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Coming together in times of crisis

How military conflicts and crises contribute to the consolidation of Kyrgyzstan's civil society

In its 30 years of independence, Kyrgyzstan has seen six different presidents, three major revolutions and even more protests and uprisings by its population. Each upheaval brought its own changes to the Kyrgyz people's way of life. Many lives were sacrificed in the struggle for freedom and independence. People protested against the loss of their land, against the repression of freedom of speech, against the usurpation of power. A culture of protest became the mechanism that united citizens from different groups of the population. This, in turn, created a strong pool of civil society activists, which continues to assert its constitutional rights in different social and political spheres and to provide substantial support to the population in difficult circumstances.

Civil society also became a trusted refuge during local clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. The country has seen over 120 of such violent incidents in the last ten years. For example, on 29 April 2021, while a meeting of the Committee of Secretaries of Security Councils of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) took place in Dushanbe, in Batken (a region on the border with Tajikistan) a state of emergency was declared. On the Kyrgyz side, the armed conflict resulted in 36 lives lost and more than 180 wounded. And on 16 September 2022, at the same time as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Uzbekistan, during which the parties signed an agreement on the construction of a China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, shooting broke out in several areas along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. According to the reports of the Kyrgyz border guards, the Tajik side opened fire on the border patrols and various positions on the Kyrgyz side. As a result of the armed conflict on the border, 62 people lost their lives, more than 200 citizens were wounded, some seriously, and the inhabitants of the villages in the Batken and Leylek districts were forced to leave their homes.

Against the backdrop of armed incursions by the Tajik military on the territory of Kyrgyzstan's Batken district, a 'Republican Headquarters' was opened in the Kyrgyz capital to provide aid for Batken. Within just a few

hours, the Kyrgyz people had consolidated their efforts to organise help, united by shared pain and suffering. More than 3,000 Kyrgyz citizens became involved in the work of the Headquarters. Thanks to the joint efforts of concerned citizens, 393 tonnes of humanitarian aid were distributed to the victims and 287 million soms (around 3.3 million euros) were paid into a special account set up to help the people of Batken. Other members of the population collected money for military supplies, with ordinary citizens purchasing nine high-quality drones and training specialists in their use. More than 5.5 million soms (around 60,000 euros) were collected to provide the army with the necessary means of defence and first aid equipment.

This same kind of community spirit was seen both during the conflict in April 2021 and in the early 2020s when Covid-19 infections were on the rise.

Filling a governmental gap

Unfortunately, in today's Kyrgyzstan, there is still no structure form of cooperation between the government and society. This makes it difficult to create a genuinely united community of citizens in the country. Consequently, the weak governmental control in many areas of life, especially the economy, has meant citizens have to survive on their own without being able to rely on governmental support. This has had a negative impact both on the authority of state institutions (sometimes resulting in their status dramatically deteriorating) and on the tendency towards social fragmentation along regional, ethnic and other lines.

A clear example of the population 'surviving' was the Covid-19 pandemic. The pressure on Kyrgyzstan's healthcare system peaked in July 2020: hospitals were overflowing and no longer admitting patients, there were shortages of medical supplies across the country. And it was volunteers who came to the rescue: members of the population and labour migrants demonstrated an impressive capacity for self-organisation and active involvement, establishing an entire chain to provide help for those who needed it. ⊠⊠

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One distinguishing characteristic of the activities of civil society during the pandemic was the provision of assistance targeting rural areas. Labour migrants made contact with village doctors to identify the needs on the ground. Thanks to a constant communication between migrants and medical personnel at the feldsher-midwife stations, targeted assistance

was organised, including the necessary medication and equipment. In each instance, the trans-local nature of citizenship (patriotism) is evident — citizens actions were not dependent on where they are located, but instead related to their place of origin.

Here, the young people of Kyrgyzstan also play an important role in the process of consolidating civil society. Kyrgyzstan's younger generation is inclined towards social activism and participation in various voluntary initiatives. According to research conducted from 2020 to 2021, a total of 85 per cent of Kyrgyz youth (aged 14–28 years) considers it extremely important to serve the community. It is this very value that is manifested in the many examples of spontaneous voluntary activities during times of crisis.

Uniting the nation

An important driving force behind young people's participation in these activities is their perception of their own political impotence in the system of government. The increasing bureaucracy, the declining transparency of the mechanisms of participation for young people, hierarchical structures in public bodies, as well as the legacy of the Soviet past have all resulted in this sense of powerlessness among the younger generation. This is why young people prefer to participate in spontaneous voluntary activities and protests. The structure in these actions is not burdened by bureaucracy and hierarchy, and, more than this, it also provides young people with a sense of solidarity with their fellow citizens.

It is essential to act to create and promote symbols that unite society, based on the development of a civic culture and respect for the laws of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

The political processes in Kyrgyzstan, over the past decade or so, have revealed a host of problems regarding the development of civic consciousness in Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately, this also includes trends which fundamentally prevent the creation of a unified civic culture. These include regionalism (a divide between the inhabitants of the north and south of the country), tribalism (a tendency towards a specific clan-based structure), as well as an adherence to a specific religion. In order to develop a civic culture, it is necessary for the public to pass judgement on the negative influence of the tendencies outlined. This step would provide the foundation for the institutionalised consolidation of society, and in

the future, would help facilitate the effective development of statehood. In this context, it is essential to act to create and promote symbols that unite society, based on the development of a civic culture and respect for the laws of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

In Kyrgyzstan, the culture of protest and involvement in spontaneous voluntary activity in times of crisis have become the means to unite members of different groups of society, especially for young people. This dynamic has paved the way for the consolidation of society, which in turn may serve as a powerful mechanism for the development of Kyrgyzstan.



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