

5 NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES FOR RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

5.5 Kyrgyzstan: Creating a space for dialogue and cooperation between the state and civil society – Violent conflict prevention, 2004-2005

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In Kyrgyzstan, civil society became an important player in the quest to channel civic protest in a peaceful fashion – in 2004 and 2005, amidst intensifying public protests, election turmoil and a Revolution, fears that the small Central Asian republic would be engulfed into widespread violence never materialized.

On 17 March 2002, in the Southern Kyrgyzstan district of Aksy, demonstrations against the central government were held to protest against the imprisonment of the Parliamentary Deputy Azimbek Beknazarov. This popular politician from the region had become increasingly opposition-oriented and particularly critical of a recent border treaty with China. On that day, during a peaceful demonstration, five people were shot dead by the police.

This event led to several months of protests and deeply affected a country that had been considered for most of the 1990's as the "Island of Democracy" of Central Asia, due to the faster pace of its economic reforms and much more liberal environment than its neighbours. President Askar Akayev however, who had been in power since the independence of Kyrgyzstan in 1991, had gradually moved in a more authoritarian direction, particularly after his controversial 2000 re-election. Akayev's unpopularity was particularly noticeable in rural areas and in the South of the country, but he had also started to lose the backing of key national and regional elites, irritated by Akayev's family control over the economy and disenchanted in the face of rising corruption. Eventually, President Akayev would be

ousted from power on 24 March 2005, in a relatively peaceful popular revolt referred to as the "Tulip Revolution".

A local initiative for conflict prevention in a politically tense climate

The Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI), a Kyrgyz non-governmental organization, was created in 1998 to prevent violent conflict and build peace and justice in Central Asia. In January 2004, FTI started a project for "Cooperation among Civil Society, Law Enforcement Agencies, and Other Bodies of State Authority to Realize Citizens' Constitutional Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly".

The political situation at the time was very tense. Local elections were to be held in the autumn of 2004. Parliamentary elections were to follow in February 2005 and a new president was to be elected in the autumn of that same year. While many people were hoping for changes and an improvement of the general social, economic and political situation, they had also become increasingly disillusioned; they felt as if they had become participants in a mere 'spectacle' of democracy in their country. The public protests were a manifestation of that unease.

For Kyrgyzstan, a country of the former Soviet Union, expressing dissent in such ways was a new phenomenon. The authorities had little capacity in dealing with civil protest and used old Soviet methods to suppress conflict and to prevent people from publicly expressing their grievances. FTI determined that the escalation of tensions that led to bloodshed during the March 2002 demonstrations in Aksy had been mainly due to a lack of professional skills on the part of the police and local authorities in dealing with civil unrest. It also recognized that demonstrators themselves had little awareness of their rights and responsibilities as active players in civil protest events. Another aspect that seemed very worrying to FTI was the complete lack of communication and understanding between the state and civil society. After Aksy events, tensions between civil society and state bodies heightened, and the police were discredited in the eyes of the general population. All these factors meant

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Bringing civil society, law enforcement agencies and government authorities together during FTI cooperation project, 2004

that any tensions and localized conflicts had a strong potential to escalate into violence and to spill over to the national, and even regional, levels.

Creating a space for constructive dialogue and enhancing capacity in peaceful conflict resolution

FTI therefore decided to design a project that would combine specific sets of activities in order to address all these inter-related issues. The overarching goal was simultaneously to enable citizens to exert their right to freedom of peaceful assembly while preventing any escalation of tensions that could lead to the outbreak of nation-wide violence. This was to be done by establishing structures allowing constructive interaction between civil society, law enforcement agencies, and other bodies of state authority in order to prevent the use of violence by either side during civil protest events. Started in January 2004, the project would last until December 2005 and be adjusted and expanded in order to adapt to a changing environment, affected most notably by the outbreak of a Revolution in the middle of project implementation. Initially funded by one main donor, the Swiss government, very soon the project would expand thanks to the support of additional partners and donors – the Danish Refugee Council, UNDP and OSCE Bishkek.

Two primary objectives were set up:

1. To promote a culture of dialogue and establish communication channels and peaceful conflict

intervention mechanisms through enhanced cooperation among representatives of civil society, law enforcement agencies, and central and local state administration.

2. To build the capacity of all participants to the project with regard to conflict analysis and peaceful methods of conflict resolution, such as negotiation and mediation.

Getting to know each other I: meetings, workshops, talks

To encourage cooperation between civil society and state authorities, FTI organized various meetings, workshops and trainings throughout 2004 and 2005, gathering representatives from civil society, law enforcement agencies and government authorities, both at the national and regional levels. While most of the activities were facilitated by FTI staff, the decision was made to hire external consultants from the former Yugoslavia to hold the trainings. Initially, participants displayed a high level of distrust and prejudice towards each other but soon they developed higher levels of communication and mutual understanding, and even established innovative structures of cross-sector cooperation for the prevention of violent conflict and peaceful crisis intervention.

The first event organized within the project took the form of a common training for participants from three different sectors and institutions: civil society, National Security Service (NSS) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). The training consisted in identifying conflict issues in the current context of Kyrgyzstan, transforming negative statements into positive ones and developing a structure and plan of activities for future development of the collaborative project. Strikingly, on the first day, when asked to explain what terms they would associate with each of these entities, strong prejudices were revealed through each group's answers. The NSS and MIA in particular, were associated by civil society participants with very negative terms such as 'fear', 'beatings', 'torture' and 'firing at people'⁵⁹. After the three-day training however, participants had learnt to

⁵⁹ Issyk-Kul, Training Protocol, February 9-12, 2004.

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know each other and to listen to their respective points of views, and all recognized the usefulness of such a process and the necessity to develop it further. Together with the other initial project meetings, the training allowed members of civil society and state and law enforcement bodies to establish first contacts, and built the capacity of all participants in communication and basic principles of peaceful conflict resolution.

In addition to meetings at the national level, five regional round tables were held in spring and autumn 2004 in Bishkek and in the Southern regions of Kyrgyzstan – in Jalalabad, Aksy, Osh and Batken. During each of these round tables, the project background and goals were explained, information on the Kyrgyz legislation on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly was provided, factors of conflicts and destabilization were analyzed, and a regional working group was established to engage regularly in dialogue and cooperation over conflict issues.

Obstacles along the way

Many obstacles had to be overcome however, in order for these initial project activities to achieve their objectives. In Aksy in particular, the first round table held on 23 March 2004 was marked by significant difficulties in organizing the event and gathering relevant representatives from civil society and different local authority and law enforcement structures. Strong efforts were required to find a neutral place for the meeting to take place (in a holiday resort where pressures from the regional capital could not be felt so strongly). As the FTI facilitator explained, ‘it was difficult to facilitate the seminar at the very beginning because of all the tension in the room and because these people had never participated in such an event before. Some people from the villages were very aggressive towards the law enforcement officials. In the afternoon however, normal conditions were established and people realized the aim of the seminar and the benefits of talking to each other’⁶⁰. After the seminar, many positive opinions were expressed. The Head of the Local Parliament saw this seminar ‘as a proof that people and state representatives are ready to engage in constructive dialogue. This is a fundamental, even historical, step for Kyrgyzstan’⁶¹. The

facilitator, who was himself from Aksy, was very touched by a question from one of the participants: “Where were you before Aksy tragedy happened? You could have prevented the death of our sons.”⁶²

Getting to know each other II: building understanding

The project represented the first opportunity for most of the project participants to meet with representatives from ‘conflicting’ sides, providing people who never had a chance to talk together with a space to discuss sensitive issues in a non-violent and inclusive way, and to overcome their prejudices and gradually build trust. Civil society members, who tended to fear and had little respect for law enforcement bodies, discovered ‘that people of the NSS and MIA were human beings like them, that they also wanted to prevent violence and that they had their own difficulties’⁶³. State and law enforcement representatives, who were inclined to consider any form of public protest as a direct threat against the stability of the state, were able to learn about the importance of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in a democratic state and to listen to the motivations of civil society representatives for organizing civic events. Points of view were shared on the sources and triggers of conflicts in Kyrgyzstan and on possible strategies for violence prevention. Despite all the difficulties and the mutual reproaches and blames, the parties agreed on an acute need for cooperation. They discovered that despite their differences, they all shared one mutual goal: preventing the escalation of crises and the outbreak of violence in Kyrgyzstan.

Preventing violence: a joint effort

A further series of meetings of the different regional and national working groups were held in December 2004, in order to analyze the most recent developments of the political situation in Kyrgyzstan. It was also intended to design a precise schedule of activities and strategy for

60 Bektemir Bagyshkulov, Analytical Report on the Aksy Roundtable, 6 April 2004.

61 Toktomat Itibaev, *ibid*.

62 *Ibid*.

63 Anara Egnaliev, FTI Project Manager, interview, November 2007.

cooperation in the upcoming crucial election period. Unique structures were established in early 2005: Regional Coordination Councils (RCCs) in three regions of the South of Kyrgyzstan and one National Coordination Council (NCC) based in Bishkek, all of whom had as a main goal the regular monitoring of conflict situations, development of possible preventive measures and intervention to defuse potentially violent crisis situations. RCC and NCC members also had the responsibility of raising awareness among their respective institutions of the goals and activities of the project. Each Coordination Council comprised between five and eleven members, consisting of civil society and media representatives, human rights defenders, representatives of law enforcement agencies and state bodies. While RCCs included local authorities, the NCC state representatives came from the National Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Presidential Administration.

The real test: election turmoil...

January 2005 saw increasing turmoil taking place in relation to the Parliamentary election campaign. More and more demonstrations and protests were organized to oppose dubious judicial decisions on various candidates' deregistration, gathering thousands of people around local executive buildings and courthouses in the regions. Tens of lawsuits were initiated against organizers and participants of opposition demonstrations, most of whom were former middle or high-level state officials. The first round of the election, on 27 February 2005, passed peacefully. Protests began quickly however, mostly in the South, where large crowds organized demonstrations and blocked roads to protest against alleged malpractice and dubious disqualifications of candidates. Opposition forces began to develop parallel structures in some regions. Because of the higher stakes involved, the second round of the elections, on 13 March, involved even more malpractice than the first. At that time however, attention had turned much more on the growing protests all over the country than on the actual results.

...and a revolution

While initially the protests were mostly conducted by

supporters of individual candidates on local issues, gradually the wider opposition joined in and the agenda broadened to national issues, most importantly the request for the resignation of President Akayev. The capital remained relatively calm until 23 March 2005, when police broke up an opposition rally organized in the centre of Bishkek by the youth group KelKel. Opposition leaders agreed to hold a major demonstration on the following day, gathering supporters from the regions. On March 24, some groups of protestors, involving mostly young people, marched straight to the White House⁶⁴ and a fight ensued with the police. As the International Crisis Group describes:

'The police managed to force the protestors back twice, but having been given an order not to use arms, they realized they could not keep control, and they fled. Within minutes, the protestors were inside the White House compound, and soon within the White House itself, throwing papers and chairs out windows. A battalion of about 30 young soldiers was led away, protected by KelKel members among others.'⁶⁵

Akayev and others had departed the White House and fled to Russia, while other presidential administration members were held up and beaten by the crowd. Looting took place but after a few days and the release of Kulov, a former vice-President who had been imprisoned since 2001, the security situation returned to normal. In the end, the Akayev regime had been overthrown much more rapidly than anyone had ever expected. As the International Crisis Group put it, the regime was simply so weak that "in some ways it was less a revolution than a process of state collapse"⁶⁶. Control of the state was then taken by a collection of opposition activists and former government officials. The leader of anti-Akayev opposition, Kurmanbek Bakiev, became acting President until he got formally elected in July 2005.

64 Central Administrative Building in Bishkek.

65 Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution, p.9. International Crisis Group Report, 4 May 2005. www.icg.org.

66 Ibid.

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Success: serious escalation prevented

Before, during and after the Revolution, the National and Regional Coordination Councils proved instrumental in preventing the violent escalation of a number of acute crisis situations, particularly in the weeks preceding the Revolution, when tensions were threatening to break out into violence at any time. Members of the NCC and representatives of the media flew to the Southern city of Jalalabat on 7 March 2005, after opposition forces had seized control of the regional administration building. The police surrounded the building while on the nearby square, thousands of protesters asking for Akayev's resignation were assembled. Special law enforcement forces had been sent in and rumours were running higher day by day that the authorities were willing to undertake violent measures against the protesters and the occupiers of the building. Members of the NCC and the Jalalabat RCC held a number of separate meetings with representatives of the police and the demonstrators. Both sides agreed to participate in negotiations. Those were to be facilitated by NCC chairwoman and FTI director Raya Kadyrova and another NCC member, Aziza Abdirasulova, a Human Rights activist. The Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs personally chose the group of five state representatives that would participate in the negotiations. It was agreed at the very beginning that the political demands of the opposition, namely the resignation of President Akayev, would not be discussed. Instead, the sole aim of the negotiations was to ensure that violence would not break out in Jalalabat. After a few hours of heated discussion, an agreement was signed stipulating the terms of the demonstrations and that neither side would use weapons or hostages or any kind of violence in the conflict. The administration building remained occupied for almost two weeks after the agreement was reached, but no violence broke out, even though large stocks of weapons were held by both sides.

In another particularly difficult case, it was an RCC member from the law enforcement sector that managed to peacefully resolve a tense conflict situation. On 6 March 2005, protesters angry at what they considered falsified election results had captured the district administration building of Uzgen, in the South of Kyrgyzstan. One of the options considered for clearing

the building was to send in armed Special Forces units. Ravshan Abdukirimov, Deputy Head of the Regional Police Department and active RCC coordinator, opened negotiations between leaders of the protesters, influential elders, local authorities, the police and National Security Service. As a result of his intervention and mediation efforts, the building was emptied by the protesters on 11 March 2005 without any violence and the situation in Uzgen stabilized.

More success: the Revolution happened – and hardly a shot was fired

In the opinion of both organizers and participants, the project for Cooperation among Civil Society, Law Enforcement Agencies, and Other Bodies of State Authority played an important role in ensuring that so little armed violence was used during the March Revolution, especially as weapons were held by all sides⁶⁷. High level officials in the Ministry of Internal Affairs had taken part in a number of the trainings and proved influential in the decisions made not to use any weapons in response to public protests. Civil society representatives had on their part realized the difficulties faced by law enforcement officers, who often found themselves in a precarious position. Since the beginning of 2005, they had been increasingly called in to act as mediators in localized conflicts, without the support of conspicuously absent state administrators. In an unexpected turn of the project, on several occasions civil society and human rights activists took responsibility for protecting police officers. As one of the meetings of the NCC and RCCs concluded in April 2005, among the achievements of the project was the fact that 'sincere friendly relationships between the police and human rights activists were established and that they assisted each other during crisis situations'⁶⁸. After the revolution, one of the new adjusted objectives of the project would be to improve the public image of

67 Interviews of different stakeholders in project implementation held during program evaluation in spring and summer 2005 by the external consultant Mladen Majetic, Report finalized on 11 December 2005; interview with Anara Egynaliev, FTI Project Manager, November 2007.

68 Minutes of the joint meeting of members of the National Coordination Council and Regional Coordination Councils, city of Bishkek, 21 April 2005.



Demonstrations in Aksy before elections, February 2005

law enforcement agencies and restore trust of the general population into them.

Post-revolution fears

While the ousting of Akayev had been greeted with excitement and high hopes, concerns developed afterwards about chaos and instability resulting from a perceived power vacuum and about whether the new government represented a true break with the past. The nature of the demonstrations and public protests held after March 2005 changed significantly, with less easily identifiable leaders, vaguer demands and increasing concerns about the manipulation of the population by criminal groups. In this context, the initiators of the project decided to expand its reach by developing a new infrastructure for the prevention of violence in Kyrgyzstan: the Early Warning for Violence Prevention project (EWVP), which started in June 2005, just before the Presidential Elections to be held in July. While

monitoring had been a part of the NCC and RCC work since January 2005, the Early Warning component was designed to focus exclusively on the monitoring of public protests and conflict situations all over the territory of Kyrgyzstan, and included systematic analysis and elaboration of specific targeted recommendations, to be distributed among all interested parties. The second component, Early Intervention, was to be implemented mostly through the RCCs and NCC, and the decision was taken to establish four additional RCCs in the North of Kyrgyzstan, to replicate the success of their Southern counterparts.

Conclusion

It is very important to underline that the project remained neutral throughout all the events that took place. Its goal was not to impact on any of the processes that led to or followed the Revolution, but to ensure that rights would be respected and that violence would not be used.

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There were numerous difficulties and challenges during project implementation. In addition to logistical issues, such as difficult transport and communication in mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan, other more substantial issues had to be dealt with. Overcoming distrust and establishing genuine and lasting cooperation took time and a great deal of effort on the part of the Kyrgyz facilitators and Croatian trainers. The training sessions turned out to be particularly successful due to the very concrete angle adopted by the trainers, who extensively used their own experience in the former Yugoslavia as part of their modules. One of the main challenges faced by the project was to develop its benefits beyond the representatives taking part in the activities. Going beyond personality and reaching the broader institutions and societal structures was not easy and often did not go as far as the objectives had outlined. However, it appeared over time that many project participants had effectively promoted the rationale of the project to their colleagues, and in some cases taken the initiative in developing trainings in their own institutions⁶⁹. Though media representatives were involved in project activities, their presence often appeared as a dilemma for the organizers, as some participants preferred to keep their participation in the project confidential, at least for some time. At the same

time, it was often mentioned that more effort should be put in public relations and in highlighting the benefits of the project to the broader population.

One of the main achievements of the project is that the structures it established still exist today. The EWVP program, born out of the project for “*Cooperation among Civil Society, Law Enforcement Agencies, and Other Bodies of State Authority to Realize Citizens’ Constitutional Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly*”, was further developed and will start its Phase III in early 2008. NCC and RCCs continue to function and will be the object of a specific program aimed at consolidating and enhancing their capacity, and attempts are being made to replicate the experience in other Central Asian countries. The relationships and communication channels established during the project still help former participants in their work today and in their efforts at peacefully resolving conflict situations. Also, many civil society participants say the project helped them to become more confident and aware of their capabilities and responsibilities, and that today they have a feeling that they are able to play a meaningful role with respect to security, stability and justice in Kyrgyzstan.

69 Such as Ravshan Abdukarimov within the police and MIA structures.