Systems in South America". *Third World Quarterly* 29 (2): 315-37.

Saxer, Marc. *Parteiförderung als Element der Demokratieförderung*. Berlin, 2006.

Shugart, Matthew S. 1998. "The Inverse Relationship Between Party Strength and Executive Strength: A Theory of Politicians' Constitutional Choices". *British Journal of Political Science* 28 (1): 1-29.

Strom, Kaare. 1990. "A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties". *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (2): 565-98.

Swedberg, Jeffrey, and Ron Sprout. 2008. *Democracy and Governance in Eurasia: A Global Comparison*. Working Paper Series on the Transition Countries No. 9. Washington, D.C.: United State Agency for International Aid.

Ufen, Andreas. 2007. *Political Party and Party System Institutionalisation in Southeast Asia: A Comparison of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand*. German Institute of Global and Area Studies, GIGA Working Papers no. 44.

United States Agency for International Development. *Political Party Development Assistance*. Washington DC, 1999.

-----------. 2003. *USAID Political Party Assistance Policy*. Washington DC.

-----------. 2006. *OECD/DAC Peer Review of the United States*. Washington, D.C.

Verheije, Marga, André Krouwel, Dessy Gavrilova, and Theo van Koolwijk. 2006. *Van partij naar partij: Nederlandse ondersteuning van politieke partijen in Europese landen in transitie. Evaluatie Matra Politieke Partijen Programma 2000-2005*. Wormerveer.

Wolinetz, Steven B. 2002. "Beyond the Catch-All Party: Approaches to the Study of

Parties and Party Organization in Contemporary Democracies". In Political Parties. Old Concepts and New Challenges, ed. Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero, and Juan J. Linz, 136-65. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yalcin, R.. 2001. "The Formation of a Multiparty System in Uzbekistan". *Central Asia and the Caucasus, Journal of Social and Political Studies*, 5 (11)