



Decolonisation of Central Asia

Policy Notes for Civil Society

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The publication is intended for young experts and consultants, researchers, decision makers, as well as a wide range of readers interested in politics and international relations in the Central Asian region.

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IWPR is an international non-profit organization that provides support to independent media and civil society in countries in transition. It operates in 28 states; in Central Asia, IWPR began operations in 1999.

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Introduction

On 15-17 March 2023, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) held a conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan, entitled 'Decolonising Central Asia: Reshaping Narratives'. 'Decolonisation' has been a topic of discussion in certain circles of Central Asian scholars, activists and artists for some time, and Russia's full scale military intervention in Ukraine in 2022 has provided a significant impetus for intensifying such debates in the region. The issue is very sensitive for Central Asians, and there is no social agreement on the nature, depth and consequences of the colonial past of Central Asian countries. Local governments are also reluctant to openly discuss their countries' history from a colonial/decolonial perspective.

In this context, the event organised by IWPR brought together public sector representatives, journalists, civil society organisations, activists, artists, scholars and researchers to openly discuss the issue of 'decolonisation' in Central Asia. For three days, participants from all five countries of the region and from different backgrounds shared their reflections on different aspects of decolonisation, including language and identity, knowledge production, foreign propaganda, history, gender, urban issues and other similar topics. On the final day of the event, participants also discussed future steps to continue and facilitate dialogue on decolonisation in Central Asia. The conference participants came up with practical recommendations on how to further promote the region-wide discussion, involving different stakeholders and wider audiences. The proposed recommendations are addressed separately to representatives of the public sector, civil society, the media, international organisations and donors. This document is a summary of the recommendations offered by the conference participants to civil society.

Participants suggested critically re-examining how to define Civil Society:

It is imperative to start with the definition of civil society, with which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are commonly associated - organisations that represent the interests or protect the rights of specific groups of the population or advocate for their rights. The term "NGO" has acquired negative connotations in the regions, and a rebranding of the image of NGOs is necessary. Civil society is more than "NGOs paid by the West" or activists who participate in rallies, and it is not limited to "privileged urbanites". We should create counter-narratives of NGOs with a human touch that challenge the narratives propagated by governments in the regions. Importantly, the concept of civil society needs to be broadened beyond banner-carrying NGOs. Creativity should be harnessed as a valuable resource that can shape people's moral and spiritual perceptions. Civil society should extend its reach beyond NGOs to include local communities at the grassroots level for greater inclusiveness and participation. The civil sector includes not only NGOs, but also bloggers, influencers and other individuals who have their own followings or audiences. It is therefore necessary to move beyond the narrow concept of "civil sector" - "this is not an NGO that came from Bishkek to Naryn and tried to teach the local community something". Decolonising the concept of the civil sector - these are the citizens of our country, organised around different principles. It is crucial to restore the agency of the people, especially the activists and individuals on the ground.

In fact, the legal profession is an integral part of civil society, and the potential of legal advocacy is often overlooked when discussing the development of civil society. In our countries, which belong to the Romano-Germanic legal system, we often simply copy legislation from the Russian Federation. By organising events and working with lawyers, we can produce academic papers, commentaries and appeals to our parliaments on various laws copied from the Russian Federation. It is also important to consolidate the bar associations.

Cultural spaces such as museums, galleries and exhibitions are also seen as integral institutions of civil society and should be used to promote decolonisation.

Conference participants suggested developing traditional civil society institutions:

The traditional institutions of civil society in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, such as the mahalla institution and 'hashar' (in Uzbek) or 'ashar' (in Kyrgyz), were distorted during the Soviet period. It is essential to revitalise and expand these formats in line with the principles of civil society.

These institutions should act as a conduit for feedback from the people, as the very essence of the mahalla is to foster communication with local communities.

It is essential to return authentically to our roots by reviving traditional institutions of civil society. This should include fostering diversity, promoting diversification and embracing informalisation within civil society.

Participants proposed to improve relations of civil society with government agencies:

Deliberate efforts should be made to engage with state bodies, including government and municipal services, in the region and to organise discussions with them on the issue of decolonisation. It is worrying that local governments often adopt laws such as the Russian Federation's "Law on Foreign Agents", as in the case of Kyrgyzstan. A strategy should therefore be developed for targeted engagement with government agencies on decolonisation, considering the capacities and perspectives of officials within these agencies.

Government agencies are often intolerant of criticism of domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, when the discourse of decolonisation is framed as a cultural or social issue, there should be no interference by state agencies in this process. Civil society should refrain from excessive interference in purely political processes and avoid politicising the discourse of decolonisation. If the focus remains on changing public attitudes, cultural values and narratives, the process can potentially develop without resistance from state authorities.

It is important to consider the different degrees of freedom and risks associated with promoting decolonisation in different countries in the region. It is crucial to avoid using toxic terms that may provoke feelings of protest among government agencies, as this can be counterproductive. For example, using the term "decolonisation" can raise questions such as "Were we really a colony?" Alternative terms such as "de-Westernisation", "return to roots" and others can be used to avoid such potential problems.

Ensuring the safety of civil society activists is paramount. It is therefore imperative that events in countries within the region are organised in coordination with government authorities to mitigate risks and ensure the well-being of activists.

Civil society should see government not as an "adversary" but as a partner. It is important to abandon the idea that NGOs replace the state.

Requesting transitional justice from state and rethinking the very concept of human rights from the prism of decolonization - the colonization of all European institutions - is a great decolonial movement in the global South.

Participants suggested raising public awareness of the importance of decolonisation:

There are many academic and scholarly publications on decolonisation in the region and worldwide, but they often use technical language that can be difficult to understand. It is therefore essential to develop more simplified and accessible resources on decolonisation that can be easily accessed and used by NGOs in the region.

Engaging in and advocating for citizen research is essential. This includes delving into historical memory, conducting research and producing alternative reports that can be translated into different languages. It is also important to use international human rights mechanisms, such as the United Nations and the Human Rights Committee, to support these efforts.

Civil society needs to influence the legislative process, because the civil sector has access to parliament (deputies from civil sector). For example, the refusal to rebroadcast Russian channels paid for by the state budget.

Building relationships with bloggers and influencers in the region can be valuable for reporting from a decolonisation perspective. Building on the momentum of the decolonisation discourse, it is important to encourage sustained and systemic engagement with the discourse and practice of decolonisation, and to ensure that these discussions move beyond superficial conversations.

It is crucial to raise awareness about decolonisation in remote areas, especially among young people. To this end, NGOs should conduct training sessions and organise meetings with the active participation of young people. In essence, NGOs have their own audiences and beneficiaries, and it is important for them to raise the issue of decolonisation by reformulating or simplifying it in countries where it may be prohibited or unsupported. Maintaining the discourse of decolonisation among NGO audiences is essential to highlight the challenges and issues associated with decolonisation. In some countries, it may not be necessary to include the term 'decolonisation' in the title of trainings, seminars and other events, as the topic can be highly sensitive and provoke immediate protest. As NGOs gradually incorporate the discourse of decolonisation into their regular activities and approach it from different angles, there may be requests from government and financial support to further these processes.

Participants suggested developing intra-regional links between civil society organisations to promote decolonisation:

It is necessary to improve interaction, communication and consolidation through cooperation between NGOs at regional level and to create a platform for the pool of activists formed in this area.

It is important to strengthen links between civil societies in the countries of the region and to promote regional solidarity, especially in times of crisis. For example, if a law "on foreign agents" is passed in Uzbekistan, Uzbeks may be afraid to talk about it because of the risk of immediate arrest. Therefore, civil society in neighbouring countries should actively write about it, rather than focusing on how Uzbeks have accepted this law without showing any resistance.

The CA region needs to join the Global South and be part of the whole decolonial/feminist/queer movement that critically reflects on all colonial structures, including European human rights structures.

Participants argued for the financial sustainability and independence of civil society organisations:

Civil society should not be overly dependent on external donors, as it is important for them to have their own values and positioning, and to be able to implement programmes based on their genuine intentions, rather than simply for the purpose of receiving grants. When civil society has a clear position within society, it fosters greater trust and confidence among people to embrace and share the values promoted by the NGO. Thus, conference participants argued that NGOs in the region should seek to be independent and not rely solely on foreign funding, and should also actively participate in government grant competitions. This can also be achieved by diversifying donor funding by seeking alternative sources of funding (e.g. by developing social entrepreneurship or by establishing contacts with businesses in their countries).



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