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EU - Central Asian Civil Societal Relations: Unrealistic Expectations, Discouraging Results

Relaciones entre la UE y la sociedad civil de Asia Central: expectativas poco realistas, resultados desalentadores

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EU - Central Asian Civil Societal Relations: Unrealistic Expectations, Discouraging Results

*Relaciones entre la UE y la sociedad civil de Asia Central:
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Summary: I. Introduction.—II. Concept. 1. Concept learning and the concept of democracy. 2. Philosophical foundations and developments. 2.1. Civil society, public space, historical and conceptual anchors. 2.2. Dominant civil society debates and foreign aid. 3. European development assistance.—III. EU support for civil society in Central Asia —IV. Central Asian civil society and democratisation. 1. Democratisation: The paradigm of transition. 2. Kazakhstan. 3. Kyrgyzstan. 4. Tajikistan. 5. Uzbekistan. 6. Turkmenistan.—V. Central Asian political sphere: challenges. 1. Absence of internal receivers, opposition and civil society. 2. Conflict of values: transition paradigm and local culture. 3. The base of power structure in Central Asia: persistence of informal groups.—VI. Conclusions.

Abstract: Central Asia has endured three decades of multiple transitions. The political life of these post-Soviet states has witnessed an active phase of education and reform of the main vectors of development. The most important international actor that has supported and encouraged this process has been the European Union. From the outset, it must be stated that civil societal development has not met the expectations of the immediate post-Cold War period. Any society in transition must correlate its actions with its historical experience based not only on opportunities and flexibility related to the state but also on civil society, representing the quintessential spirit of the people, defining the contours of reform and the potential of society as a whole. One may assert that successful public change largely depends on the institutional matrix and socio-cultural features that can both drive change and create an environment of resistance. Therefore, this research aims to provide insight into the theoretical comprehension concerning Central Asian political reform expectations and to investigate the interaction between Central Asian civil society and the EU.

Keywords: Civil Society, European Union, Central Asia, Democratization, NGOs.

Resumen: *Asia Central ha soportado tres décadas de múltiples transiciones. La vida política de estos estados postsoviéticos ha sido testigo de una fase activa de educación y reforma de los principales vectores de desarrollo. El actor internacional más importante que ha apoyado y alentado este proceso ha sido la Unión Europea. Desde el principio, debe señalarse que el desarrollo de la sociedad civil no ha cumplido las expectativas del período inmediatamente posterior a la Guerra Fría. Toda sociedad en transición debe correlacionar sus acciones con su experiencia histórica basada no solo en las oportunidades y la flexibilidad relacionadas con el Estado sino también con la sociedad civil, que representa el espíritu por excelencia del pueblo, define los contornos de la reforma y el potencial de la sociedad en su conjunto. Se puede afirmar que el cambio público exitoso depende en gran medida de la matriz institucional y las características socioculturales que pueden impulsar el cambio y crear un entorno de resistencia. Por lo tanto, esta investigación tiene como objetivo proporcionar información sobre la comprensión teórica de las expectativas de reforma política de Asia Central e investigar la interacción entre la sociedad civil de Asia Central y la UE.*

Palabras clave: *Sociedad civil, Unión Europea, Asia Central, Democratización, ONGs.*

I. Introduction

Central Asia is one of the cradles of civilization. Whereas many would correctly identify Athens as being the preeminent city of art, culture and ideas two and a half thousand years ago, it would be wrong to assert it as being the only city to possess such features. Samarkand, in the heart of Central Asia, was as magnificent and impressive as Athens more than two millennia ago. Knowledge flourished and art developed not only on the shores of the Aegean Sea but also on the banks of the Oxus River. Therefore, Central Asia is as much a region of historical significance as the Mediterranean. Over the centuries, the region witnessed waves of preponderances of power and influence as well as waning authority and impact. The twentieth century was a particularly dynamic time period when Turkic Central Asia came to be dominated by Russian authority under the guise of Czarism and Bolshevism, finally culminating in independence in the last decade of the century.

The transition from Soviet socialism, which the region had endured for seven decades to an economic free market alongside democratisation was a major challenge for all the newly independent countries. The Leviathan Soviet state wanted to leave no space for any independent or collective action to be organised or take place without its prior consent. There could be little chance of escaping the watchful eye of the state in terms of non-state action. Therefore, it was impossible for any grouping to be independent from the state, which included trade unions. Hence, one could not speak of any semblance of civil society until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Prior to and following this development, civil society had become a strong buzzword within political science, especially in development work where all donors and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) incorporated a civil society component in their programmes with development partners worldwide agreeing on the concept's role and function. Nevertheless, civil society has not always been part of the more extensive development discussions. The concept has had different meanings and understandings since its origin in the Enlightenment era.

II. Concept

First of all, then, what is a concept? A general definition of the concept would be useful. By definition, concepts are general mental representations and abstractions of an object of knowledge which seek to

achieve a classification objective¹. In connection with this, the concept as a mental category gathers, among other things, objects, experiences, and beings. Human beings must classify events, objects and phenomena surrounding them in specific categories according to their differences and similarities. The concept is characterised by the mental construction of a category of entities - events, ideas, attitudes - whose specific attributes are identical².

Moreover, a concept is analogous to an idea of the mind that makes possible the organisation of knowledge³. By sharing common characteristics distinct from them, certain elements are incorporated into the same conceptual class; therefore, conceptualisation is a process⁴. The meaning of the concept's categorisation, or classification, then depicts the first degree of definition of the concept. However, the broad definition of the concept cannot be complete without specifying its abstract character. From this point of view, a concept corresponds to a mental representation and is imagined by the spirit of a thing⁵. It perceives for its part this expression as a symbolic representation, which is usually verbal, used in the game of abstract thought and having a general meaning valid for a set of concrete representations in what they have in common⁶.

It can be further asserted that the concept is usually objective. According to this idea, the representation of concepts would be required to be distinct from the thought of the person who expresses them since concepts differ from declarative knowledge that must be memorised. Their definitions are charged with meaning and specify specific properties, while their use contributes to the learning and improving of a common vocabulary⁷.

¹ Smith, Eliot R. "Mental representation." *The Handbook of Social Psychology* 1 (1998): 391.

² De Houwer, Jan, Bertram Gawronski, and Dermot Barnes-Holmes. "A functional-cognitive framework for attitude research." *European Review of Social Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2013): 252-287.

³ Spender, J-C. "Organizational knowledge, learning and memory: three concepts in search of a theory." *Journal of organizational change management* (1996).

⁴ Rowley, Jennifer. "From learning organisation to knowledge entrepreneur." *Journal of knowledge management* (2000).

⁵ Fodor, Jerry A., and Zenon W. Pylyshyn. "Connectionism and cognitive architecture: A critical analysis." *Cognition* 28, no. 1-2 (1988): 3-71.

⁶ Garnelo, Marta, Kai Arulkumaran, and Murray Shanahan. "Towards deep symbolic reinforcement learning." *arXiv preprint arXiv:1609.05518* (2016).

⁷ Fensel, Dieter. "Ontologies." In *Ontologies*, pp. 11-18. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2001.

A concept comprises the attributes that constitute and specify it. The concept is presented according to its operational structure⁸. The concept consists of a denomination, that is to say, an appellation allowing a union between a precise term and this abstract representation. However, the representation that constitutes the basis for understanding the concept should not be reduced to the simple meaning of the name given to it⁹.

The concept is in itself different from the label attached to it. Assuming the idea of mental representation, concepts are inherent structures of various models and phenomena related to each other¹⁰. In this respect, the concept has attributes and distinct characteristics that make possible its intellectual significance despite its name. These attributes result from individual perceptions and cross-cultural variables that influence cognitive processes¹¹.

Finally, one can affirm that the concept is represented above all by its abstract nature. It is inside the cognitive organisation of a person that it is structured. These are the attributes that allow its mental representation. Concepts serve as an anchor for the cognitive structure¹². They are defined as abstractions that share a standard set of defining features or attributes unconstrained by the spatiotemporal framework, from which contextual examples and counter examples can be applied or excluded¹³.

Historical concepts do not escape all these rules, but they have two specific characteristics. First, their framework of representation is subject to variations since it is context-dependent and constantly open to anachronistic possibilities¹⁴. Historical concepts do not belong to the

⁸ Ramezan, Majid. "Intellectual capital and organizational organic structure in knowledge society: How are these concepts related?." *International Journal of Information Management* 31, no. 1 (2011): 88-95.

⁹ Gerring, John. "What makes a concept good? A criterial framework for understanding concept formation in the social sciences." *Polity* 31, no. 3 (1999): 357-393.

¹⁰ Peuquet, Donna J. "A conceptual framework and comparison of spatial data models." *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization* 21, no. 4 (1984): 66-113.

¹¹ Oddou, Gary, and Mark Mendenhall. "Person perception in cross-cultural settings: A review of cross-cultural and related cognitive literature." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 8, no. 1 (1984): 77-96.

¹² Agra, Glenda, Nilton Soares Formiga, Patrícia Simplicio de Oliveira, Marta Miriam Lopes Costa, Maria das Graças Melo Fernandes, and Maria Miriam Lima da Nóbrega. "Analysis of the concept of Meaningful Learning in light of the Ausubel's Theory." *Revista brasileira de enfermagem* 72 (2019): 248-255.

¹³ Kwan, Mei-Po. "Space-time and integral measures of individual accessibility: a comparative analysis using a point-based framework." *Geographical analysis* 30, no. 3 (1998): 191-216.

¹⁴ Podoksik, Efraim. "One Concept of Liberty: Towards Writing the History of a Political Concept." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 2 (2010): 219-240.

historical discipline but several other disciplines such as sociology, geography, anthropology and psychology and are used extensively in the common language¹⁵.

1. *Concept learning and the concept of democracy*

In a logical order of ideas, a reflection on the learning of general concepts is necessary. Learning is a cognitive process that makes knowledge acquisition possible by building conceptual representations distinct in the awareness of their value and their validity¹⁶. It is essential to read reality and following this line of thought, the properties of a concept become apparent as soon as it is put in parallel with other neighbouring concepts¹⁷. These desired comparisons allow the concepts to be used as tools. They allow the identification and the classification of various social phenomena by the recognition of their attributes but also the comparisons between societies of time and geographical contexts present¹⁸.

Having a scope of mental representation and classification, the concept of civil society and democracy, and more particularly its representation, implies knowledge of its definition, but also the identification of some attributes allowing to determine if a situation is democratic or not. First of all, some clarifications are necessary for the concept under study. Originating from the Greek word *dēmokratia*, it links the expressions *demo* meaning people and *kratos*, having the sense of power and command¹⁹. Thus, even though this idea of power to the people originated in Antiquity and only reappeared in the Renaissance, with the French and American revolutions, it constitutes the foundations of our governments and influences the dynamics of history. Therefore, one must answer the question: what is democracy?

¹⁵ Washabaugh, William, James C. Woodward, and Susan DeSantis. "Providence Island Sign: A context-dependent language." *Anthropological Linguistics* 20, no. 3 (1978): 95-109.

¹⁶ Novak, Joseph D. "Meaningful learning: The essential factor for conceptual change in limited or inappropriate propositional hierarchies leading to empowerment of learners." *Science education* 86, no. 4 (2002): 548-571.

¹⁷ Redclift, Michael. "Sustainable development (1987–2005): an oxymoron comes of age." *Sustainable development* 13, no. 4 (2005): 212-227.

¹⁸ Paasi, Anssi. "The institutionalization of regions: a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of regions and the constitution of regional identity." *Fennia-International Journal of Geography* 164, no. 1 (1986): 105-146.

¹⁹ Jent, H. Clay. "Demos Kratos: Democracy, old and new." *The Social Studies* 58, no. 6 (1967): 242-245.

A polysemous concept, it gives rise to several definitions. For some, a democracy requires a peaceful structure of political opposition so that power can be exercised²⁰. For others, it is only valid if it has frequent free and fair elections²¹. In general, two principles stand out and form the basis of these reflections on democracy. First, that of people's control over the collective decision-making process through elections and then, that according to which all men have the same rights in applying this control. Democracy is in this context perceived as much more than a direct, parliamentary or representative political system. It also establishes a set of historical influences that persist in space and time²².

The conception of the principles of institutions and a specific social environment implies that democracy is affiliated with a range of values, thus supporting, more or less, a saturation of meaning²³. Democracy is a concept that allows popular control over decisions and common rights. It is therefore synonymous with participation in social and civil life. The academic literature on this theme demonstrates the primary standards of democracy and the characteristics of an environment. One can propose seven attributes of democracy: fair election, right of speech and association, equality, solidarity, public good, justice and transparency²⁴. This may be reduced to three – equality, freedom and responsibility – but the same foundations are retained²⁵. Democracy may also be considered a utopian idea, turning into a way of life, varying according to each society. History, economics and politics influence citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards democracy. The elements that make up a democratic system for a society at a specific time may constitute a dictatorship for another society at a different time²⁶. The history of the 20th century testifies to this effect that democracy remains a fragile reality, mainly because of its requirements that must continually be

²⁰ Baehr, Peter. "The honored outsider: Raymond Aron as sociologist." *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 2 (2013): 93-115.

²¹ Dahl, Robert A. "The shifting boundaries of democratic governments." *Social Research* (1999): 915-931.

²² Davenport, Christian. "Human rights and the democratic proposition." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43, no. 1 (1999): 92-116.

²³ Barro, Robert J. "Determinants of democracy." *Journal of Political Economy* 107, no. S6 (1999): S158-S183.

²⁴ Knight, Tony, and Art Pearl. "Democratic education and critical pedagogy." *The Urban Review* 32, no. 3 (2000): 197-226.

²⁵ Diamond, Larry, and Leonardo Morlino. "The quality of democracy: An overview." *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (2004): 20-31.

²⁶ Neumann, Sigmund. "Toward a comparative study of political parties." In *Comparative Government*, pp. 69-76. Palgrave, London, 1969.

adapted to the present world²⁷. Therefore, it is clear that democracy is a complex concept that takes on a panoply of senses. It is also prone to different interpretations, thus marking its relevance as an object of representation. Faced with this polysemy, failing to specify its framework conceptually, one views democracy from a dynamic perspective, which considers the freedom, equality and sovereignty of the people.

Democracy requires citizens to believe in democratic values, such as freedom and equality, and know the peculiarities and significance of this political system. Understanding the concept of democracy does not only refer to knowing its definition but also to identifying specific attributes and examples that allow students to identify conceptual representations.

In the case of the construction of concepts, environmental or socio-cultural factors play a significant role²⁸. The construction of the specific concept of democracy goes in the same direction since, by its cultural conditions, it goes far beyond the purely political arena²⁹. The awareness of this character gives the person the possibility of using the same concept again in a different context³⁰.

Civil society has become one of the unique and debated concepts in the social sciences. The concept has been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by a whole gamut of social scientists, and yet there is no consensus on either its intention or its extension³¹. Some assert that civil society is much talked about but rarely understood that that civil society is not a coherent theory or concept³². In order to engage in the discussion about the concept, it is necessary to understand the origins and development of the idea of civil society since then. This development can be categorised into three phases.

²⁷ Stotzky, Irwin P. "The fragile bloom of democracy." *U. Miami L. Rev.* 44 (1989): 105.

²⁸ Abdullahi, Ahmad Isa, and Fakhrol Anwar Zainol. "The impact of socio-cultural business environment on entrepreneurial intention: A conceptual approach." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2016): 80-94.

²⁹ Tremblay, Manon. "Democracy, representation, and women: A comparative analysis." *Democratization* 14, no. 4 (2007): 533-553.

³⁰ Collier, David, and Steven Levitsky. "Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research." *World politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430-451.

³¹ Holmén, Hans, and Magnus Jirstrom. "Look Who's Talking! Second Thoughts about NGOs as Representing Civil Society." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 4 (2009): 429-448.

³² Somers, Margaret R. "Narrating and naturalizing civil society and citizenship theory: The place of political culture and the public sphere." *Sociological theory* (1995): 229-274.

2. *Philosophical foundations and developments*

The idea of civil society emerged in the Enlightenment era with thinkers such as Rousseau and Kant, for whom civil society was synonymous with the state or political society. Civil society was a type of state governed by a social contract agreed upon among the individual members of the society³³. With the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, such as Ferguson and Hutcheson, a significant shift in conceptualising the idea occurred when civil society's role was to protect personal freedoms against state powers³⁴. Civil society began to be separated from the state and was viewed as voluntary associations organised as part of a resistance against state intrusions on individual rights and freedoms³⁵. With Hegel, civil society became the intermediate realm between the family and the state³⁶. Civil society, according to Hegel, had to do with wildly differing representations of social reality and conceptions of the interaction with the state and the market. Civil societal actors were not always in harmony but rather in conflict, as citizens mainly followed their self-interest³⁷.

This theme was taken up by De Tocqueville who remains associated with the idea of a vibrant civil society as the foundation of a stable democratic polity³⁸. The definition narrowed again in the twentieth century when civil society came to be understood as occupying the space outside the market, state, and family. In this way, civil society became the realm of culture, ideology, and political debate. Antonio Gramsci is the thinker most associated with such a definition and according to him civil society was part of the superstructure in addition to the state, but with a different function³⁹. Here, the state served as an arena of force and coercion for capitalist domination. Civil society served as the field through which values and meanings were established, debated, and challenged⁴⁰. Despite the changing content in the term, all these different definitions had an ordinary

³³ McNair, David. "A new social contract?." Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. *The OECD Observer* 276/277 (2009): 32.

³⁴ Wiktorowicz, Quintan. "Civil society as social control: State power in Jordan." *Comparative politics* (2000): 43-61.

³⁵ Chambers, Simone. "A critical theory of civil society." *Alternative conceptions of civil society* (2002): 90-110.

³⁶ Hardt, Michael. "The withering of civil society." *Social text* 45 (1995): 27-44.

³⁷ Pietrzyk, Dorota I. "Democracy or civil society?." *Politics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 38-45.

³⁸ Woldring, Henk ES. "State and civil society in the political philosophy of Alexis de Tocqueville." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 9, no. 4 (1998): 363-373.

³⁹ Buttigieg, Joseph A. "Gramsci on civil society." *boundary* 2 22, no. 3 (1995): 1-32.

⁴⁰ Kumar, Krishan. "Civil society: An inquiry into the usefulness of an historical term." *British Journal of Sociology* (1993): 375-395.

core meaning; they were all about a rule-governed society based on a social contract among individuals⁴¹. From this time onwards, civil society was seen as oriented toward the state and acting on and counter to state powers⁴².

The idea of civil society flourished again in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America and Eastern Europe. The concept became widely used to describe social movements against military dictatorships and totalitarianism. People realised that overthrowing regimes from the top-down was not realistic. It was necessary to achieve changes in society from the bottom-up⁴³. Civil society here refers to the potential for local people to change the relationship between state and society, striving for governments that are more democratic and a redistribution of power and economic wealth⁴⁴. The new understanding of civil society represented a withdrawal from the state and a move towards global rules and institutions, where social movements were able to create political space through international links and appeals to international authorities⁴⁵. As an outcome of these conflicts, the expectations of civil society grew high. As state institutions failed to provide security, accountability, and essential services to their citizens, civil society became more effective than governments in providing development needs⁴⁶. The idea of civil society as a precondition for democracy thus spread during the 1990s.

With the end of the Cold War in 1991, the idea of civil society broadened significantly again and became understood in different ways. For social movements and activists concerned with human rights, climate change and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), the term civil society expressed their brand of non-party politics⁴⁷. Civil society became interested in “good

⁴¹ Glasius, Marlies, David Lewis, and Hakan Seckinelgin. “Globalization and civil society.” In *Exploring Civil Society*, pp. 164-170. Routledge, 2004.

⁴² Cox, Robert W. “Civil society at the turn of the millenium: prospects for an alternative world order.” *Review of international studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 3-28.

⁴³ Scholtens, Joeri, and Maarten Bavinck. “Transforming conflicts from the bottom-up? Reflections on civil society efforts to empower marginalized fishers in postwar Sri Lanka.” *Ecology and Society* 23, no. 3 (2018).

⁴⁴ Fröhlich, Christian. “Civil society and the state intertwined: the case of disability NGOs in Russia.” *East European Politics* 28, no. 4 (2012): 371-389.

⁴⁵ Kidd, Bruce. “A new social movement: Sport for development and peace.” *Sport in society* 11, no. 4 (2008): 370-380.

⁴⁶ Brinkerhoff, Derick W. “Exploring state-civil society collaboration: policy partnerships in developing countries.” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 28, no. 1_suppl (1999): 59-86.

⁴⁷ Kothari, Rajni. “The non-party political process.” *Economic and political weekly* (1984): 216-224.

governance” objectives within the neoliberal new policy agenda for Western governments and international institutions. International donors and governments were sure of the positive contribution civil society made to the promotion of democracy and facilitating market reforms. Here, civil society came to stand for NGOs, both international and local and the term came for many to be interchangeable with the concept of democracy itself⁴⁸. Thus, many people today view civil society as a necessity for democracy everywhere, in all contexts⁴⁹. They would agree with the neo-Tocquevillian belief that the solidity of liberal democracy depends on a vibrant and robust sphere of associational participation⁵⁰. This view, however, has been criticised by social scientists, in particular anthropologists, who argue that the civil society concept is Eurocentric, something born out of the Western cultural context, and does therefore not apply to contexts that have more traditional organising structures⁵¹. In response to this critique, another trend in understanding the term was the notion of civil society as a form of organisation, often non-Western, representing a check on state power. These organisations included local traditional institutions and religious and ethnic movements⁵². Such developments of the concept influenced the contemporary discussions concerning civil society.

2.1. Civil society, public space, historical and conceptual anchors

The notion of civil society lends itself to a discussion, contradiction, and opposition. There is no single consensus concerning its definition and the meaning to be given to it. Becoming the “buzzword” of the last thirty years, it has enjoyed popular and global success without ever managing to acquire a precise and legitimate definition at the semantic level. This concept has been accused of ultimately being an empty label, which gives the impression of achieving consensus while ultimately designating different interpretations and perceptions⁵³.

⁴⁸ Mercer, Claire. “NGOs, civil society and democratization: a critical review of the literature.” *Progress in development studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 5-22.

⁴⁹ Arato, Andrew. “Thinking the Present: Revolution in Eastern Europe. Revolution, Civil Society and Democracy.” *Praxis International* 10, no. 1+ 2 (1990): 25-38.

⁵⁰ Chambers, Simone. “A critical theory of civil society.” *Alternative conceptions of civil society* (2002): 90-110.

⁵¹ Dutta-Bergman, Mohan J. “Civil society and public relations: Not so civil after all.” *Journal of public relations research* 17, no. 3 (2005): 267-289.

⁵² Minkoff, Debra C. “Producing social capital: National social movements and civil society.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, no. 5 (1997): 606-619.

⁵³ Frolic, B. Michael. “State-led civil society.” *Civil society in China* (1997): 46-67.

Civil society is one of the most ambiguous notions in the field of current socio-political debate. Some have defined it and still define it in opposition to the state, thus encompassing all the institutions - family, business, and associations with individuals pursuing common interests without interference from the state⁵⁴. For others, civil society should not be perceived in opposition to the state but, on the contrary, as being the place where the private and the public interpenetrate, between the will and the perception of a universal civil society or a Western-style civil society leading to a view regarding it as Western exceptionalism⁵⁵.

The standardisation of the concepts of civil society and public space and a knowledge that is too technical or too semantic allows, of course, to reach a consensus but also sometimes has the consequence of keeping the citizen away from the understanding of reality and the actor in the centre of the analysis. The danger is then, consciously or unconsciously, to choose not to focus on the political, conflictual and ultimately participatory dynamics of popular and civic action. The purpose here is to draw attention to the complexity of civil society's emancipatory notion and the need to take into account and respect the diversity of contexts.

In the historical and conceptual continuity of what has been outlined and to approach more representative contemporary issues, one needs to isolate and compartmentalize civil society into a single dimension. Thus, civil society takes shape in the emancipation of individuals from their families and the private sphere. This dimension of civil society in keeping with the Tocquevillian tradition, is represented by the associative sphere. Associations whether they are networks, groups, organisations, institutions, NGOs produce social capital - understood as family, friends, professional relations, necessary for economic development and, therefore, for the functioning of a democratic society⁵⁶.

These associations produce a system and structures of social norms, values, opinions, representations, identities. This plurality and contradictions are projected into the public space, perceived as one or more areas of argumentation and deliberation, under the state's sphere of influences and arbitration. In effect, not all the associations are the same and the link between the liveliness of the associative world and democratic liveliness is not always so evident and apparent. Moreover, as will be demonstrated, this

⁵⁴ Chambers, Simone. "Civil Society." *The Oxford handbook of political theory* 1 (2006): 363.

⁵⁵ Kingsbury, Damien. "Universalism and exceptionalism in "Asia"." In *Human Rights in Asia*, pp. 19-39. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.

⁵⁶ Schuurman, Frans J. "Social capital: the politico-emancipatory potential of a disputed concept." *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 991-1010.

definition is faithful and essential to remember concerning the (new) post-independence socio-political context that characterises the Central Asian states that are under scrutiny in this chapter.

In this perspective, one accepts public space, the space where a process of argumentation and deliberation takes place within a dense fabric of associations and institutions⁵⁷. Thus, civil society is characterised by the associations, organisations and movements who condense, reverberate, by amplifying them in the public political space the resonance that social problems find in the spheres of private life⁵⁸. The perception of a space opening between the state and civil society, especially associations, where citizens meet to discuss matters of general interest freely, becomes important as through public space people try to forge an identity by emancipating themselves through political discussion⁵⁹.

Habermas considers public space as the process during which the public made up of individuals using their reason appropriate the public sphere controlled by authority and transform it into a sphere where criticism is exercised against the state's power⁶⁰. Therefore, what is essential is insisting on the capacity for resistance and, above all, the critical potential of a pluralist and differentiated mass public, which, in principle and theory, goes beyond national borders and class in its cultural and civic habits.

The concept of the public sphere or public space, therefore, also refers to the conditions of social possibility for forming a public opinion. Indeed, in Habermas, the perspective of the monopolisation of public space by a bourgeois elite and the question of legitimacy around the genuine general interest are also present. In Habermas' work, public space also appears as a distinction to distinguish modern societies may be called public societies as opposed to traditional societies or even a secret society, in these last types, where most of the words on which authority is based are secret or private and are therefore not based on dissemination or public debate about these words among the population⁶¹.

⁵⁷ Porta, Donatella. "Making the polis: social forums and democracy in the global justice movement." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (2005): 73-94.

⁵⁸ Ayres, Jeffrey M. "Global civil society and international protest: no swan song yet for the state." In *Global Civil Society and Its Limits*, pp. 25-42. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2003.

⁵⁹ Papacharissi, Zizi. "The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere." *New media & society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 9-27.

⁶⁰ Fraser, Nancy. "Transnational public sphere: Transnationalizing the public sphere: On the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion in a post-Westphalian world." *Theory, culture & society* 24, no. 4 (2007): 7-30.

⁶¹ Boeder, Pieter. "Habermas' heritage: The future of the public sphere in the network society." *First Monday* (2005).

2.2. *Dominant civil society debates and foreign aid*

As civil society is a normative and descriptive concept, it is closely tied to the context in which each version of the concept was shaped. There are a variety of conceptualisations of civil society that influence the academic literature and debate. However, one can argue that it is the Tocqueville's ghost which prevails⁶². Notably there is a focus on associational activity, civility, and deepening democracy, which is often imagined through terms such as having a voice and activity⁶³. Democracy for development for example is a white-hot topic in the development literature⁶⁴. The idea of civil society is connected to a broader neoliberal understanding of "good governance", for which democracy is the premise. As civil society is seen as a necessity to achieve democracy, civil society, by implication, becomes central to achieving "good governance"⁶⁵.

Hereto, civil society is perceived as naturally "good" because it seeks justice and fairness⁶⁶. Civil society is furthermore associated with NGOs that seek to influence, or claim space from, the state and the positive role these organisations can play in political and economic development⁶⁷. The dominant contemporary debate on civil society is where NGOs stand for civil society, celebrated as the hero of liberatory change⁶⁸. Thus, civil society has been universalised in the space of a few decades and with little regard for historical concept or critical genealogy⁶⁹. However, civil society as a concept, for example, in foreign aid did not gain prominence before the 1990s, when "development aid" emerged as a core element between the developed world and the developing world.

As will be recalled, foreign aid originated from Cold War diplomacy as previously, there had been humanitarian relief programmes. However,

⁶² Obadare, Ebenezer. "Revalorizing the political: Towards a new intellectual agenda for African civil society discourse." *Journal of Civil Society* 7, no. 4 (2011): 427-442.

⁶³ Lewis, David. "Civil society and the authoritarian state: Cooperation, contestation and discourse." *Journal of Civil Society* 9, no. 3 (2013): 325-340.

⁶⁴ Croissant, Aurel, and Lars Pelke. "Democracy and development in Asia." In *Research Handbook on Democracy and Development*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021.

⁶⁵ Roy, Indrajit. "Civil society and good governance:(re-) conceptualizing the interface." *World development* 36, no. 4 (2008): 677-705.

⁶⁶ Crocker, David A. "Truth commissions, transitional justice, and civil society." *Truth v. justice: The morality of truth commissions* (2000): 99-121.

⁶⁷ Gallagher, Mary E. "The Limits of Civil Society in." *Civil society and political change in Asia: Expanding and contracting democratic space* (2004): 419.

⁶⁸ Pasha, Mustapha Kamal, and David L. Blaney. "Elusive paradise: the promise and peril of global civil society." *Alternatives* 23, no. 4 (1998): 417-450.

⁶⁹ Helliker, Kirk. "Civil society and state-centred struggles." In 'Progress' in Zimbabwe?, pp. 43-56. Routledge, 2013.

foreign aid as the gift of public resource transfer from one government to another - or an international NGO - to improve humanitarian conditions did not exist⁷⁰. Due to the Cold War threat, the United States (U.S.) initiated aid programmes and put pressure on other countries to do so.

3. *European development assistance*

The Rome Treaty considered the idea of a Euro-African free trade zone, which included almost exclusively Francophone African countries as part of a European Development Fund, channelled towards economic and social investment⁷¹. In 1975 with the first Lomé Convention, European development aid evolved considerably, with many more countries becoming involved as well as the instruments adopted⁷². Foreign aid experienced its most significant rise in the 1970s and 1980s when aid exceeded eight billion US dollars worldwide and development aid gained prominence during this period⁷³. By 2000, aid had become a common and expected element in relations between rich and developing countries.⁷⁴ This was demonstrated by the significant rise in the distribution of aid, which was oriented towards the poorest countries. A more significant proportion of overall aid began to be channelled through multilateral aid agencies, and the number of NGOs increased. These aid agencies began to produce official statements and development strategies. The increasing professionalisation of aid agencies was a sign of this growing seriousness of aid for development purposes⁷⁵.

In the 1990s, foreign aid experienced changes with the end of the Cold War, which meant a decline in the diplomatic relevance of giving aid for some governments and emerging new aid purposes. These purposes were economic and political, where democracy promotion and post-conflict

⁷⁰ Rothschild, Daniel M. "Book review of Carol Lancaster's foreign aid: diplomacy, development, domestic politics". *Michigan Journal of Public Affairs* 4 (2007).

⁷¹ Langan, Mark, and Sophia Price. "Imperialisms past and present in EU economic relations with North Africa: Assessing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements." *Interventions* 22, no. 6 (2020): 703-721.

⁷² Brown, William. "From uniqueness to uniformity? An assessment of EU development aid policies." *EU development cooperation* (2004): 17.

⁷³ Engh, Sunniva. "The 'Nordic model' in international development aid: Explanation, experience and export." In *The Making and Circulation of Nordic Models, Ideas and Images*, pp. 124-142. Routledge, 2021.

⁷⁴ Rothschild, Daniel M. "Book..."

⁷⁵ Roth, Silke. "Professionalisation trends and inequality: experiences and practices in aid relationships." *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 8 (2012): 1459-1474.

resolution became relevant in the formerly socialist countries⁷⁶. Democracy for development picked up momentum across the developing world, and by the end of the 1990s, foreign aid had acquired new prominent purposes: promoting economic and political transitions, addressing global problems, furthering democracy, and managing conflict⁷⁷.

Not surprisingly civil society became an increasingly hot topic within foreign aid. Civil society's role became perceived as a buffer against autocratic regime intervention, global economic neoliberalism, social justice, and a source of economic wealth and personal happiness. Therefore, donor agencies and governments have increasingly focused on strengthening civil society as a formula for democracy⁷⁸. Due to the increasing number of NGOs in the past three decades, civil society has become associated with NGOs. This negotiation of civil society marks a shift from somewhat loosely organised and broadly mobilising social movements to more professionalised and structured NGOs⁷⁹. The enormous rise in development NGOs for example reflects a new order, where NGOs have moved from the periphery of the development community to being professionalised and essential agents in development work becoming central to contemporary development discussions and practice⁸⁰.

Regarding foreign aid as “gift-giving”, it is now clear that the relationship between donors and NGOs is crucial for the foreign aid system⁸¹. Donors provide NGOs with aid in return for implementing projects that contribute to overall global development. At first glance, this relationship might seem relatively innocent, but if one examines it more closely, it is a relationship of unequal power. The concept of aid as free and disinterested does not exist. Instead, the “gift of aid” contributes to

⁷⁶ Kumar, Krishna. “International assistance to promote independent media in transition and post-conflict societies.” *Democratization* 13, no. 4 (2006): 652-667.

⁷⁷ Burnell, Peter. “Democracy, democratization and climate change: complex relationships.” *Democratization* 19, no. 5 (2012): 813-842.

⁷⁸ Hadenius, Axel, and Fredrik Uggla. “Making civil society work, promoting democratic development: What can states and donors do?.” *World development* 24, no. 10 (1996): 1621-1639.

⁷⁹ Ungsachaval, Theerapat. “NGOization of Civil Society as Unintended Consequence?.” In *Premises on the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and its pressures toward NGOs in Thailand*. ISTR conference, Stockholm. 2016.

⁸⁰ Kelly, Leanne M. “Worthwhile or wasteful? Assessing the need for a radical revision of evaluation in small-sized development NGOs.” *Development in Practice* 32, no. 2 (2022): 201-211.

⁸¹ Mawdsley, Emma. “The changing geographies of foreign aid and development cooperation: contributions from gift theory.” *Transactions of the Institute of British geographers* 37, no. 2 (2012): 256-272.

constructing and reproducing an unequal power relation between the giver and receiver, where donors have something that the NGOs need and desire.

The European Court of Auditors declared that, “between 1991 and 2013 the European Union (EU) allocated more than 2.1 billion euro in development and humanitarian assistance to Central Asia, of which 750 million euro was for the 2007–13 period. During the 2007 to 2012 period, the Commission paid 435 million euro in development assistance to Central Asia, of which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been the main beneficiaries”.⁸²

Hence, what most clearly defines foreign aid is the symbolic power politics between donor and NGO⁸³. In the partnership between donor and NGO, power is manifest through the control and flow of money. This type of partnership is not one of equality, mutuality, and shared responsibility but rather a relationship of power inequality expressed through the control of one partner over the other⁸⁴. Money is central in this relationship since NGOs depend on money to work towards their missions and, ultimately, their survival. Donors value money because it gives them the ability to influence development in the direction of their agendas. The partnership between donors and NGOs is based on the inequality in controlling money, where donors give it, and NGOs receive it. In this way, the relationship between donor and NGO is one based on power, reflected in the act of giving money.

According to Sahlins, there are essentially three types of resource allocation in human society: economic exchange, redistribution, and giving⁸⁵. Foreign aid falls under the third category since it is commonly perceived as a gift from one country to another or a donor to an NGO. Gift giving has to be seen in the context of systems of exchange, which involve obligations to give, receive, and repay⁸⁶. Thereby with a gift comes the obligation to reciprocate if the social relation persists. In

⁸² European Court of Auditors. 2013. “EU Development assistance to Central Asia”. Special Report No: 13. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/sr13_13/qjab13014enn.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/sr13_13/qjab13014enn.pdf).

⁸³ Hattori, Tomohisa. “Reconceptualizing foreign aid.” *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 633-660.

⁸⁴ Reith, Sally. “Money, power, and donor–NGO partnerships.” *Development in Practice* 20, no. 3 (2010): 446-455.

⁸⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. “The conflicts of the faculty.” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 997-1017.

⁸⁶ Konstantinou, Efrosyni, and Robin Fincham. “Not sharing but trading: Applying a Maussian exchange framework to knowledge management.” *Human Relations* 64, no. 6 (2011): 823-842.

social systems where there are significant social divides, “negative reciprocity” characterises the relationship between these social in-equals, where the universal obligation to reciprocate no longer holds and foreign aid falls into this type of gift-giving, where the gift cannot be reciprocated, namely unreciprocated giving⁸⁷. This is because the social relation in which the gift is extended reveals material inequality between donor and recipient. The donor has resources to give that the other lacks. Following these arguments, foreign aid can be understood as symbolic domination: a practice that maintains social hierarchies⁸⁸. The extension of the gift transforms a donor’s status from the dominant to the generous, and when accepting such a gift, the recipient becomes grateful. This type of relationship between the generous and the grateful gives the practice of unreciprocated giving its social power. Giving is the allocation of material goods needed or desired by the recipient⁸⁹. What gives the gift symbolic power involves authentic goods and services that fulfil real needs and desires; the donors have the goods that the recipient desires⁹⁰.

The donor’s agenda is often expressed through funding requirements, and it is up to the NGOs to demonstrate how they fit into this agenda. In this way, donors tend to distribute money only to NGOs whose aims and agendas are similar to their own. If NGOs fail to show these similar objectives, their applications are typically rejected⁹¹. It is essential to understand the competitive context of the aid system, where NGOs are increasingly dependent on donors and are therefore increasingly vulnerable to donor demands. This sometimes leaves NGOs to accept donor funding, even if it means sacrificing their own goals for the donors and becoming servants of an externally imposed agenda⁹². Therefore, the donor sets the agenda, and the receiver is accountable to the donor for its assistance. When offering aid, the donor demands that projects be

⁸⁷ Jensen, Lea Graugaard. “Civil Society: A Powerful Concept.” (2016).

⁸⁸ Mawdsley, Emma. “The changing geographies of foreign aid and development cooperation: contributions from gift theory.” *Transactions of the Institute of British geographers* 37, no. 2 (2012): 256-272.

⁸⁹ Hattori, Tomohisa. “Reconceptualizing foreign aid.” *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 633-660.

⁹⁰ Schwartz, Barry. “The social psychology of the gift.” *American journal of Sociology* 73, no. 1 (1967): 1-11.

⁹¹ Zanotti, Laura. “Cacophonies of aid, failed state building and NGOs in Haiti: setting the stage for disaster, envisioning the future.” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 755-771.

⁹² Reith, S. (2010). Money, power, and donor-NGO partnerships. *Development in Practice*, 20(3), 446-455.

implemented following the donor's development idea⁹³. In this way, there is no such thing as a free and disinterested gift⁹⁴.

III. EU Support for Civil Society in Central Asia

When the Central Asian states gained their independence, the EU showed interest in this region and initiated a multi-dimensional relationship. One of the areas in which it paid close attention to and supported both financially and politically was the arena of civil society. In 2007, the EU published its Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia. It defined the priorities for its cooperation with each Central Asian state according to its specific needs, requirements and performance, which includes human rights, good governance, democracy and social development⁹⁵.

The EU strongly believed that strengthening the commitment of Central Asian States to international law, the rule of law, human rights and democratic values, as well as to a market economy, would promote security and stability in Central Asia, thus making the countries of the region reliable partners for the EU with shared common interests and goals⁹⁶.

The EU and its Member States intended to intensify support for the protection of human rights and the establishment and development of an independent judiciary. The aim was to contribute in a sustainable manner to the establishment of structures based on the rule of law and international human rights standards. Therefore, cooperation in the field of justice between Central Asian states and EU Member States were highly desirable⁹⁷.

The EU believed that “the task of sustaining a culture of human rights and making democracy work for its citizens calls for the active involvement of civil society. A developed and active civil society and independent media are vital for the development of a pluralistic society. The EU will

⁹³ Woods, Ngaire. “Whose aid? Whose influence? China, emerging donors and the silent revolution in development assistance.” *International affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008): 1205-1221.

⁹⁴ McGoey, Linsey. *No such thing as a free gift: The Gates Foundation and the price of philanthropy*. Verso Books, 2015.

⁹⁵ Council of the European Council. 2007. “The EU And Central Asia: Strategy For A New Partnership”. *Data.Consilium.Europa.Eu*. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

cooperate with the Central Asian States to this end and promote enhanced exchanges in civil society.”⁹⁸

Furthermore, the EU asserted that the “diversity of religions and centuries-old traditions of peace and tolerance constitute a valuable heritage in Central Asia. Moderate and tolerant Islamic thinking respecting the constitutional secular principle is a hallmark of the Central Asian countries. The EU highly values the peaceful multi-ethnic and multi-cultural coexistence of various creeds in Central Asia. Building on this, the EU will promote dialogue within civil society and respect for freedom of religion”.⁹⁹

In 2019, through a new strategy entitled “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership,” the EU reiterated its support for a robust civil society to address regional challenges in Central Asia. Since 2019, an annual EU-Central Asia Civil Society Forum has met¹⁰⁰. The Forum is viewed as a platform that allows civil society representatives from both parties to contribute to the development of the bilateral partnership. At the Forum, media experts, private sector, government experts, representatives and researchers discuss ideas and put forward new and innovative proposals. Their aim concerns how civil society can actively contribute and become more involved in implementing the EU Central Asia Strategy at the local level through programmes and policy levels. The EU proposed working together with the countries of Central Asia to strengthen the architecture of partnership, intensify political dialogue and open up space for civil society participation¹⁰¹. It would remain engaged as a leading development partner for the region and strengthen public diplomacy to underline the benefits of the partnership to the region and its citizens¹⁰².

Civil society participation in public decision-making had a crucial role to play in ensuring the sustainability of the ongoing modernisation processes in Central Asia. From this dynamic, the EU would promote an enabling legal and policy environment for civil society that would allow human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists and independent

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Council of the European Council. 2007. “The EU And Central Asia: Strategy For A New Partnership”. Data.Consilium.Europa.Eu. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007-INIT/en/>.

¹⁰⁰ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2019. “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities For A Stronger Partnership”. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

employers' organisations to operate freely and safely, fostering dialogue and cooperation between civil society and administrations at all levels¹⁰³.

IV. Central Asian Civil Society and Democratisation

Due to the collapse of the Soviet system, following the example of similar countries already party to the Warsaw Pact, the Central Asian republics embarked on a series of political and institutional reforms to unify their domestic systems with those of the countries of the Euro-Atlantic area. The republics of Central Asia were then considered a fertile ground for expanding the liberal democratic model. On the latter's part, there was an exciting adhesion to the requests coming from these new actors on the international stage.

However, the experience of the last thirty years has shown the emptiness of initial expectations. Despite countless efforts, programs and various initiatives aimed at opening up and transforming Central Asian political systems according to the principles of the rule of law, the regional landscape remains characterised by unfair and unfree elections, authoritarian practices and corrupt and inefficient judiciary. Moreover, the number of daily violations of the fundamental rights of citizens has remained constant, while in a considerable part of the region the grey areas of non-law have widened.

To this day, the relationship of regimes to democratisation programs is in a paradoxical condition. Although the leaders declare that the establishment of representative democracy and respect for fundamental freedoms are objectives of their policies, the latter's reality testifies to a precise will to prevent concrete developments in this direction. In recent years, this divergence has been justified in building a so-called "guided democracy" (*upravlyayemaya demokratiya – управляемая демократия*)¹⁰⁴. Claimed as a national way to democracy, this formula is rather understood as "imitated democracy", a screen for regimes that are not entirely dictatorial but are concerned about maintaining a dialogue with systems considered authentically democratic¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Krasin, Yuri Andreevich. "Russian Democracy: A Corridor of Opportunities." *Policy. Political Studies* 6 (2004): 125-135. (Красин, Юрий Андреевич. "Российская демократия: коридор возможностей." *Полит. Политические исследования* 6 (2004): 125-135.)

¹⁰⁵ Mamychev, Alexey, Diana Mamycheva, Valeria Krupnitskaya, and Alla Timofeeva. "Political transformation of public-power organisation and the color revolution technology in the Eurasian space". *Central Asia & the Caucasus* (14046091) 17, no. 3 (2016).

1. *Democratisation: the paradigm of transition*

The conjuncture of the early 1990s favoured the application to the region of a complex of new doctrines and completely new ideas. All the Soviet Central Asian Republics participated in drafting a new Union Treaty proposed by Gorbachev. In contrast, the Caucasian and Baltic Republics refused to do so as they had already planned an independent future. From the Central Asian point of view, the local elites found themselves pushed into independence that, far from being an endogenous aspiration, was a decision by the centre to abandon the region¹⁰⁶. While the Georgians and Armenians joined Moldova and the Baltic Republics in refusing to participate in the 1991 referendum on the Treaty, the Central Asian Republics voted overwhelmingly – by an average of 95% – to approve of the New Union Treaty¹⁰⁷. The individual party leaders wanted the Soviet Union to continue in a reformed guise; the results indicate that their electorates shared this outlook¹⁰⁸. One cannot discern a yearning for independence when less than 5% opposed the new Union Treaty. Still, the very few votes cast against the treaty indicate that there was only a minimal and marginal group that wanted the Soviet structure to be dismantled. Furthermore, six republics had refused to draft and participate in the referendum, whereas the Central Asians had acted precisely in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, given the state media monopoly and the forceful use of propaganda, the result could never have been in doubt.

Thus, not only did the Central Asian leadership suddenly have to manage this new situation and its immense challenges, but also this took place in a context of absolute emptiness in ideals caused by the similar disappearance of the Marxist-Leninist conceptual framework. The latter, albeit profoundly modified by the adaptation to the local reality; had nevertheless constituted the ideology at the basis of the system, the source of apparatchik's mental and cultural universe rigidly formed to serve it. Having monopolised the ideology so profoundly and for such a long time in the field of political reflection, there was an acute need for alternative models for managing the new situation and the necessary reform of the existing administrative structures. Lacking an institutional memory prior to imperial times and then experiencing Soviet

¹⁰⁶ Muiznieks, Nils R. "The influence of the Baltic popular movements on the process of Soviet disintegration." *Europe-Asia Studies* 47, no. 1 (1995): 3-25.

¹⁰⁷ Suyarkulova, Mohira. "Reluctant sovereigns? Central Asian states' path to independence." Cummings, Hinnebusch (2011): 127-50.

¹⁰⁸ Gleason, G. (1991). Independent Muslim republics in Central Asia: legacy of the past, shape of the future. Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. *Journal*, 12(2), 355-375.

integration, adopting the democratic-liberal models of the victorious West at the end of the Cold War emerged almost automatically as an obligatory path.

Such an approach was enthusiastically welcomed on the western side, especially in the EU and the U.S. For over a decade, the concept of the “world democratic revolution”, an ideological tool of internationalism used by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), had made its way as a central element of global foreign policy¹⁰⁹. At the basis of this ideology was a theoretical paradigm with a scientific claim, the “transition to democracy”, which, in a teleological vision, advocated the possibility of a linear path of passage from authoritarianism to democracy. Furthermore, a path on which any state could start and progress through the application of standard schemes, regardless of the starting conditions and its type of internal structure¹¹⁰. Under its functionality as a superpower foreign policy, this vision had been developed by large sectors of the US academic world who enriched it with literature articulated upon a series of central concepts to influence the field of hegemonic studies¹¹¹. In the view of its supporters, these principles configured a universal right to democratic governance, which collective international processes had to protect.

On the European side, the approach had been more pragmatic. Faced with little or no initial interest in these parts of the former USSR, it limited itself to hoping for transformations in a democratic sense, such as the most suitable developments to guarantee the security of the new international environment and the stability of Central Asian societies¹¹².

Nonetheless, under the influence of the transitological view, in the cosmopolitan perspective of legal globalism dominant in the 1990s, Europeans also considered neoliberalism and its primary representations of the rule of law and human rights, such as superior principles and normative foundations, as the legitimacy of any government. Thus a shared Western vision emerged to achieve a “third wave of democratisation” and, for some, a “third way” to complete planetary uniformity as the sole and best socio-

¹⁰⁹ Schapiro, Leonard. “The International Department of the CPSU: key to Soviet policy.” *International Journal* 32, no. 1 (1977): 41-55.

¹¹⁰ Gans-Morse, Jordan. “Searching for transitologists: contemporary theories of post-communist transitions and the myth of a dominant paradigm.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2004): 320-349.

¹¹¹ Novy, Andreas, and Bernhard Leubolt. “Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre: social innovation and the dialectical relationship of state and civil society.” *Urban studies* 42, no. 11 (2005): 2023-2036.

¹¹² Berdiyev, Berdi. “The EU and former Soviet Central Asia: an analysis of the Partnership and Cooperation Cooperation Agreements.” *Yearbook of European Law* 22, no. 1 (2003): 463.

political system¹¹³. This drive was applied within the borders of the former USSR with a particular voluntarist intensity, driven by a real triumphalism, which fueled a renewed conviction of the inevitability of the path that the republics should have followed in order to reach the double landing of the free market and democracy and an even more reduced consideration of the structural limits of the export of the model in the conditions typical of the region.

For realising its plan in the global periphery, through the international development aid system, representatives came running to the fore and reflected what happened to the defeated communist adversary; the transition paradigm offered a concrete apparatus of democracy alongside the promotion of community. As part of the Soviet bloc, the same schemes used in Eastern Europe were applied. At the centre of attention concerning institutional transformations, the central focus and base were good governance¹¹⁴.

The essence of the latter derived from another critical element of the “transition” paradigm was its totalitarian prejudice, the belief that at the root of the alleged evils of the Soviet system there was an omnipotent state, a Leviathan who was now caged to favour an idealised civil society and the liberalisation of the economy¹¹⁵. Consequently, a substantial part of the activities implemented by the apparatus deployed in the region focused on the formal aspects of defining domestic politics, in particular on parliaments and electoral mechanisms. These programs traced the experiences of development cooperation in the third world of the 1960s and 1970s.

The formal adoption of laws and structures could not interact with societal behaviour and practices. The institutions that defined the political field, which, although transforming themselves to respond to post-independence challenges, were ultimately strengthened¹¹⁶. Forcing the adaptation of the model numerous times generated a growing resistance and aversion within the region. The recently formed states could not accept elements such as the deterioration of national specificities and the exhaustion of the state’s role.

¹¹³ Lobo, Marina Costa, and Pedro C. Magalhães. “From ‘Third Wave’ to ‘Third Way’: Europe and the Portuguese Socialists (1975–1999).” *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 3, no. 1 (2001): 25-35.

¹¹⁴ Ahrens, Joachim, and Herman W. Hoen. “Economic transition and institutional change in Central Asia.” *Institutional Reform in Central Asia: Politico-Economic Challenges* (2012): 3-17.

¹¹⁵ Haskell, John D. “Will the Real Transitology Please Stand Up?.” *Baltic Yearbook of International Law* 15 (2015): 2016-03.

¹¹⁶ Mayer, Sebastian. “Walking alone, Walking Together? OSCE-EU Relations in Central Asia.” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 3 (2017): 300-312.

In the degradation of the general conditions of life and given the fact that it reduced democracy to a formal procedure, the imported ideology of transformation was increasingly perceived as a system conceived not for development but rather for the opening of these peripheral economies to global capital, which, could influence national policies through the agenda of international financial institutions without paying particular attention to the populations of the beneficiary countries¹¹⁷.

A factor to which everyone had to pay attention was that in neglecting the state dimension, without the strengthening of the institutions and authorities responsible for organising the elections and the law enforcement jurisdictions, it would not have been possible a priori to speak of democracy, not even within the formal terms envisaged by the standard package of the transition¹¹⁸. Throughout the second half of the 1990s, the abovementioned paradox was consolidated by which, even in the face of little or no results on the ground, the transition was assumed as a complete phenomenon, apart from some negligible side effects. An insecurity that betrayed the political will to continue to definitively take for granted the impossibility of a model other than the Anglo-Saxon form of liberal democracy, as the inevitable point of arrival of the political coexistence of human societies.

For their part, with the fading of enthusiasm and expectations typical of the first post-independence period, while continuing to declare themselves in favour of a discourse that was the obligatory route for access to international financial aid, Central Asian leaders began to oppose an argument that underlined the limits of an unconditional and accelerated democratisation. This argument was based on cultural particularism, on the principles of non-interference and sovereignty and, above all, on the risks that an unconditional opening of the political field could entail for the stability of young states¹¹⁹. In this way, the vision of transition continued to be accepted. The idea of leaving a past of totalitarianism, which, under the deep traces left by it, would have required a long period of adaptation to democratisation policies by local entities.

¹¹⁷ Bolesta, Andrzej. "From socialism to capitalism with communist characteristics: the building of a post-socialist developmental state in Central Asia." *Post-Communist Economies* 34, no. 1 (2022): 71-98.

¹¹⁸ Blank, Stephen. "Democratic Prospects in Central Asia." *World Affs.* 166 (2003): 133.

¹¹⁹ Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Post-colonialism compared: Potentials and limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 279-297.

2. *Kazakhstan*

Reigning over an immense country subjected to numerous centrifugal forces, Kazakh President Nazarbaev made a wise modification of the relationship between centre and periphery, an essential dialectic inherited from the Soviet system. If the centre maintained direct control through the appointment of regional governors (akim), the powers of the latter were strengthened so that they served as a guarantee of the necessary mobilisation of voters during the numerous electoral exercises and, more generally, of the legitimacy of the regime at the regional level¹²⁰. This de facto decentralisation also derived from - relative compared to its neighbours - party pluralism, which allowed regional leaders to appropriate resources already available to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) apparatus, which further increased its power and margin for manoeuvre in the implementation of policies from the centre.

At the same time, as a formal opening to decentralisation, the principle of the eligibility of regional assemblies was preserved. The central power was favoured by the objective difficulties encountered by forming a counter-elite precisely under the immensity of the distances between the different urban centres. Potential leadership alternatives were easily co-opted into the elite or marginalised by the impossibility of structuring support networks on a national scale¹²¹.

Another structural element that must be kept in mind is how the system was restructured by accentuating the ethnic-nationalist principle in a nutshell in the Soviet national construction¹²². In this way, belonging to the Kazakh ethnic group became an essential prerequisite for finding work or making a career. In a context in which the country's eponymous nationality constituted only a narrow majority, this situation placed a substantial part of the population in a grey area of non-law underlined by the ambiguity of the official definition of citizenship, oscillating between *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*.

In other words, the main factor that shaped the system was the full affirmation of the presidential clan's control over the country's economic life. Faced with the precariousness of the internal holding, the key to

¹²⁰ Hess, Steve. "Kazakhstan." In *Authoritarian Landscapes*, pp. 157-198. Springer, Boston, MA, 2013.

¹²¹ Kennedy, Ryan. "A colorless election: The 2005 presidential election in Kazakhstan, and what it means for the future of the opposition." *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 6 (2006): 46-58.

¹²² Koch, Natalie. "Sport and soft authoritarian nation-building." *Political geography* 32 (2013): 42-51.

Nazarbaev's success in such an enterprise primarily resided in balancing domestic sources of support with international ones¹²³. By agreeing to the introduction of a general economic policy direction of liberal inspiration, as required by the significant transnational capital, which was installing itself in the country's energy sector, the regime ensured the silence of those critiquing the slow progress of democratisation. At the same time, the regime drew from the international context only those elements that could be useful to it in the work of internal consolidation, at the same time discarding what would have put into play the rents and monopolies controlled by the elite.

Just after New Year in 2022, protests began in Kazakhstan, in Zhanaožen responding to an increase in the price of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) due to the elimination of state subsidies, turning into a diffuse compendium of demands as they spread throughout the country. This coincided with political slogans shouted by the demonstrators «Shal, ket!» - Leave Old Man! referring to the continued hold on power by Nazarbayev after relinquishing the presidency three years ago in 2019¹²⁴.

This protest was not the first of its kind. However, on this occasion, the rapid spread of protests and violence that took place led analysts to think that it was not only about the rise in prices but a host of social factors that marked the discontent of a population that had been kept calm thanks to unprecedented economic growth experienced by the country between 2000 and 2015¹²⁵. The success of the Kazakh Government primarily rested on three fundamental pillars: economic success, a weak opposition and the repression of non-conformists. The ruling party dominated the political system, which all other participants in the elections supported; therefore, the population did not have natural political alternatives to vote for.

However, other essential motivations were also observed, such as the consequences of the COVID pandemic, the severe repression exerted by the government, the restrictions on fundamental freedoms and suffocating corruption, which led to the disillusionment of the majority of the population¹²⁶. The few organised groups of demonstrators also demanded a profound political reform toward genuine democracy and the release of

¹²³ Nurgaliyeva, Lyailya. "Kazakhstan's economic soft balancing policy vis-à-vis Russia: From the Eurasian Union to the economic cooperation with Turkey." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 92-105.

¹²⁴ Kudaibergenova, Diana T., and Marlene Laruelle. "Making sense of the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan: failing legitimacy, culture of protests, and elite readjustments." *Post-Soviet Affairs* (2022): 1-19.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Heuer, Vera, and Brent Hierman. "Manhandling and mediation: unpacking the repressive repertoire in Kazakhstan's 2016 anti-land reform protests." *Asian Security* (2022): 1-18.

political prisoners. To all this, one must add other causes of discontent of a local nature, as in the case of the easternmost regions, where they experienced power supply problems caused by the overload of the network due to the consumption generated by the mining of cryptocurrencies.

3. *Kyrgyzstan*

In the face of the successes and the balance in the implementation of capitalist restructuring typical of the Kazakh experience, Kyrgyzstan offered the example of a country which, from the first moment of the disappearance of the Soviet federal structure, did not cease to oscillate between different institutional experiments which was at least theoretically destined for development, democratisation and effective governance. Kyrgyzstan had long been considered the model for applying the transition paradigm to the Central Asian region. Here too much depended on the figure of the first president, Askar Akaev, the only Central Asian leader at the dawn of independence who did not come from the CPSU nomenclature but the academic world¹²⁷.

Aware of the sympathies that this fact earned him in the international arena, Akaev dreamed of making his country an “island of democracy” or the “Switzerland of Central Asia” against the authoritarian background in the first half of the 1990s region¹²⁸. For a few years, this seemed to work. The first Constitution, issued in May 1993, was entirely modelled on the principles of Anglo-Saxon liberalism, with the related emphasis on human rights, to which the country was dedicated. Akaev harshly condemned “totalitarianism”, introducing disparate reforms with the applause and assistance of different supranational institutions. Among these were the IMF, which suggested a structural adjustment reform with devastating effects on the country’s economic structure. Against this background, it quickly became apparent at the centre that with the tools of liberal regimes, it would not be possible to govern a country deeply divided by a general north/south rift and, within these macro-regions, by a particularly fragmented clan structure, which numbered approximately forty groups¹²⁹. Given the scarcity of material resources and the jarring regional

¹²⁷ Ivanov, Yevgeny. “Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan.” In *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century*, pp. 517-547. Springer, Cham, 2022.

¹²⁸ Fletcher, Joseph F., and Boris Sergeyev. “Islam and intolerance in Central Asia: the case of Kyrgyzstan.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 2 (2002): 251-275.

¹²⁹ Lowe, Robert. “Nation building and identity in the Kyrgyz”. *Central Asia: aspects of transition* (2003): 106.

contradictions, democratic institutions could only be an empty shell, secondary to the need to ensure the country's stability within the borders inherited from the USSR. Akaev had to refer more and more to his international sponsors. To such an extent, Kyrgyzstan was described as entirely dependent on the international community¹³⁰.

The difference concerning the period prior to 1991 was that instead of having to relate to a single ordering power, the country had to refer to a set of trans-national - but mostly Anglo-American - subjects, without the support of which the state would not be able to ensure the most basic functions of public administration such as education, security structures and health. However, the international support, on the one hand, was not enough; on the other, its internal referents, the community of NGO operators created by the cooperation programs, pressed for the continuation of the reforms without taking into account the profound effects on society, which was interpreted as modernisation overheating¹³¹.

The Soviet legacy of the Kyrgyz judicial system had multiple consequences and played a central role in the three revolutions of 2005, 2010 and 2021. After the second revolution, the political leadership initially opted for democratic openness and close cooperation with international donors and civil society. This was primarily due to two reasons. First, the events of 2010 reminded all that power must remain accountable.¹³² If the people could not achieve this accountability through the democratic process, they would not hesitate to resort to force again. Thus, openness and support of civil society allow power to gain legitimacy. It should be noted that civil society in Kyrgyzstan was a strong actor who played an essential role in the revolutions. Thus, several representatives of civil society were invited to join the government¹³³. Secondly, Kyrgyzstan remained an impoverished country, and the state could not perform most of its duties.¹³⁴ This is why it welcomed with open arms the international

¹³⁰ Huskey, E. (2008, November). Foreign Policy in a Vulnerable State: Kyrgyzstan as Military Entrepot Between the Great Powers. In *China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly* (Vol. 6, No. 4).

¹³¹ Bogatyrev, Valentin. *Kyrgyzstan, Democratic Success or Threat to Stability?* (2007), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/11867983.pdf>.

¹³² Yigit, Sureyya. 2010. "A Day In The Life Of A Revolution: Kyrgyzstan". *Reflection-cafe.Net*. Retrieved 28 May 2022 <http://www.reflectioncafe.net/2010/04/day-in-life-of-revolution-kyrgyzstan.html>.

¹³³ Radnitz, Scott. "What really happened in Kyrgyzstan?." *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 2 (2006): 132-146.

¹³⁴ Yigit, Sureyya. 2010. "A Day In The Life Of A Revolution: Kyrgyzstan". *Reflection-cafe.Net*. Retrieved 28 May 2022 <http://www.reflectioncafe.net/2010/04/day-in-life-of-revolution-kyrgyzstan.html>.

donors and NGOs that could replace at least in part its functions and obligations¹³⁵.

Kyrgyzstan was deploying a strategy to capture the international financial windfall. The international community was sub-contracted by up to 12,000 local NGOs, which replaced the state's traditional role in many areas¹³⁶. NGOs primarily provide public services related to health. NGOs largely replaced the state in health, education, and religion¹³⁷. Higher education had also been privatised, and foreign universities developed under the aegis of foundations¹³⁸.

As far as religion is concerned, above all the Saudi foundations and organisations financed many mosques and religious schools¹³⁹. These examples demonstrate that NGOs, supported by foreign donors, were putting an end to the welfare state. Elites got rich through processes of liberalisation and privatisation, leaving a large part of the population in poverty because the disengagement of the state in the social spheres had been encouraged by the donors. For some, the thousands of Kyrgyz NGOs demonstrate a dynamic civil society and a democratisation of the country and an example of the deployment of global soft power for others¹⁴⁰.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, one sees the emergence of civil society strongly influenced and even created by international intervention in the context where the state is weakening and disengaging. Contrary to classical Western ideas, civil society does not emerge from the bottom up but is top-down. All NGO Funds come from external sources, which raises questions about their financial independence and the content of the programs and reforms they promote. There are almost no volunteers in the NGOs. However, staff - in terms of the Kyrgyz average - are highly remunerated as donors outsource development policy to national NGOs, with many

¹³⁵ Paasiaro, Maija. "Home-grown strategies for greater agency: reassessing the outcome of civil society strengthening in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 1 (2009): 59-77.

¹³⁶ Dar, Firdous A., and Tabasum Firdous. "The role of NGOs in the socio-political development of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan: A comparative study." *Journal of South Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2015): 213-230.

¹³⁷ Connery, Joyce. "Caught between a dictatorship and a democracy: civil society, religion and development in Kyrgyzstan." *Fletcher Journal of Development Studies* 16 (2000): 1-18.

¹³⁸ Heyneman, S. P. (2007). Three universities in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: The struggle against corruption and for social cohesion. *Prospects*, 37(3), 305-318.

¹³⁹ Tabyshalieva, Anara. "Political Islam in Kyrgyzstan." *OSCE Yearbook* 8 (2002): 83-92.

¹⁴⁰ Connery, Joyce. "Caught between a dictatorship and a democracy: civil society, religion and development in Kyrgyzstan." *Fletcher Journal of Development Studies* 16 (2000): 1-18.

resourceful persons preferring to create their NGO rather than engage in politics or economics¹⁴¹.

Therefore, NGOs have become the means of capturing funds from abroad, and state organisations are forced to go through NGOs to obtain funds. The weakness of the state in Kyrgyzstan has resulted in the deconcentration of power of which the NGOs are an expression¹⁴². The reduction of the state's sovereign powers has resulted in the appearance of thousands of NGOs financed by external aid, which more or less ensure the missions that were previously the responsibility of the state: social, education, health, and now justice. Therefore, the result of thirty years of sovereignty for Kyrgyzstan boils down to a dependence on the new structures such as NGOs, international institutions, and development agencies.

Initially, the regime first began to apply increasing pressures on the media; then, with the growing social disasters caused by the new economic course and the consequent rise in the level of criticism from the opposition, it had to try to reconstruct a vertical line of power capable of maintaining the contact between the centre and the regions. Akaev began a growing use of the referendum instrument to override the legislative framework and thus proceed with the chosen transition line¹⁴³.

Following the example of Nazarbaev, Akaev set up a pyramid system at the top of which were the members and neighbours of the presidential family, who in turn guaranteed the benefit of a series of clans and economic interest groups¹⁴⁴. However, the higher internal fragmentation and poverty made the internal stability of the system much more difficult. It was also of little use to resort to the mobilising myths of nationalism, which found a suffused echo, not sufficient to overcome the regional clan fragmentation nor the growing alienation of the rural masses increasingly exposed to the effects of liberal restructuring.

The Akaev system went into a crisis with the elections for the renewal of the parliament and the presidency in 2005. On the one hand, the interests consolidated around the regime made countless and clumsy attempts to keep their privileges unchanged. On the other hand, the long line of

¹⁴¹ Pétric, Boris-Mathieu. "Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan or the birth of a globalised protectorate." *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 3 (2005): 319-332.

¹⁴² Work, Robertson. "Overview of decentralisation worldwide: A stepping stone to improved governance and human development." (2002).

¹⁴³ Fumagalli, Matteo. "Semi-presidentialism in Kyrgyzstan." In *Semi-presidentialism in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, pp. 173-205. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Collins, Kathleen. "The logic of clan politics: Evidence from the Central Asian trajectories." *World politics* 56, no. 2 (2004): 224-261.

discontents with the current state of affairs began to fall out of line, the first regime change in Central Asia¹⁴⁵.

The main actors, according to Gulzhan Baibetova, Director of the Zhenskaya Demokraticchyskaya Set Kyrgyzstana - ZDS Women's Democracy Network in the Kyrgyz Republic, were the masses of dispossessed mobilised towards the palaces of power by the opponents, peasants or sub-proletarians of recent urbanisation who expressed the revenge of the countryside against a capital city perceived as indifferent to the degradation of their living conditions¹⁴⁶. The subsequent evolution of the country's political life confirms its structural crisis, mainly resulting from an erroneous application of schemes alien to its reality.

4. *Tajikistan*

The Soviet national delimitation of the 1930s created a particularly unbalanced subject in Tajikistan, where the main problem was the low degree of self-identification of the provinces with the centre. Regional rivalries erupted into conflict as sudden independence wiped out the external factor that had ensured the system's strength. Nonetheless, the civil war of the 1990s was misinterpreted as a confrontation between old regime forces and democratically inspired groups.

The figure of Imomali Rakhmonov, an obscure lower-level apparatchik, was raised to the presidency by the ruling coalition, probably believing that, given his low profile and the absence of a structured support network at the national level, he would be quite easily manipulated in a transition phase. On the contrary, however, Rakhmonov surprisingly managed to survive the *éminence grise* and juggle the high level of conflict within the same governing coalition to maintain power by presenting himself as the architect of national reconciliation.

The conjuncture following the civil war raised high expectations among the actors of democratisation in Central Asia. The cessation of hostilities was based on a National Reconciliation Agreement, which provided institutional mechanisms and practices to ensure access to power for members of the opposition, for which 30 per cent of public offices were reserved¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁵ Freedman, Eric. "When a democratic revolution isn't democratic or revolutionary: Press restraints and press freedoms after Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution." *Journalism* 10, no. 6 (2009): 843-861.

¹⁴⁶ Telephone interview with Gulzhan Baibetova on 27 May 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Turajonzoda, Akbar. "Tajikistan—Politics, Religion, and Peace: A View from the Opposition." *Problems of Post-Communism* 42, no. 4 (1995): 24-28.

The singularity of the Tajik situation also lay in recognition of political legitimacy for members of the Islamist opposition – the Islamic Renaissance Party - unique in a region in which the forces referring to political Islam were repressed in every way as they were presented as a threat to secular institutions¹⁴⁸.

The climate created in the region by the post-2001 “anti-terrorist” emergency favoured the re-emergence of a renewed public discourse on the “Islamic threat”, also a constant in the regional institutional paths. However, Rakhmonov balanced his quasi-liberal moves with opening acts, considering that external sources of financing - especially those destined for the conspicuous third sector - remained among the main items of the national budget.

Overall, civil society in Tajikistan is less influential than in Kyrgyzstan. It often faces various obstacles in its activities. Given the authoritarian nature of government in Tajikistan, civil societal organisations are a force that promotes democratisation, emphasises the social problems of the country in their activities and cultivate a critical approach to the existing state policy. Despite the constitutionally enshrined democratic basis, respect for human rights and the priority of public interests, the government often ignores these values, and sometimes neglects the guaranteed freedoms¹⁴⁹. In this regard, NGOs seek to fill the resulting democratic vacuum and provide services and knowledge to vulnerable populations and individuals despite facing limitations in the implementation of programs and activities, as a result of which they need to closely coordinate their actions with government bodies. The government, on the other hand, sets the legal norms for NGOs, since authoritarianism provides for close top-down supervision of non-state initiatives implemented as commercial and nonprofit organisations.

The government is not convinced if the NGOs are really trying to help local communities or using it as a façade to cover destabilization activities under Western tutelage. This notion has grown into a form of full-fledged paranoia, which now defines the relationship between the state and civil society in Tajikistan¹⁵⁰. Such thinking is akin to a conspiracy theory, which

¹⁴⁸ Akbarzadeh, Shahram. “Why did nationalism fail in Tajikistan?.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 7 (1996): 1105-1129.

¹⁴⁹ Elnazarov, Davlatsho, and Jamshed Jamshedov. “Guarantees of the Rights and Freedoms of Man within the New Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan.” In *International Conference” Topical Problems of Philology and Didactics: Interdisciplinary Approach in Humanities and Social Sciences”(TPHD 2018)*, pp. 112-116. Atlantis Press, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Gupta, Pravesh K., and Santosh K. Jha. “Development of civil society in Tajikistan and Mongolia in the Post-Soviet period.” *International Journal of Applied Social Science* 5, no. 1 (January 2018), 48-56.

has developed in the post-Soviet space. In the mid-2000s, after numerous protest movements in Ukraine, Georgia and neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, public organisations became the object of criticism as the main driving forces of such movements.

This has led to the widespread accusation of being a “foreign agent”, which refers to any organisation that receives funding from abroad, especially Western countries. The overt negative connotations are a key element of the term, which has become quite popular among all authoritarian post-Soviet politicians. Immediately, doubts turned into a fear of a lack of control, which has led authoritarian governments to introduce new regulations and restrictions on NGOs or tighten existing legislation.

The civil war in Tajikistan oversaw a complete restructuring of all political, economic and social mechanisms in the country. The general mindset ran into problems regarding the identity and perception of independent government. Policy makers had to pave the way for an independent Tajikistan to begin the process of democratisation. Civil society, mostly people who chose not to take part in the hostilities on either side, became the main, if not the only, catalyst for democratisation and, as it became clear, a counterbalance to the authoritarian tendencies in the country’s rule. The EU and donors have seen potential in new NGOs in Tajikistan, thus making efforts to expand the ability of non-governmental organizations to use this potential to preserve democratic norms¹⁵¹. On the other hand, NGOs do not explicitly link their mission to full-fledged ideological shifts that legitimately would threaten the fragility of authoritarian rule in the country. Each NGO has its own agenda, be it human rights or women’s empowerment, but in general they fall under the understanding of civil society as a whole as a force that provides an alternative perspective on the actions and policies of the current leadership of Tajikistan.

However, the obstacles for NGOs in Tajikistan are not limited to legislation. In fact, legislation is only an expression of the government’s mistrust of civil society; the imposition of restrictions outside the legal framework also takes place in the interactions between NGOs and the state. As part of their activities, NGOs must coordinate their actions with government agencies in order to avoid unnecessary problems, which is not required by law. The government has access to information, data and contacts that can be key to NGO projects. In general, limiting the availability of any information is the main reason for the reluctance of the Tajik government to ensure transparency. In this case, NGOs have to adapt.

¹⁵¹ Kluczewska, Karolina. “Questioning local ownership: insights from donor-funded NGOs in Tajikistan.” *Journal of civil society* 15, no. 4 (2019): 353-372.

Such conditions force them to apply to state bodies, to conduct personal negotiations with officials and convince them to give permission or share contacts and necessary information or provide assistance. Moreover, NGOs must provide any required document confirming the main goal of the project, plans and financial capabilities.

There are different regimes for NGO registration at different levels: smaller ones just need to notify local authorities, while others need to register at the national level and some faith groups do not have to register at all. NGOs often do not understand the regulatory framework and, therefore, do not comply with their information obligations. Similarly, the ability of them to meet standards is an issue in Tajikistan, a country where NGOs find it difficult to keep up to date with their paperwork and where they lack legal capacity¹⁵².

Such requirements are not standardised by law, so the list of documents and their form may vary depending on the city or region in which NGOs plan to implement their programs. Thus, NGOs always have to adapt, mobilize their personal connections and find different ways to just do their job and be accountable to donors¹⁵³.

Government distrust of CSOs and NGOs has also negatively affected public opinion about NGOs, due to the paranoia that foreign funds are a key source of sustainability for local NGOs, the public tends to come to the same conclusions as the state. This factor is most significant for NGOs, since local communities are the main beneficiaries of their activities and the services they provide. However, such paranoia among the population is associated with a sense of threat to their personal safety, to avoid interacting with them so as not to have problems with the state and not be associated with foreign agents, which has become a strong stigma¹⁵⁴.

5. *Uzbekistan*

By its central location and demographic weight - over half of the Central Asian population - Uzbekistan had a profound influence on the life of the region, including political trends. During the Soviet period, the

¹⁵² Michel, S. T. E. F. A. N. "Conservation of Tajik markhor (*Capra falconeri heptneri*) and urial (*Ovis vignei*) in Tajikistan and adjacent Afghanistan." *Galemys* 22 (2010): 407-419.

¹⁵³ Kluczewska, Karolina. "Donor-Funded Women's Empowerment in Tajikistan: Trajectories of Women's NGOs and Changing Attitudes to the International Agenda." *Studies in Comparative International Development* (2021): 1-22.

¹⁵⁴ Hogan, Bea. "Internet Latest Battle Ground for Central Asian Repression." *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* (2000).

Uzbek state, which was the pivot of the Central Asian administration system, disposed of enormous economic resources to improve the living conditions of the masses and took root deeply among the population. After leaving the federal structure, the ruling elite made a clear choice based on the state's central role in leading the transition to independence.

The intertwining of political and economic power expressed a high level of interdependence between all privileged classes and state structures, forming the basis of support of President Islam Karimov. In a patrimonial scheme, loyalty to Karimov was translated into privileges in the economic sphere, to maintain which the elites have offered whatever support the top required of them¹⁵⁵.

The strength of the interests consolidated in this bloc was to sabotage the attempts at democratisation, which would have undermined consolidated privileges by increasing the system's transparency and popular participation. The centralisation was favoured in the context of the first years of independence when the collapse of the security situation in Tajikistan and the degradation of living conditions among the neighbours because of the neoliberal "shock therapies" seemed to justify Karimov's political course¹⁵⁶. In parallel, he drew another vital resource to consolidate his regime from the historiographical and propaganda manipulation of the Uzbek past. With an intensity at times resembling a totalitarian character, an ideology of "national independence" was elaborated, borrowing mechanisms from Soviet propaganda. In particular, the fight against "alien and destructive" ideas and the glorification of presidential authority¹⁵⁷. The aim was to materialise an analogical assimilation that projected an unreal past greatness onto the bright future that the president's leadership would provide for the country in order to justify all the system's forcing¹⁵⁸.

If the system of state patronage with its propaganda mechanisms presented a high degree of coherence during the 1990s, with the exhaustion of economic resources by the solid demographic growth and the course of foreign policy marked by autarchy and in contrast to Russia, things began to deteriorate. The closures of the system began to constitute a severe brake

¹⁵⁵ Ikhamov, Alisher. "Neopatrimonialism, interest groups and patronage networks: the impasses of the governance system in Uzbekistan." *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 1 (2007): 65-84.

¹⁵⁶ Mamajonov, Nuriddin. The creation of the national educational system of Uzbekistan and establishment of bilateral educational relations with leading European countries. No. 1611-2016-134564. 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Adams, Laura L., and Assel Rustemova. "Mass spectacle and styles of governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan." *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1249-1276.

¹⁵⁸ Farxodjonova, N. F. (2020). Formation of national idea through factors of national culture. In *МИРОВАЯ НАУКА 2020. ПРОБЛЕМЫ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ* (pp. 3-6).

on the development of entrepreneurial activities with the creation of contrasts between the groups dedicated to the rentier sectors of the economy and the emerging ones linked to trade and finance. Economic degradation gave a solid impetus for corruption. In increasing the use of coercive measures at the general policy level, public officials and law enforcement agencies were encouraged to engage in predatory behaviour at all levels.

The expense was that of the Ferghana valley, the most sensitive point of the country where over a third of the population resided and where the leading agricultural and industrial activities were concentrated¹⁵⁹. In addition, here, the social and demographic problems were more marked, intertwined with the firmest grip of Islam on the community, a concentration of conditions for the development of virulent forms of protest that constituted the most significant cause for concern for the central authorities. Above all, the stagnation broke the balance between the leading clans of the country.

An expression of the growing contrast between the Ferghana valley and the central power was the events of Andijan in 2005. Against the backdrop of instability in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the economic groups affected by the manoeuvres of the centre did not hesitate to manipulate popular discontent to seek to strengthen their position towards the government, which responded with an iron fist to the local challenge¹⁶⁰.

Since the first years of sovereignty, Karimov had fully exploited the theme of political stability and the Islamist threat, real or perceived, looming over the country and, conversely, over the whole region. The facts of Andijan indicated that the regime was increasingly inclined to use violence to resolve political disputes. These issues were “securitised”, i.e. removed from the debate and the field of politics and deliberately exasperated to justify any internal repression. Security rose to an absolute value. Every prospect of political reform was sacrificed, with a parallel strengthening of the security structures and a closure of the access possibilities to the top of the elite. At the same time, the desire for total control over social and non-governmental organisations grew, which was repressed through legal restrictions, freezing of funds and various intimidating measures¹⁶¹.

¹⁵⁹ Lubin, Nancy. “Uzbekistan.” In *Environmental Resources and Constraints in the Former Soviet Republics*, pp. 289-306. Routledge, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Kangas, Roger. *Redefining Extremism in Central Asia*. The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) (2018), <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/ISPSW-541%20Kangas.pdf>.

¹⁶¹ Rotary, Igor. “Uzbekistan”. *Russia and the moslem world* 2 (2002): 24-31.

6. Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan occupies the extreme point of the Central Asian political spectrum - which is not broad - and is very close to the definition of a model totalitarian system. It must be said that even before independence, this was physically and culturally one of the most isolated parts of the USSR. Consequently, the renewals of the perestroika era were less felt so that there was no social fabric through which to attempt democratisation of the country¹⁶².

The personal factor played a considerable role in defining the political profile of post-Soviet Turkmenistan. For 21 years, until he died in 2006, public life was dominated by the figure of President Saparmurat Niyazov. Naming himself Turkmenbashi (“father of the Turkmen”), Niyazov differed from his colleagues and neighbours for a particular intellectual honesty towards the discourse of democratisation. While following the regional tendencies aimed at creating formal institutions on the Western model, the former president always made it clear that international influence would be subordinated to his conception of national interests, boasting the need to preserve the orientalist character of the country, as it was more suited to the character and needs of the population¹⁶³.

Niyazov was the only leader among all the heirs of the Soviet system to keep the one-party system (renaming the Communist Party as a Democratic Party), organised referendum plebiscites first to extend and then promulgate his presidential term for life and introduced a cult of one’s personality that put Stalin to shame¹⁶⁴. The political result achieved was a highly centralised form of personal patrimonial power, which could be defined as “sultanistic” by the absence of structures of intermediation between the top and the masses. In fact, the administrative and military apparatus acted as pure personal instruments of the president based on elementary impulses such as the fear of punishment and the desire for reward¹⁶⁵. Niyazov managed to wisely control the balance of the country’s five main clans and prevent the consolidation of alternative poles of power through an uninterrupted rotation of different personalities in the main public offices.

¹⁶² Horák, Slavomír. “Turkmenistan at the Last Stage of Perestroika. Determinants of an Authoritarian Path.” *Cahiers d’Asie centrale* 26 (2016): 29-49.

¹⁶³ Koch, Natalie. “The “Personality Cult” problematic: Personalism and mosques memorialising the “Father of the Nation” in Turkmenistan and the UAE.” *Central Asian Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2016): 330-359.

¹⁶⁴ Brown, Stephen M., and Konstantin Sheiko. “The Soviet legacy and leader cults in Post-Communist Central Asia: the example of Turkmenistan.” (2006): 1.

¹⁶⁵ Bohr, Annette. “Independent Turkmenistan: from post-communism to sultanism.” In *Oil, transition and security in Central Asia*, pp. 23-38. Routledge, 2004.

On the constitutional level, the president was simultaneously head of state, government and the armed forces and had an unlimited power to issue decrees having the immediate legal force and the exclusive right to appoint magistrates, prosecutors and all regional executive positions¹⁶⁶. The legislative power initially represented by a parliament (Mejlis) of 50 deputies was emptied of meaning through the introduction of a People's Council (Khalq Maslikhaty) where, in addition to normal parliamentarians, the representatives of the districts and the hakim (regional governors) appointed by the president participated.

As stated, Niyazov did not just extend his control to all spheres of public life but built a Stalinist cult of personality. In the context of massive propaganda about his role in restoring the Turkmen to alleged lost greatness, the president had attempted to attribute sacred characters to his person with the publication of the Rukhnama (Book of the Soul) in 2002. The assiduity with which this and a small number of messages decided by the top bombarded the masses, the ubiquity of the president, and the absence of any committed content gave the Turkmen media system a surreal character worthy of Orwell's dystopian fiction.

Such a system presented one of the worst records in the world regarding respect for human rights - severely restricted personal freedoms, severe restrictions on freedom of movement both within and abroad, and denial of the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. All in the context of a systematic effort aimed at isolating the country from any influence coming from the rest of the world, including those coming from the religious sphere. Turkmenistan stood out as the only former Soviet republic where all places of worship belonging to denominations outside of official Islam and the Orthodox Church were demolished and considered "alien"¹⁶⁷.

Therefore, the situation in Turkmenistan leads to a series of interesting reflections on the issue of civil society and democratisation and the evolution of Central Asian political systems. First of all, it was evident that in the presence of substantial energy resources, the international community, including to a certain extent the EU, was inclined to a large degree of indulgence. The authoritarianism of the oil regimes could be forgiven when it served to ensure a stable internal framework as a precondition for the entry of international capital.

The Turkmen situation emerged as particularly relevant after the sudden death of Niyazov, when it was carefully followed to evaluate the possibilities of keeping Central Asian regimes after years of centralising the

¹⁶⁶ Bohr, Annette. "Turkmenistan." *Nations in Transit* 11 (2008).

¹⁶⁷ Mills, Courtney Anne. "Turkmenbashi: the propagation of personal rule in contemporary Turkmenistan." PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2007.

systems around the people of the presidents. Even though this element with Niyazov had reached its maximum intensity, which led to the prediction of scenarios of chaos and paralysis, the transition took place calmly¹⁶⁸. However, the hermetic closure of the country to outside gazes prevented all external actors, including the EU, from evaluating precisely what was happening.

After Niyazov power passed to Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, a senior official who survived the countless Niyazovian purges, confirmed in office by a typical plebiscite vote against the background of a substantial condescension from the international community¹⁶⁹. The speed of this process also suggested that the tyrant's disappearance was not natural but should instead be interpreted as the effect of a "palace" revolt, which could also serve as a model for other successions in the region. Presidential elections were held in March 2022, where the president's son was elected in another sham election, thus strengthening the argument that Turkmenistan was a sultanistic regime with power being transferred from father to son¹⁷⁰.

V. Central Asian Political Sphere: Challenges

From this overview, it is clear that the natural institutional choice made by the Central Asian regimes after the end of the USSR was in the sense of an authoritarian system in which, even within the framework of formal observance of a constitutional provision, the seat of power was consciously placed outside the regulatory framework.

The failure of the democratisation schemes applied to Central Asia and the particularities of the political development of the five republics must be examined by comparing the contradictions between the theoretical assumptions of the transition paradigm and the cultural and political realities of the region. As already mentioned, transitology involved an ideological approach to the region's problems, in which some factors were given excessive importance while others were overstated or underestimated.

Among the overestimated elements was the totalitarian impact of the Soviet system on local realities and the hope of being able to form a social base that would act as a vector of change, as an alternative to the power

¹⁶⁸ Sullivan, Charles J. "Halk, Watan, Berdymukhammedov! Political Transition and Regime Continuity in Turkmenistan." *Region* (2016): 35-51.

¹⁶⁹ Bohr, Annette. "Turkmenistan." *Nations in Transit* 11 (2008).

¹⁷⁰ Oxford Analytica. "Turkmen dynastic succession promises nothing new." *Emerald Expert Briefings* oxan-es (2022).

pyramids of presidencies¹⁷¹. Among those underestimated the persistence of pre-modern characters in local value systems, the specificity and depth of the Soviet policy management enterprise, and the particularities of internal tribal segmentations. From this set of distortions derives the inconsistency of the elements of formal democracy introduced in the post-Soviet power practices and a series of risks to the prospects of the systems' stability.

1. *Absence of internal receivers, opposition and civil society*

Among the main misunderstandings deriving from the regulatory approach to transition and the establishment and maintenance of civil society was the claim to identify local social forces ready to be bearers of change in a democratic sense, along the lines of the experience in this sense in Eastern European countries.

If the openings of the short season of perestroika had given rise to sketches of endogenous democratisation processes in Central Asia, however, these had in no way represented mass popular movements comparable to those that arose in the Caucasian or European regions. Central Asian oppositions had taken hold in some sectors of the old Soviet intelligentsia, that is, among urban minorities educated in Russian culture and therefore profoundly uprooted from the mass of the population - in comparison, the cadres of the presidential parties successors of the CPSU, with their roots in the bodies rural social networks always presented a considerably higher degree of popular representation. In Uzbekistan, it was visible that the self-styled democratic parties liquidated by Karimov represented socio-cultural associations rooted in literary circles rather than fundamental operational political oppositions. Democracy thus appeared as a tactical slogan used for purposes of political struggle.

It should be noted that since their beginning, alongside the ecological claims and the contestation of the role of the CPSU, such oppositions had not hesitated to manipulate ethnic-nationalist slogans whose uncontrolled evolution, against the background of the inter-ethnic clashes that characterised the dissolution of the communist systems, could have caused unpredictable consequences for the delicate structure of Central Asian inter-ethnic coexistence¹⁷². In any case, the opposition parties maintained maximalist and intransigent attitudes towards regimes, thus favouring the

¹⁷¹ Pelkmans, Mathijs. "Introduction: post-Soviet space and the unexpected turns of religious life." (2009): 1-16.

¹⁷² Pomfret, Richard. "The economies of Central Asia." In *The Economies of Central Asia*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

latter's propaganda to brandish them as dangerous for stability. This fact can be doubted given that these subjects had increasingly become marginalised, unable to overcome their personalism and internal divisions and present a public debate capable of transcending the inter-ethnic and inter-regional divisions typical of the Central Asian context.

In light of the poor results on a party and media level, hopes for the democratisation process have focused on civil society as its main driving force. In the latter's view, civil society refers to the legacy of dissidence from the Soviet regime, as it opposes the totalitarian state and its sphere of action in the economic and political fields. In concrete terms, one was dealing with representatives of the third sector. The presence of NGOs was required as mandatory for a whole series of aid programs of the EU, which thus created the demand for their development. As in the rest of the post-Soviet space, a class of NGO operators was formed in Central Asia, with Western economic support, engaged in precisely the functions uncovered by the withdrawal of public affairs supported by the same client. Therefore, one can retrospectively question how much such a class would be capable of subsisting without its inspiring source¹⁷³. Nevertheless, it is precisely this notion of a social body separated from the spheres of politics and economics that are remarkably absent from the region's culture.

Accordingly, the presence of civil society concerning the region could be deduced by distinguishing within it a neo-liberal component (i.e., the sector induced by international cooperation) from a community one that leads to forms of social self-organisation found in certain secular traditions of the peoples of the region. This manifested in forms of mutual aid or making decisions at the local level; however, these informal traditions are primarily non-antagonistic to power and, therefore, difficult to classify in a classical conception of civil society. Therefore, only NGOs remain under this category, whose leaders are often mainly alien to the local communities where they operate and are doubtful as real actors of substantial change.

On the contrary, in their total dependence on international subsidies, rather than positive agents of change, they have been increasingly perceived by the population as vectors of a foreign and hostile model, in a climate of resentment and apathy that has led to the devaluation of democratic values. This perception was heightened after the events of March 2005 in Kyrgyzstan, where NGO workers appeared as a counter-

¹⁷³ Ziegler, Charles E. "Civil society, political stability, and state power in Central Asia: cooperation and contestation." *Democratization* 17, no. 5 (2010): 795-825.

elite manipulated by foreign intervention to determine national policy¹⁷⁴. Ultimately, a large part of the international action aimed at stimulating the growth of civil society is the result of misleading research, often a way to spend the allocated funds, ignoring, again, the complex otherness of Central Asian reality compared to Western societies.

It should also be noted how these sectors of the opposition, although repressed, were at the same time manipulated by regimes as necessary for their democratic legitimacy in front of the international audience. In this sense, the presence of substitute opposition with a right of limited participation in public life and functioning Western-funded helped create the curtain behind which power privately controlled the resources of the state.

2. *Conflict of values: transition paradigm and local culture*

Observing from the outside the gap between the values declared by the regimes and the authoritarian reality of the exercise of power, European actors in Central Asia were surprised at how local citizens could accept this. It was not possible to explain the maintenance of these authoritarian practices regardless of the cultural orientations of Central Asian societies. A look in this direction provides additional evidence of how a Western-style adoption experience of modernisation has no hope of success if it does not consider the subtle internal mechanisms by which each society thinks and reproduces itself so that transformation can adapt to this type.

The considerable degree of success achieved by Soviet modernisation in the region consisted precisely in its ability to adapt to the particularities of local societies, which, under the socialist superstructure, confirmed deeply traditional elements and, in some cases, even definable as pre-modern¹⁷⁵. For their part, Central Asian societies had shown that they had an aptitude for maintaining specific and ancient traits while adapting to new trends and an extraordinary ability to blend antagonistic concepts in a reasonably harmonious way, which is one of the primary keys to understanding the history of the region during the twentieth century.

Thus, Central Asia remained Islamic in its values and collective representations at its core. With the disappearance of the previous

¹⁷⁴ Petrov, Kirill. "Elites and Color Revolutions: The Logic of Russia's Response." *Russian Politics* 5, no. 4 (2020): 426-453.

¹⁷⁵ Shahrani, Nazif. "Central Asia and the challenge of the Soviet legacy." *Central Asian Survey* 12, no. 2 (1993): 123-135.

superstructure, seventy years of its impact on the local population can be assimilated towards “socialist globalisation” rather than striving towards the new liberal standards with a universal claim. Central Asia has returned to rediscover its traditional practices. All the more so since, thanks to the harmful media exposure typical of the first post-Soviet decade, the individualism and unbridled freedoms of Western democracy had been branded by many as destructive to traditional values and destabilising social life¹⁷⁶. This resulted in new attention to the ethics of justice according to Muslim tradition¹⁷⁷. A more accentuated value was given to political stability rather than freedom per se. In this sense, as elsewhere in the world, the Western conception of human rights was portrayed as opposed to the community culture of Islam, which in harmony with the values of the socialist period, emphasised the duties of collaboration and identification of the individual in the community rather than on individual rights as opposed to the collective sphere.

The ability of presidents to remain in office cannot be explained if these anthropological peculiarities of the Central Asian area are not taken into account. For the mass of the population, the presidential figure appeared as the guarantor of the rest of the socialist welfare state and against a type of Islamic or ethnic-nationalist radicalisation. This element was evident in the experience of Kyrgyzstan under Akaev. Whilst it was clear that the president was inept, whose management was responsible for the country’s degradation, nonetheless, Akaev held on to power for 15 years since his figure was at times idolised by the majority of the population - primarily by minorities - who perceived him as the main guarantor of stability¹⁷⁸.

Another essential anthropological characteristic of Central Asian societies, equally decisive in influencing political change, was constituted by a much more solid and rooted patriarchalism proceeding from north to south. It derived from the influence of the extended family, which created profound respect for hierarchy and seniority, which was reproduced in the social segmentation of solidarity groups. Here the councils of the elders

¹⁷⁶ Ziegler, Charles E. “Civil society, political stability, and state power in Central Asia: cooperation and contestation.” *Democratization* 17, no. 5 (2010): 795-825.

¹⁷⁷ Delving even deeper than Islamic values, in lands marked by the memory of belonging to the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan, one can find echoes of the patrimonial principle of the transmission of fiefs (ulus) based on lineages associated with a “mandate from Heaven”. Hence, a particular sacral perception of power individuals submits to avoid “celestial” interference in their lives was maintained even in the communist period.

¹⁷⁸ Troitskiy, Evgeny. “Political Turbulence in Kyrgyzstan and Russian Foreign Policy.” (2011).

(aksakal) have come to assume an increasing weight as consultative bodies and arbitration of conflicts¹⁷⁹.

Moreover, not to be overlooked are factors deriving from the dialectic between the nomadism of the steppes and the agricultural sedentarism of the south, which has always been a firm thread of the political evolution of the area and, as such, a cultural watershed that was reconfirmed at every historical turning point of local destinies. In fact, the political systems proved to be more open between two peoples who had escaped from the nomadic tradition: the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz¹⁸⁰. Moreover, it should be remembered how, especially in urban contexts, the Soviet Union had created with its consolidated welfare mechanisms a high level of civilisation, which seriously deteriorated after 1991 - with the possible exception of Kazakhstan. The memory of such a level maintains not only high expectations among the population towards governments but also an aversion to the principles of economic liberalism. Faced with this set of historical, anthropological and cultural factors, it was evident that a path towards establishing democracy had to follow an approach designed to reflect the same internally and in no way could it refer to the imitation of the experience of Western societies.

3. The base of power structure in central Asia: persistence of informal groups

Having failed to consider the cultural orientations of local societies, transition schemes had pursued the democratisation of Central Asian political systems by focusing on their formal aspects. They conceived in Weberian terms the existence of a rational and impersonal authority by taking measures for its strengthening. Nevertheless, Central Asian power relations traditionally are based on personal and informal obligations that transcend official administrative divisions. These personal powers are structured on local solidarity groups based on the ethnic-tribal and regional

¹⁷⁹ Earle, Lucy. "Community development, tradition and the civil society strengthening agenda in Central Asia." *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 3 (2005): 245-260., Beyer, Judith. "Customisations of law: Courts of elders (aksakal courts) in rural and urban Kyrgyzstan." *POLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 38, no. 1 (2015): 53-71.

¹⁸⁰ Among these peoples, there is the so-called principle of *öldža*, in which, once a social group, tribe or clan conquers the internal hegemony of the collectivity, no one should contest it as long as the dominant power can ensure the order. This principle places the obligation on the dominant power to maintain the loyalty of subordinates.

factors, composing their different impulses in variously articulated systems of favouritism¹⁸¹.

These traditional networks - differently defined according to the context, such as clan or tribe - represent forms of social interaction based on trust and loyalty from which the individual expects protection and help. They have different origins depending on whether they arose in a sedentary or nomadic context. First, they represent brotherhoods based on the control of critical resources, water in the first place, and the observation of religious practices - the model being the Uzbek *mahalla*. In contrast, in the second, they constituted a means of transmitting knowledge and adapting to the rigidity of life of transhumance. In sedentary areas, belonging to solidarity groups derives from the place of residence, while in the second, from traditional tribal and kinship ties - authentic or perceived as such. Given its roots in the social fabric, the legitimacy of power in Central Asia has always derived from respect for the authority of the key figures in these segmentations.

The persistence of these segmentations until the present day helps shed light on the fundamental nature of the Soviet system at these latitudes and its alleged totalitarian nature. Despite its ability to penetrate and the extent of its functions, the Soviet enterprise was far from encasing society and the economy in the oppressive hood presupposed by a totalitarian vision. Before and after the Stalinist excesses, it appears on the contrary that it always encountered enormous difficulties in affirming a monolithic and centralised control over the immense country. From the beginning, official terminology recognised this difficulty as “местничество - mestnichestvo: -localism, thus indicating the fragmentation of decision-making power between opposing alliances of interests aggregated into corporate pyramids whose influence reached the heart of the party-state¹⁸².

Regionalism, the vertical structuring of space on administrative units competing for the allocation of resources, was a cornerstone of the Soviet policy of managing the Asian peripheries¹⁸³. Here, if, on the one hand, the official ideology required solidarity groups to leave the official public sphere, the shortages of the mobilised economy kept the demand alive for

¹⁸¹ Tousley, Scott W. *Afghan Sources of the Tajikistan Civil War*. Army command and general staff Coll Fort Leaven Worth KS, 1995.

¹⁸² Cucciolla, Riccardo Mario. “The transformist: The evolution and adaptability of Sharaf Rashidov’s regime in Soviet Uzbekistan.” In *Moscow and the Non-Russian Republics in the Soviet Union*, pp. 92-121. Routledge, 2021.

¹⁸³ Libman, Alexander. “Regionalisation and regionalism in the post-Soviet space: Current status and implications for institutional development.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 3 (2007): 401-430.

their function as channels for the allocation of resources, thus favouring the conditions for their reproduction within collectivist and party structures. Unable to eliminate them, the Soviet system used pre-existing internal segmentation based on clan or regionalism to build a complex system of balances between centre and periphery in which the boundaries between state and society were confused. In this, it gave evidence of a unique reorganised local society based on an entirely new social experiment in which the model of the European nation-state, in the Marxist-Leninist understanding, was imprinted on the Turkic and local Muslim multi-ethnic reality by integrating its internal segmentations on new foundations¹⁸⁴.

Ultimately, as the main element of continuity with the region's pre-Soviet past, the segmentation of society into solidarity groups and the power relations emanating from it constitute an essential and structural element of Central Asia's political and social order. Therefore, far from being treated as a defect to be overcome as in the transitological approach, they constitute an obligatory field of confrontation for the action of state modernisation initiated after independence, especially since the clan and tribal factor was further strengthened after the disappearance of the USSR. Indeed, with their impact on the life of the majority of the population, the neoliberal policies carried out during the 1990s gave new life to the sense of clan ties based on which, as in the 1930s, people built new informal exchange systems to cope with the shortcomings of daily life. In many areas of the region, belonging to a particular tribal group became a crucial moment for entry into the political and economic world¹⁸⁵. More generally, throughout the southern strip of the former USSR, there is still a complex dialectic in which state action and the clan structures inherent in indigenous societies interact. Observing this state of affairs, one can particularly understand the ineffectiveness of regulatory programs aimed at affirming the concept of the rule of law in the region.

If the Soviet system had founded a judicial system of courts formally similar to the European ones, its functioning was subjected to the informal mechanisms of the party and its internal segmentation. Still, the influence of the clan factor determined a widespread preference for the informal resolution of disputes rather than for their reliance on the rigidity of the law. Practices that appeared hostile to Western understanding as corruption revealed themselves - if analysed in a perspective of social anthropology -

¹⁸⁴ Melvin, Neil J. "Patterns of centre-regional relations in Central Asia: the cases of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan." *Regional & Federal Studies* 11, no. 3 (2001): 165-193.

¹⁸⁵ Collins, Kathleen. "Clans, pacts, and politics in Central Asia." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 3 (2002): 137-152.

as a “culture of gift” endemic to local experience¹⁸⁶. It is one of the founding elements of the system as it oversees the resource distribution mechanism that ensures the tightness of the administration chain. Thus, the formal and democratic procedures borrowed from the West can intervene in changing the internal equilibrium, but in no case be decisive for their definition, as the advocates of transition claimed.

In this regard, it should be noted that the insistence by international donors on the development of civil society through the growth in the number of NGOs contributed to the improvement of the situation but did not transform the situation, in some cases strengthening clientelist practices and regional centrifugal tendencies. Once again, the example of Kyrgyzstan is notable. Here, the formation process of NGOs often occurred in a cascade starting from large central structures founded in the capital by prominent former politicians, who acted as guarantors of international funding. Far from creating new social forces, new hierarchical structures emerged parallel to those managed by the state. As such, organisations dealt with vital functions for local communities, such as water management in rural areas, their leaders (now respondents in Brussels, Washington rather than Bishkek) assume greater political power than the elected authorities do. Thus, this was another demonstration of how de-nationalising international action created the groundwork for new conflicts¹⁸⁷.

In a context of a growing detachment of regimes from society, degradation of living conditions and in which the benefits of the self-styled democratisation process are felt only by a tiny elite, one is witnessing a growing recourse to use of force as a tool for regulating political issues. This trend was favoured by the climate of widespread anti-terrorist consensus created by the US intervention in the region, which allowed the regimes to extend the scope of “securitised” issues in the public debate to intensify the repression of dissidents¹⁸⁸. It increasingly restricted the lawful spaces of contestation. This is in a context already characterised by the lack of political organisations capable of channelling and giving a public voice to dissent by the ruling elite to satisfy Western interests. Given the impossibility of obtaining any change through the ballot box, antagonistic groups that openly refused to participate in official political life were

¹⁸⁶ Werner, Cynthia. “Gifts, bribes, and development in post-Soviet Kazakstan.” *Human Organization* 59, no. 1 (2000): 11-22.

¹⁸⁷ McQuaid, Sara Debris. “Book review: Agency in Transnational Memory Politics.” (2021): 1507-1511.

¹⁸⁸ Jackson, Nicole J. “International organisations, security dichotomies and the trafficking of persons and narcotics in post-Soviet Central Asia: A critique of the securitisation framework.” *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 3 (2006): 299-317.

developing. The games were predetermined mainly beyond the periodically organised facade of electoral exercises¹⁸⁹. In this disconnect between the internal elites, the fundamental reason for the phenomenon of “colour revolutions” observed in the 2000s in various points of the post-Soviet space, which affected Kyrgyzstan, must be sought. Here, as well as in the Uzbek events of Andijan, it was possible to see how the Central Asian potential for protest remained excluded from the political field, assuming at the limit the characteristics of a communal uprising destined in the future to manifest themselves in ever more violent forms, devoid of objectives and any ideal impulse.

A digression must be made to follow the European attitude towards these developments. While following a more balanced approach, the countries of the EU have essentially followed the US policy for the region. It would have been difficult to expect any other behaviour. In fact, unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries, the European ones do not have specialised cadres in Central Asia and diplomatic representations on the ground, which has produced a disorderly and incoherent action. If despite all the contradictions to which the US has given rise, they have followed a line following their geopolitical interests, the Europeans have thus lost sight of the broader context in which their resources were used¹⁹⁰.

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an organisation that has played an essential role among the actors of democratisation under its presence on the ground in all the republics and direct access to the highest leaders of the same, must also be framed in the context of European action. If the OSCE has provided an essential platform for dialogue between Europe and Central Asia, it has also found itself in severe difficulty in understanding the local reality, sandwiched between the particularism of the latter and the universalism of the normative conception of civil rights, lacking a strategy suitable for intercultural dialogue and the integration of norms deriving from different interpretative universes¹⁹¹. The Central Asian regimes expressed growing frustration towards the OSCE and the EU for being under scrutiny without corresponding attention being paid to the developments within the Euro-Atlantic area in the sphere of fundamental rights, which was under attack after the opening of the war on terrorism. This contradiction was evident in contrast to Kazakhstan's

¹⁸⁹ Yigit, Sureyya. “Presidential Elections and Marketisation in Tajikistan and Mongolia.” *Middle Eastern Analysis/Ortadogu Analiz* 5, no. 50 (2013).

¹⁹⁰ Cornell, Svante E. “Geopolitics and strategic alignments in the Caucasus and Central Asia.” *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (1999).

¹⁹¹ Shkolnikov, Vladimir. “Missing the big picture? Retrospective on OSCE strategic thinking on Central Asia.” *Security and Human Rights* 20, no. 4 (2009): 294-306.

request to preside over the Organization. With the growth of US international action's missionary role, the OSCE has also been accused of being an additional instrument of the US regional geopolitical agenda that uses the democratisation processes instrumentally for geopolitical purposes.

Especially in the light of developments of growth in European interest in the region justified in the exclusive terms of energy security, which has led on more than one occasion to overlook the importance of democratic principles in order to agree with regimes endowed with raw materials, Europe has seen its alleged moral superiority crumble¹⁹². The paternalistic attitude of politics increased the disillusionment both among the elites and among the mass of the Central Asian population towards democratisation, at the same time putting regimes even more on the defensive¹⁹³.

VI. Conclusions

Therefore, the support of the EU for the development of civil society and democratisation in Central Asia provides a fragmented and contradictory picture. Faced with the crisis offered by Kyrgyzstan, rather than a trend toward greater openness in the region, there was a widespread expectation of strong charismatic power capable of imposing rules on strongly deconstructed societies. Over thirty years of efforts in this direction have produced minimal results. In Kazakhstan, it is evident that accompanied by destruction and looting, the events in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have had the effect of strengthening the conservative feelings of the citizens. In fact, many of the representatives of the nascent middle class who previously wished to implement political reforms in time now fear that any forcing of the regime's hand could affect their standard of living and economic well-being.

At the regional level, the authoritarianism connected to these trends is perceived by the majority as a necessary precondition for the stability of the economy and, in any case, a lesser evil in the face of the growing prospect of an "Afghanization" of regional security given the Taliban have returned to power after an ignominious western withdrawal in 2021¹⁹⁴. This prospect

¹⁹² Yiğit, Süreyya. "Turkic energy supply and EU demand". *Middle Eastern Analysis/Ortadoğu Analiz* 5, no. 60 (2013).

¹⁹³ Matveeva, Anna. "Democratisation, legitimacy and political change in Central Asia." *International Affairs* 75, no. 1 (1999): 23-44.

¹⁹⁴ Hahn, Gordon M. "China and Central Asia after Afghanistan's 'Kabulization'." *International Studies* (2012): 5. Sullivan, Charles J. "White flags: on the return of the Afghan Taliban and the fate of Afghanistan." *Asian Affairs* 52, no. 2 (2021): 273-287.

is indeed dangerously real. The tendency to use violence by regimes and their opponents retains all its relevance. Although a certain liberalisation can be expected, indispensable after the excesses of the Niyazov and Berdymuhammedov eras, the evolution of Turkmenistan remains an unknown factor from which it seems reasonable to expect the exercise of a regressive influence on regional trends. In Kazakhstan, despite the brilliant economic results of the past, the increase in wealth has also meant a surge in the level of the clash between elites, which can also produce unpredictable results, as was witnessed in January 2022 after Nazarbaev had left the political scene. How the recent Kyrgyz President Japarov came to power also shows how power and authority are transferred in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz Presidents were overthrown by widespread unrest; in 2005, 2010 and 2020. It is the only Central Asian state that has experienced such successful outbursts by its citizens on the streets. Its relatively progressive civil societal organisations operating in a relatively free social and political environment financially supported by the EU have played an important role in opposing fraudulent election results, culminating in the forcible replacement of heads of state.

Therefore, the general picture is a systemic crisis of regional political systems, where ruling elites and opposition are absorbed in the struggle for power and increasingly distant from ordinary people. On the external level, it seems that the post-Soviet republics remain more objects rather than subjects of international life, incapable of detaching complex detaching themselves from the networks of external influences interested in controlling their strategic position.

There is, moreover, undoubtedly a role for international assistance in the evolution of domestic political landscapes. However, it is essential to rethink the intellectual basis of this role. The regressive trends opened by the events of 2005 indicate a systematic deviation in the developmental model applied so far. New interpretations and paradigms of interpretation of the regional reality are needed in order to get out of the interpretative cage and the ideological weight of the transition paradigm. The concept of “democratisation” remains an uncertain term in applying to the region¹⁹⁵. The concept of modernisation appears perhaps to be more appropriate in this sense; in any case, it is better perceived at the local level¹⁹⁶. Speaking of democracy, of compliance with international

¹⁹⁵ Jackson, Nicole J. “The role of external factors in advancing non-liberal democratic forms of political rule: a case study of Russia’s influence on Central Asian regimes.” *Contemporary politics* 16, no. 1 (2010): 101-118.

¹⁹⁶ Melvin, Neil. “The European Union’s Strategic Role in Central Asia.” CEPS Policy Briefs 1-12 (2007): 1-8.

standards, setting the analysis of phenomena on their presence or not is misleading. It constitutes the lowest common denominator of consensus between the regimes and the mass of the population about what one seeks to achieve through the efforts of reform. There are elements of openness, but the main problem is how to use these elements in the (re) construction of institutions that must ensure the system's functioning and impose the legality indispensable to protect human rights. Attempts at reform focused on the formal aspects of institutions are doomed to fail because, on the one hand, they refuse to take into account the powerful informal aspects of local political life. On the other hand, they are carried out by structures currently perceived as extraneous - communities where their action takes place.

Therefore, the priority is to concentrate efforts on the reconstitution of an efficient public service capable of coping with the chronic instability of the peripheral regions by taking concrete action to respect fundamental rights. To this end, attention should be drawn, rather than to the delegation of power and the expansion of the third sector, to strengthening the chain of command and the interaction between centre and periphery, a principle on which the Soviet Union was built. Public administration today must be brought back under effective control. Affirming the centre's stabilising effect is indispensable to avoid the anarchist drifts whose results can be observed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is also essential to review the training principles of state officials, which today are fragmented into different international programs and must be brought back under the bed of national public institutes, possibly assisted by councils in which international bodies are represented.

Secondly, it is necessary to resume the path of assistance in the awareness that this will be able to follow innumerable paths without "necessary" and linear paths. The requirements of local institutional systems cannot be defined based on absolute values. However, they must be evaluated based on concrete experiences, the historical absence of democratic practices and the fact that the application of laws is here subjected to informal rules in a context where the very concepts of democratisation are far from being perceived as legitimate. It is, therefore, necessary to break with the universalism and abstract determinism of utilitarian rationality that has so far overseen the efforts of international assistance.

Experience shows that successful strategies are only those capable of merging with pre-existing informal structures in a complementary and consensual way by integrating different anthropological and sociological approaches. One can assert that the success of any modernisation strategy passes through the aptitude to reuse traditional forms and not through the

direct and integral projection and application of the set of forms considered modern, directly borrowed by companies considered to be more advanced¹⁹⁷.

An indispensable premise is re-inventing traditional forms, thinking about managing local diversity without denying the universal scope of particular economic and legal advances. Development strategies must be based on research on the actual structures of legitimacy specific to the Central Asian context to elaborate an equation of the exercise of power that considers the traditional mechanisms of selection of the elites. All this requires the emancipation of individuals and a skilful work of adaptation to the traditional mechanisms inherent in Eurasian societies. As the experience of Japan demonstrates, a new and effective normative order can only emerge from the interpenetration between the cultural orientations of the community and the political and economic innovations of modernity. One way forward is undoubtedly that which seeks to make explicit the informal links underlying community architecture and solidarity groups. If indeed the presence of such segmentations poses a challenge to the order of Central Asian societies, the institutions must face it by engaging in the management of these divisions, giving shape to their meaning and the role they can play in contemporary public life through the creation of institutional solutions capable of reflecting and managing cultural pluralism. An effort directed in this sense can be more effective in preserving social stability and increasing the representativeness of forms of government rather than an approach to deny these phenomena according to paradigms that provide for the inevitable assimilation of particularities.

Similar considerations should oversee an opposition to the hijacking of Islam by militant extremists, which, as a structuring factor in networks of solidarity, shapes individual expectations regarding the legitimacy of the political order. Here, too, an effective and stabilising evolution of local political systems - with a particular emphasis on secularism separating the state from religion, maintaining equidistance from all faiths and ensuring that religion remains a matter of private conscience within the realm of the individual - requires a selective integration of elements of traditional legal culture into national law.

One of the most important contributions of NGOs has been to promote a change in the way society and its researchers view the poor and poverty. Through their knowledge of the realities of people living in poverty, NGOs

¹⁹⁷ Kenzhekhanuly, Rauan. "Ideologies and alphabet reforms in Central Asia." (2012): 133-150.

have shown the multi-dimensional and dynamic aspects of situations of poverty. They have demonstrated how different life difficulties (lack of housing, unemployment, the difficulty of access to health, education, justice) mutually reinforce each other to drive the person deeper into poverty and exclusion, hence the acceptance that poverty is much more than a simple lack of revenue¹⁹⁸.

NGOs have been instrumental in understanding that poverty violates human rights. The poorest have taught us to understand the indivisibility of human rights. Extreme poverty is detrimental to the free exercise of fundamental rights, which are access to civil and political rights and other rights such as the right to housing, health, education, culture, and justice, to name only the main ones. When this precariousness persists, they compromise the ability of the people concerned to assume their responsibilities and regain their rights by themselves. These people then no longer consider themselves subjects of rights. NGOs also play a monitoring and control role to ensure that the social commitments made by states are implemented.

Ultimately, it is necessary to think of an institutional framework that directly measures the region's peculiarities, which makes use of them selectively instead of stigmatising them, reflecting them in the public sphere to introduce adequate transparency. Such an approach can more effectively defuse the explosive potential of internal segmentation in Central Asian societies, which remains to the extent that they are denied and relegated underground.

Finally, it is necessary to introduce changes in the economic development model. It is unrealistic to expect fundamental changes in the institutions without a corresponding activation of the social dynamics to support them. In this complex process, Europe could have a decisive role to play as long as it does not hold onto improbable expectations unless it is prepared for quite discouraging results.

In the current geopolitical competition, the EU could reassert itself as a moderating force and the affirmation of values such as cooperation and multilateralism, in which genuine openness and pluralism remain a long-term vision. However, from a European point of view, this evolution requires a quintuple reformulation:

- i) an adequate evaluation of the strategic significance of the Central Asian area on the international scene, i.e., avoiding considering the region only from the point of view of its raw materials;

¹⁹⁸ Chambers, Robert. "Poverty and livelihoods: whose reality counts?." *Environment and urbanisation* 7, no. 1 (1995): 173-204.

- ii) a reappraisal of the security vision which led to diverting natural resources towards military programs which began on 11 September and have recently taken an upward turn with Russia's war in Ukraine;
- iii) the awareness that it will be increasingly challenging to play an effective and constructive role in a region so difficult to access without some form of cooperation with Russia, which looks increasingly unlikely, at least in the short term in the aftermath of its military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022;
- iv) given its open support in 2007 declaring a "moderate and tolerant Islamic thinking respecting the constitutional secular principle is a hallmark of the Central Asian countries", an exploration of joint and complementary programs with a secular Turkey, given its leadership potential within the Turkic world, in the realm of administrative reforms, state restructuring and political development;
- v) awareness and assurance that the relationship with Central Asia is not, nor perceived as, between two parties, one being the giver and the other as a receiver, characterising their association as an unequal power relationship.

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