

CIVIL SOCIETY

**CIVIL FORUMS
IN CENTRAL ASIA:
GOALS, SPECIFICS, POTENTIAL****Bakhodyr ERGASHEV***Ph.D., professor,
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In Central Asia, society is divided into three segments: the power vertical, business structures, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which largely interact in keeping with time-tested international practices. What is more, the historical-cultural and national-religious characteristics of the region's countries are modifying the structure

of civil society in ways that are turning the nationwide consolidation processes into something of a mindbender for researchers. This, together with the growing geopolitical role of the Central Asian countries, is giving research of the evolution of democratic institutions in these republics vital scientific significance.

**The Historical and
External Environment**

In the official political vocabulary of the region's countries, the very term "civil society" did not come into active use until the second half of the 1990s. Although, for example, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev states that "our history has essentially had no experience of a civil society,"¹ this in no way means that the leaders of the Central Asian states are not paying attention to this problem. The facts confirm that in the 20th century alone peaks of interest in a civil society occurred in the 1910s, the 1920s-1930s, the 1960s-1970s, and during the second half of the 1980s. Whereby the most productive in terms of constructive results can be considered the pre-revolutionary and perestroika periods.

¹ *Speech by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev at the Civil Forum (Astana, 15 October, 2003)* [www.president.kz].

For example, M. Bekhbudi, a prominent representative of the region's intelligentsia, leader of the Turkestan jadids (the end of the 19th-beginning of the 20th centuries), and "father" of local positivism, openly called for the constructive analysis and dissemination of ideological pluralism. In particular, by criticizing the Marxist theory, he recognized the need for comprehensive development of patronage of the arts, national consolidation, and youth reformation.² The informal movements of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which arose at the end of the 1980s, also played a certain positive role in the revival of civil self-awareness. (The whimsical symbiosis of the constructive wing of the national communist parties, the patriotic vector of the cooperative movement, and the intellectual stratum of the "people's fronts" that came with "perestroika" is still awaiting its researcher.)

As becomes clear from the multitude of facts, civil self-awareness in post-communist Central Asia was also indirectly stimulated by the political processes not only in the Baltic states alienated from the U.S.S.R., but also in Eastern Europe.³ In the experience of the European countries, particularly regarding organizing "public consent" measures, the local intelligentsia was fascinated by their "velvet" and effective nature. The successful political fate of Czech presidents Vaclav Gavel and Vaclav Klaus, who by means of civil forums managed to unite all the constructive forces, ensure their victory at the parliamentary elections, and carry out socioeconomic reforms, only confirmed the expediency of using European traditions.

Russia, the closest nation to us in past and present mentality, was unable to put a system of civil forums into practice until the 21st century. One of the initiators, Gleb Pavlovskiy, head of the Efficient Policy Foundation, believes that such forums make it possible, first, to carry out an "inventory" of power, second, to involve society in resolving state problems, and third, to adjust the program of the powers that be on the eve of parliamentary elections.⁴ But in Russian society there were also voices that spoke out "against," maintaining that in this way the authorities were trying to "lasso" a civil society. In any case, the fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the opening of the Civil Forum on 21 November, 2001, and that the Russian government adopted the "List of Measures to Implement the Results of the Civil Forum" on 14 February, 2002, had a certain influence on the spread of the forum's ideas in Central Asia as well.

Program Precepts

Civil forums usually carry out four main tasks in transitional societies: they confirm the general adherence to democratic values, draw up principles for strengthening cooperation among the power vertical, business structures, and NGOs, stabilize the sociopolitical situation, and reinforce the human factor. This form of democratic participation is usually effective only if it is ongoing, and if the activity of the executive structures of the civil forum is also continuous.

Transformation of the "third sector" into a factor of maturity of the democratic processes, on the one hand, and a component of the country's international image, on the other, makes it possible to view NGOs not only as a subject, but also as an object of the state's national security. In other words, of all the elements of the triad (power vertical-business structures-NGOs), the "third sector" is considered the most mobile, the most independent, and in so doing, is very authoritative at the international level. In this way, the dialog between the state and NGOs is considered compulsory and necessary.

In Central Asia, local civil forums were held in one way or another as early as the end of the 1990s-beginning of the 2000s. For example, in Uzbekistan, one of them was organized within the framework of

² See: Oina-Samarkand, No. 32, 1914, p. 623b; Khurriat-Samarkand, 3 May, 1917. For more detail, see: *Uzbekistan na puti k grazhdanskomu obshchestvu*, Shark, Tashkent, 2003, p. 91.

³ See, for example: "Rukovodstvuias obshchenatsionalnymi interesami," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 18 January, 2003.

⁴ See: G. Pavlovskiy, *Grazhdanskii forum dolzhen polozhit nachalo formirovaniuu obshchestvennogo shtaba prezident-skoi kompanii* [www.rambler.ru/db/news].

a project by the Izhtimoi fkr Public Opinion Research Center (the republic's largest sociological service) along with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Germany). These first initiatives were distinguished by a certain theme⁵ (including the Uzbekistan forum mentioned) and were aimed, in particular, at raising the legal education of women and activating their participation in the country's economic, political, social, and scientific life.

In Kazakhstan, the idea of a national civil forum was expressed in the president's Message to the people in April 2003. But the head of state qualified such an undertaking as a "republic-wide congress of nongovernmental organizations" and gave instructions for it to be held during the second half of 2004.⁶ If we take into account that there are approximately 4,500 NGOs in this republic, which employ about 35,000 people on a full-time basis, and 50,000 part-time (consultants and experts), with more than 100,000 volunteers, Nursultan Nazarbaev's idea is quite pertinent for Kazakhstan. It seems to us that when organizing "public consent" measures, the authorities of the Central Asian states were motivated by a desire to achieve national consolidation of society on the eve of the elections.

What is more, the so-called Partner Forum held in July 2003 in Kyrgyzstan and attended by the country's president demonstrated two organizational-technical difficulties characteristic of holding such undertakings not only in Central Asia, but also in other post-Soviet countries: defining the members of the working group and the quotas of regional representatives. But as the head of state himself noted, "it is not representation of all the people that is important, but representation of all the ideas."⁷ It is worth noting that this forum, which was the fourth major national meeting of the country's NGOs, was preceded by a discussion in which all of its sociopolitical forces participated. An important role in the forum's success was played by the "Ten Principles of Partnership and Stability" adopted 15 days earlier at a round table in the republic's parliament.

The authorities of Tajikistan, on the other hand, are placing greater significance on nascent businesses in their relations with public institutions. It is worth noting that in his program speech on 4 April, 2003, President Emamoli Rakhmonov called private property "one of the main prerequisites for the existence of a civil society."⁸ Nevertheless, the obvious weakness of the business structures in many of the region's districts does not allow business structures to be an equal component of the above-mentioned triad.

The national NNO forum held in Uzbekistan⁹ in August 2003 confirmed another general trait of the largest Central Asian "consent" undertakings—broad international support both by sponsors, and by the mass media. The recommendations adopted by the members of this forum to international charity foundations and organizations in planning and implementing their own projects can be classified as one of the forum's special features. Open orientation toward active participation of the electorate in the upcoming parliamentary elections was expressed at the Second Forum of Women's NNOs held in December 2003 in Tashkent.

It is possible to single out five general indices of the effectiveness of democratic institutions, in particular of "consent measures:" access of the broad masses of the population to these structures; their maximum financial support from the state and international organizations; linguistic diversity, linguistic parity, and cultural communality; expansion of the sphere of communication among NGOs; sincerity and trust of all three sides (power vertical-business structures-NGOs).

⁵ Held on 29-30 October, 1998, the Forum of Women's Nongovernmental Organizations of Tajikistan was distinguished, for example, by specific proposals to the authorities, international organizations, and NGOs, as well as by the priorities of the gender theme.

⁶ See: N. Nazarbaev, *Main Areas of Domestic and Foreign Policy for 2004. The Message of the President of the Country to the people of Kazakhstan*, Astana, 4 April, 2003 [<http://www.president.kz>].

⁷ A. Akaev, *Speech at the opening of the Partner Forum "Kyrgyz Statehood of the Third Millennium: New Ways and Mechanisms of Partnership of State Power and a Civil Society"* [<http://www.president.kg>].

⁸ E. Rakhmonov, *Otvetsivnost' za budushchee natsii*. Speech by the Tajikistan President to the Majlisi oli [www.tajikistan.ru].

⁹ NNO—In Uzbekistan: nongovernmental noncommercial organization.

National Innovations

The leaders of the Central Asian states understand the building of a civil society in different ways. For example, the seven priorities for strengthening democratization proclaimed in Uzbekistan primarily include ensuring independence, strengthening security and stability, and creating a market infrastructure, thus underlining the fundamental role of the state in this question.¹⁰ The President of Kyrgyzstan singles out “three main tasks in developing democracy:” maintaining an atmosphere of positive striving and social optimism, completing formation of the democratic institutions, and creating a strong vertical of representative democracy.¹¹ It appears that these two approaches nevertheless show the dilemma of choosing between comprehensiveness, on the one hand, and breadth of conceptual approaches, on the other.

National innovations are even more apparent using the example of the transitional organizational structures that exist in all of the Central Asian countries of interaction between the power vertical and civil society. For example, the National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights (NIDHR), which exists in Turkmenistan, can be seen as a kind of bridge between the state and the “third sector.”

President Askar Akaev called the Public Council of Democratic Security (PCDS) of Kyrgyzstan an “absolutely unique structure.”¹² The PCDS’s experience in monitoring implementation of the national human rights program and drawing up the Democratic Code project is interesting for other states. And it is worth noting the council’s right to “hear the reports of directors of state structures, local self-government structures, other organizations and institutions on questions regarding the protection of human rights and freedoms.” It is also expedient to qualify this structure’s ability to present corresponding recommendations to the president and republic’s government as a good lesson. But the PCDS is inevitably acquiring political functions, since this organization is a kind of indicator of the state of democracy in the country.

The Tajikistan National Unity and Revival Movement (TNURM) created in July 1997 “unites the efforts of different social strata and forces to establish strong civil peace, mutual trust, and consent.”¹³ This experience of resolving civil problems within the political movement deserves close analysis, even if only because TNURM is headed by the president and this movement has effective channels for strengthening social partnership.

In Kazakhstan (also under the patronage of the head of state) there is a Standing Assembly for Drawing up Proposals on Further Democratization and Development of the Civil Society. Judging from the decisions made (Memorandum on Adherence to Democratization and Development of a Civil Society, several important resolutions on questions of judicial and legal reform, the activity of the mass media, etc.), the Standing Assembly is demonstrating the same efficiency as the civil forum and has successfully involved oppositional political organizations in its activity.

The Institute for Civil Society Research (ICSR), which opened in Uzbekistan in June 2003, could become one of the largest NNOs. For example, as early as the second half of 2003, it held 20 round tables on questions of social partnership and, at the request of the political parties, organized a scientific experts’ examination of their program documents. With the assistance of public and state structures, the institute is creating a national data base of “21st Century Leaders.” The proposals and recommendations of the ICSR, which were formulated taking public opinion into account as much as possible, form the basis of many legislative acts.

All the named structures (the NIDHR, PCDS, TNURM, Standing Assembly, and ICSR) reflect the national models for building a civil society. In so doing, great attention is paid to economic, political,

¹⁰ See: I.A. Karimov, “Osnovnye napravleniya dal’neishego uglubleniya demokraticeskikh preobrazovaniy i formirovaniya osnov grazhdanskogo obshchestva. Doklad na IX sessii Oliy Majlisa Respubliki Uzbekistan vtorogo sozyva 29 avgusta 2002 g.,” *Narodnoe slovo*, 30 August, 2002.

¹¹ See: A. Akaev, *Speech at the Opening of the Partner Forum...*

¹² A. Akaev, *Speech at the Opening of the Partner Forum...*

¹³ According to official data, there are currently more than 1,000 NGOs active in the republic, many of them participated actively in implementing the Public Consent Treaty in Tajikistan.

legal and social issues. They include: the extent to which market relations have been established in different countries, as well as the middle class as the foundation and guarantor of a civil society; the rates at which government and society are being democratized; the presence of budget assignments (albeit in the form of social state orders) and foreign sponsor investments in NGOs; the quality of the population's life, citizens' interest in socially beneficial labor and complete information; perfection of the legislative base for developing democratic institutions; attitude toward intellectual labor and the extent of the "brain drain."

It seems to us that there is no need to look for any social threat in nationalizing democratic institutions. As Manuel Castells wrote on a similar issue, "in order to retain a steady course in the midst of a variety of different currents, there must be a reference point, there must be an anchor. This anchor is originality."¹⁴ In addition to this, it can be said that originality only accelerates or slows down the inevitable transition to democracy, but in no way destroys it.

Difficulties and Dangers

Civil forums in the region, no matter what auspices they are held under (the Partner Forum, the NNO Forum, and so on), have the same difficulties in common.

- These are, first, the problems mentioned above (using the example of Kyrgyzstan) in creating working structures and promoting delegates. Russian experience shows that these problems can be resolved by granting basic and additional quotas. The basic quotas are calculated according to the size of the region's population and the additional quotas with the aid of an experts' evaluation of public activity in the region and advantages for cities with a population of more than one million. In our opinion, under Central Asian conditions (with its large territory, rural population, and absence of development indices for civil society institutions), a series of preparatory provincial civil forums is more important than quotas.¹⁵ (Incidentally, in the Russian Federation, they were held in Kaliningrad, Cheliabinsk, Perm, Nizhny Novgorod, Tiumen, Krasnoyarsk, Sakhalin, Buriatia, and so on).
- Second, they are very expensive to hold, which against the background of the difficulties of the transition period, society may sometimes perceive as blasphemy (for example, according to the mass media, the civil forum in Russia cost the treasury 1.5 million dollars). Nevertheless experience shows that this is not a case where the strictest economy is needed (after all the NGOs themselves, thanks to their charitable activity, save the state dozens of times more money!). Under Central Asian conditions, by way of an alternative to such high expenses, it is desirable to attract the funds of international organizations.
- Third, due to the difference in starting conditions and degree of development of market relations, it is quite difficult to involve businessmen and other representatives of the nascent middle class. In particular, it is difficult to convince the relatively young stratum of businessmen that helping NGOs is not a quittance, but a social requirement, even greater than paying taxes. In this sense, Kazakhstan's experience is interesting, where the first open contest to implement socially significant projects was held among NGOs and the 20 best were chosen, which were then financed from the budget. This is a graphic example of how it is possible to "instigate" the interest of commercial structures in the "third sector."

We can single out three dangers among those befalling civil forums in the region, designating them as "buffoonery," "dressing up for show," and "duping." The forum really can be limited to a simple state-

¹⁴ See: M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture*, Vol. 2, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p. 2.

¹⁵ As an example of positive initiative, we could present the interregional forums held in Uzbekistan by NNOs of the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic and the Khorezm Region.

ment of public opinion, or turn into a garrulous show-piece, thus being socially ineffective. Since the president is guarantor of the constitution, he, as the experience of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan ascertains, should also be the “first fiddle” (but not the “conductor”) of the forum. In the triad mentioned above, “the power vertical” is still the most powerful element in terms of resources, and as such it is the state that should “be lenient” toward society and give it the opportunity to speak up, without forgetting in so doing to activate the economic and financial levers favorable to the “third sector.”

Taking into account the strategic partnership between several of the region’s states and the U.S., there is a great temptation to turn the forum into a show intended exclusively for diplomatic representative structures and foreign journalists. All of the participants in the forums organized in Central Asia should, in our opinion, proceed from two fundamental premises: realizing vitally important national interests and creating a favorable international image for their country. It frequently happens that the representative offices of international organizations are not completely informed about the state of the countries involved and the mentality of the actors in the political processes, which distorts their view of how a civil society is being formed in these states and sometimes causes it not to correlate with the strategic tasks of the countries whose interests they are supposed to be defending.¹⁶ One of the sensitive topics relating to civil forums is participation in them by the opposition.

And finally, it is difficult to agree with the opinion about the need for strict regulation of civil forums. “Gentle” regulation presumes, as already mentioned above, personal presentation of a report by the head of state. Restriction of representatives, regulation of debates, and a lack of real results, on the contrary, only reduce the efficiency of these meetings. In this respect, it is necessary to emphasize the negative impact on civil society of the ideas of “controllable democracy” currently being spread in Central Asia,¹⁷ which are promulgating ultra-patriotism, restricted parliamentarianism and freedom of the regions, a ban on objective political and economic analysis, reduction of the role of the mass media, and introducing censorship.

First Results

Based on the “forum palette” study of the Central Asian states in 1996-2003, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- First, a national mechanism of systematic restoration of the data base on nongovernmental organizations at the central and regional level is being created in each of its republics. For several reasons, particularly taking into account the declared liberalization of public life, the justice structures may not (and should not) coordinate the activity of NGOs. In this respect, as well as due to insufficient information about so-called “initiative groups” (clubs, activity groups, and so on, which are frequently not registered due to the high registration fees and other expenses imposed by the current legal requirements), the secretariat of the Civil Forum could be responsible for this coordination.
- Second, NGOs are being increasingly involved in resolving specific socioeconomic tasks. In this respect, we must agree with Alexander Pochinok, who at one time as head of the Ministry of Labor and Social Development of Russia, noted: “Civil forums (in the RF.—*B.E.*) are decreasing the work volume of the social ministries. We need to move away from the model where all social protection is concentrated in the hands of the state. If every NGO took ten people in need of social protection under its wing, there would not really be any need for the ministries.”¹⁸

¹⁶ We would like to limit ourselves here to only two examples illustrating our thesis: discussion at the end of 2003 by the civil society institutions in Kazakhstan of the new law on mass media, as well as the scientific polemics around the *Ethnic Atlas of Uzbekistan* published with help from the Soros Foundation.

¹⁷ In any case, as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez noted, we need to talk not about controllable democracy, but about democratic controllability.

¹⁸ A. Pochinok, *Printsip finansirovaniia sotsialnoi sfery neobkhodimo meniat* [<http://www.robalt.ru>].

A similar assessment also applies to Central Asia. It is particularly worth underlying the improvement of legislation on the state financing of nongovernmental organization projects.

- Third, the expert consultation potential of NGOs is being increasingly recruited for government purposes. Due to the continuing “brain drain” from the region and the fact that many qualified analysts are moving to work in international organizations, the question of involving (on a volunteer basis) nongovernmental intellectual potential in resolving government tasks is becoming particularly topical. The civil forum is promoting the formation of a broader data base on the personnel fund, which can be used by the state, businesses, and the “third sector” itself.
- Fourth, the ranks of the so-called volunteer movement are expanding and strengthening. The NGOs of Central Asia have acquired valuable experience in using the population’s volunteer resources. Moreover, socioeconomic difficulties (unemployment, migration, etc.), on the one hand, and “transit” phenomena (lack of spirituality, apathy, etc.), on the other, are dramatically increasing the need for volunteers, particularly of those recruited from among young people.
- Fifth, the outlines of state development conceptions for NGOs and their activity programs for the future are forming. (A conception, for example, forms the strategy, while a program forms specific state support measures of the “third sector.”) These documents define the optimal model of interrelations between the state and NGOs. What is more, as experience shows, when drawing up such documents, public opinion must be taken into account as much as possible.

According to our estimates, approximately 2,500 NNOs have been created in Uzbekistan (including territorial divisions and initiative groups). Approximately 17,000 people are employed in these structures full-time, with 26,600 on a part-time basis (consultants and experts), and 53,000 volunteers, that is, approximately 96,600 people are active in the “third sector.” To one degree or another, approximately 2.7 million of the republic’s citizens enjoy the services of NGOs. These organizations have become the only way to attract nongovernmental investments into the humanitarian field.

For example, among the most general indices of the effectiveness of “consent measures” characteristic of all the Central Asian states, we will note the following: the change in dimensions of the “third sector;” its expression of the real needs of democratic development; the number of grant-giving organizations, including state-owned; the level of involvement of NGOs in the social sphere, their resolution of gender problems, environmental issues, and so on; the influence of nongovernmental organizations on the state decision-making process, their participation in law-making; and governmental policy regarding NGOs.

Forecasts and Proposals

Talking about the near future, first, national forums of the “third sector” will soon become organizationally independent of state structures and have stronger financial backing.¹⁹ Second, the stronger interregional NGO forums (for example, in the Ferghana Valley located on the territory of three republics of the region) will promote even greater interaction between the state and civil society.²⁰ Third, it is quite likely that with successful regional integration, further specialization can be expected of both state (media, gender, environmental, and so on) and interstate forums. Fourth, interstate forums in particular will become the main catalyst for regional integration, by eliminating citizens’ psychological and intellectual discomfort. Fifth, interstate forums can be thematic and address a particular topical theme of domestic or

¹⁹ It seems that the time will come in Central Asia when the participation of the power vertical in the triumvirate of civil society becomes proportional to the participation of business and the “third sector.”

²⁰ As predecessors of the efficient interregional forums, we can single out the Central Asian Youth Congress (2-24 October, 2002), the Central Asian Meeting of Leaders of Women’s NGOs (14-16 October, 2003), and several others. We can also refer to the experience of progressive countries, for example, to interregional civil forums of North European countries held within the framework of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

even foreign policy. It seems to us that the main “forum” driving force will be young people, who, in contrast to people of the older generation, will be able to more successfully correlate market and democratic values.

We would single out the following topics that are pertinent for discussion at interstate civil forums of Central Asia: ethnic relations, the development of local self-government, judicial-legal reform, the penitentiary system, banning torture, youth policy, military reform and alternative service, combating terrorism and religious extremism, the problems of the Aral Sea and Sarez Lake, eliminating customs barriers, ensuring access to information, abolishing censorship, improving the normative-legal basis, and so on. Creating an interstate support center, Info-Center NGO, can be recommended as a step toward strengthening interregional integration of the “third sector” based on the Kazakhstan analogy.

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Civil forums in Central Asia, as public institutions gaining in momentum and taking into account the national specifics of their particular country, are becoming an important factor of democratization. On the whole, they are in tune with the centuries-long traditions of the region and are based on human values and models that have time-tested by world practice. It is not just a matter of ensuring that parliamentary and presidential elections are well organized, a national idea as such in any form requires systematic rallying of all constructive forces, and this is something only a civil forum is capable of doing.
