

## NEW INDEPENDENT STATES OF CENTRAL ASIA: MOBILIZATION EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract.** *Some drastic shifts have occurred in the development of Central Asia over the past twenty years. Although they cover a short period from a historical perspective, these years are the equivalent to a century-worth of evolution in terms of its importance and force for the region. To overcome negative tendencies in the economic sphere, most Central Asian countries create and implement long-term plans and socio-economic development programs. Concurrently, the promotion and revitalization of civil society contributes to overcoming the social challenges that characterize the region. In some cases, the governments themselves are making conscious efforts to renounce or limit their attributions in favour of civil society institutions. These institutions include both non-governmental organizations and local traditional communities, typical for Central Asia. The study presents some aspects of social transformation in the region, problems, and prospects of the civil society development, and activity of local traditional communities, taking into account the increasingly important part they play in conquering social issues of the state.*

**Keywords:** *Modernization, Central Asia, traditional society, social transformation, volunteer, local communities.*

**Rezumat: Noile state independente din Asia Centrală: experiența mobilizării comunităților locale.** *În ultimii douăzeci de ani, în dezvoltarea Asiei Centrale s-au produs schimbări radicale. Deși, din perspectivă istorică, acești ani acoperă o perioadă scurtă de timp, ca însemnătate și importanță pentru regiune ei echivalează cu evoluția specifică unui secol. Pentru a depăși tendințele negative din sfera economică, majoritatea țărilor din Asia Centrală creează și implementează planuri pe termen lung și programe de dezvoltare socio-economică. În același timp, promovarea și revitalizarea societății civile contribuie la depășirea provocărilor sociale care caracterizează regiunea. În unele cazuri, guvernele*

*însele fac eforturi conștiente în direcția renunțării sau limitării unor atribuții în favoarea instituțiilor societății civile. Acestea din urmă includ atât organizații neguvernamentale, cât și comunități tradiționale locale, tipice pentru Asia Centrală. Studiul prezintă câteva aspecte ale transformării sociale în regiune, problemele și perspectivele dezvoltării societății civile și activitatea comunităților tradiționale locale, ținând seama de rolul tot mai important pe care îl joacă în depășirea problemelor sociale.*

**Résumé : Nouveaux Etats indépendants de l'Asie Centrale : l'expérience de la mobilisation des communautés locales.** *Les derniers vingt années, des changements radicaux se sont produits dans l'essor de l'Asie Centrale. Quoique, de perspective historique, ces années-là couvrent une période courte de temps, en tant qu'importance et signification pour la région, ils équivalent avec l'évolution spécifique pour un siècle. Pour dépasser les tendances négatives de la sphère économique, la majorité des pays de l'Asie Centrale ont créé et implémenté des plans à long terme et des programmes de développement socio-économique. En même temps, la promotion et la revitalisation de la société civile permet de dépasser les provocations sociales qui caractérisent la région. En certains cas, les gouvernements eux-mêmes firent des efforts conscients dans la direction du renoncement ou de la limitation de quelques attributions en faveur des institutions de la société civile. Les dernières incluent des organisations non-gouvernementales, mais aussi des communautés traditionnelles locales, typiques pour l'Asie Centrale. L'étude ci-jointe présente quelques aspects de la transformation sociale dans la région, les problèmes et les perspectives du développement de la société civile et l'activité des communautés traditionnelles locales, tenant compte du rôle de plus en plus important que surmonter les problèmes sociaux signifie.*

## INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of region-wide sustainable social and economic growth, the identification of appropriate development strategies and corresponding social and economic policies are now becoming ever more relevant to all Central Asian States. Since gaining independence in 1991, the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia (now newly independent states), had to choose a route of development, while being majorly influenced by the initial socio-economic situation, national circumstances, and goals and attitudes of political leaders. As a consequence, the social sphere took the hardest crushing hit shortly after independence, which led to the education system, health care, and social security needing special support.

It is noteworthy that some researchers compare the states that emerged from the fall of USSR to barbarian kingdoms, referencing to the parallel of Europe's conditions about the 5th – 9th centuries. They find the underlying correlation of the starting-points of the events, which gave rise to the formation

of the CIS and current situation, and the events of early medieval Europe. There certainly was the collapse of an empire in both cases<sup>1</sup>.

Over 60 million people now live in the newly independent states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The countries of the region sharply differ in sizes, population numbers, economic and natural resources potentials, as well as in social, ecological, and administrative domains<sup>2</sup>.

### THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF SOCIETY

Many states throughout the world still tend to bring communities forward in answer to the social problems of society. It may be argued that the existence of associations is a necessary preliminary condition of any effective self-government. Generalizing from facts obtained in “the third world”<sup>3</sup>, Milton J. Esman and Norman T. Uphoff conclude that local associations are the key element of successful development of the village: “The solid network of civil organizations is essential to any serious effort aimed at overcoming mass poverty in developing countries. (...) And in spite of the fact that infrastructure investments, public support, suitable technologies, bureaucratic and market institutes are also necessary, it is difficult to imagine a little perfect development strategy of the village in absence or debility of *local* organizations”. At the same time, the mentioned authors assumed that local organizations “transplanted” from outside are doomed to failure<sup>4</sup>. Those who realize native, “nationalistic” initiatives in rather solid local communities achieve the greatest progress.

The national construction of many states of the region relies on the ideas of national identity and attempts to prove the existence of a “special”, own path of development. Traditional social institutions play a significant role in the upkeep of the notion.

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<sup>1</sup> С. Каспэ, *Содружество варварских королевств: независимые государства в поисках империи* [Commonwealth of barbarian kingdoms: independent states in search of empire], in “Полития” [Politiya Journal], 2008, no. 1 (48), p. 17-26.

<sup>2</sup> Roza Zharkynbayeva, *Characteristics of the Demographic Development of the Central Asian region during independence*, in “Central Asia and Caucasus”, 2011, no. 4, p. 66-73.

<sup>3</sup> Milton Esman, Norman Uphoff, *Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, p.40.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99-180; David Korten, *Community Organization and Rural Development: A learning Process Approach*, in “Public Administration Review”, 1980, no. 40, p. 480-511.

Having received a reference point from the West, keeping in mind both mistakes and progress achieved, over the past two and a half decades the states of the region have been trying to develop a modernization model that would meet the thousand-year spiritual and moral quest of the people of Central Asia. It is important to note that, undeterred by the paradigm-altering structural social, economic, and ideological shifts in Central Asia, local traditional institutes showed incredible stability and importance of the role they play in social relation micromanagement. Being the provider of legitimacy, the cultural base of these institutes should be considered when searching for community involvement into administration and development at the local level.

The activities of local traditional institutes require thorough consideration and reflection on both positive and negative aspects, so as to efficiently integrate their potential into the development of the region's socio-economic development plans and programs.

For that reason, exploration of local communities' role in tackling social problems poses an important challenge for both foreign and regional researchers. Foreign researchers are chiefly interested in the problem of transformation of the traditional social institutions, particularly the Uzbek mahallas. In this respect, the works of David M. Abramson can be highlighted: *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union* of Terry Martin<sup>5</sup>, *Uzbekistan's Mahalla: From Soviet to Absolutist Residential Community Associations* of E. Sievers<sup>6</sup>, and *From Soviet to Mahalla: Community and Transition in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan*<sup>7</sup>.

At present, there are instances when the State government makes a conscious effort to relinquish or limit its functions in favour of civil society institutions. Thereby, the institution network mobilizes and attracts major fixed assets and manpower to the State, leading to the reduction of load on public institutions and mitigation of their shortcomings (excessive bureaucracy and inflexibility in addressing specific problems).

What is interesting is the experience of effective community mobilization efforts in the states of Central Asia. Territorial, ethnic and patrimonial factors of self-

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Sievers, *Uzbekistan's Mahalla: From Soviet to Absolutist Residential Community Associations*, in "The Journal of International and Comparative Law", 2002, Vol. 2, p. 92-158.

<sup>7</sup> David Abramson, *From Soviet to Mahalla: Community and Transition in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan* [Ph.D. dissertation], Bloomington, Indiana University, 1998; Masaru Suda, *The Politics of Civil Society, Mahalla and NGOs: Uzbekistan*, in "Slavic Eurasian Studies", 2006, no. 10, p. 335-370.

organization manifest most in shaping local communities in Central Asia, which have resulted in steady formations such as Mahalla, Guzar (the word 'Mahalla' – meeting space – refers broadly to a neighbourhood or local community, meaning "local" in its Uzbek derivation of the Arabic term, mahalla is residential community associations that were once common throughout the Islamic world<sup>8</sup>), Jamoat (*Jamoat* is an institution of self-government in towns and villages<sup>9</sup>) and Avlod (*avlod* is a patriarchal community of blood relatives who have a common ancestor and common interests, and in many cases shared property and means of production and consolidated or coordinated household budgets<sup>10</sup>). Numerous informal institutions created and operating within local communities, their functions and social relations that emanate from the traditional social structure are typical for Central Asia. Overall, the experts define community as a form of social self-organization on various grounds: patrimonial, ethnic, territorial, confessional, as well as self-organization based on home economics (country communities, artisans' bands, and other) and on diaspora feature (community of migrants). Communes and municipalities, cooperatives and associations can also be classified as the highest communal forms of people self-organization. Thus, social ties and processes of self-control within local communities might rest on relationship, neighbourhood, religion and other grounds.

Mahalla institution is one of Uzbekistan's traditional social system features. The neighbour's community as a form of a certain district's societal organization has existed since ancient times. It had several names – the Mahalla, Mahallaat-district, Neighbourhood, Zhamoat, Guzar, and it was not only a territorial but also an administrative unit, the most civic-oriented cell of urban and rural divisions<sup>11</sup>. Mahalla is one of the names for local social institutions and networks that enmeshed Central Asian pre-industrial society. At the same time, in different regions and cities, it was called differently, e.g. a city block in the pre-Soviet Bukhara was called "Guzar". In the Soviet period, the state inherited former colonial practice to create a

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Sievers, *op. cit.*, p. 92-158.

<sup>9</sup> Mamadsho Ilov, Mirodasen Khudoiyev, *Local Government in Tajikistan*, in Igor Munteanu, Victor Popa (eds.), *Developing New Rules in the Old Environment*, Open Society Institute, 2001, p. 608: <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/6f8ec8/pdf/> (Accessed on 12.01.2019).

<sup>10</sup> Muzaffar Olimov, Saodat Olimova, *Ethnic Factors and Local Self-Government in Tajikistan*, in Valery Tishkov, Elena Filippova (Eds.), *Local governance and minority empowerment in the CIS*, Budapest, Local Government and Public Service Initiative, Open Society Institute, 2002, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Zoia Arifkhanova, *Traditional Communities in Modern Uzbekistan*, in "Central Asia and Caucasus", 2000, no. 4, p. 53-61.

more ideological view of the makhallia as a public institution with a wide range of functions<sup>12</sup>. Thus, despite the socio-economic modernization carried out during the Soviet period, the indigenous ethnic groups of Central Asia and Kazakhstan largely retained traditional social structures. To reduce administrative expenses of the republic, a decision was made to assign the distribution of those means to the Mahalla. The distinctive feature of the “Mahalla” (residential area) social care system is the use of the Mahalla social care program committees (since 1994) assigned to determine and grant allowances for children (up to 16 years of age) since 1997. The Mahalla committees carry out a vast range of official (social care administration) and non-official functions (organization of wedding ceremonies, assistance to the settlement of disputes)<sup>13</sup>. “Our people have such traditional levers of society’s stability as a family and the Mahalla – bases of our mentality”, noted the former President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov. “Family and the Mahalla are helping people to confront the challenges of the transitional period and keep the continuity of past and present”<sup>14</sup>.

In 1999 the law on Self-government Institutions of Citizens, focusing on objectives of the Mahalla, was passed. In addition to the aforementioned functions, Mahalla was entrusted with new duties: protection of the interests of family and women, care for the elderly, social support for the Mahalla, provision of public order, prevention of delinquency among juveniles, retail shops, and commercial services monitoring, environmental surveillance, etc.<sup>15</sup>

Uzbekistani researchers demonstrate diverse views on the expansion of the Council's functions:

- the excessive expansion of the Mahalla’s scope of work often results in the formalization of the Mahalla committees and serves as a distraction from basic traditional roles<sup>16</sup>;

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<sup>12</sup> С. Абашин, *Советская власть и узбекская махалля* [Soviet power and Uzbek mahalla], in <http://www.islamsng.com/uzb/culture/3485> (Accessed on 06.01.2019)

<sup>13</sup> *World Bank Report. Uzbekistan - Social and structural policy review*, in <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/983241468779117007/Uzbekistan-Social-and-structural-policy-review> (Accessed on 06.09.2018)

<sup>14</sup> С. Абашин, В. Бушков, *Ферганская долина: этничность, этнические процессы, этнические конфликты* [Fergana Valley: ethnicity, ethnic processes, ethnic conflicts], Москва, Наука, 2004, с. 149.

<sup>15</sup> *Закон Республики Узбекистан от 14 апреля 1999 года N 758-I “Об органах самоуправления граждан”* [Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan of April 14, 1999 N 758-I “On bodies of self-government of citizens”], in “Ведомости Олий Мажлиса Республики Узбекистан” [Vedomosti of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan], 1999, no. 5, ст. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Zoia Arifkhanova, *op. cit.*, p.53-61.

- the nature of activities undertaken, including the provision of social care and handling of people-related affairs, needs to be fundamentally distinct from the State's public actions. No legal regulation should equate Mahalla to the government bodies or subject them to étatisation<sup>17</sup>.

According to Sergey Abashin, because of the independent Uzbekistan leadership's policy, Mahalla took firm shape as a State institution in the post-Soviet period, having layers of bureaucratic officials, uniform credentials and strict binding to a certain territory. The process of Uzbekistan's "mahallazation" that started in the Soviet period was brought to its logical conclusion following the collapse of the USSR<sup>18</sup>.

The Uzbek researcher Farhod Musurmankulov reaffirms the views of the Japanese scientist Yutaka Tsujinaka: "We studied the process involved in the formation of civil society in 13 countries of the East and the West. The results of the research proved once again that the Uzbek Mahalla is a unique national democratic institute, strongly different from the self-government paradigms in other countries. The Mahalla primary values its historical traditions that are maintained and developed. All the citizens actively participate in the process, including youth and women. It has an important role to fulfil in society democratization and promotion of peace and interethnic harmony. It also has very strong mandates on matters related to territory, target-oriented social protection, humanitarian, social and household-related affairs. The Mahalla is a very strong and sustainable structure. Throughout the development of civil society in Uzbekistan, the state has been steadily drawing down its functions and passing them on to the Mahallas, who assumed the responsibility. The experience of the Mahalla deserves to be widely circulated."<sup>19</sup>

Japanese scientists even draw analogies between the Uzbek Mahalla and the Japanese "chōnaikai" (local community of citizens, a neighbourhood association, residential area, micro district), both of which consist of groups of locals, officially

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<sup>17</sup> Р. Алимов (Ed.), *Узбекистан на пути к гражданскому обществу. Сборник статей* [Uzbekistan on the way to civil society. Collection of articles], Ташкент, Шарк, 2003, с. 111.

<sup>18</sup> С. Абашин, *Узбекская махалля: XX век* [The Uzbek mahalla: the 20th century], in "Ислам в странах Содружества Независимых Государств: международная политика и сфера безопасности. Ежеквартальный научный альманах" [Islam in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States: international politics and security. Quarterly scientific almanac], 2011, no. 4 (5), p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Ф. У. Мусурманкулов, *Махалля – важный субъект самоуправления граждан* [Mahalla is an important subject of self-government], in "Молодой ученый" [Young Scientist Journal], 2013, №7, p. 351-353.

independent of the municipality. According to the sources, "chōnaikai" was formed in times of war and remains dutifully active to this date, keeping order and cleanness, strengthening the relationship between inhabitants, etc. The Mahallas of Uzbekistan have committees consisting of the representatives of the local population (nowadays defined as the Citizens self-government institutions), which is similar to "chōnaikai" in a way<sup>20</sup>.

A new edition of "Law on Self-government Institutions of Citizens" came into force in April 2013 in Uzbekistan. The legal powers of the Citizens' self-government institutions have been substantially expanded in terms of implementation of target programs aimed at supporting socially vulnerable segments of the population, providing financial assistance to young people from low-income families in the events of marriage and wedding celebrations. The citizens' self-government institutions have also been entrusted with allocating and paying childcare benefits to unemployed mothers, as well as to mothers working in budgetary organizations and persons in loco parentis with children under two years of age<sup>21</sup>.

The self-government in the states of Central Asia is the Councils of People's Deputies. In Uzbekistan, they are called Kengashi, in Kazakhstan – Kenesy, in Kyrgyzstan – Kenesh, in Turkmenistan – Gengeshi. Kengashi is a group of residents with additional authorities in the youth employment support and social welfare, including support for single aged people, pensioners, the disabled, and persons in need of social support. The meeting of residents of villages, kishlaks, auls and the makhallas of cities is given the discretion to establish, reorganize and disband businesses in their respective areas in the manner prescribed by law. Aside from that, members of kengashi have authority to act as guarantors of business entities for obtaining loans in accordance with the established procedure. The self-government together with other public authorities and economic management bodies, banks, non-state and non-profit organizations and other entities are now also able to provide additional financial support to young

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<sup>20</sup> Масато Хиватари, *Роль общины в экономическом развитии: "махалля" в Узбекистане и "мура" в Японии* [The Role of Communities in Economic Development: Mahalla in Uzbekistan and Mura in Japan], in <http://eprints.lib.hokudai.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2115/42738/1/DPA222.pdf> (Accessed on 06.09.2018).

<sup>21</sup> Закон Республики Узбекистан "Об органах самоуправления граждан" (новая редакция) [Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On self-governing bodies of citizens" (new version)], in [http://lex.uz/pages/GetAct.aspx?lact\\_id=86238](http://lex.uz/pages/GetAct.aspx?lact_id=86238) (Accessed on 06.09.2018).



people from low-income families, including aid in the events of marriage and wedding celebrations. The Mahalla committees gained powers to create counselling centres within their territories to encourage the development of business, including family entrepreneurship and handicraft activities<sup>22</sup>.

In Kyrgyzstan, the role of local communities is also rather significant. Representative bodies of local self-government are the local keneshies. The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Local Government and Local Public Administration reiterates: "Local self-government is exercised in form of councils and committees of micro-districts, housing complexes, house/street/block-committees, zhamaat (communities) and other forms that do not contradict the Constitution, the present Law and other laws of the Kyrgyz Republic"<sup>23</sup>.

The function of social solidarity is carried out by ayilas (villages, where the majority of the country poor can be found) that essentially are the basis of Kyrgyzstani social organization. Of special interest is the fact that in the earliest days of the Soviet system, political party functionaries sounded the alarm concerning the peasants' pursuit of integration into collective farms basing on the descent. However, the struggle against "patrimonial collective farms" and "patrimonial villages" stopped short of achieving its goal – the collective farms were formed based on tribal lines<sup>24</sup>. It is important that the organization of settlements' residents was made possible owing to participation and public service of the poor in the self-help groups. The purpose of this service is to empower the disadvantaged and help them regain confidence and self-esteem. Moreover, it is planned that the target self-help groups will gradually exert influence over society to approach crosscutting issues. Thus, the poor, women and the youth will have a chance at fair opportunities, a possibility which will help the local community to manage its problems independently<sup>25</sup>.

In Kazakhstan, local communities are also under a considerable emphasis in the context of local self-government development. The Commune-elected local

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Закон Кыргызской Республики "О местном самоуправлении и местной государственной администрации" [Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On local self-government and local state administration"], in *Нормативные правовые акты Кыргызской Республики для органов местного самоуправления* [Normative legal acts of the Kyrgyz Republic for local governments], Бишкек, 2010, с. 260.

<sup>24</sup> Dzhenish Dzhunushaliev, Victor Ploskikh, *Tribalism and Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan*, in "Central Asia and Caucasus", 2000, no. 3. p.146-155.

<sup>25</sup> *Инвестиции в человека. Программа Развития ООН в Кыргызстане* [Investing in people. United Nations Development Program in Kyrgyzstan], Бишкек, 1999, с. 79.

government of the relevant rural or city local community is the Kenes (council). The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of January 23, 2001, No. 148-II on Local Public Administration and Self-government in the Republic of Kazakhstan, defines local community as a society (local community members) living in the corresponding administrative territorial unit within the boundaries of which the local government is formed and operating<sup>26</sup>.

The key challenges the local government faces are as follows: substance and revitalization of public spaces (parks, boulevards, beaches, recreation areas and other objects); landscaping; monitoring of heat, electricity, gas and water supply to the population; rendering support to the development of preschools, secondary and professional educational institutions and establishments of social and cultural sphere. The tasks also include assistance in the organization of transport services for the population, assistance to the socially vulnerable groups, promotion of entrepreneurship, promotion of community policing, and provision of legal assistance to the citizens living within the territory of the local community<sup>27</sup>.

Measures to address socio-economic challenges in the Republic of Kazakhstan include the use of local resource mobilization. It is expected that this model will make a major contribution to the development and reconstruction of the market and civil society<sup>28</sup>. Since April of 2010, a joint project of UN Volunteers Programme, Civic Alliance of Kazakhstan, and Kazakhstani volunteer organizations on establishing a unified nationwide volunteer network – National Volunteer Network (NVN) – has been active in Kazakhstan. The NVN mission is the creation and development of the volunteer culture and work; the purpose of

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<sup>26</sup> Закон Республики Казахстан от 23 января 2001 года № 148-II «О местном государственном управлении и самоуправлении в Республике Казахстан» [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of January 23, 2001 No. 148-II "On Local Government Administration and Self-Government in the Republic of Kazakhstan"], in [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=1021546](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=1021546) (Accessed on 06.09.2018)

<sup>27</sup> Закон Республики Казахстан от 23 января 2001 года № 148-II «О местном государственном управлении и самоуправлении в Республике Казахстан» [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of January 23, 2001 No. 148-II "On Local Government Administration and Self-Government in the Republic of Kazakhstan"], in [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=1021546](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=1021546) (Accessed on 06.09.2018)

<sup>28</sup> З. Байсакова, *Мобилизация усилий местного сообщества по преодолению бедности в Алматинской области* [Mobilization of the efforts of the local community to overcome poverty in the Almaty region], in *Проблемы борьбы с бедностью в Казахстане в условиях глобализации, Материалы межд. конф.* [Proceedings of the international conference "Problems of combating poverty in Kazakhstan in the context of globalization"], Алматы, Дайк-Пресс, 2004, с. 125-129.

the project is the comprehensive and progressive development of voluntary initiatives. One of the efforts in the direction of realizing the main objectives is the provision of educational services on volunteerism for the representatives of civil society, non-governmental non-profit organizations, state agencies and other persons interested in the advance of the NVN ideas of national volunteerism on a voluntary basis<sup>29</sup>.

In Turkmenistan, a rural community of the Turkmen existed as an autonomous and independent link that undertook the basic functions of the State. Structurally, the rural community consisted of a set of households. As Chary Yazlyev noted, the solemn duty of a family was to support community members, to share both joy and sorrow if it were ever needed. The Turkmen family was constrained by thousands of obligations towards fellow community members, especially towards the blood relatives<sup>30</sup>. There are also six social and religious groups known among the Turkmen under a collective name "*Ovlyad*", which were mistakenly characterized as tribes<sup>31</sup>. However, the studies indicate that as of today the people of Turkmenistan are becoming more and more interested in the return to traditional family institutions as an alternative to social security programs that will meet the living needs and overcome harsh circumstances of the current stage of economic development. This, in turn, means the transition of the Turkmen's system of values from a socialist model, which gave priority to the public interest and common good, to the value system where the private interest of a person and their family are becoming increasingly important<sup>32</sup>. Article 115 of

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<sup>29</sup> Р. Жаркынбаева, *Об истории и специфике добровольчества в Центральной Азии Социальная работа в современном мире: взаимодействие науки, образования и практики* [On the history and specificity of volunteering in Central Asia Social work in the modern world: the interaction of science, education and practice], in *Материалы VI Международ. науч.- практ. конф.* [Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> conference], Белгород, 2014, 384 с.

<sup>30</sup> Ч. Язлыев, *Туркменская сельская община* [Turkmen rural community], Ашхабад, Ылым, 1992, 300 с.

<sup>31</sup> М. Демидов, *Туркменские овляды* [Turkmen Ovides], Ашхабад, Ылым, 1976, 109 с.

<sup>32</sup> А. Куртов, *Туркменистан: особенности транзита и безопасность региона* [Turkmenistan: transit features and regional security], in "Казахстан в глобальных процессах" [Kazakhstan in global processes Journal], 2007, no. 1, p. 43-47.

the Constitution of Turkmenistan states that the “system of local self-government is formed by the Gengeshes and bodies of territorial public self-government”.<sup>33</sup>

In Tajikistan, institutes for mutual assistance and social support, men's associations, special organizations for women's social and cultural activity (as well as for the representatives of separate professions), the principles and values of workplace ethics were formed and developed within the traditional network of society. Residential settlements and villages are the local governance in Tajikistan, as recognized in the Constitution of 1994. The Law on Authorities and Village and Rural Communities Self-Government Act regulates the organization and functioning of the local governance. These local self-administrations cover the territories of residential settlements they were created in. The mission of the jamaats (Jamoat in the Tajik language) is to assist in implementing the right of citizens to partake in the managing affairs of the society and the State, to unite them and address social, economic and other important issues that directly affect public interests. They also aim to aid and ensure the State Government authorities to implement the Constitution, laws and other legislation.

Tajikistan emphasizes the following key priority directions of the state administration development:

- enhancing the capacity of local authorities and rural communities' self-government.
- strengthening the role of civil society in the adoption and implementation of public decisions<sup>34</sup>.

The Jamoat as a local governing body is typically composed of the elected representatives (delegates) of the villages, streets, and the Mahallas, who then meet at least twice a year. The Jamoat elects its own Chairperson, a Vice-Chairperson and a Secretary for the term of five years. There is a small staff of civil servants to the Chairperson, the number of which is determined by the chairperson of the district (city) or by the Mazhlisi of People's Deputies of the area (city)<sup>35</sup>.

Khojend, Isfara, Ur-Tyube, Kanibadam, Kulyab, Gissar, etc. are the historical cities of Tajikistan that have preserved their traditional multi-layered social

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<sup>33</sup> *Constitution of Turkmenistan (new edition)* (with amendments and additions as of 10/11/2017), in [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=31337929](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=31337929) (Accessed on 06.09.2018).

<sup>34</sup> *Стратегия повышения уровня благосостояния населения Таджикистана на 2013-2015 годы* [The strategy of increasing the level of well-being of the population of Tajikistan for 2013-2015], Душанбе, Контраст, 2013, 146 с.

<sup>35</sup> Abdusattor Jabborov, *Nation-Building in Tajikistan*, in “Central Asia and Caucasus”, 2004, no. 1 (31), p. 55-62.

organization in many respects. The set of micro-communities (Mahalla, Guzar, etc.) continues to be the base layer of urban society, concentrating actual mechanisms of city management. That is the reason behind the stability and sustainability of Tajikistan's old towns, despite the upheavals of the last years<sup>36</sup>.

In Tajik society, the tribal communities of Avlods are a powerful force. According to the findings of many ethnographers and anthropologists researching Tajik social institutes, the Avlod represents a combination of both living and dead male relatives and their wives, descending from a single forefather, i.e. a blood-related, patrilineal descendant group – a community. It has the necessary complex of life support systems, economic, territorial, legal, spiritual, cultural, and ideological mechanisms that made the Avlod some sort of a micro-state and provided the community's survival, relative independence, and adaptability<sup>37</sup>. As Valentin Bushkov has rightly commented, the involvement of new socio-economic structures did not manage to completely replace Central Asian traditional, largely "tribal" and "patrimonial" social relations. The first small collective farms in the Leninabad area were shaped by the power of the family-related Avlods, and even the collectivized land was considered the property of the Avlod<sup>38</sup>. Parallel to the "avlod", the terms "kaum" and "heysh" are sometimes employed interchangeably, as well as the "mahalla" can also be named "guzar". Bushkov says that the social fabric of Tajik society remains largely unchanged, far from the westernized model that some scholars wanted to use as the framework for the social assessment, given the fact of the cursory transformation of its structures. The blood-related, patrilineal Avlods remain the very heart of this society, while the small families never achieved the position of its primary cell<sup>39</sup>.

The Avlod as a social institution remains valuable in all spheres of the social life of Tajikistan. The Tajikistani researcher Saodat Olimova assumes that social organisms, namely the Avlods, were the real participants of the inter-Tajik

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<sup>36</sup> С. Олимова, М. Олимов, *Таджикистан на пороге перемен* [Tajikistan on the verge of change], Москва, Центр стратегических и политических исследований, 1999, 168 с.

<sup>37</sup> В. Бушков, *Таджикский авлод тысячелетия спустя* [Tajik avlod millennium later], in "Восток" (Orient Journal), 1991, no. 5, с. 80-90.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, *Население Северного Таджикистана: формирование и расселение* [The population of Northern Tajikistan: formation and resettlement], Москва, Институт этнологии антропологии имени Н. Н. Миклухо-Маклая, 1995, 173 с.

<sup>39</sup> В. Бушков, Д. Микульский, *Анатомия гражданской войны в Таджикистане (этно-социальные процессы и политическая борьба, 1992–1995)* [Anatomy of the civil war in Tajikistan (ethno-social processes and political struggle, 1992-1995)], Москва, Институт этнологии и антропологии, 1996, 169 с.

conflict, and the Avlod heads played the key role in conflict development<sup>40</sup>. Currently, the communal structures of various types are strengthening throughout the republic. War, destruction, mass migration, the collapse of the infrastructure (communication systems included), naturalization, weakness of the State and its institutions – all of that contributed to the restoration of the traditional social structure.

The progress has been discontinuous and uneven from one region to another. The re-actualization of traditional social institutes and, particularly the Avlods, occurs in the mass-migration areas, primarily labour-related ones. In several of the areas most affected by war, the Avlods were induced to assume duties of all the social institutions, including those of the State<sup>41</sup>.

As Valentin Bushkov noted it, the preservation of traditional institutions stems from the fact that “the collectivist mentality had never been fully replaced with the individual one”, hence human life is defined not so much by the individual will “but rather by the decisions of family and community networks”<sup>42</sup>.

Even so, the traditional institutions are not always supportive of the democratic principles that entail people’s audit and government’s accountability. The desire of the elitists to abuse local cultural patterns is often the cause of non-acceptance, as these institutions are not conducive to the establishment of a democratic society. Another aspect that gives a cause for concern is that existing institutions are geared towards the reproduction of gender inequality. Certain traditional institutions’ doctrine of gender bias regarding the roles and identities of females impede the inclusion of women in the equal-opportunities programs.

### THE IDEA OF VOLUNTEERING

The inextricable cultural and historical ties people of the region have with each other are due to the shared history, long-standing cultural affinities, the

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<sup>40</sup> С. Олимова, *Социальная структура Таджикистана и ее влияние на процессы демократизации* [The social structure of Tajikistan and its impact on the democratization processes], in “Демократические процессы в Центральной Азии: опыт и перспективы”, Мат. межд. Научно-практ. Конференции [Proceedings of the conference “Democratic Processes in Central Asia: Experience and Prospects”], Бишкек, 1998, с. 68-77.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> В. Бушков, *Таджикистан: традиционное сообщество в постиндустриальном мире* [Tajikistan: a traditional community in the post-industrial world], in “Этнографическое обозрение” [Ethnographic Review], 1995, no. 4, с. 84-92.

likeness of traditions, and the lack of language barriers. One of such strong, long-lived and prevailing Central Asian traditions is the practice of volunteerism, "assar" in the Kazakh language, "khashar" in Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen languages. This centuries-old practice of collective volunteer labour represents brotherly kinship, the integrity of compatriots, and selfless willingness to help one another, all of which take place at a time when a person is unable to cope with the large-scale tasks. The Central Asian idea of volunteering is generally thought to trace back to the pre-Islamic period and has been maintained as a cultural and historical tradition. The distinguishing feature of the said form of volunteerism is that people carry out the work on a voluntary basis and free of charge; the hosts were only requested to provide the food necessary for the period of work. In the event the relatives or neighbours were left without homes or belongings due to an accident or natural calamities, necessary assistance was always granted. Voluntary initiatives were not limited just to the cases above and were carried out for the large undertakings that required assistance, e.g. house construction, tilling or harvesting, various household events<sup>43</sup>.

Based on his field research, Dr. Johan Rasanayagam writes that the inhabitants of a kishlak claimed that during the Soviet period all people helped with the construction of private houses, and this work was mainly organized by the aksakals (village elders, headmen) of the Mahalla. At present, only the people maintaining close social connections with each other are ready to help with similar construction. The inhabitants say that currently, people have much less free time as it takes more effort and energy to earn a living than it did before. The owner of a plot might share a certain part of the harvest with the people who rendered help with the harvesting, though the quantity is unrelated to the amount of work done. It is not uncommon for the helpers to do their work on a non-reimbursable basis, yet there had been cases of the work being remunerated albeit well below their market value<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Р. Жаркынбаева, *Об истории и специфике добровольчества в Центральной Азии Социальная работа в современном мире: взаимодействие науки, образования и практики* [On the history and specificity of volunteering in Central Asia Social work in the modern world: the interaction of science, education and practice], in *Материалы VI Международ. науч.-практ. конф.* [Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> International scientific conference], Белгород, 2014, 384 с.

<sup>44</sup> Johan Rasanayagam, *Об этнической принадлежности, государственной идеологии и концепции "общества" в Узбекистане* [On ethnicity, state ideology and the concept of "society" in Uzbekistan], cited in *Ферганская долина: этничность, этнические*

As stated above, volunteering in Central Asia is carried out within local communities, which play an important role in addressing pressing social issues. The peculiarity of it lays in the incentive and fundamental idea that while the money savings are limited, people can benefit from each other by sharing experiences, skills, stock and, most importantly, labour. This informal traditional practice was successfully used by both the state and international organizations to establish the development programs to address social problems of the society.

For example, a joint initiative of the UN and UNDP in Uzbekistan – the program to raise the living standards is being implemented in various areas of Uzbekistan since 2005. One of its three key elements is to “expand the rights and possibilities of local communities in the sphere of social security improvement by encouraging them to implement self-help schemes and restore the social service infrastructure”<sup>45</sup>.

The Program team met with the well-respected people in the local community – village elders, female activists, and local authorities’ representatives – to help and identify the most pressing problems of the area. The locals themselves decided what should be done to improve the quality of life in their community. After that, the UN and PROON calculated the funds necessary to solve the problem. This model was utilized to encourage the villagers to work on a voluntary basis for the good of the community. The project, which aimed to improve the water supply in Karakalpakstan and Namangan, helped some 5,000 residents of settlements to gain access to clean running water.<sup>46</sup>

One more example of a civil activity is the local public association “Aybek” that has been using the local Jamoat community as the “Yrys Aldy Yntymak” model group since 2003 (the word is derived from the Arabic, meaning “community of the faithful” and “group”). Following the devastating flooding and mudslides in the city of Kerben and the Chong-Tash village, the Yrys Aldy Yntymak’s steering committee convened a special community meeting where it was decided to build

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*процессы, этнические конфликты* [Fergana Valley: ethnicity, ethnic processes, ethnic conflicts], Москва, Наука, 2004, 224 с.

<sup>45</sup> Доклад ПРООН “Понимание добровольчества в целях развития в Юго-Восточной Европе и Содружестве Независимых Государств: Уроки, направленные на расширение деятельности” [UNDP Report “Understanding Volunteering for Development in South-Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States: Lessons to expand activities”], 2010, 57 с. in [http://www.kdobru.ru/netcat\\_files/171/143/Ponimanie\\_dobrovolchestva\\_v\\_celjakh\\_razvitija\\_OON.pdf](http://www.kdobru.ru/netcat_files/171/143/Ponimanie_dobrovolchestva_v_celjakh_razvitija_OON.pdf) (Accessed on 06.09.2018)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



a dam on the Avletim river using the “ashar” method<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, the communities mobilize the efforts of its members in rendering social assistance and peer support.

In accordance with Dr. Johan Rasanayagam’s opinion, the areas of social interaction emphasized with the principles of public participation and the framework of contributions and consumption, represent the “spectrums of public participation”. These spectrums may remain constant over time, for example in the case of housekeeping, or may be utilized during a certain length of time in such instances as road paving. It should also be noted that the collective farms, the government, and the State still could be incorporated in the spectrum of public participation. In the Soviet period, the collective farms constructed roads and schools for a kishlak and provided it with electricity and gas. Nowadays it is unable to carry out similar projects on its own means due to the lack of resources. The institutions of social service, such as school or medical institutions may also be included in the spectrum of public participation. The wealthy residents support these establishments financially through private sponsorship to public institutions. Furthermore, the sponsorship of establishments and projects for public benefit is viewed as the ethical commitment and supportive involvement in the community on behalf of the affluent people<sup>48</sup>.

Traditional leaning to ritualism is of great importance to the people of Central Asia. It is particularly noticeable with the organization of marriage ceremonies (in most cases, marriage was arranged according to the decision of parents), births of children (besik – or beshik-toy), circumcision ceremonies for boys (sundet – or sunnat-toy), and funerals. All of the mentioned activities involve the feasting tradition, which is one of the reasons the celebrations are rather financially costly, labour-intensive and time-consuming. Marfua Tokhtokhodzhayeva views the matter in the following regard: “The need to adhere to traditional ritualism as a form of national identity is not just an individual commitment to the cultural traditions, but can be explained as the sign of low self-esteem and the pressure of community opinion. There were never complaints on the huge costs for marriages and funerals, people just did everything they could to avoid accusations of pettiness, disrespect to the relatives and contempt for the customs. It was important because the public opinion of the Mahalla determined a person’s place in society. (...) The ceremonialism as a

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<sup>47</sup> Bakyt Baimatov, *Indigenous Dimensions of “Civil Society” in Kyrgyzstan – Perspectives from the Margins*, in “Central Asia and Caucasus”, 2006, no. 4, p.17-30.

<sup>48</sup> Johan Rasanayagam, *op. cit.*

phenomenon has predetermined the stability of traditionalism and its consolidation, which ultimately led to the degradation of society. People were working for the sake of ceremonies and not for their very own development. (...) The average household could afford a “standard” ceremony under the tighter spending conditions that included cutting expenses on food, health-care, education and personal needs”<sup>49</sup>.

Central Asia has its own specific traditions of mutual support within local communities. These traditions existed during the pre-Soviet times, they line-up with a contemporary understanding of volunteering as a form of social behaviour, free of financial motivation and aiming to benefit others. If the development of the individual forms of charity and volunteer activity was characteristic for the 1980-1990s, the growth of the non-governmental organizations, supported by the international contributors has become another turning point in the mid-1990s. The region’s governments are starting to realize the major role volunteering plays in supporting both the non-governmental sector and the government bodies involved with the most vulnerable segments of the society. The state support of the NGOs contributes to the volunteers’ involvement in the NGOs’ activities. Thus, at present, the public authorities, the political elites, and the non-governmental organizations are interested in the development of volunteering in Central Asia. There is an increasing awareness of the role of volunteering in responding to social problems and bringing stability to the state. In Central Asia the development of the non-governmental sector, and through it, the volunteering agenda has advanced significantly over 25 years of independence.

The traditions of volunteering in Central Asia have deep roots and this historical heritage represents a huge potential for the further development of volunteering and its adaptation to the quickly changing conditions of the region. Strong traditions of collective mutual aid, which can be shown through *asar*, *ashar*, *khashar* in the region, successfully endured the Soviet period and still are a common practice in the rural areas.

## CONCLUSIONS

Globalization presents many challenges and opportunities for the future and viability of the region. One source of great concern is negative repercussions

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<sup>49</sup> М. Тохтаходжаева, *Утомленные прошлым. Реисламизация общества и положение женщин в Узбекистане* [Tired by the past. The re-islamization of society and the status of women in Uzbekistan], Ташкент, 2001, 352 с.

of the region's states existing serious problems, such as risks of economic underdevelopment and transformation into mere suppliers of raw materials for more developed countries, a decline in living standards, extremism, a drop in the education standards and a disadvantage in access to cutting-edge technologies. Another continuing problem concerns the migratory outflow, which has resulted in a talented workforce drain, social polarization, and gender inequality.

To meet those challenges, the region needs to create and develop its civil society. In general, the region's civil society falls under three essential categories, the first and the lowest, nationalistically authentic of which is embodied by local traditional communities; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) represent the second, middle level. Despite operating quantitatively impressive figures, most NGOs are in fact dependent on western funders and target well-educated urban population most of which are proficient in English. The third level consists of political parties, associations, and movements. Yet, the states of the region have forged almost one-party governments, barely tempered with parties that are small and powerless in terms of influence on people.

At present, it is too early to speak of the established system of interaction between the layers of civil society: traditional social institutions, NGOs and political parties and movements in the region. It is also necessary to take account of Central Asian society's idiosyncrasies that bears the hallmarks of both traditional and modern sides of society. The quest for modernization, the manufacturing industry, and a well-educated population are features of modern society. However, the widespread of the conventional socio-cultural line of reasoning, tribalism, regionalism, and nepotism demonstrates that the society of the countries in Central Asia is more traditional than modern. The role of traditional social institutions cannot be overemphasized in that regard.

In view of the above, local communities of Central Asia may be classified as the territorial communities founded on spatial proximity, where people have frequent contacts on many questions concerning the residency in the specific area. Certain psychological relationships and generally accepted behaviour standards for all the residents also represent a particular phenomenon, along with the specific social style of life. The individuals subject themselves to the rules and all aspects of this community life – family, leisure, work and religion that create a strong sense of identity. Members of the community know each other very well; local economic and social relations provide all the necessary things, while they get to hold a certain position in the developed hierarchy and the system of social communications. There is a feeling of kinship and mutual support among both male and female parts of the population, mainly related to domestic and family

aspects of life. At the same time, by introducing certain social stereotypes to the consciousness of people, local communities of the region are capable not only to assist with solving a number of social and domestic problems, but also to revive and cultivate the burdensome traditional ritualism as well as resurrect the prejudices and discrimination against women existing in the society.

The question of the real role of local communities is eliciting mixed reactions in the modern world. On the one hand, for the Post-Soviet states, local communities are one of the main tools and indicators of the formation of democracy in the context of the development of the local government. Practically all states of the region legislatively fixed the modernized forms of the communities within the local government – the meetings of citizens of a residential settlement, a kishlak, an aul and Mahallas of cities (Uzbekistan), the zhamaatas, courts of aksakals, women's councils, youth councils and other committees (Kyrgyzstan) are designated as various forms of the local government.

On the other hand, the processes of urbanization, the internal and external migration of the population, technologization, growth of cultural exchanges, and many other phenomena accompanying the modernization process, force “the communal culture” out. So, with the formation of the urbanized culture in the modern states of Central Asia, with its orientation to industrialization and globalization, there are noticeable changes, hostile to the traditional style of life with its informal relationships between people<sup>50</sup>. The rural traditional way of life represents a more ancient form of public relations, which is now exposed to new threats and challenges from the arising capitalist relations and its carriers of the middle and highest classes of the society.

Thus, *Mahallas, Ayylas, Jamaats, Auylas* in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan as well as rural communities in Turkmenistan, and patrimonial Avlods in Tajikistan play a large role in the mobilization of efforts of local communities in solving social problems in Central Asia. The phenomenon of a patrimonial organization of the local community exists in all Central Asian states. It has a connection with the Muslim tradition, the difference is that for some it plays a major role, and for others – a minor one.

In general, the appeal to traditionalism in Central Asia is rather justified as it promotes the economy of resources and keeps the order in society in emergency conditions. The development of modern views takes place in the region against the antagonism of various purposes and ideals, at the opposition of traditionalism

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<sup>50</sup> Kadyrzhan Smagulov, Gulnar Nasimova, *Analysis of the protest mood in the western region of Kazakhstan*, in “Central Asia and Caucasus”, 2016, no. 3, p. 38-47.

and modernity. Whereby, for the city dwellers, the western standards of life and views are more habitual, where the borrowed ideas, theories, and norms are exposed to synthesizing and changes. In the transit societies of Central Asia, the modernity coexists with the traditionalism, forming freakish combinations and sometimes resisting one another.

Local traditional communities have some strong points about their performance. They provide a more universal means of approaching the problem without complicating the issue with redundant state bureaucracy; facilitate the resolution of disputes and conflicts between citizens; act as mediators between the government and the people; carry out duties of local self-government; contribute to the persistence of national values and traditions; provide assistance in the organization of numerous traditional activities within a community.

Nevertheless, these strong points entail or otherwise involve the following shortcomings. Traditional communities, *inter alia*, do not represent the interests of a specific social group; they have no voice in government's policy development processes and may not interfere with the adoption of laws; their power is limited to tackling social issues; they encourage the revival and protection of burdensome conventional ritualism; they contribute to put pressure on women and coerce them into a subordinate position in society; they are not conducive towards modernization and democratization of political life in a country.

Along with the traditional forms of mutual support within the community, new forms of volunteer activity are being established to contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of the states of the region. The most popular forms of the volunteer activity, apart from the direct assistance to the ones in need, are the network activities, the counselling and information provision, the office work, the visiting friends initiative, and the protection or representation of people's interests. Currently, there is considerable potential in Central Asia to ensure the person-focused development and improvement of people's life by means of volunteering. Together with that, such factors as a decline of collectivism values and a growth of the individualism, as well as a decrease in the living standard of population force people to focus primarily on the personal well-being. An insufficiently strong economic basis of the NGOs serves as the limiting factor for the further development of volunteering in the region.

At the same time, it should be noted that for the majority of countries the state is still the subject of social policy, consolidating interests of various strata of the population. It is especially characteristic for the Post-Soviet republics that have a shared totalitarian history, given that a considerable part of the residents did not manage to free themselves from the state and paternalistic complex, and

the governments do not wish to share the authority. Because of the drastic transformations in the economic and public life of the society, the state loses its exclusive role in the course of the social policy formation, considering the further democratization of the country and the formation of institutes of the civil society.

However, in the Post-Soviet countries, the role of the civil society in solving social problems is not big enough, but it may become more powerful eventually. It is impossible to count on the wide public interest in the process of civil society development without substantial growth in the living standard of the region's population. For the Central Asian states, the activity of the NGOs and the further active development of international interactions such as "national diplomacy" is essential. It is aimed to promote the expansion and deepen cultural collaboration and mutual influence, which are the relevant factors of the establishment of an open civil society that in turn is one of the main signs of the democratization and modernization of the state.