

Kyrgyzstan 2010-2013:

Civil Society, Political Change and the Role of the International Community

On 1 March 2013, the OSCE Academy organized a discussion of the political developments in Kyrgyzstan since 2010. The discussion focused on three key themes that stood out in the international perception of Kyrgyzstan as a polity: a) the development of civil society after 2010, b) the development of the political system against the backdrop of questions over political stability, regionalism and North-South division, and c) the changing roles of the Western and non-Western donor community. Below is a summary of the discussion.¹

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan has always stood out among the Central Asian states in that its formal democratic procedures were not always completely orchestrated. Since the 1990s, this has given hope to various stakeholders interested in advancing democracy, economic reform and human rights. Such attempts have been frustrated repeatedly, however, and by 2010 the country appeared to fit the mold of post-Soviet authoritarianism, softened by economic dependency on donors.

The April 2010 overthrow of the ruling regime rekindled some hope again. A strengthened parliament, relatively free elections and free media were all taken as positive signs that, in the eyes of some observers, counterbalanced ethnic conflict, economic dysfunction, corruption and organized crime.

So what has really changed since 2010?

The participants of the seminar in various ways described the situation as one of non-improvement and non-change. This picture contradicts the promise of the political reforms in 2010. Captured by the metaphor of “stable instability,” the picture can be called pessimistic. That said, seminar participants did not agree on any scenario that would lead to violent developments.

This rather sombre analysis concurs with much of what has been written on the topic recently, as well as the mood prevailing among the development community. Speaking in more abstract terms, one fails to see any obvious, or even not so obvious, drivers of change.²

¹ The OSCE Academy does not publish the transcripts of this meeting, but only a general summary of the views expressed. These views are not those of the OSCE Academy or the OSCE.

² See DFID “Drivers of Change” available at http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dfid.gov.uk/contracts/files/ojec_5512_background.pdf (accessed on 19 March 2013) for an operational definition of this term.

Civil Society since 2010

An articulate and arguably “vibrant” civil society has often been cited as the key achievement in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the extent to which the civil society activism is ‘owned’ by the society of Kyrgyzstan (as opposed to the foreign donors) and thus, is sustainable has been heavily questioned lately in both academic and policy discussions.

Discussion participants highlighted three key processes taking place within civil society in Kyrgyzstan.

First, the ideological discourses that prevailed among civil society organizations has changed, from predominantly liberal-democratic during the presidencies of Akaev and Bakiev, to a more diverse palette, featuring nationalist and religious elements, among others. Today the most active non-governmental organizations are divided and polarized along lines that reflect the political cleavages within the elite and society at large.

Noteworthy is the rise of the Kyrgyz-speaking branch of civil society, which has been changing the previous, distinctly urban and Russian-speaking face of civil society. “Province has disappeared,” a speaker stated, pointing to the demographic and political underpinnings of the rise of young nationalist groups within the civil society.

The rise of religious groups, both Muslim and Christian, that do not fall under the umbrella of “civil society” as supported by the Western donors, was noted as well. These groups are essentially political, although excluded from internationally visible electoral competition by the existing laws, and thus cannot be an official part of the political scene. Nevertheless, these are the groups that most successfully reach out to local communities, and they are in fact becoming a part of those communities.

Participants stressed that this “diversification” of civil society coincided with the elimination of another, much more constructive type of civil society that was just emerging: so-called “voter groups,” a legal term for free association of city residents which were allowed to run for city council. The voter groups that appeared after 2010 competed successfully in local council elections, but were crushed by electoral laws favouring large, traditional parties that reflect the interests of their leaders and associates.

Second, the sources of support for civil society groups have increasingly internationalized, which partly explains the previous point on ideological diversification within civil society. This is an external process, not tightly linked to the events of April 2010. The initial dominance of western donors is now being replaced by a multiplicity of sources, notably Russian, Chinese, Turkish and Arabic, which have been successfully employing soft power. China for example, established social venues and Chinese language instruction, aiming to increase the number of people among the business community and generally population that look up to China and do not share the traditional perceptions of a Chinese threat.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, the state-oriented policies of external actors, already visible from 2005 to 2010, continued to demoralize the human-rights-oriented segment of civil society. After 2010, the topic of “stability” came to mean the continuation of a consequence-based rather than norm-based logic for international (most notably Western) approaches to the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan.

The Political System and Political Cleavages

Roundtable participants warned against overestimating the impact of the regime change in 2010 on the overall evolution of the political system. The following key points were made regarding the development of the political system:

- No driver of (positive) change has appeared, and generational change at the top is impeded by the lack of younger alternatives.
- The development of the party system favours the old, large, personality-based organizations. Alternative voter groups, which started to emerge in 2010, have been excluded from the political process. Generally, party developments and civil society processes are disconnected.
- The government is extremely weak and fractured along party lines, which makes it a committee of experts rather than an executive body.

A representative of the state faces a number of insecurities: fear of organized crime, concern with popular discontent, and a sense of the dominance of external players. The latter leads to the perception that political actors in Kyrgyzstan are, perhaps unknowingly, agents of external influences. This may or may not constitute the belief in conspiracy. However, the idea that the country is in the crosshairs of external “projects” remains a factor. This concerns elections, which, even when formalities are in place, are believed to be decided by forces outside of the control of voters as well as of the government. Organized crime and external players are such forces. The very belief in such powerful influences is a factor, irrespective of the factual basis of such a belief.

An additional aspect of this insecurity of the state and its representatives is presented by the on-going trial of the security officers who allegedly killed demonstrators during the anti-Bakiev rally on 7 April 2010. The general outcome of this three year process is that the security forces are unlikely to defend state structures in the event of anti-government riots. This means that political elites are going to rely even more on alternative, private security forces, which, in turn, may have fundamental implications for the development of the institutions of the state.

Development requires long-term vision, plans and relevant actions. However, as a result of these uncertainties and insecurities, and in light of politically-charged and selective justice,

there is an observable short-term nature to the thinking of political actors. The lack of a meaningful and effective development strategy also reflects the inability of the governing elites to fully rely on the state apparatus.

Regional division has been seen as a factor of significant concern in politics of Kyrgyzstan. Despite an electoral law that formally favours the formation of nation-wide political organizations, the election process (particularly the latest parliamentary elections) has re-kindled regionalism and ethnic division, resulting, for instance, in a seemingly paradoxical alliance between northern Kyrgyz elites and southern Uzbeks (at the expense of southern Kyrgyz). Yet outside of election campaigning, the North-South division becomes increasingly muddled by internal migration from North to South, and by political alliances crossing regional borders.

The West and the Rest

The liberal idea in Kyrgyzstan has failed to gain much ground. The population has been socialized through different ideas, diminishing the soft power of the US and Europe.

This casual observation suggests a deep disappointment on the part of the development community and donor organizations in Kyrgyzstan. One participant stated that bureaucratic momentum that is sustaining the presence of the West in Kyrgyzstan. The disappointment of the donors extends beyond the West, however, and includes Russia and Turkey, who could not claim much success either.

This is a two-way street, however. Representatives of civil society in Kyrgyzstan point to the lack of purpose, a crisis of *Zweckrationalitaet*, within the Western donor community. Specifically after 2010, Western partners sacrificed too much of their good will with local civil society for the sake of “stability.” Cooperation with the state was put above the normative principles professed by these donors, generating resentment and leading to the dismantling of the institutional achievements made earlier.

To this, one should add that authoritarian powers, Russia in particular, are popular in the country. Russia is traditionally an object of normative emulation for Kyrgyzstan, and together with China and Uzbekistan presents a counterweight to Western governance models.³

In lieu of conclusion

This roundtable aimed at collecting views on and assessment of some key current developments in the country. This summary should contribute to development of policy

³ As an example, the Russian branding of NGOs as foreign agents is viewed positively in Kyrgyzstan.

recommendations for key domestic and international policy-making institutions. At this point however we abstain from making policy inferences, leaving this task to other forums and formats. The OSCE Academy will continue to host such expert discussions, together with the publication of policy papers, and invites all the stakeholders to participate in these endeavours.

Participants of the discussion (in alphabetical order):

Cholpon Jakupova, Adilet Legal Clinic

Elmira Toktogulova, Internews

Emil Juraev, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Ikbol Mirsaidov, National Institute for Strategic Studies

Maxim Ryabkov, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Medet Tiulegenov, American University of Central Asia

Mohira Suyarkulova, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Muratbek Imanaliev, Institute for Public Policy

Shair Juraev, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Svetalana Dzardanova, OSCE Academy in Bishkek