



GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE
INSTITUTE

CIVIL SOCIETY REFORMS IN UZBEKISTAN: MORE THAN GOVERNMENT CHICANERY?

Hubertus Juergenliemk

Abstract

‘Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together’ states the EU’s Central Asia Strategy (EU 2007:2)¹. One promising avenue for bridging the European Union and Central Asian countries is via civil society. As one of the most traditional and least likely candidates, Uzbekistan has recently shown signs of opening to Civil Society Organisations.

Before this background this Briefing Paper asks if the opening by the government is genuine or pure chicanery? If the latter, how can we explain that one of the most authoritarian countries on earth raises expectations it cannot satisfy?

GGI Briefing Paper 1/2014

GGI Briefing Paper Series

Peace & Security Section
© The Global Governance Institute (GGI)
January 2014

The Global Governance Institute

Pleinlaan 5, Brussels
B-1050 Belgium
Email: info@globalgovernance.eu
Web: www.globalgovernance.eu

Introduction

‘Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together’ states the EU’s Central Asia Strategy (EU 2007:2)¹. One promising avenue for bridging the European Union and Central Asian countries is via civil society. It could become a hub for exchange and mutual learning between Europe and Central Asia. However, since independence in the early 1990s the Central Asian states have often safeguarded the old elites, are not used to and not comfortable with debate, criticism and the ideas of civil society.

At the heart of Central Asia is Uzbekistan, the most populous and military capable of the Central Asian Republics. As one of the most traditional and least likely candidates, Uzbekistan has recently shown signs of opening to Civil Society Organisations. A highly unusual move as the government created such a hostile climate for International NGOs that only 30 maintain operations in the country. The government reports over 6.000 national NGOs, but many are deemed to be government owned NGOs, trade and business associations or working at community level².

Before this background the Briefing Paper asks if the opening by the government is genuine or pure chicanery? If the latter, how can we explain that one of the most authoritarian countries on earth raises expectations it cannot satisfy?

The background to hostility against civil society in Uzbekistan

In addition to the hostile climate for NGOs, President Karimov is one of the last survivors of the Soviet period. Having worked himself to the top of the Communist party at the time of independence he has ruled the country since. In September 2013, Karimov celebrated the 23rd anniversary of Uzbekistan’s independence: 23 years under his firm rule. And despite the positive development of the economy, Uzbekistan has not benefited from oil or gas wealth as much as their richer neighbours Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Both have a three to four time higher GDP per capita. As a result, Karimov ensures regime and societal stability by

tightly controlling the media, civil society and cracking down on the political opposition.

In response, his regime is widely criticized for torture, appalling prison condition, child labour and widespread violation of human rights³. By most democracy standards, Uzbekistan features close to the bottom (161/167)⁴. As the most populous country in Central Asia with the most capable military, Uzbekistan nonetheless plays a central role for stability in the region. It is home to almost as large a population as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan taken together. With borders to all the other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan also has sizeable minority groups of Russian (5,5%), Tajik (3%), Kazakh (2,5%), Karakalpak (2,5%) and Tatar (1,5%) minorities. Considerable potential exists for tension among the communities.

Uzbekistan was almost exclusively dependent on producing cotton during the Soviet period. It is now less so, but it still makes for over 20% of the countries exports. Given the risks associated with economic diversification from the monopoly of cotton to exporting copper, gold, gas, cars and food, most in the government see democratic transition as too high a risk for the country’s stability.

Central Asia at a Glance	Pop. Mio	Pop. Dens.	GDP/capita \$	Dem. Rank
Uzbekistan	28.1	60	2,600	161
Turkmenistan	5.2	10.5	7,846	161
Tajikistan	7.1	10.5	2,066	151
Kyrgyzstan	5.4	27.4	2,372	106
Kazakhstan	16.4	5.94	11,772	143

Another risk for the country is the fragile security situation. In 2014 the international engagement in Afghanistan is decreasing with NATO’s withdrawal and the transition to training and capacity building for the Afghan police and military by remaining coalition force. As a result religious extremism is feared in Uzbekistan. An escalation of the simmering conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is not unthinkable.

All of the above make it difficult to imagine why the government would genuinely open up to civil society in such a period. Yet, even if the government had decided to open up, the challenge would be to find the right pace to

¹ EU 2007: The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, 31 May 2007. Brussels: Council of the EU.

² Un 2013: Uzbekistan Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, 5 July 2013. Geneva: United Nations.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit 2013 Democracy Index 2012.

ensure regime stability while implementing societal reforms and economic development⁵.

Pre-emptive opening to civil society to secure a succession struggle to President Karimov

The main reason to why very cautious optimism might be in order is that elections are coming up. President Karimov is 75 years old. He was elected in 1991, 2000 and 2007. Presidential elections were originally planned for late 2014, but have been pushed back to 2015. Karimov could remain President, but all signs are indicating that he is becoming frail and planning to step down. By 2015 time he would be 77 and 84 at the end of a renewed term. In November 2013 his daughter, once debated as possible successor was investigated in a move that indicates the unwillingness of Karimov's entourage to accept her as successor.

An incremental opening of the regime before this background could be a strategic decision. If Karimov will not run again, then the regime needs to ensure international acceptance by a candidate close to him. Such a leadership change can result in regime instability. Thus, the elites in the government are much better off giving up some power and stay in control over the term of the next two years than loose it entirely if elections produce sufficient public interest, which might potentially lead to voting for a Presidential candidate outside of Karimov's entourage. The Arab Spring and the potential mobilisation of the population to assemble and protest in public gives the police state the chills. Uzbekistan, similar to countries in Northern Africa has a young population – 46% are below 25 years old – and nine million Internet users, 4 million on mobile devices.

Apart from his daughter, the Prime Minister Mirziyoyev, the Deputy Prime Minister Azimov as well as the head of the national security policy Inoyatov are speculated as candidates⁶. It is likely that Uzbekistan's most important economic partners and the international donors have suggested reforms and opening to the government in private to avoid losing control. China and Russia as the biggest trading partners

account for almost 50% of the countries' exports and have thus a key stake both in regional stability as well as in preserving their business interests in Uzbekistan⁷. A new President not close to the current entourage might reconsider done deals and is thus a risk.

The EU stressed in the 2012 progress report on the Central Asia strategy that Uzbekistan is an 'important partner for the EU'⁸. To also make the point politically, it opened a delegation to use the new political competences of the Lisbon Treaty. In consequence, it notes 'the opening of an EU Delegation in Tashkent in 2011 was an important turning point and relations are broadening into the important energy field and deepening with the new EU support programmes in key areas such as the rule of law'⁹.

Japan, South Korea, Germany and the EU as well as the United States provide over half of Uzbekistan's 211 Mio EUR Official Development Assistance¹⁰. For them, in addition to the development money invested, Uzbekistan is a key stability provider in the region and a key ally to control the border with Afghanistan once NATO leaves. A more positive business climate and international foreign direct investment requires a less authoritarian government. Maintaining influence and working with a more favourable regime is in their interest as much as to prevent the country further orienting towards Russia and China.

The formal steps taken in the 'reform' process

Uzbekistan has embarked on national reforms in the last few years. The OECD noted in 2011 that Uzbekistan 'keeps improving the national anti-corruption legislation and institutional basis, ensuring the society's transparency and openness' (OECD 2011:2)¹¹.

One of the pillars of this reform process was the adoption of the 'Concept for promotion of democratic reforms and formation of civil society in the country' on 12 November 2010 by

⁵ EU 2012: Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia Implementation Review and outline for Future Orientations, 28 June 2012. Brussels: Council of the EU. p.4

⁶ Stroehlein / Swerdlow 2013: Keeping Up with the Karimovs. *Foreign Policy*: <http://goo.gl/hDWB0z>

⁷ MIT 2013: Observatory of Economic Complexity: <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/country/uzb/>

⁸ EU 2012: Progress report, p.11

⁹ Ibid, p.11

¹⁰ OECD 2013: Development Assistance Profile Uzbekistan, www.oecd.org/dac/stats

¹¹ OECD 2011: Uzbekistan Progress Report.

<http://www.oecd.org/corruption/acn/48807826.pdf>

President Karimov. It consists of six priority areas for reform (OECD 2011:2)¹²:

1. Democratization of public governance and administration,
2. Judiciary and legal system,
3. Information and ensuring freedom of speech,
4. The electoral law,
5. Fostering civil society institutions, as well as for
6. Furthering market reforms and liberalization of the national economy.

In addition, a package of legislative initiatives and more parliamentary control anchored in the Constitution was adopted. 'Given the current political and legal realities and the developed nations' record, the Concept provides for establishment of a target holistic program aiming at a drastic improvement of the legal education and awareness-raising activities in the country, and promotion of the level of legal expertise in the society' (OECD 2011 report)¹³.

However, it is highly unrealistic to expect the reforms genuinely aiming to give more space to civil society. The government has too much at stake to lose control after 23 years of a Presidential government. Instead, the reforms should be interpreted as a way of appeasing the international community. At the same time, with reforms under way the government could always promise to the public to 'speed up' the process if enough political pressure will build up. The reforms are also a way to ensure that the donors do not withdraw their political support to the regime completely. At the moment, considerable international support packages are provided to strengthen the security sector of the country with large military support programmes, border policing and training of customs officials.

Policy recommendations for engagement of the European Union and the United States

The European Union is engaging since the update of its Central Asia strategy more on a bilateral basis¹⁴. One key dimension for stability is to provide platforms to meet, discuss and debate at regional level. As regional programmes, for example for a regional border security

programme, have been difficult, less sensitive issues should be advanced, such as supporting:

- City partnerships in border regions,
- Exchanges of trade and women organisations,
- Regional sports competitions,
- Pairing of politicians, diplomats and officials on issues of common concern.

In addition, offering conferences in Europe, Russia or China on neutral ground offers all countries of the region offers to think about joint problems and opens informal channels of communication.

At the same time, offering more education opportunities in Europe is necessary to help educate future leaders and give opportunities to the young population. Such funding would assist rebuilding the intellectual life in Uzbekistan¹⁵. In particular, programmes could include:

- University partnerships with European Universities,
- Civil Society Fellowship programmes for Central Asian government officials in Europe and the US to learn the value and importance of civil society,
- Executive training courses at European Public, Police or Military Academies or at Universities for officials.

Last, but not least, the European Union and US should promote one or two large investment programmes that add leverage and signal to the government that EU countries 'have a stake' in the stability and economic development of the country.

About the author

Hubertus Jürgenliemk is Director of the Peace and Security Section at the Global Governance Institute. His research focuses on European Security and Defence Policy, EU cooperation with NATO and the United Nations, civilian crisis management and European security governance. He can be reached at hjuergenliemk@globalgovernance.eu or on Twitter @hjuer.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ EU 2012: Progress report, p.11

¹⁵ International Crisis Group 2007 Uzbekistan Stagnation and Uncertainty, p.15 <http://goo.gl/3x9AWn>