



Decolonisation of Central Asia

Policy Notes
for International
Organisations

Decolonisation of Central Asia: Policy Notes for International Organisations

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 International organisations.

The conference participants offer the following recommendations for international organisations to (1) improve their overall performance in the region, and (2) support more tailored initiatives related to 'decolonisation'.

- First of all, international organisations and donors need to recognise the subjectivity of Central Asia as a separate region. Some international organisations and donors continue to treat Central Asia as an extension of other regions or countries, such as Russia or Eurasia. Occasionally, they do not have separate offices for Central Asia, but rather manage their activities from other European capitals. Similarly, in some institutions it is still common for desk officers for Central Asia to be of Russian/Eastern European origin. As a result, these organisations may develop a distorted understanding of the processes taking place in the region. Recognising Central Asia's subjectivity as a distinct region should be the first step for these international organisations to rethink their presence in the region.
- International organisations and donors also need to de-Westernise their approaches and practices. They are often perceived as acting in part as neo-colonial entities, determining which issues and projects to focus on and how to implement them, without proper consultation with local actors. Projects funded by various international organisations often involve foreign experts who may have little understanding of the contextual specificities of Central Asia, while local experts with region-specific expertise remain neglected. Even when local experts are involved, they are paid significantly less than foreign experts for the same quality of work. Without changing such discriminatory practices and rethinking their inflexible top-down approaches, international organisations and donors will continue to suffer from poor performance and lack of trust from local stakeholders.
- As for 'decolonisation' in Central Asia, although some scholars/activists/artists have been promoting such a discussion for some time, it is still an evolving issue for wider Central Asian societies. There is still no agreement on the nature, extent, depth and consequences of the colonial past of the Central Asian countries. To answer these questions, an important step is to conduct more research, including basic studies, on 'decolonisation'. Very often, research-related activities are overlooked by international organisations in Central Asia. In this regard, it is suggested that these organisations support research activities related to 'decolonisation', including supporting the conduct of original research on the topic, organising regular venues to discuss the findings, and disseminating the results to a wider audience. Without building a foundation of knowledge about 'decolonisation' in Central Asia, any further discussions are likely to remain fragmented or even speculative.

- At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that 'decolonisation' is a very sensitive topic both for Central Asian governments and societies. Therefore, international organisations and donors are also suggested to be mindful while framing 'decolonisation', promoting related activities, and funding local actors. To be impactful, decolonisation-related activities should not be seen as being promoted from abroad, rather they need to originate locally and Central Asian stakeholders should have ownership over the initiatives. In this sense, the role of international organisations should be that of a facilitator rather than an agenda-setter.
- International organisations and donors are sometimes criticised for being biased. They are said to support only those initiatives that fit their narrow interpretation of the issue at hand, while neglecting alternative issues and interpretations. Given the complexity of 'decolonisation', it is recommended that international organisations adopt a holistic approach, meaning that 'decolonisation' should be studied and discussed in all its colours. International organisations should avoid prioritising one issue or framework over another. Rather, they are recommended to help create environments and platforms that allow for more nuanced discussions.
- Similarly, international organisations are criticised for having a 'list of favourites' - organisations, experts and audiences - with whom they primarily work, while others who are not on a 'list' often remain outside the scope of their activities. At present, 'decolonisation' in Central Asia seems to be discussed mainly among a narrow group of activists, artists, scholars and journalists, mostly based in the capitals and large cities. However, this does not mean that 'decolonisation' is absent in other parts of the Central Asian states. International organisations and donors are therefore advised to avoid favouritism in their approaches. They also need to go beyond the existing 'decolonisation bubble' and support initiatives that engage wider audiences and bring together different experiences and voices.
- Finally, in order to promote 'decolonisation' to a wider audience, it is also recommended that international organisations and donors support more creative communication tools to increase audience receptivity to the issue. This could include awareness-raising through art, documentaries, exhibitions, comics, podcasts and other similar tools. Given that the majority of the Central Asian population speak their mother tongue as their first language and that each country has its own specificities, the content produced must be in local languages and tailored to local contexts.

Overall, 'decolonisation' in Central Asia should be driven primarily by local stakeholders, using local actors and expertise. However, there is always a place for international organisations and donors, who can also play an important role in facilitating such a discussion.



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