



The EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum, Almaty

6 October 2021

**“Building
Forward Better:
engaging for a sustainable
post-COVID recovery”**

Main discussion points and recommendations





Concept:

The EU – Central Asia Civil Society Forum, held in 2019, 2020 and 2021, is a **platform for dialogue involving representatives of civil society** from Central Asia and the European Union in the discussion of the implementation of the EU Strategy on Central Asia.

By organising this Forum, the EU in a Team Europe spirit seeks to promote the role of civil society in addressing the challenges that partner countries are facing.

As highlighted in the EU Strategy on Central Asia and its priorities, civil society has an important role to play to **strengthen resilience and prosperity of societies, as well as regional cooperation**. Another important objective of the event is to increase the understanding of the Team Europe objectives and values, and to **strengthen EU visibility** in the region. Finally, it is important for the governments, civil society and private sector to **learn to dialogue with each other**. As the space for civil society is shrinking around the world, it is important to maintain space for civil society wherever and whenever we can.

Session 1:

Taking stock of the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy and next steps

This session provided an opportunity to review the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy, discuss the Team Europe approach to engagement with Central Asia and the role of civil society.



Main discussion points:

- The engagement between the EU and Central Asian countries has broadened over the years. There are more platforms for dialogue ranging from the High Level Political and Security dialogue to sectoral dialogues to a regional Civil Society Forum or EU – Central Asia Economic Forum. More initiatives and more areas for engagement have developed, from environment, education to support during the COVID-19, drought or other critical situations. This broader engagement in the region is appreciated. Besides, the new Central Asia driven tendency towards regional integration helps the EU to engage with the region as a whole.
- Points of potential misunderstanding and disagreement for the Central Asian partners include: (i) slow decision-making on the EU side which can also be seen as the lack of follow up, (ii) low budget allocations, (iii) (mis)understanding of tradition vs. democracy, democracy promotion as well as (iv) the importance and influence of the Russian Federation and China as for the Central Asian countries , and (v) the need to engage with regional organisations. In the current environment, the importance of addressing the developments in Afghanistan was underlined.
- A significant part of the discussion focussed on understanding, improving and strengthening the relationship between the state authorities and the civil society in Central Asia. Different ways of cooperation were discussed and showcased. Some countries such as Kazakhstan have an elaborate framework for such an engagement. It could be worth looking at the experience and lessons learned for both the EU and other Central Asian countries.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of home grown initiatives for societal resilience.
- Women's rights have become more fragile during the pandemic, notably with domestic violence being brought to the fore. Social protection, right to work, and participation of women in the societal process need to be ensured and protected, both by the State and the civil society, which should be strengthened to deal with these and similar issues.

Main recommendations:

- Regional cooperation among civil society organisations should be encouraged and supported on social, economic, environmental, climate change, and other topics, including in Afghanistan. It would be important for the civil societies across the region to exchange experience, best practices and lessons learned in addressing the challenges that societies are facing.
- Central Asian countries should be supported in implementing their UN commitments and other international standards, including in the areas of gender equality (e.g. access to justice, access to resources), human rights and other universal rights, without specifically promoting Western values.
- Civic education was singled out as an area where more support and engagement could be beneficial for youth.
- New local initiatives that have emerged within civil societies as a result of the pandemic should be explored and supported rather than business as usual.



Session 2:

Strengthening resilience through inclusion

This session examined the role and contribution of civil society in addressing the challenges faced by communities by sharing innovative approaches, best practices and success stories in strengthening the resilience of societies. The overarching themes were strengthening community resilience, health, rule of law and access to justice.



Main discussion points:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has offered an opportunity to move forward on societal issues which have long been on the agenda of Central Asia's States, in particular the need to change the paradigm towards human centred approach.
- There is a need for civil society to participate in the reform process as an equal partner with the government (developing concepts and approaches, offering options and opinions, being an intermediary between society and the authorities, exercising watchdog functions), but for this, it is important that civil society comes forward with more consolidated positions.
- For example, in Kyrgyzstan, portals for legislative and procurement initiatives initiated by business and civil society offer a possibility for citizens to participate and monitor the process.
- NGOs play an important role in promoting the right to health (including for vulnerable groups such as drug addicts, people living below the poverty line and others), and were instrumental in the COVID-19 medical response from a rights perspective, including working with the authorities and media. Donors' support and coalition-building with other NGOs was essential.
- Trends that result in shrinking space for civil society and media (limited access to information, legal hurdles, etc.) are observed in Central Asia.
- Trust in governments has declined or is already low. Journalists and bloggers have an important role to play to build trust, however, limitations on freedom of speech and access to information hinders this important role that they could play in the society.
- There was a discussion on how best to define gender policies: from the family perspective or from an individual woman/girl/man/boy perspective.
- There was a discussion on how to ensure that there is no backsliding on the commitments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Main recommendations:

- There is a need for international community to widely support the civil society. Regarding Kazakhstan, it is important that there is a chapter dedicated to civil society in the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Expanding civil society's engagement with authorities should be pro-actively supported, through the commitments that have already been made in national development plans, for example, or other signed documents.
- Civil society organisations should be encouraged and supported to monitor the funding and impact of projects implemented by the EU, to move forward on accountability and transparency of funds used to deliver policies and services by the State.
- NGOs and partners should play an important role in supporting the social orientation of the State. The important role that NGOs played to ensure the right to health was highlighted. Support is also needed for the NGOs to enhance social policies, including the wider coverage extending to rural areas or other vulnerable groups.
- Research and understanding of the societal processes taking place in the societies should be supported.
- Taking action on domestic violence and women's empowerment should be carried on.
- It is important to work towards human centred and inclusive institutions as a basis for resilient societies.



Session 3:

Green prosperity – harnessing the potential of women and youth for increasing prosperity

This session focused on ways the civil society could empower women and youth, in particular, to promote green recovery and build back better. The session focused on the following issues: women and youth empowerment through social entrepreneurship and digitalisation; and sharing good practices of how the civil society can work with business to address societal challenges.



Main discussion points:

- In order to develop sustainable policies for green economy and for women's empowerment, it is important to build on the historical and cultural foundation already in place.
- Environmental problems are key issues, including through the economic and development lens, however, addressing them requires significant financial resources.
- Domestic violence is and should be high on the agenda.
- CSOs showcased how civil society resourcefully addresses issues such as bringing the internet, devices and digital skills even to remote areas of Kyrgyzstan, to connect local communities, improve education and create content in local languages.
- CSOs showcased how civil society can support victims of domestic violence by working with the local authorities, ministries and businesses to provide victims with skills, employment opportunities, as well as reaching out to society to discuss the prevention of violence against women.



Main recommendations:

- Educational content for online education needs to be developed in a language or style that engages children in a modern way. Media literacy should be the other side of the digitalisation coin, and digital education should be provided to ensure proper use of internet and critical thinking.
- States should develop policies to support businesses to provide internet to remote areas. Besides, governments should ensure mobile friendly platforms for providing services in order for the services to cover and be accessible on mobile devices and with weak internet connections.
- Working with civil society to address problems such as domestic violence and women's empowerment can develop into beneficial partnerships with authorities and promote values against domestic violence.
- Cooperation and improvement in the area of education for children and youth should be fostered, as well as ensuring inclusivity and participation in decision-making for women, youth and other vulnerable groups. It is important to offer rural children and youth, especially girls new role models, e.g. in STEM, and young people should themselves be engaged in becoming role models.
- Regional internet connectivity should be reinforced and adopting General Data Protection Regulation norms should be considered.
- The experience in use of digital technology in the penitentiary system in Kazakhstan could be replicated in other Central Asian countries.

Session 4:

Regional cooperation – addressing environmental challenges

The session discussed regional challenges looking at the role of civil society in implementing green strategies; how civil society's contributions can support regional and cross-border environmental cooperation as well as confidence building, and explored the potential of local communities and expertise of civil society.



Main discussion points:

- Addressing environmental challenges is key for the region, even a matter of survival. The region has many inherited problems such as the drying up of the Aral Sea, nuclear tailings, and collapse of infrastructure in 30-40 years. Climate change, carbon emissions limitation, and the impact of COVID-19 are new and additional challenges. Climate change manifests itself most visibly through water.
- Civil society can raise awareness and can support regional action, especially now that there is political will for cooperation, to address cross-border issues and build cross-border confidence, address local community needs such as access to clean water or sanitation and complement the work of government.
- The EU can be a reliable partner through funding, experience sharing and cooperation with civil society to address these regional issues.
- Civil society can help governments to achieve environment-related SDGs, and develop and implement green strategies by supporting the development of environmental code, and international cooperation and training.
- For example, waste management represents a significant problem. In Kazakhstan, civil society has been working with businesses to separate and recycle plastic waste, building coalitions and raising awareness among the populations.
- In Uzbekistan, civil society has been working with rural communities to increase food security, transfer technology, and increase resilience of the local agricultural communities in the Aral Sea area, building coalitions with international organisations, academic institutions and businesses.
- It is crucial to involve local communities and public unions in finding solutions to everyday problems, as they know best the root causes. This kind of cooperation can take place at the regional level as well.
- Small environmental changes have already created food, energy and water insecurity that in the long term, can lead to social instability, more poverty and conflict. Civil society can help mitigate these climate change risks at the community level by improving knowledge and capacity building, improving the ability to predict the impact of climate change on them and develop strategies to mitigate them. Civil society can connect and cooperate across fault lines and connect authorities with the grass root communities, which are key to identifying root causes and finding solutions.
- Preserving biodiversity in Central Asia should be higher on the agenda and can help mitigate climate change, including in other parts of the region.
- Water problems in the region have high conflict potential, and focus to decrease this conflict potential is needed.

Main recommendations:

- A regional strategy for climate change is needed, and should be developed with the involvement of civil society. Regional cooperation in research on green solutions should be promoted and regional mechanisms for knowledge and technology transfer have to be developed. Green regional hubs for sustainable energy and water resource management could also be established.
- A web-based learning facility should be created to support capacity building for civil society, with climate change related knowledge and skills, including on conflict resolution, where appropriate. Awareness should also be raised around the world on the impact emission-producing countries have on those who are the victims of this impact.
- The creation of financial instruments that would tax polluters and redirect funds to solve the problems they cause, e.g. tobacco or plastic manufacturers, should be encouraged.
- Successful examples of governments and private companies working together to encourage consumers to change their behaviour, such as selling waste to recycling plants, should be explored.
- Preserving biodiversity needs to be high on the agenda for Central Asia.
- It is important for donors to coordinate their support to promote sustainability from one project to another.
- A spinoff of the EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum that would specifically focus on environmental issues should be considered. A regional level legal framework for sharing resources in support of improving resilience should be developed.

Conclusions:

Civil society plays an important role in the implementation of the EU – Central Asia Strategy. Its implementation needs to speed up even though the COVID-19 pandemic and the developments in Afghanistan might have changed the order of priorities.

