



PEOPLE'S PEACEMAKING PERSPECTIVES

MARCH 2012

Central Asia

THE POST-SOVIET GENERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA represents a crucial demographic both in terms of its size and potential to influence the direction of the region's development. It is a generation that has grown up amidst nation-building and religious revival, but without the sense of regional cohesion built on the common Soviet identity known by its predecessor. Moreover, young Central Asians have emerged from an impoverished education system into ailing economies offering them bleak job opportunities. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising to find youth at the forefront of current religious, political and social struggles. The central role played by youths in violent clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and the widespread perception that young people in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are vulnerable to radicalisation, call for a better understanding of their values and grievances, the conditions shaping them, as well as their implications for the region's development.

The findings and recommendations in this policy brief are drawn from research conducted *among* young people *by* young Central Asian researchers working in cooperation with local civil society organisations in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from June to September 2011. Some research was also conducted in neighbouring Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and in Afghanistan.

Many young people in Central Asia feel excluded from decisions and events affecting their lives and deprived of the opportunity of a dignified existence within their native countries. There is little understanding of civic (non-ethnic) concepts of nationhood and few express solidarity with fellow citizens from other regions or ethnic or religious communities. Many feel deep disillusionment with democracy. Their response in some cases is a resigned retreat into a close family or community circle. Others escape through emigration, regular migration or criminality, while some vent their anger and frustration through affiliation with extremist movements or participation in ethnic violence. A small minority are finding ways to work within or around these obstacles to achieve their goals peacefully and constructively within their home countries.

The success of the European Union (EU)'s policies on energy security and counter-terrorism in Central Asia risks being undermined by these underlying frustrations and divisions. By rebalancing the emphasis in its policies towards a more rigorous promotion of democratic values and pluralism, the EU can have a positive influence on the region's trajectory. The EU needs to demonstrate to young people that aspirations for stability, security and economic opportunity are best served by democracy, national unity and active engagement in civic life.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Youth support for democracy in Central Asia is not a given. The EU should consistently demonstrate the benefits of democracy** for security, stability and prosperity in its relations with and engagement in Central Asian states and help to create the conditions for youth participation.
- **Efforts to build young people's skills and initiative in democratic practices are required** in order to provide them with alternatives to violence as a means to achieve their goals.
- **Ethnic intolerance and exclusion of minorities are widespread among young people.** Initiatives and policies, which encourage communication across ethnic, rural-urban, religious and regional divides, and pluralism are essential for peaceful development in such a diverse region.

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

"Nobody has ever asked about young people's opinions."

Group discussion, Tajikistan

Findings and Recommendations

1.

Youth support for democracy in Central Asia is not a given. The EU should consistently demonstrate the benefits of democracy for security, stability and prosperity in its relations with and engagement in Central Asian states and help to create the conditions for youth participation.

Young people in Central Asia have limited exposure to genuine democratic values and concepts. Their understanding of and ideas about what democracy is and what it is not are determined primarily by their experience of it in the states in which they live, all of which claim to be democratic. Many participants recognised that this practice of democracy falls far short of the true values and principles behind the term and that the democratic label has become a pretext for abuse of power by political and economic elites. Many in rural areas complained of the deterioration in infrastructure and associated this with the arrival of 'democracy'.

"We don't have democracy – we have kleptocracy. 'Democracy' is [used as] an excuse to justify all actions."

Participant, group discussion, Tajikistan

For many young people the abuses, uncertainty and injustice associated with supposedly 'democratic' leaderships have instilled a sense of disillusionment, as well as confusion about democracy and its relative merits. Responses revealed that the majority of young people have a limited understanding of the term. For some democracy is an imported notion, imposed by the West but not suited to the Central Asian context and its traditional customs, "We don't really need democracy: Kyrgyz have been ruled by *aksakals* [elders] for ages." Others did not distinguish between democracy and authoritarian rule; most participants in Uzbekistan said they considered their country to be a democracy.

"Democracy is when one leader governs a country."

Participant, group discussion, Nookat, Kyrgyzstan

Indeed, for some, a strong, authoritarian leader was preferable. Participants in two discussion groups in Kara-Kulja, Kyrgyzstan, concluded that what was needed is a "ruler like Stalin, a tough one, instead of democratic rule." While Uzbekistani research participants referred to their country as a democracy, a participant in Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, cited President Karimov as an effective leader precisely because he eschewed democracy.

"Democracy should be limited. It is like a loose dog that bites everyone it wants to."

Student, 22, Osh, Kyrgyzstan

The lack of positive demonstration and experience of democracy, combined with what is perceived as at times the inconsistent or hypocritical application of democratic principles by the West in its relationships with Central Asian leaderships, are undermining the credibility of democracy in the eyes of young people. Yet, despite this and the confusion around the term, many young people still rank democracy high on their list of values, associating it with notions of freedom, equality, stability and peace. This suggests that the space to demonstrate its value and benefits, though diminishing, still exists.

While the responsibility to redeem perceptions lies primarily with Central Asian governments, the EU can encourage and support this by consistent demonstration of its commitment to democratisation and rule of law and condemnation of corruption and abuse of power. This in turn will bolster the EU's ongoing investment in programmes designed to build and support democratic institutions and governance in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- By taking a more consistent and sustained public stance on abuse of power, corruption and discrimination, the EU, and its Member States through their bilateral relations, should ensure that fundamental principles of democracy and good governance are not compromised through a preoccupation with counter-terrorism and energy security.
- Discussion of human rights issues should not be confined to the platform of the Human Rights Dialogues, but form part of all areas of policy dialogue and greater attention should be paid to the implementation of commitments in this area. The EU should encourage wider public discussion on human rights standards and democracy to clarify understanding of these terms.
- EU programming in all sectors should be informed by a more detailed analysis of the local context with a view to ensuring that all activities have a positive peacebuilding impact. Under the 'Investing in the future' strand of the EU's regional strategy, aspects of education reform which increase youth alienation, such as corruption, should receive specific attention.
- Contribute to an understanding among the general populace, particularly in rural areas, that democracy brings tangible improvements in infrastructure by encouraging greater government accountability for communities' needs and taking a stronger stance on cases of state-sponsored theft of infrastructure.

2.

Efforts to build young people's skills and initiative in democratic practices are required in order to provide them with alternatives to violence as a means to achieve their goals.

Neither the education system, nor organised activities for youth provide them with the space to air their grievances and ideas, develop critical thinking skills, influence decisions or have a stake in the implementation of initiatives and solutions. Youth organisations across the region focus primarily on providing entertainment and distraction for youth in order to keep them from criminality or religious extremism. In Bukhara, Uzbekistan, a youth leader of Kamolot, an organisation run by the President's daughter, which provides resources and support for youth activities, explained that,

"...our organisation is constantly trying to involve young people in any activities, trying to organise their leisure time."

In Kazakhstan, a similar role is filled by Jas-Otan, the youth wing of the presidential party. In Kyrgyzstan, the relatively new Ministry of Youth and youth committees, from national to community level, are responsible for youth activism; several political parties also have youth wings. In Tajikistan, a national youth committee exists, which has a network of regional youth committees and youth representatives across the country. These structures tend not to be used as fora in which to discuss needs or to participate in decision-making processes, which would in turn equip youth with the skills necessary to participate in and help build a democratic society.

"We don't do analysis... We don't have any problems right now."

Representative of official youth organisation, 20, Kazakhstan

Cultural norms and entrenched resistance among elders towards young people's participation in decision-making were cited as key barriers to young people gaining democratic skills. In Afghanistan and some rural areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan the sense of exclusion is most keenly felt, as

one twenty-five year-old ethnic Tajik girl from Kabul commented,

"young people are thought to have full mental capacity only when they reach the age of 45."

Traditional attitudes compound the obstacles for young women. In rural areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan young girls complained bitterly about being unable to influence decisions about their own fate. A respondent from Shakhrituz, Tajikistan, claimed, "there are many girls here who are forcefully handed over for marriage under the age of 16 by elders."

"If a young person cannot contribute to a single decision in the family setting, how would she be able to take part in decisions at the level of national politics? Naturally their attitude towards politics is negative."

Young women, Afghanistan Ministry of Women's Affairs

Access to a range of information sources, a prerequisite for meaningful participation in a democratic system, is variable across the region. While in urban areas young people reported easy access to the internet, newspapers and to numerous television channels, including state and official Russian news channels, access in rural areas was much more limited. Television proved the exception, with levels of access varying considerably. In two mountainous districts in Tajikistan participants reported that most families have satellite television and view both Russian and state channels; in other rural areas in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan access is limited to a single official channel.

Yet even when information is readily available, the research revealed that young people more often than not choose not to question or analyse it, deliberately avoiding information which might challenge or contradict their views and stereotypes. Many mistrust the media and rely instead

on word-of-mouth to fill in the gaps in formal news, a factor that, according to several participants, played a role in the spread of the June 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan.

"I don't trust Russian or Tajik news channels [...] I think much of the news is driven by political motivations."

Young woman, Murghab, Tajikistan

In the absence of opportunity, skills and space to air grievances constructively, some young Central Asians are prepared to use violence to vent their frustration and achieve their aims. In the Pamir region of Tajikistan, some young men talked admiringly of the 2011 Arab Spring, while some young Kyrgyz men said they were willing to "spill blood" for change. Small-scale incidents of violence have become a regular occurrence in Kyrgyzstan. In Leilek, young respondents claimed to have blocked a main road and held a representative of the local authority hostage. In Talas, young respondents described how villagers had burned the office of a mining company, as a means of ensuring that grievances were heard.

Yet a few, albeit limited, examples of positive action through participation emerged. In one village, schoolgirls described how, through participation in parent-teacher meetings, they had successfully made the case for a sports club in the village. In another case, young Kyrgyz related how they had set up a youth foundation which relies solely on voluntary subscriptions from its young members. Young residents of Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, spoke enthusiastically of their experience at a Soros-funded summer camp, where 150 teenagers were tasked with governing their own 'republic'.

Concerted effort is required to stimulate and inspire young people to overcome generational and information barriers in order to take a more active role in their communities and in decisions affecting them.

3.

Ethnic intolerance and exclusion of minorities are widespread among young people. Initiatives and policies, which encourage communication across ethnic, rural-urban, religious and regional divides, and pluralism are essential for peaceful development in such a diverse region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate participatory processes into programme and policy planning in order to seek and capture young people's perspectives and ideas. Learn lessons from initiatives such as that led by the EU Special Representative on Bosnia and Herzegovina, 'Generation Bosnia and Herzegovina for Europe', which brought young people together to develop a common vision and in turn share that with national and international decision-makers.
- Support activities which provide opportunities for youth to participate in resolving community problems, in order to build confidence in their own abilities and demonstrate their contribution to older generations and authorities. These could include volunteering and youth-led, community-based initiatives.
- Develop the role and capacity of youth institutions in encouraging and organising genuine youth participation and in developing programmes tailored to youth interests and concerns, including through relevant training to staff. Include youth representatives in work on youth-related policies.
- In designing programmes, draw on innovative and interactive methods used by local civil society organisations to engage young people.
- Promote greater cross-generational interaction to strengthen social cohesion, for example by supporting youth debates and discussions to which elders and authorities are invited as observers, and air these through television and the internet.

"Racism and nationalism are positive, because they are helping us preserve our culture."

Participant, group discussion, Osh city, Kyrgyzstan

The research found that Central Asian states have largely failed to promote national identities that take into account the linguistic, ethnic, religious and regional differences within their borders, despite paying lip service to diversity in public statements. All five post-Soviet states have promoted forms of culture, traditions, language and religion of their titular ethnic group as the predominant markers of citizenship. In Tajikistan, for example, the 2008 law on state language dictates that any contact between citizens and state institutions must take place in a standardised form of Tajik that differs markedly from the Tajik spoken in many parts of the country. According to participants in discussions in Soghd and Khatlon provinces, the current national identity policies deepen a sense of 'us versus them'.

Across the region, but particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, participants emphasised their 'communal' identities – primarily ethnic identity shared with members of the communities in which they lived, but also religious affiliation and place of birth – over and above their national identity: their citizenship of a nation state.

"First and foremost, I am Kyrgyz. My parents are Kyrgyz. My grandparents and their great-grandparents were also Kyrgyz. That is why my heart beats as an Kyrgyz and I have pure Kyrgyz blood. I cannot change my blood and heart."

Ethnic Kyrgyz male, 22, Murghab, Tajikistan

However, understanding of the concept of identity and citizenship was often blurred in people's minds, a finding which came into sharp relief when discussing attitudes towards those with other communal identities to their own. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, since the inter-ethnic violence in 2010, little distinction is made between Uzbek ethnicity and the state of Uzbekistan and the feeling that people should live in the country bearing the name of their ethnicity has become widespread. Similarly, some young ethnic Uzbek respondents in Uzbekistan associated fellow ethnic Kyrgyz citizens with the anti-Uzbek violence in Kyrgyzstan.

"People think Uzbeks should go to their own country."

Young woman, Kyrgyzstan

Negative attitudes towards other communal groups are particularly strong in areas, which have experienced inter-group conflict over recent years. Since the violence in 2010 there have been many reports of ethnic discrimination, prejudice and hatred.

"We young people don't co-operate or build friendship with our [ethnic] Kyrgyz peers. They don't approach us and we don't go to them. I only know my neighbours and we often keep it at the 'Salomalek' [a common greeting] level... Sometimes I want to mingle with them but it is hard when you feel different."

Participant, 19, group discussion, Tajikistan

Ethnic prejudice and national policies reinforce a sense of exclusion from civic life among ethnic minorities across the region. While policies of 'integration' purport to establish a level playing field, in reality they favour the urban members of a state's titular ethnic group and translate in effect into a policy of assimilation.

School children participating in a tolerance festival, Tash-Bulak, Kyrgyzstan.

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Examining identity in Murghab, Tajikistan

The research examined the extent to which young people feel included or excluded by their governments' attempts to create a common national identity and their visions for the future of their states. The responses highlighted both the diversity and complexity of identity across the region.

"I am Tajik because my passport tells me that. For Kyrgyz people in Murghab, we are Tajik, but when we go to Dushanbe, we become Pamirians, despite what is in our passports. It is hard to be Tajik and not Tajik at the same time."

Participant, group discussion, Murghab, Tajikistan

Murghab, a remote district in the Pamir Mountains in eastern Tajikistan, borders with Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan. The population is largely ethnic Kyrgyz, with a Tajik minority. Here a sense of national identity, based on citizenship of a particular nation state, was described by many research participants as being, at best, secondary to their communal identity.

"For me being an Ismailia is the foundation of my identity. Whatever I am now is informed by my Ismaili identity. I identify myself as a Tajik not for myself, but for others."

Ethnic Ismaili woman from Murghab, Tajikistan

While loyalty to regional identity can translate into a reluctance to relate to those different from oneself, for some, Murghabi identity was in fact synonymous with embracing pluralism.

"I am a Pamirian Uzbek brought up with Sunni and Shia Ismaili teachings equally. I love both and can't say I belong to only one. Sometimes I find it hard. I am not an Uzbek amongst Uzbeks, but for Tajiks I am an Uzbek. Being Murghabi is an important part of my identity. It combines all the other identities I have. It is like ground where different flowers grow. Sometimes outsiders do not respect our good traditions. [...] [They] really can't understand the complexity of our environment. They think us savage or illiterate, looking to our clothes or appearance. I think people [...] really need to go through some kinds of courses about pluralism and natural differences. They need to learn about us."

Ethnic Uzbek participant, Murghab, Tajikistan

3. continued

In one instance, a young Kyrgyz civil society professional suggested Uzbeks could improve their social standing by becoming more ethnically 'neutral', including by not wearing traditional dress. In some parts of the region, disengagement from the public sphere into informal structures provide alternative survival strategies for minorities.

The tendency towards exclusionary and potentially hostile identities, and the resistance among young people to an explicitly multi-ethnic state, are worrying in such an ethnically diverse region. At the rhetorical level, there is still much talk of inclusive citizenship and shared regional interests. Indeed international programmes are often posited on the idea that there are shared regional interests. In reality, however, states, communities and individuals are more likely to stress their differences rather than their similarities. These inward-looking and divisive attitudes, overlaid with social and economic pressures, do not bode well for the development of peaceful societies.

"The main causes of conflict are regionalism and ethnic differences."

Young staff member of an international organisation, Turkmenistan

RECOMMENDATIONS

- International actors should support governments in the region in the development of inclusive civic identities through participatory processes. These might include:
 - support for the introduction of courses within education establishments which explore suitable national policies for their respective countries;
 - initiatives which explore the past with youth and other groups, including minorities, promote reconciliation and bridge divides;
 - opportunities for youth to examine the extent to which historical or cultural traditions and practices are conducive to inclusive development in their countries.
- Share lessons and experience with policy-makers and civil society actors in Central Asian states from efforts in other contexts to develop inclusive national policies, including through experience exchange programmes, and make available information on different models of minority protection.
- Stimulate and support opportunities and mechanisms for joint activities across different ethnic and religious communities, including across borders, and in particular joint action to solve shared problems.
- Improve understanding of the local context, in particular ethnic composition, local tensions and minority exclusion, in order to better inform programming and adopt regional approaches which are not based on assumed cultural similarities between states, but rather are sensitive to regional tensions around ethnic diversity.
- Funding for civil society organisations involved in peacebuilding-related activities should be contingent on a demonstrable commitment to ethnic pluralism and equality, including within the organisations themselves, and on consideration in all project planning of socio-economic inclusion.



This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Saferworld and Conciliation Resources take no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

A focus group of young people in Khorog, Tajikistan.

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References and Acknowledgements

The findings in this policy brief draw on a wider report entitled: *"Nobody has ever asked about young people's opinions": Young people's perspectives on identity, exclusion and the prospects for a peaceful future Central Asia*. The study is the result of a collaborative effort between young researchers from Central Asia and Saferworld conducted under the People's Peacemaking Perspectives project. For full details of the project please visit:

www.saferworld.org/PPP

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Methodology

The findings and recommendations in this policy brief are based on research conducted by young researchers and civil society activists from Central Asia among young people from the region, with support from Saferworld staff. This approach was used in order to ensure as wide a range of young people's views as possible were captured within the time-frame and geographical scope of the study.

In total, across 6 target countries and in 21 key locations, researchers conducted 48 focus group discussions, which involved interactive, participatory and creative activities, 51 in-depth individual and group interviews and 73 key informant interviews. The majority of the research was conducted in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which include the volatile Ferghana Valley region.