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## The European Union's support for civil society in Kazakhstan: pursuing a strategic approach?

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**Abstract.** In the European Union's (EU's) official discourse, support for the development of civil society takes quite a prominent place. But to what extent does the EU pursue a strategic approach towards the empowerment of civil society in third (non-EU) countries? And how do non-governmental actors targeted by the EU assistance view the EU support? This paper seeks to answer these questions based on a case study of the EU aid to civil society organizations in Kazakhstan. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of EU documents and expert interviews with Kazakhstani NGO representatives, the author reveals an instrumental (as opposed to strategic) approach of the EU towards civil society support. She further uncovers local criticisms of the assistance delivery, demonstrating the EU's inability to fully account for the needs and capacities of Kazakhstani NGOs.

**Keywords:** civil society; development assistance; European Union; Kazakhstan.

**Introduction.** Civil society support is an integralelement of the European Union's (EU's) development and democracy assistance to third (non-European) countries<sup>1</sup>. In Kazakhstan, the EU, or to be more precise – the European Commission – has been providing grant aid to civil society organizations since the early 2000s. This paper reviews the EU's assistance to the country with the aim to find out whether the Union pursues a strategic approach towards strengthening the civil society sector. Based on numerous semi-structured interviews with representatives of Kazakhstani non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the study further offers a local perspective in evaluating civil society support programs of the EU.

The article is structured as follows. It starts by mapping the EU's aid to Kazakhstan since the country's independence after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. The analysis draws on the EU's documents (strategy papers and indicative programs) and online sources related to Central Asia as a whole and to Kazakhstan in particular. In the second step, the study evaluates the EU's approach by taking a closer look at the European Commission's funding allocation and project selection procedures as they are seen by local civil society actors. The final part concludes.

**The EU's civil society support at a glance.** After obtaining its independence in 1991 and before 2007, Kazakhstan – along with other former Soviet countries – received financial aid from the European Union under the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program. This assistance was designed to address the immediate consequences of the Soviet Union's disintegration, and was primarily aimed at institution-building, administrative reform, transition to a market economy, and development of infrastructure in the newly emerged states. In the 1990s, support for civil society was not among the stated priority areas of TACIS in Kazakhstan or in the broader Central Asian region. In the later period of TACIS implementation, when the EU's *Regional Strategy Paper for Central Asia 2002-2006* was the main EU document regulating budget allocation and distribution of the European financial sources to the Central Asian republics, the non-state sector in the region has received a greater attention. Still, the Strategy Paper focused primarily on economic development, trade and investment in the energy and

<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Development with Civil Society in External Relations, COM (2012) 492 final, 12 September. Brussels: EC.

transport sectors rather than on civil society development<sup>2</sup>.

In 2007, the EU development assistance was reformed together with the other financial schemes. As the result, in Central Asia the TACIS program was replaced with the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). Reflecting on the UN Millennium Development Goals, the DCI shifted the emphasis from the previous EU's approach of «assisting the former Soviet republics to become full-fledged market economies and democracies» to the new tasks of poverty reduction and sustainable development (Boonstra, Hale 2010, p. 5). At the same time, the new *Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007-2013* was adopted. It divided the available EU assistance into three priority objectives: promotion of Central Asian regional cooperation and good neighborly relations, poverty reduction and improving living standards, and support for economic reform and good governance<sup>3</sup>. Civil society development was again not mentioned among the main European priorities in the region. Instead, projects implemented by civil society organizations were seen as a means of contributing to the EU's development agenda, and at the same time European support for civil society was placed within the framework of the EU's external democratization policy (Ibid.). In this context, the *Central Asia Indicative Program* for 2007-2010 that was attached to the above strategy paper and provided more specific objectives of the EU's assistance identified «promotion of civil society and democratic processes, including social dialogue», as one of its «focal priorities» in all Central Asian republics, including Kazakhstan<sup>4</sup>.

2007 also signified a new stage in the EU-Central Asia relations through the adoption of the *EU Strategy for a New Partnership*, which provided an overall political framework for the regional approach of the Union towards Central Asian states. The strategy notes the role of civil society in democratic development of the countries and the EU's aims in this regard. In as many words the strategy claims: «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 cooperate with the Central Asian States to this end and promote enhanced exchanges in civil society»<sup>5</sup>. Yet, the Strategy for a New Partnership does not elaborate any further on this matter. Neither does it include support for civil society among the EU key priorities in Central Asia. Such limited attention to local civil society development in the official documents questions the EU's strategic approach towards strengthening civil society in the region.

In line with the EU's documents, Central Asian civil society organizations, including Kazakhstani NGOs, received a relatively small share of European assistance, as compared to funding channeled to the government. For instance, over 2007-2013 the non-governmental sector received estimated €5.51 million, only about 9 per cent of the overall European Commission's assistance to Kazakhstan (Tsertsvadze, Boonstra 2013, p. 8). The assistance was provided through several programs targeting civil society actors, which drew on funding allocations under TACIS and later DCI, as well as under additional budget lines foreseen specifically for NGOs.

Between 2001-2006 the TACIS incorporated the Institution Building Partnership Program (IBPP) to Support Civil Society and Local Initiatives, for which all Central Asian states but Turkmenistan were eligible. The program was designed to foster a capacity building process and targeted non-governmental organizations, local (municipal) authorities and not-for-profit professional organizations in the TACIS

<sup>2</sup> Strategy Paper 2002–2006 and Indicative Programme 2002–2004 for Central Asia. Brussels, at: [http://www.eas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/rsp/02\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://www.eas.europa.eu/central_asia/rsp/02_06_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> European Community Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013, at: [http://www.eas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/rsp/07\\_13\\_en.pdf](http://www.eas.europa.eu/central_asia/rsp/07_13_en.pdf) (accessed 10 August 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Central Asia Indicative Programme 2007 – 2010, at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/rsp/nip\\_07\\_10\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/rsp/nip_07_10_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership. Brussels, at: [http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/librairie/PDF/EU\\_CtrAsia\\_EN-RU.pdf](http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/librairie/PDF/EU_CtrAsia_EN-RU.pdf)

countries through partnership and cooperation with their counterparts in the European Union or countries benefiting from the PHARE<sup>6</sup> program. The IBPP aimed at strengthening the role of local civil society actors by enabling them to: create NGO networks working on common issues in order to share experiences and information; participate in public oversight of decision making and policy planning and develop partnerships with local authorities; lobby the authorities on various issues of concern; and create links with state actors as well as with civil society organizations from the EU. The IBPP small grants, varying from €100,000 to €200,000, were provided to partner projects in the spheres of public administration reform, social services provision (especially to vulnerable groups, such as persons with HIV and children with disabilities), urban management, and environmental issues. Overall, 16 joint projects co-implemented by Kazakhstani NGOs and local authorities received IBPP support throughout 2001-2006 (Giffen, Buxton, Naumann, Hinchliff 2007).

Later, under the Development Cooperation Instrument in 2007, the thematic program Non-State Actors and Local Authorities (NSA-LA) was established. In Central Asia, it aims at supporting non-governmental actors and local authorities by providing funding to their initiatives in the areas that strengthen participatory development, foster capacity development processes at a country or regional level, promote mutual understanding processes, and facilitate communication and coordination between civil society networks. In 2007-2013, Kazakhstani NGOs and local authorities received an overall funding of €3.15 million under the NSA-LA. The funded projects related to civil society capacity building, involvement of people with HIV in public life, people with disabilities, and poverty reduction of children deprived of parental care (Boonstra, Tsertsvadze, Axyonova, 2014, p. 28).

Another financing instrument of the European Union, providing small grants (under €200,000) to civil society, is the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which became available to Kazakhstan in the early 2000s. The instrument is aimed at the support of NGO projects in the broader sphere of democratization and human rights promotion. The EIDHR funds are provided in a separate budget line and in this sense are complementary to the DCI sources. Since 2007, the EU committed an estimated €2.36 million under the EIDHR to Kazakhstan. Grants were allocated to projects focusing on government transparency and accountability, monitoring of human rights policies and awareness raising, labor rights, mass media and vulnerable groups (Boonstra, Tsertsvadze and Axyonova 2014, p. 26).

With regard to the EIDHR and NSA-LA implementation, officials from the European Union's Delegation in Kazakhstan hold regular meetings and consultations with civil society representatives on relevant issues of support. Such meetings are of particular importance when calls for project proposals are launched, as the process of application for grants often requires additional clarifications. These meetings and consultations are not to be confused with the annual civil society seminars organized as part of the bilateral human rights dialogue between the European Union and Kazakhstan, which was established after the adoption of the *EU-Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership* in 2007 (Axyonova 2011). The civil society seminars focus on a particular issue under discussion within the human rights dialogue (e.g. reform of the judicial system) and are not related to the grants application and implementation processes.

**A view from within.** Considering the limited funding the EU allocates to support non-governmental organizations in Kazakhstan, the above programs cannot be expected to have a profound impact on the development of the country's civil society sector. Nevertheless, the European Commission's small grant programs bear some effects that need to be evaluated. In order to assess these effects, this section draws on

<sup>6</sup> PHARE stands for *Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies*. Although originally created as a financial instrument of the pre-accession strategy for Poland and Hungary, the program was later expanded to all Central and Eastern European countries that applied for the EU membership.

insights obtained from interviews with representatives of Kazakhstani NGOs that received (or applied for) the EU funding. The interviews were conducted on various occasions between 2009 and 2013. The interview questions focused on practical issues related to the grant's application procedures, selection process, project implementation, and the EU's approach towards monitoring and evaluation of the projects. Here, the anonymous answers are summarized.

The most often repeated criticism of the European Commission as a donor expressed by local NGO workers concerned the complexity of the application procedure for EU small grants. Several interviewees described the EU's procedure as the most overwhelming and bureaucratic, in terms of the documents and forms that need to be provided with the grant application, compared to other donors' requirements. On the positive side though, it was mentioned that such complicated procedure and strict requirements «discipline the applicants», contribute to a better project-planning, and thus «guarantee successful results», to quote one of the respondents.

In 2007, in order to simplify the application process and reduce the number of documents that need to be submitted by applying NGOs, the European Commission established what is called the PADOR (Potential Applicant Data Online Registration) system. The system allows for maintaining the data of registered NGOs, which have applied for EU grants at least once. Thus, NGOs do not need to provide information and documents regarding their establishment and development history every time they apply. This is assessed as a very positive development by local NGOs, considering that before 2007, they had to provide all this documentation each application round.

All forms that need to be filled out and submitted for a grant along with very detailed guidelines for their completion can be found on the website of the European Commission. Yet, in order to be able to download these documents from the website or register in the PADOR system, one needs to have a stable (and not too slow) internet connection, which is available in the cities and bigger towns of Kazakhstan, but not in remote rural areas. Thus, already at this preliminary stage, potential grant applicants from rural regions are excluded (Axyonova 2012).

Another point that has been characterized as problematic by several representatives of smaller NGOs is the language of application. All documents and forms that need to be completed, as well as guidelines for completion, are provided in English. It is thus assumed that NGOs either have qualified English speakers among their staff or can engage external translators for grant applications. Using English as the language of application presents an additional challenge to smaller NGOs (again especially in rural areas), which struggle for their existence and cannot afford external translation services or rely on English speaking volunteers.

Regarding the selection process, lack of transparency and insufficient responsiveness of the EU Delegation's staff were criticisms of the NGOs' representatives, whose grant applications were rejected. Detailed information about the selection stages and criteria for final selection of projects used by EU officials in Brussels can be accessed on the European Commission's website. Yet, the criticism primarily addressed the initial pre-selection process, which is conventionally accomplished by local specialists in the Delegation of the European Union in Astana. Thus, it was argued that local Delegation's staff failed to clarify specific criteria for pre-selection and/or explain the reasons for refusal in certain cases.

With regard to financing regulations and grant implementation, several challenges were identified by the interviewed NGO representatives. Among these challenges were: the requirement to provide a considerable share of own resources, the VAT-related rules, step-by-step grant payment, lack of budgetary flexibility, finding reliable partners for project implementation, and the necessity to meet European standards. All these aspects are, of course, less problematic for established NGOs with a long-term experience in working with international donors

and a well-developed partner network. In fact, several NGO representatives characterized the EU project implementation requirements as contributing to professionalism and capacity-building of Kazakhstani NGO workers. Yet, these requirements were criticized as too demanding for smaller NGOs, without much experience and established partnerships.

Finally, the European Commission's approach towards project monitoring and evaluation is based on the so called «result chain» with a strong emphasis on achieving project objectives and quantifiable indicators of success. Such an approach is common for all major international donors and is the standard project management tool in the development sphere. Yet, the approach creates an impression of prioritizing achievement of specific objectives over the solution of actual problems. As several NGO representatives mentioned, when planning and implementing their projects, they were primarily guided by the necessity to meet the initially stated objectives, because an NGO cannot hope for the next grant, if the previous one was not a success story.

**Conclusion.** Considering the above, it is difficult to draw unambiguous conclusions about the EU's approach to supporting civil society and the impact of this assistance in Kazakhstan. In contradiction to the stated importance of civil society support in the EU's external affairs<sup>7</sup>, in Kazakhstan and Central Asia the EU has neither prioritized civil society development rhetorically (in its programing documents related to the region), nor did it provide funding that would have been significant for empowering local civil society organizations in the long run. Instead of pursuing a strategy of fostering the non-governmental sector, the European Commission has rather used an instrumental approach towards civil society in Kazakhstan, meaning that NGOs have not been the ultimate targets of the EU assistance but rather additional tools of the EU's development and democratization agenda and complementary channels of fund disbursement to specific sectors of assistance.

In terms of the practical implementation of the EU support, the European Commission's small grants have enabled local NGOs to further develop their institutional capacities. Certain project implementation requirements – particularly strict financial reporting and project partnerships – have ensured better project-planning and inter-organizational cooperation, eventually leading to the establishment of long-term partnerships and broader NGO networks. Yet, only some categories of NGOs could benefit from EU grants. The complicated application procedures are ill-adapted for smaller projects and less experienced NGOs, especially from rural areas. Only established NGOs that have previously gained sufficient professional capacities are able to meet the EU grant criteria. This eventually contributes to the increase of segregation between civil society organizations in urban and rural areas. Furthermore, the complex application and implementation procedures for small grants create an impression that calls for proposals are initiated by the European Commission with little consideration for local needs, which exemplifies the lack of a participatory approach in the EU program planning. Finally, implementation requirements and the monitoring-for-results approach often lead to the fact that projects are designed by local NGOs to fit grant criteria and not social reality.

After the end of the EU's 2007-2013 funding cycle, Kazakhstan is no longer eligible for European aid through its development cooperation mechanisms, as it is now considered an upper middle-income country. Yet, the NSA-LA program will

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<sup>7</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Development with Civil Society in External Relations, COM(2012) 492 final, 12 September. Brussels: EC.

continue running at least for some period under the previous commitments. The EIDHR funds will also be available to Kazakhstani NGOs, as the instrument is placed in the domain of the EU's democratization support and not development assistance. To what extent the EU will change its approach to civil society support with the new funding period of 2014-2020 will remain to be seen. Yet, taking the previous experience into account, a profound change in the EU's assistance planning and delivery is unlikely.

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## Қазақстандағы Еуропалық Одақтың азаматтық қоғамды қолдауы: стратегиялық тәсілдемені қолдану?

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**Түйін.** Еуропалық Одақ (ЕО) азаматтық қоғамның дамуын қолдауымен ресми дискурста көрнекті орын алған. ЕО стратегиялық тәсілдемені үшінші мемлекеттің азаматтық қоғамының мүмкіндігін кеңейтуге қаншалықты құқылы және қандай дәрежеде өткізеді (ЕО кірмейтіндер)? Және қалай мемлекеттік емес субъектілер ЕО көмегімен ЕО қолдауын қарауға бағытталады? Бұл мақалада осы сұрақтарға жауап беріледі, Қазақстандағы азаматтық қоғамды ұйымдастырушы ЕО көмегіне негізделеді.

Қазақстандық НПО өкілдерінің сараптау сұхбаттарымен және ЕО құжаттарының мазмұнына сапалы талдау жасауға сүйенеді. Автор аспаптық тәсілдеме мен (стратегиялық тәсілдемеден айырмашылығын) ЕО азаматтық қоғамның қолдауы бойынша анықтайды. Сондай-ақ қазақстандық НПО мүмкіндігі мен қажеттіліктерін ескере отырып, ЕО жарамсыздығын жариялап көмек көрсетуді сынап көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** азаматтық қоғам; даму мақсатымен көмек; Еуропалық Одақ; Қазақстан.

## Поддержка Европейским Союзом гражданского общества в Казахстане: применение стратегического подхода?

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**Аннотация.** В официальном дискурсе Европейского Союза (ЕС), поддержка развития гражданского общества занимает довольно видное место. Но в какой степени ЕС проводит стратегический подход к расширению прав и возможностей гражданского общества в третьих странах (не входящих в ЕС)? И как неправительственные субъекты нацелены при содействии ЕС рассматривать поддержку ЕС? Содержание статьи пытается ответить на эти вопросы, основываясь на примере помощи ЕС организациям гражданского общества в Казахстане. Опираясь на качественный анализ содержания документов ЕС и экспертных интервью с представителями казахстанской НПО, автор раскрывает инструментальный (в отличие от стратегического подхода) подход ЕС по отношению к поддержке гражданского общества. Она также раскрывает критику оказания помощи, демонстрируя неспособность ЕС в полной мере учитывать потребности и возможности казахстанских НПО.

**Ключевые слова:** гражданское общество; помощь в целях развития; Европейский союз; Казахстан.

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## Ethno-cultural Distribution of Turkic and Mongolian Tribes between 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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**Abstract.** The paper presents a detailed ethno-cultural analysis of Turkic and Mongol tribes living between 6-9 centuries in Central Asia. Turkic and Mongol tribes are represented together on the historical scene in the steppes of Central Asia in the X century. They created all kinds of cultural and political relations. The process was so intense that sometimes Turkic tribes mongolized, and Mongolian communities Turkicized. As a result, the sources generally cannot decide for sure whether some tribe was Turkic or Mongolian. They claim that the Turks and the Mongols were the same. This situation makes it impossible to determine the boundary between the two nations. When the Turkic tribe was numerous, the Mongol tribes obeyed, and vice versa. Regardless of their origin, when the great powers broke up, all the tribes of the west and east acted independently. Those who moved to China, settled there, and became Chinese.

**Keywords:** Turkic tribes; Mongol tribes; ethno-cultural interaction; Turks and Mongols in China.

The Juan-juan state was destroyed by the Turks(Kök-Türks) under Bumin Qagan in 552. Bumin, who received the title Il (Illig) Qagan, founded the Kök-Türk state in the same year (Taşağıl 2002, P. 16-18). The state became the only dominant force in Central Asia, by spreading from the Black Sea coast to Korea in the form of a tribal confederation within a short time. Soon, Mongol and Manchu tribes also obeyed to this polity (Taşağıl 2002, P. 19-59; Liu Mau Tsai 1957, P. 1-15). Qitan (Ch'i-tan), Shih-wei, Hsi and K'u-mo-hsi were the outstanding Mongol and Manchu tribes. Chinese sources give detailed accounts about their situation in the VI-VIII. centuries. Thus, we have very illuminating information about history and culture of contemporary tribes of Turkic and Mongolian origins. Aforementioned Mongolian tribes were included in the Turk (Kök-Türk) Confederation. As the state got weaker in 582, they started to act independently. They even contacted with China and were bounded to that state. They continued this situation of sometimes obeying the Turk (Kök-Türks), sometimes to the Chinese, and sometimes acting independently up to the final collapse of the Turk (Kök-Türk) state in 744. However, this situation was crucial under the Great Uighur Qaganat, too. Mongolian tribes were now under the Uighur Federation (Mackerras 1968; Hamilton 1955, P. 55).

After the decline of the Uighur Qaganat, which was established in 745, by the Kyrgyz in 840, hegemony in the Orhon region passed over the latter (Taşağıl 2004, P. 78-81). They, however, could not set up strict dominance, and even could not keep control for a long time. By the coming of the Mongolic Qitans from east in 920's, and invading the region completely, Turkic peoples left the Orhon basin at all. From then on, gravity of Turkic history was in Western Turkistan.

The Qitans moved westward, and founded a state called Karahıтай around the Tengri ranges. Turkic tribes living in that region such as Uighur, Kipchak and Qarluq came under their domination (Taşağıl 2001). The Karahıтай state became owner of the Karakhanid domain, namely today's Eastern Turkistan and Southern and Eastern Kazakhstan.

During the Chingizid days, there happened dramatic changes. Many Turkic tribes came under Chingiz Khan, who turned his state to a worldwide empire within a very short time. What should be expressed here is that Turkic and Mongolian tribes cohabited in Inner Asia by the time of Chingizids (Moğolların 1986; Merçil 2000, p. 29). Populous Turkic tribes like the Kipchaks and Kyrgyz played crucial role in shaping the Mongol Empire. They became even essential elements of the state. Cultural influence of the Uighurs was felt mostly in the central and eastern parts of