



Decolonisation of Central Asia

Policy Notes for Governments

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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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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 governments of the Central Asian states.

Experts from public sector, non-governmental organisations, civil society and researchers have listed potential recommendations for Central Asian governments on how to act and what to consider within growing demand on decolonial discourse. Even though feasibility and administrative acceptability of the following recommendations might have constraints, recognition and raising awareness of this topic is necessary. Since there is no consensus of defining decolonisation in the current context in the region and reluctance of states to use this term, there might be conceptual challenges in implementing policies as well.

For the Central Asian region, decolonisation has often been juxtaposed with de-Sovietisation and de-Russification. At the same time, what goes beyond this is the need for recognition and the construction of the region's own agenda in international relations, which would not limit Central Asia to being seen in terms of its neighbourhood with Russia or China. Most of the recommendations presuppose a political, cultural and economic alliance between five countries in order to have their subjectivity recognised by other states and also by international organisations. Indeed, this is where decolonisation comes into practice, when it meets regional cooperation. The promotion of regional cooperation at all levels and the prioritisation of multilateral relations were emphasised.

One of the main recommendations was maintaining interethnic and ethno-cultural diversity and stability on national and regional levels. On a bigger scale experts connected it with fostering civic nationhood in each state, which might later on help strengthen regional identity as well. By referring to common history and geography, they pointed out the importance of peace and consolidation within states too. Yet, the notion of Central Asian identity, which has become a topic of discussion for a while, still remains ambiguous. Promoting regional soft power of the region as a political and cultural entity in this sense was briefly mentioned. Within a decolonial framework claiming “subjectivity” and having an opportunity to frame their own identity, as experts stated, should become core priority now. For countries that over the last three decades have promoted top-down nation building policies, there might be a necessity of taking into account bottom-up nationhood processes linked with decolonisation.

Even if derussification/desovietisation sometimes seen as one of the branches of decolonisation in Central Asia, experts were relatively cautious in referring to such concepts. Considering economic partnership with Russia, most experts have agreed on “strategic silence” in certain cases to be one of the safe and realistic options. At the same time, derussification/desovietisation in certain ways as a process was not eliminated from discussions too. For instance, to limit or to stop broadcasting Russian TV-channels national TV was suggested for all five countries. Besides that, military cooperation, according to experts, should also be re-considered in favor of Central Asian states.

Experts have suggested more feasible policy options for education and research sectors. When it comes to education governance, one of the main recommendations was to facilitate higher education exchange programs across the region. Such an initiative had already been announced back in 2021, such as the Central Asian Unified Higher Education Zone.[1] Besides that, to promote state languages, first year of studies with scholarship for international students was suggested to be taught in Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen languages respectively. Participants also proposed high school exchange programs that would give students the opportunity to strengthen cultural ties within the region.

Experts recommended decolonisation to regional research and launch a potential Central Asian Think Tank network with a branch in all five countries, that would facilitate cooperation on the basis of research. One of the governing bodies or facilitators could be Ministries of Foreign Affairs, as experts mentioned. Such think tanks could also provide an opportunity to organize thematic workshops or trainings for civil servants in all five countries. It could help to raise awareness among government members and help them facilitate potential changes in their own countries and across the region.

For higher university curriculums experts advised incorporating decolonial lenses (literature, approaches) to social sciences and humanities. Yet, there is no common consensus on how to understand and teach “decoloniality”. “Decolonisation” is the long time debate, experts highlighted that mainstreaming it will be a part of the discussion for a while. Namely, academic cooperation with Global South and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries as intra-regional cooperation was suggested. More room in discussing decolonisation in academia in the countries and across the region might be efficient to bring up this dialogue.

Fostering regional cooperation with focus in gaining subjectivity (as part of decolonial processes) can be based on revising history books and politics of memory. Even though nationhood in each country might remain a priority, more regional history and outlook should be given. One of the suggestions was to develop a Central Asian history textbook for schools and universities to raise awareness about the region in all five countries. It should be highly important to give a floor to local authors- scholars and educators to be involved in the process as well.

Since the request on decolonisation is coming from the grassroots, the core suggestion to governments was to strengthen cooperation with civil society. Since the pool of activists is relatively small in each of five countries and civil society is not yet a big part of the whole population, building an open dialogue of government with civil society would be very impactful.

[1] On June 18, 2021, within the framework of the forum with the participation of the ministers of education of the Central Asian countries in Turkestan, a declaration was adopted on the creation of the Central Asian Higher Education Zone. <https://rm.coe.int/-/1680a2eac8> <https://astanatimes.com/2021/06/central-asian-countries-to-create-unified-higher-education-zone/>



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