

CIVIL SOCIETY AND TRANSITION PERIOD

NATIONAL SECURITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Bakhodyr ERGASHEV

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor,
department head of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

Once more it has become obvious that the national security and civil society structures in nearly all the Central Asian states are impotent. Political power cannot in the long-term perspective oppose interest groups wishing to penetrate local countries.¹

¹ Officials of all local countries, Kyrgyzstan included (where under Akaev the per capita number of NGOs was equal to the East European figures), admit that the institutions of civil society are still undeveloped. For example, President of Kyrgyzstan described the local “third sector” and its activities as “marking time” (K. Bakiev, “O partiya-kh bez galstukov i bez obiniakov,” Interview to the *MCH* newspaper [www.president.kg]).

Meanwhile, NGOs are invited to deal with the vitally important issues of international security on an increasingly greater scale. How can the “third sector” be invited to deal with domestic and foreign threats and other deep-cutting political processes without damaging the democratic institutions? How can the state protect the fragile civil institutions from illegal pressure exerted by the power structures and establish viable civilian control? Finally, how can the state tune up the mechanism able to identify “points of contact” and efficient partnership for the sake of common national interests?

I. The Necessary Conceptual Adjustments

The primitive formulation of national security as the “exclusive task of the power structures” and of civil society as the “inevitable alternative to political power” continue to interfere with positive social processes. The lower points of political evolution (the civil war in Tajikistan, the terrorist acts in Uzbekistan, the aborted assassination of the Turkmenian president, etc.) were accompanied by the

authorities' more or less sincere appeals to the nation to help the power structures and increase public vigilance. At these moments, the leaders temporarily abandoned their roles of demiurges of social change, while the local political elite skillfully exploited the national mentality (the ordinary people's immense trust in the authorities, psychological intolerance of those who oppose the government, the very specific legal culture, etc.) to strengthen law and order.

The "local" conceptual mindset must be re-adjusted in view of the major social and political events that swept the Muslim East in 2005. I am convinced that today national security should be interpreted as a system which minimizes interference in the spiritual and moral world of the nation's majority and ensures dignified conditions for the nation's continued existence. Civil society, on the other hand, should be described as a structure created by the dialectics of social development which minimizes the government's interference in its functioning and will gradually limit the role of the government as a law-governed state emerges. The "duet" of national security and civil society, be it realized as a conglomerate, sum total, system, or integral whole, makes it possible to supply the above-mentioned cooperation with a theoretical basis.

The following aspects can be described as "mental" constants of national interests (the interests of the lower order) which bring together the national security and civil society structures: their shared rejection of international terrorism, their disapproval of WMD proliferation, the need to prevent technogenic and ecological catastrophes, etc. The need to resolve the problems created by the rental economy, low political culture, spreading poverty, Islamism and chauvinism, and penetration of the "yellow" culture belongs to the national security's "non-traditional" components. This is an interest of the higher order connected with the need to make the political elite and civil society more intelligent. National security and civil society have many "points of contact" and can potentially cooperate with good results.

It was in the age of ideological confrontation that the "lonely" national security system was quite effective. Today, when society is facing the threat of a split of civilizations, it is the civil society institutions which can arrange, better than others, a dialog and bring harmony to national, cultural, and religious relations. The ruling elites of all the Central Asian states have recognized this: between 1991 and 2005 all the Central Asian summits invariably declared that the region needed a common popular front based on geographical proximity and civilizational kinship to fight extremism and terror.² Fifteen years of independence have demonstrated that popular diplomacy can create cooperation zones much better than official diplomacy.

There is a certain contradiction between the domestic nature of national security and the global nature of civil society which betrays itself in the region and outside it. First, as distinct from national security, civil society can be universal and equal and function "either for all or for nobody." Second, it has become clear that it can go ahead without state support and the state structures—a fact demonstrated in some of the CIS countries. Third, such a society prefers to keep away from the power structures in favor of public and political influence. Fourth, civil society as a rule does not lean toward national might and the balance of power—it relies on generally accepted international standards and international law.

II. The Recent History of the "First" and "Third" Sectors Partnership

The official policy of "rejection of the past" popular in Central Asia at the early stages of sovereignty made the social transformations somewhat chaotic. The statements which corresponded to

² On 11 September, 2005, President of Kazakhstan Nazarbaev said at the second Civil Forum that "the NGOs play a special role in ensuring personal and social security, as well as human rights and freedoms" [www.akorda.kz]. He described "high living standards" as the main aim of the government/"third sector" cooperation.

the Western standards issued by the local political leaders at that time contradicted the practical, “Soviet” methods of their realization, which inevitably worsened the situation in all countries. Industrial decline, more complicated political realities, social tension and the plummeting living standards of most of the nation widened the ideological gap between the intellectuals and the government. In this context, the numerous statements to the effect that “the country aimed to build a state ruled by law and the foundations of a civil society” were obviously premature and, in fact, compromised the idea.

The part of the national elites burdened by the material hardships of the transition period and shackled by the “transit” official national ideologies³ lingered for a long time at the crossroads of hard social decisions. In the 1990s, the intelligentsia accepted an “unofficial” and in many respects unwelcome invitation to join a new sphere—the “third sector,” which functioned on foreign grants. Between 1993 and 2002, the civil society institutions incorporated the best and most charismatic members of the educated classes and creative workers; this resulted in an intellectual imbalance between the government and the nongovernmental community in favor of the latter.

Gradually and spontaneously the civil institutions of the local states learned to function as generators of ideas conducive to crisis settlement and creation of a new regional order to help the Central Asian countries join the world community. Indeed, some of the world-famous writers from Central Asian countries promoted this process: Olzhas Suleymenov from Kazakhstan worked in the sphere of nuclear safety; Chinghiz Aytmatov from Kyrgyzstan was involved in preventing local conflicts; Ozod Sharafiddinov from Uzbekistan, in liquidating the repercussions of environmental disasters; and Loika Sherali from Tajikistan, in preserving territorial integrity. Today, the most respected former diplomats and political figures are promoting regional and interregional integration.

Transformation of tolerance into a factor of the political process achieved late in the 20th century was the best achievement of Central Asian civil societies and contributed to regional security. The creative intelligentsia, the moving force behind the “third sector,” managed to preserve public rejection of aggression, annexations, wars, the use of force, riots, militarization, confrontation, terrorism, espionage, in short everything that contradicted long-term vitally important national interests. The local intelligentsia managed to teach their societies that personal, social, and state security could not exist separately; it also took part in finding a niche for their countries in the system of global and international security.

III. Common Threats to Both Sectors

There are five key issues in the total range of “points of disagreements” between the structures of national security and civil society in all the Central Asian republics: cross-border cooperation; information exchange; migration; demilitarization; and economic integration. This is not all that the two sectors should discuss.⁴ It is in these spheres, especially in the Ferghana Valley, shared by four out of five Central Asian states, that the divergent national interests of the local states touch upon the common interests of the local civil societies. The “third sector” frequently runs up against

³ In Central Asia, the tragedy of the man-in-the-street included, among other things, the hard task of abandoning Soviet cosmopolitanism for the sake of positive nationalism. Political realities—Draw Apart to Unite—demanded difficult spiritual efforts and the willingness to discard old habits. Many proved unequal to this. The majority rejected the past, yet the future was too vague for the intellectuals to nurse optimistic expectations.

⁴ The two structures treat the term “territorial integrity” differently, which is probably explained by its power and public “dimensions.” The power aspect is more zealous, more conservative, and more rigid, while the public is more “far-sighted,” more progressive, and more flexible. These are probably the two political extremes that create threats to national security of the second order.

the political vectors of international cooperation in the sphere of the simplest, educational and spiritual issues.

The common regional identity of the Central Asian civil societies is fairly developed thanks to the supranational phenomenon present in the practical political integration of the existing international structures (EU, EurAsEC, etc.). The same is probably responsible for the very specific and constructive policy of the institutions of civil society in relation to foreign diasporas. Meanwhile, there is the objective necessity (which the “third factor” has not yet grasped) to create national markets at the first stage in order to merge them at the next stage. It demands that civil society should adapt itself to the old and new threats, and to the risks and challenges of world politics. (In this way, society becomes a bridge between the individual and the state.⁵)

As distinct from the national security structures, the civil society structures arrange relations among themselves horizontally, not vertically. In this way, they achieve efficient and equal cooperation among the partners. Small countries (all Central Asian republics belong to this category) profit from this a great deal when pursuing their foreign policies⁶ in the context of unbalanced international cooperation typical of the local countries’ relations with the world centers of power. Judging by what the local leaders say, the Central Asian political elite is aware of this.

The following opinion commonly shared across the post-Soviet expanse can be accepted in general: “The state is the key agent of change in Russia today, as well as in other countries going through a similar stage of economic development.”⁷ There is another seemingly erroneous opinion according to which the state and its leaders can ensure national security and realize their “monopoly on the sphere,” while civil society is dangerous because it pursues disconnected aims, is ignorant of common interests, and might, therefore, destabilize the country. Meanwhile, in the globalization context, the state cannot claim the right to ensure national security single-handedly, either physically or morally. Hence the conclusion: national security is a result of cooperation and the balancing of group interests.

It seems that the structures with shared national interests can identify their common approaches to their realization. The following aspects should be stressed among the basic principles of cooperation of the national security and civil society structures: combination of centralized leadership of the former with control over them by the latter; timely identification, liquidation, and even prediction of threats and adequate responses to them; sufficient potential of the forces, means, and resources needed to ensure national security and their rational use; correspondence between the real level of readiness (training) for ensuring national security and the required level; and not damaging the international and national security of other countries.

IV. Western Expansion: Small Pros and Big Cons

It was late in the 1980s that the American experience of relations between the government and the “third sector” was brought to Soviet Central Asia by the Soros Foundation. We must admit that

⁵ Obviously, national security should be ensured not only to prevent threats, risks, and challenges, but also to promote the individual, human rights and freedoms, and society’s material and spiritual values. In other words, not only short-term, but also long-term national interests responsible for the agenda of partnership of the “first” and “third” sectors are involved.

⁶ Significantly, Resolution No. 1624 of the U.N. Security Council approved by the jubilee Summit 2005 speaks, for the first time, not only of the states’ responsibilities, but also of the need to tap civil society’s potential (educational systems, the media, and the business community) to ensure military security. The systems of national security and civil society obviously share certain problems.

⁷ Address by Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov at Stanford University, San Francisco, 20 September, 2005 [www.mid.ru], 24 September, 2005.

Western charities were keeping the local academic communities and creative intelligentsia afloat during the most trying transition period, thus preventing an even greater brain drain and stimulating some of the academic branches. The same applies to the NGOs—the Western lead in their development is generally recognized. The United States and its allies created a developed “third sector” in Central Asia in which, until recently, charity prevailed over realization of the critical national interests in the oil- and gas-rich region.

Unfortunately, it was money from abroad that determined the image of many of the local NGOs. The public organizations caught grantomania, a new and hazardous disease. In fact, the local “third sector” was not to blame: grants created a seemingly shadow branch of public life with quasi patronage programs, strong personnel and considerable technical potential, specific parlance, far-flung geographic contacts, etc. This branch promotes a Western lifestyle in the region. (Network structures are another specific feature of this expansion.)

Today, foreign religious, mainly Christian, expansion is engulfing the region. Sponsored by the West, the missionaries bring new religious movements (in my opinion their number has increased 3.3-fold), most of them still unregistered. The state security structures are concerned with the spread of extremist information in Southern Kazakhstan, Western Kyrgyzstan, and Northern Tajikistan, which does nothing to promote tolerance.

The institutions of civil society treat the image of their countries in a special way. Despite its ideas of charity, the West is promoting the philosophy of individualism, which in principle rejects patriotism. The positive image of one’s country (which demonstrates negative development trends) is seen as absolute nonsense: the entities of the imposed philosophy described themselves as victims of “the misfortune of being clever,” while the individualists easily parted with the “unwashed country.” The adepts of Western influence seem to be unaware of the pitfall: the local intelligentsia with its more or less Islamic conscience has never totally abandoned its love for the Motherland, therefore individualism has no chance in Central Asia.

It seems that by the mid-2003 the Central Asian official structures finally became convinced that the borrowed (fully or partially) patterns of switching over to democracy did not fit the local cultural and historical conditions. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan were the first to recognize this. In their speeches they spoke about the need to protect the civil institutions from foreign influence. President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov pointed out: “The desire to plant democracy from outside without due regard for the specific features of states and nations will bring sad and grave results in the same way as this happened with the efforts of exporting communism.”⁸

Political activities in any country should be absolutely transparent—this fully coincides with the spirit and values of Western democracy and civil society—historically unique structures different from the Central Asian analogies.⁹ This means that the funding of political activities should be absolutely transparent. We cannot tolerate the NGOs being used for funding political activities, especially when the funding comes from abroad. This would obviously become “a foreign policy instrument of other states,”¹⁰ “distort the national political process, and plant a mine under the future development

⁸ I. Karimov, *Chelovek, ego prava i svobody, interesy—vysshaia tsennost*, Speech delivered at a gala meeting dedicated to the 13th anniversary of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan [www.press-service.uz].

⁹ There are fairly considerable differences between the historical experience of the Central Asian and the Western states (the U.S. in particular). There were absolutely comfortable conditions in the United States, where a civil society grew from the grass-root level. It was based on the Protestant communities that had arrived from England. Today, however, there are certain contradictions between civil society ideals and national security needs. The Patriot Act is one of the examples.

¹⁰ Russian President Putin put this in a nutshell when explaining his position on the improvement of the national laws related to the NGOs and their types of funding. There were different approaches to the problem in Russia, obvious even

of the country.”¹¹ I would like to point out that even though the political parties in Central Asia belong to the civil society sector, under national laws the NGOs that form its core cannot go into politics or commerce.

Washington prefers to ignore the changed official position of the five Central Asian capitals on interaction between the local and foreign NGOs; it insists on its old political line in the region, in particular regarding civil society and national security. On 13 October, 2005, speaking at the Gumilev Eurasian National University in Astana, U.S. State Secretary Condoleezza Rice said: “True stability and true security are only found in democratic regimes. And no calculation of short-term interest should tempt us to undermine this basic conviction. America will encourage all of its friends in Central Asia to undertake democratic reforms.”¹²

V. Taking Part in Strengthening Information Security

The events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan confirmed that the civil institutions should be involved in ensuring information security. Indeed, in conflict situations it was not the opinion prevailing among the local people (or at least of a few sociological services and non-state media) that passed for “public opinion,” but the opinions offered by the local branches of foreign and international NGOs (the International Crisis Group, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, etc.). New relatively independent analytical structures began mushrooming under the “post-revolutionary” conditions, the Regional Politics Foundation in Uzbekistan being one of them. They were patterned on similar Russian non-state structures, such as the Effective Policy Foundation, the Politika Foundation, etc.

The civil society institutions should be invited to fight domestic information threats, such as blending of state and criminal structures in the communication sphere; inadequate budget funding; lower-than-ever efficiency of the system of education and upbringing; shortage of skilled personnel; and the fact that the Central Asian republics are trailing behind the world’s leaders where the level of information awareness of the state structures is concerned. Western practices of involving retired politicians in international NGOs (such as Ulof Palme and Jimmy Carter) should be tapped to invite the “third sector” to help create the country’s favorable image.

It is advisable to set up public alliances in Central Asia in the form of independent analytical centers to work in the security sphere. Such structures—the International Institute of Contemporary Policies and the Center for Political Research—are already functioning in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respectively; they contribute to resolving regional and global problems and are active in the foreign policy field. They are staffed with retired officers of the power structures, as well as academics specializing in military security, world politics, and international relations. We can obviously set up NGOs for studying the state’s problems independently from its power bodies.

inside executive power. As a result the adopted amendments reflected public opinion to a greater extent [than the original version] (see: *Vstrecha V. Putina s predsedatelem Soveta po sodeystviu razvitiu institutov grazhdanskogo obshchestva i pravam cheloveka Elloy Pamfilovoy 24 November, 2005* [www.kremlin.ru]).

¹¹ S.V. Lavrov, op. cit.

¹² [usinfo.state.gov].

¹³ [www.mid.ru].

VI. How Unity Can Be Strengthened

To influence decision-making in the national security sphere, civil society should be constantly aware of the opinions prevailing in the nation to be analyzed, generalized, and listed as a short enumeration of political alternatives offered as part of the state's foreign policy and defense programs. This is the road toward the most realistic state course, on the one hand, and public control over its realization, on the other. We should take account of Western experiences and all opinions about ensuring national security—from liberal pragmatism to healthy conservatism. A “club of rational discussions” can be set up to make this task easier.

Today, it is strategically important to ensure the security of civil society itself, that is, competitiveness, to use a Russian political term. What can be done to achieve this? Laws should be improved to allow citizens take part in political decision-making through polls, public hearings, public assessments, and referendums; we need structures that will implement political decisions related to civil society and be staffed with third sector members. There is the Public Chamber in Russia, the Council of Promoting Civil Society in Uzbekistan, the National Democratization Commission in Kazakhstan, etc.; public movements and charities need financial support; the NGOs should primarily be involved in fighting poverty and helping the needy; laws should be adjusted to develop public control in the form of public “inspections” and make it more effective, etc.

It would be short-sighted to deny the NGO sector wide financial support. Analyses have confirmed that the West spends nearly 10 times more than the Central Asian republics on public associations in the region. This is hardly conducive to “discontinuing the export of democracy,” as the official structures insist. Many of the post-Soviet states accepted positive discrimination as the road toward equal starting conditions in the civil society sphere.¹³ On the one hand, local public organizations should receive privileges, on the other, similar foreign structures will have to pay taxes. (To keep within the article's subject I shall not dwell on Russia's practice of setting up a Donors' Council.)

In the near future the Central Asian “third sector” will be able to fill the local niche of “soft security” and contribute to fighting drugs, homelessness, and environmental pollution. This is confirmed by a considerable number of NGOs working in these spheres on American grants. This sector can gradually acquire legal forms of effective civil control over the power structures. This is already taking place today in the form of the NGOs' involvement in parliamentary hearings in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, etc.

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The Central Asian countries have not yet acquired a middle class, the cornerstone of a civil society, yet the need to ensure national security is forcing the states to place higher demands on the “third sector.” Civil society, which can help carry out this task, cannot be produced by a simple legal act—it is a long process. Time is needed, probably as much as 50 years; the main thing, however, is the state's effective activities, which would describe it as a social state. In the final analysis, the statehood of Central Asian countries depends on their ability to build a civil society.