

The Development of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

An Analysis of the National and International Context

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Abstract In the past two decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that post – communist civil society is weak and structurally deficient and is characterised by low levels of social trust, voluntary organisational membership, and public participation. This article intends to challenge this academic consensus by providing an in-depth analysis of civil society development in Kyrgyzstan, a country, whose non-profit sector has been described as the most vibrant and plentiful of the Central Asian region. To this scope, the article analyses the ways and extent to which the national and international environments have influenced the development trajectory of Kyrgyz civil society. Special emphasis is placed on the specific forms and manifestations of civic engagement characterising the non-profit sector of the selected country and on the strategies it has implemented to overcome its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The paper sheds new light on factors and features that have contributed to the strengths of Kyrgyz civil society and which can be used to increase our understanding of civil society developments in other transition countries.

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1 Introduction

In the past two decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that civil society is structurally deficient in post-communist countries (Ekiert, Foa 2011, 1) and is characterised by low levels of social trust, voluntary organisational membership, and public participation (Howard 2003, 1). This phenomenon has been explained as the result of the Soviet institutional and individual associational legacy: i.e., norms, regulations, attitudes, and behaviours inherited from the Soviet period, which still

undermine social capital and civic mobilisation in the post-Soviet era. As a matter of fact, civil society remained a very limited phenomenon in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party “attempted to supplant the very need for independent social activities with a dense institutional web of groups and organizations”, which ranged from trade unions, cultural associations, and youth, women and workers groups to less-politicised sports and book lovers’ clubs (Howard 2003, 23). The engagement in these groups was generally mandatory, coerced and/or instrumental since, by joining these organisations, people could improve their career prospects, receive special benefits and enjoy privileged access to otherwise scarce resources (26-7). At the same time, through the establishment of enforcement agencies and a system of denunciations, the Soviet system contributed in atomising the individual and undermining her trust in society (28-9) with enormous repercussions for contemporary and future development of the non-profit sector in the entire post-Soviet region. Yet, is it accurate to assume that all post-Soviet countries share a uniformly weak and ineffective third sector? And, if not, how can the strengths of post-Soviet civil society be explained? This study intends to challenge the academic consensus around the ‘weakness of post-communist civil society’ (Howard 2003) by providing an in-depth analysis of civil society development in Kyrgyzstan, a country, whose non-profit sector has been described as the most vibrant and plentiful of Central Asia (Liebert, Condrey, Goncharov 2013, 353).

The geographic isolation from consolidated democracies, the absence of previous democratic experiences and low level of economic development make of Kyrgyzstan a deviant case for theories of democratisation. Remarkably, the development of Kyrgyz civil society was boosted especially by foreign donors who, since the 1990s, have invested millions of dollars in promoting democratisation in the region through the seeding of civil society. The action of the international community was mainly grounded in what Mandel defines the ‘civil society orthodoxy’ based on which ‘NGOs = civil society = democracy’ (Mandel 2002): i.e., democracy was equated to civil society and civil society was equated to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). More precisely, foreign donors sought to foster democracy in Central Asia by using a Western-style civil society as

ready-made, compulsory blueprint for [democratic] reform to be implemented in ‘oriental’ society in the span of one generation, (Roy 2005, 1005)

and NGOs as the building blocks of civil society itself (Mandel 2002, 283).

In Kyrgyzstan, the initial liberal orientation of President Aksar Akayev contributed in ensuring the country a very generous financial support on behalf of the international community. As a result, the number of Non-

Commercial Organisations (NCOs) proliferated dramatically.¹ Notably, in the mid-1990s,

the vibrant civil society that emerged earned the country the tag of Central Asia's 'island of democracy'. (Dar, Firdous 2015, 224)

In the 2000s, Kyrgyz civil society went through a very turbulent phase, playing a major role in the overthrow of President Akayev during the Tulip Revolution in 2005,² and President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010³ and in consolidating its position in the public sphere. Since 2010, Kyrgyz civil society has operated in a conducive environment which has allowed NCOs to express criticism on the government and its legislation. Nowadays, there are 14,880 registered Non-Commercial Organisations in the country (ICNL 2017),⁴ and civil society representatives are regularly included in public consultation processes. Worthy of note, in 2014, the Law on Public Advisory Councils of the State Bodies was introduced, to establish citizen advisory bodies in all government agencies. Remarkably, the public advisory councils are explicitly aimed at strengthening the involvement of civil society representatives in decision-making processes concerning the formation and implementation of public policy through the monitoring of the activities of public authorities.

This paper explores the development trajectory that Kyrgyz civil society has undergone since the collapse of the Soviet Union by scrutinising the national and international political context in which the third sector of the country could flourish. To this scope, the three following questions are

1 In Kyrgyzstan, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are registered as Non-Commercial Organisations (NCOs). In the present paper, the two terms NGOs and NCOs will be used interchangeably.

2 The First Revolution (also known as Kyrgyz Revolution) began after the parliamentary elections of February 27 and March 13 2005, as a response to reported electoral inconsistencies and violations. The protest goes back to the overall decrease of popularity faced by President Akayev due to allegations of increasing corruption affecting his government and family. The Revolution ended with the Akayev's resignation and the conduction of new presidential election that brought Bakiyev into power on July 10 of the same year.

3 The Second Revolution should be interpreted as a response to the massive increase of utility prices registered in the winter 2009-10. Also in this case, the protest goes back to a decrease of popularity faced by President Bakiyev due to the allegations of corruption and nepotism affecting his administration. The unrest began with the first rallies in the city of Naryn on March 10 2010, where demonstrators called on the government to withdraw its decision on price increase and privatization of energy companies. It rapidly spread to Bishkek, Talas, Issyk-Kul and Jalal-Abad regions, bringing to the ousting of Bakiyev. In June, clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks broke out in the south of the country during which over 100,000 ethnic Uzbeks fled across the border to Uzbekistan. The revolution led to the consolidation of a new mixed presidential-parliamentary system under the interim government of Roza Otunbayeva.

4 <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/kyrgyz.html> (2017-11-20).

investigated throughout the paper. Firstly, to what extent and how have national and international environments influenced specific forms and manifestations of post-Soviet civil society in Kyrgyzstan? Secondly, where lay the strengths of these forms and manifestations of civic engagement that have contributed to the development of the strongest third sector in Central Asia? And, thirdly, which challenges and vulnerabilities have characterised post-Soviet Kyrgyz civil society and which strategies have been implemented to overcome these weaknesses? In order to better capture the contribution of international and national actors to the development of the sector, the analysis takes into account four ideal-types of civil society – neo-liberal, communal, state-led and global – as identified by Babajanian et al. (2005) in their study on civil society development in Central Asia (and the Caucasus). Although the focus of the paper is on the impact of political institutions in framing the space that exists for civil society, it does not deny that civil society itself is a political agent shaping its context. For instance, as noted by Glasius, Lewis, Seckinelgin (2004) in this regard,

while civil society is constituted within a particular political discourse, it also in return influences the ways this discoursed is transformed. (4)

Therefore, while identifying the different types of civil society that were promoted by the political context in Kyrgyzstan, the article does not overlook how civil society itself has affected the environment in which it has operated.

This paper is based on the examination of secondary sources concerning the development of Kyrgyz civil society and a review of the legislative framework regulating the activities of the non-profit sector in the country. It proceeds as follows: section two familiarises the reader with the analytical framework selected for this study; i.e., the civil society typology suggested by Babajanian et al. (2005). Next, we then proceed with the analysis of civil society developments in Kyrgyzstan by investigating which types of civil society have been supported by the state, on the one hand, and the international donor community, on the other. Grounded in a critical reading of Giffen, Earle, Buxton (2005) and Alymkulova et al. (2006) and going beyond their periodisation, this paper contributes to the identification of four stages of development of civil society in Kyrgyzstan. More specifically, the article describes a first phase (1991-1996), seeing the establishment of the post-Soviet Kyrgyz non-profit sector, through the seeding of a Western-style civil society equated to NGOs; a second phase (1997-2004), that registered quantitative and qualitative changes linked to the introduction of a community-based approach; and a third phase (since 2005) characterised by a further consolidation of the sector and its active involvement in the reform process of the country. The last part of this section is then centred on a new phase of development starting in 2010, which has seen a more structured participation of civil society in the

policy-making process, together with a greater engagement of the Kyrgyz government in improving the financial environment of the non-profit sector. Section four sums up the main findings of the paper by highlighting the contribution of the national and international political environment to the development of post-Soviet Kyrgyz civil society. The final section explores the broader implications of these findings for civil society developments in Central Asia and, more in general, in the post-Soviet region.

2 Civil Society: in Search of Definition(s)

The term 'civil society' is very difficult to define and its meaning remains vague and contested. The concept has been employed in different theoretical, practical, and historical contexts, so that contemporary attempts to use this term are usually more obfuscating than illuminating (Jensen 2006, 39). The idea of civil society goes back to the Enlightenment and the values of 18th century Western Europe modernity, where a civilised and commercial society was created as the result of the rise of a capitalist economy and the emergence of a modern bureaucratic state (see, for instance, Keane 1988 and Parekh 2004). The members (men at least) of such a society were given the rights to vote and serve in public office. Their participation in public affairs was no longer inherited or imposed by birth, but rather voluntary and institutionalised (Babajanian et al. 2005, 211). Civil society became a counterpart to the state and a market and, more precisely, a

buffer zone, strong enough to keep both state and market in check, thereby preventing each from becoming too powerful and dominating. (Anheier 2005, 57)

The concept of civil society was reinvented in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1980s (Glasius, Lewis, Seckinelgin 2004, 3), when it was linked to

the empowerment of dissident opposition movements who launched a liberal political project to terminate their region's socialist/communist experiment. (Babajanian et al. 2005, 211)

In this framework, civil society was defined in a rather neo-liberal fashion and attributed a central role in the process of democratic consolidation by

stabilizing expectations, bringing actors closer to the political process, reducing the burdens of governance and checking potential abuses of power. (Diamond, Plattner 1996, xxxi)

This neo-liberal form of civil society was mainly composed of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that were believed to

have the potential to further encourage the rolling back of the state and contribute to the liberalization of social service provision. (Babajanian et al. 2005, 211-12)

During the 1990s, these NGOs became the main target of the financial and technical support on behalf of Western donors, and addressed a wide range of issues, such as human rights promotion, environmental protection, education, microeconomic development and women's leadership (211-12).

Besides the neo-liberal interpretation, Babajanian et al. (2005) refer to a communal type of civil society, which is relevant for the Central Asian region. This second version is the product of the expansion of the civil society debate to non-Western contexts in the mid-late 1990s and, in particular, of the attempt on behalf of scholars from the Islamic world to re-conceptualise this term (Babajanian et al. 2005, 212). Communal civil society can be located in

families, communities, friendship networks, solidaristic workplace ties, voluntarism, spontaneous groups and movements. (Dekker, van den Broek 1998, 13)

It is bound by a set territory and focussed on local community, of which it seeks to maintain stability and security. This version of civil society tends to be conservative, patriarchal and consensus-oriented: the expression of group solidarity prevails on the assertion of the individual's will and shared values and ideas on innovative and divisive ones (Babajanian et al. 2005).

The third version of civil society – the state-led one – is well exemplified by the formal public organisations and associations typical of the Soviet period that, while performing civil society functions, were controlled by the state and included in its political structure (Babajanian 2005). In particular, as noted by Frolic (1994), this type of civil society is

created by the state, principally to help it govern, but also to co-opt and socialize potentially politically active elements of the population. (9)

State-led public organisations may help disseminating information, advocating and representing the interests of their beneficiaries, all that while under the watchful eye of state appointed representatives (Babajanian et al. 2005, 214). This version of civil society is not a counterpart of the state, but part of it, by helping the state in organising the economy and society and acting as its powerful ally in separating individuals from society (Frolic 1994, 10). Examples of these organisations include Women's Federation, the Trade

Unions, Youth Leagues and Writers' Associations, which in the Soviet Union served as transmission belts for government policies (9), being a

crucial communications channel between a state organ and the organisations' members, thereby helping the state to get across ideological points or specific policies. (White 1993, 79)

Finally, the global version of civil society can be defined as the

realm of non-coercive collective action around shared interests and values that operates beyond the boundaries of nation states. (Anheier, Helmut 2005, v)

It can be conceived as a

thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks, pyramids and hub-and-spoke clusters of socio-economic institutions and actors who organize themselves across borders. (Keane 2003, 2-8)

Examples of this ideal type of civil society include transnational movements and citizens' networks engaged with global issues, such as the implementation of international treaties, the fight against HIV/AIDS and climate change (Babajanian et al. 2005, 214) that advocate for the causes, not only in front of the state, but also the international and intergovernmental institutions.

In the next section, the typology presented above is used to examine the development that Kyrgyz civil society has undergone since the independence of the country by looking at the type(s) of civil society that were promoted by the national and international context.

3 Civil Society Developments in Kyrgyzstan

3.1 The Establishment of Civil Society (1991-1996)

In 1991, Kyrgyzstan gained independence without political struggles and mass mobilisations, and in the early 1990s

the majority of the people could not understand the reasons for the collapse [of the USSR and] sincerely trusted in the re-unification of the former Soviet Union in the near future. (Alymkulova et al. 2006, 6)

Kyrgyz citizens, who had been extraneous to the momentous political changes affecting the country, were consequently not prepared for and committed to an active engagement in political, social, and economic reforms (6).

At the beginning of his mandate, the first President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Akayev, recognised the importance of a lively civil society for building a democratic state and fostering economic liberalisation. In fact, the development of a democratic and pluralistic society was stated as one of the main objectives in the preamble of the first Kyrgyz Constitution adopted in 1993 (Jailobaeva 2011, 11). At the same time, the openness towards the non-profit sectors also represented a viable strategy against the increasing mass impoverishment that the Kyrgyz population was facing. Indeed, the development of a neo-liberal model of civil society made up of service organisations was seen by Akayev's government as a possible solution for addressing urgent and acute socio-economic problems, which were caused by events, such as the lay-off at most of the state-owned plants and factories, the reductions of social subsidies, the stagnation in the agricultural sector and the growing inflation (Alymkulova et al. 2006, 25).

The liberal orientation of President Akayev made Kyrgyzstan the main Central Asian target of Western support in the field of political reform, and millions of dollars were invested in the country in seeding a Western-style civil society equated to NGOs. At that time, the international community focussed its efforts on strengthening a neo-liberal version of civil society, which was meant to play a central role in checking and balancing the power of the government and holding those in power accountable. In this context, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were conceived as a useful instrument to avoid possible authoritarian backlashes of former communist leaders and bureaucrats still in power (Shishkaraeva et al. 2006, 6). The US Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank, the European Commission (EC), and the United Nations with the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) were among the most active donors (11). In this first phase, international organisations, such as the Kyrgyz American Human Rights Committee, Counterpart Consortium, INTRAC, and Soros Foundation, began being active in Kyrgyzstan (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 112), where they specialised in the provision of capacity-building activities for NGOs in the fields of institutional and organisational management. Altogether, donor agencies tended to financially support civil society organisations that met Western values, views, and expectations and those which had a global orientation and were involved in fields, such as the protection of human rights, the promotion of women's initiatives and environmental protection (112). The availability of aid for such groups was a catalyst for similar organisations to emerge and, as a result of the generosity of the international community, a neo-liberal form of civil society, characterised by transnational linkages and a strong orientation toward global issues, was rapidly developed. The Diamond Association, Ecolog club, BIOM Ecological Movement, Youth Environmental Movement, the Forum of Women's Non-Governmental Organisations of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Kyrgyz-American

Human Rights Bureau, the Peace Research Centre of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Women's Congress can be cited as representative organisations characterising the first stage of the NGO development (Alymkulova et al. 2006, 26). At the same time, Soviet organisations, such as the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Society, veterans' associations and children's funds continued to be active in their new NGO capacity (25). It is noteworthy that most of the leaders and representatives of the new NCOs had previously been engaged in Soviet state-funded and -controlled public associations and had succeeded in quickly switching into NGO activities (25).

The rapid growth of the third-sector, linked to the mushrooming of donor-funded non-commercial organisations (DONGOs) (see Table 1), was concurrently supported by the liberal legislation in place. Nonetheless, in this first phase, both Kyrgyz government and citizens looked at the development of a neo-liberal civil society characterised by global aspirations with certain scepticism. Soon it became clear that Kyrgyz NGOs were extremely dependent on the international donor community, not only financially, but also ideologically. In most cases, these DONGOs lacked of long-term mission and strategy and set up their agenda based on the availability of foreign aid, rather than on their objectives (ACSSC 2006, 25). The phenomenon was aggravated by the fact that these organisations were concentrated in urban centres and active in (global) fields, which were not relevant for regular population that at that time was affected by apparent mass impoverishment. In this first phase, NGOs were rather

short-lived, at the mercy of a host of exogenous forces, including skills in writing proposals and the finesse of their consulting firms or organization headquarters in Brussels, Geneva, or inside the Washington belt area. (Mandel 2000, 285)

The DONGOs struggled constantly for their own survival and most of them were created and active only for the duration of one project. Their sustainability was threatened by both their inexperience in strategic and financial management (ACSSC 2006, 25), and a competitive, rather than a collaborative, environment, in which they operated.

Table 1. Number of Non-Commercial Organisations registered in the country (1993-1996)

Regions	1993	1994	1995	1996
Bishkek	298	365	475	586
Chui	55	70	95	238
Issuk-Kul	36	49	56	118
Naryn	20	24	29	63
Talas	27	28	35	86
Jala-Abad	60	60	82	168
Osh	99	110	139	251
Batken	16	17	23	40
Kyrgyz Republic	611	731	934	1,550

Source: UN in the Kyrgyz Republic, Overall Country Assessment 2003 (Alymkulova et al. 2006, 32-3)

Confronted with the limitations of the previous strategy based on the civil society orthodoxy, in the late 1990s, the international community was forced to recognise that

democracy promotion activities do not occur within an institutional cultural vacuum but are characterised by two-way interactions between international and local actors (Adamson 2002, 180)

with both these actors shaping the outcomes of development assistance programmes. Thus, a new strategy was introduced by Western donors and was focussed on community development by using a participatory approach. The strategy was more attentive to the social context in which the programmes were implemented, and to traditional forms of civic engagement, already present in the country. This new community-based approach and its implication for the development of the Kyrgyz NGO sector will be presented in the next section.

3.2 Civil Society Development Through a Community-Based Approach (1997-2002)

In the late 1990s, donor agencies understood the need of (re-)connecting post-Soviet Kyrgyz civil society with the national and local context in which it operated. As a matter of fact, back then Kyrgyz civil society organisations either had lost touch with their target groups or had never established a full understanding of their needs (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 129). Therefore, in the second phase of civil society development, international donors sought to reduce the existing gap between the non-profit sector and Kyrgyz citizens by ameliorating the access of the former to local communities

and by improving its contribution to local development in both urban and rural areas. These two objectives should be contextualised in a broader paradigm shift characterising international development cooperation that was linked to the establishment of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Earle 2005, 251). In fact, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, poverty and inequality had affected Central Asian countries more intensively than expected, and Western countries were concerned with the potential negative consequences in the region, such as social unrest and the radicalisation of Islam.

The new strategy adopted by international donor agencies was focussed on community development and promoted a communal version of civil society. More precisely, through a participatory and community-driven approach, they sought to involve

all groups of the population in decision making processes about the nature, quality and amount of development services people wish to receive. (ACSSC 2006, 37)

A central role was given to community-based organisations and initiative groups that were seen as able to mediate “between donors and villagers, helping to mobilise their input” (Earle 2005, 251), with the international community facilitating the inclusion of pre-Soviet autochthonous forms of civil society (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 90). These community-based groups and initiatives were very often led by the *aksakals* (literally ‘white beard’): male members of the community, who had been traditional leaders of villages and small towns before the Soviet era and were still acting as advisors or judges in local disputes. Remarkably, their engagement in the implementation of donor-funded initiatives served as a source of legitimisation for the projects and helped in stimulating the participation and financial support on behalf of the other members of the community (Earle 2005, 251). Nonetheless, the donors’ engagement with more traditional manifestations of civil society also had a harmful impact. Indeed, in many cases, the cooperation with the *aksakals* conferred greater legitimacy to patriarchal, hierarchical, and undemocratic practices, since local elders were more prone to promote the interests of their families, rather than those of their communities (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 90). In addition, the participation of the *aksakals* in community-based projects had a detrimental effect on gender equality, since many women felt discouraged in voicing their opinions in front of the authority of the ‘white beard’ men (Earle 2005, 254-5).

In order to strengthen local civil society and foster the mobilisation of local communities, in this second phase of civil society development a

process of decentralisation of the NGO sector was initiated.⁵ This process was funded by USAID and implemented by the Counterpart Consortium which, since the beginning of the 2000s, established a dispersed network of over thirty Civil Society Support Centres (CSSCs) in Central Asia also in partnership with indigenous NGOs (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 124). It is noteworthy that more experienced NGOs began working as intermediary between foreign donors and local organisations, providing the latter with information, capacity-building activities and small tenders (124). Apart from promoting the professionalisation of NGOs also in rural and peripheral areas of the country, the CSSCs contributed to establish the first consultations between the government and the non-governmental sector. At the beginning of the 2000s, CSSCs organised the first meetings, where Non-Commercial Organisations lobbied together against the government over human rights and environmental issues as well as other legislative activities (ACSSC 2006, 33). Moreover, fora and platforms were created in Kyrgyzstan, such as the Association of NGOs and the Coalition of NGOs, which allowed public groups to come together to

discuss critical issues and articulate opinions and criticism of government policy. (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 128)

Nonetheless, also in this second phase of civil society development, the largest problems faced by the sector were related to its organisational and financial sustainability. Overall, Kyrgyz Non-Governmental Organisations lacked a large membership and stable constituencies and were run by strong personalities, who provided the organisation with short-term effectiveness, but were not able to ensure its continuity beyond their leadership (USAID 2001, 96). At the same time, the tax legislation applying to the NGO sector was not conducive for its growth, since the commercial activities performed by Non-Commercial Organisations did not have any fiscal advantages and were taxed at the same level as business activities. Moreover, due to the economic hardship affecting the country, only very limited local resources were available to NCOs, which were forced to rely almost entirely on the support of the international donor community.

5 In 1999, about half of the public associations registered in the Kyrgyz Republic were stationed in the capital Bishkek.

Table 2. Number of Non-Commercial Organisations registered in the country (1997-2002)

Regions	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Bishkek	586	821	1,036	1,280	1,065	2,341
Chui	287	369	422	519	798	992
Issuk-Kul	146	199	299	365	454	660
Naryn	78	106	125	183	264	357
Talas	106	164	230	269	359	429
Jala-Abad	212	289	562	672	844	1,113
Osh	312	461	741	878	1,109	1,407
Batken	48	98	158	178	280	331
Kyrgyz Republic	2,010	2,722	3,817	4,669	6,058	7,630

Source: UN in the Kyrgyz Republic, Overall Country Assessment 2003 (Alymkulova et al. 2006, 32-3)

As shown by Table 2, the second phase of development of the Kyrgyz non-profit sector was characterised not only by a qualitative, but also by a quantitative growth. This growth was also sustained by Akayev's government, which became increasingly supportive of organisations working in the field of social services provision. As already mentioned in this paper, service associations were regarded as strategic partners in addressing urgent social and economic problems affecting the country, for which the Kyrgyz state did not have the necessary resources. Remarkably, the government's support did not apply in the case of politically engaged NGOs, whose involvement in the political arena was intensified by the flawed parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000 (USAID 2003, 98). Despite the approval of a new NGO Law in 1999, meant to support the further development of the sector, politically engaged NGOs were subject of harassment on behalf of government structures and encountered impediments in the registration and re-registration processes foreseen by the law (UNSAID 2001, 97). This is emblematic of the government's inclination towards a state-led model of civil society focussed on the provision of social services. As a matter of fact, it was at this stage that a politically-driven fragmentation of the sector emerged, based on which organisations were divided into government-controlled or government-sympathetic versus independent ones.

The politicisation of the sector continued, especially after the tragic killing of demonstrators in the southern oblast of Jalal-Abad in early 2002 that led to

large-scale protests at the community level and the national mobilization of civil society groups on issues such as press freedom and the right to demonstrate. (Giffen, Earle, Buxton 2005, 155)

In the following years, civil society organisations held important campaigns against corruption and dynasty-building in the regime, as well as against the referendum proposals introduced by President Akayev to placate his political opponents (155). This was the beginning of a new phase of civil society development, when Non-Commercial Organisations became increasingly involved in advocacy activities and established new forms of cooperation with the government, especially at the local level, as shown in the next section.

3.3 Consolidation of the Kyrgyz Non-profit Sector (2003-2010)

The third phase of civil society development registered an active involvement of Non-Governmental Organisations in promoting the reform process in the Kyrgyz Republic, especially through the intensification of their advocacy activities (USAID 2004, 110). This new focus needs to be contextualised in a shift of priorities characterising bilateral and multilateral development institutions that was linked to the approval of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness of 2005. According to the Declaration, development aid should be aimed at

support[ing] partner country efforts to strengthen governance and improve development performance [and international assistance should] be harmonised within the growth and poverty reduction agendas of partner countries.⁶

Whence it followed that, since the mid-2000s, international agencies active in Kyrgyzstan have withdrawn funding for NGOs' capacity building and have concentrated their efforts on supporting Kyrgyz civil society organisations advocating changes and reforms in state policies (USAID 2004, 110).

The engagement of NCOs in advocacy activities included a variety of causes, as voters' education campaigns and monitoring of local elections, constitutional reforms of the country and related information campaigns for citizens, participation in opposition mass meetings, active lobbying for citizens' rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of conscience (USAID 2009, 135). All these activities were conducted especially with the assistance of USAID. An important contribution was offered by CSOs in lobbying for the bill "Amendments and Addition to the Tax Code of the Kyrgyz Republic" that entered into force in 2003 and made humanitarian aid and grants tax-exempt. This campaign succeeded in bringing together government and non-governmental actors through the creation of a task

⁶ <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf> (2016-03-26).

force consisting of representatives of the parliament and the NGO sector, as well as through the organisation of roundtables and seminars throughout the country involving NGOs, mass media, and state institutions. Worthy of note, the advocacy activities increased especially after the regime change in 2005, when

the organizations found themselves with an unprecedented opportunity to influence the new government's priorities and implement their own agendas in a newly open environment. (USAID 2006, 119)

Nonetheless, by the end of the 2000s, important changes affected the regulatory framework, in which Kyrgyz organisations operated, with significant repercussions also on their ability to engage in advocacy activities. More specifically, the government control of the sector became more systematised and several measures were initiated to limit NGOs and their influence on public opinions (USAID 2007, 135-6). In 2007, a decree was approved to limit the right to assemble and a new draft of the Tax Code was presented. As a matter of fact, this new draft equalised the taxation of the non-profit sector to the for-profit one and imposed financial restrictions for NGOs "Pursuing political objectives" (136). In 2008, amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations were adopted, which substantially restricted the operation of faith-based organisations. Similarly, in 2009, some amendments to the Law on Non-Commercial Organisations were introduced, which would have given state bodies the right to

revise NGOs' internal documents, participate in all NGO events, ban NGO financing by international NGOs and stop NGOs' activity or even liquidate an organization at their discretion. (USAID 2010, 130)

Although the amendments were not approved, they testify the government's attempt to increase its control on the non-profit sector and represent a clear sign of the deterioration of its relation with politically engaged NGOs at the national level.

At the same time, the third phase of civil society development registered the establishment of new forms of cooperation between local government and NGOs delivering social services. To be more precise, service NCOs began cooperating regularly with local officials in projects concerning training, budget hearings and research, and local governments' funds were allocated by the Ministry of Finance to local grassroots organisations for the conduction of small social projects (USAID 2010, 130). This mechanism of state funding for civil society organisations was expanded in 2008 with the introduction of the Law on Social Services Contracting. As emerges from Table 3, in the first years, the government's support in this field was extremely limited. This was due to several factors, such as

state entities' lack of understanding of the law, weak by-laws and normative documents regulating the implementation of the social procurement system and a lack of budget appropriations on behalf of the ministries (USAID 2010, 130). In addition, the budget available was scarce, also due to the difficult economic situation affecting the country. The situation was further aggravated by the April Revolution of 2010 causing the closure of the borders with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and the consequent export suspension with these countries (USAID 2011, 112).

Table 3 – State budget available for social procurements under the Law on Social Services Contracting for the period 2009-2010

Year	Amount in KGS	Amount in \$
2009	KGS 5 million	\$ 111,100
2010	KGS 5 million	\$ 111,100

Source: Author's own compilation according to USAID 2013

In the third phase of civil society development, financial vulnerability remained the most acute and serious issue affecting the Kyrgyz non-profit sector. International funding continued to be the main source of financing for NCOs, although the most important donor agencies, like USAID, the DFID and the EC, decreased their financial commitment (USAID 2010, 132). While small and weak organisations were forced to close down, the remaining organisations had to increase their professionalisation to meet the requirements of the international donor community and to be able to compete in an environment characterised by paucity of available funding (Jailobaeva 2011, 151). It is noteworthy that the increase of the professionalisation and institutional capacity of NGOs represented also a *conditio sine qua non* to enhance their legitimacy and to be recognised as partner by the state in the implementation of its development agenda.

In addition, many non-commercial organisations began focussing on social issues and specialised in the provision of social services, especially for women, children, elderly, and other marginalised groups, and in the field of environment and public infrastructures (Jailobaeva 2011, 51). NGOs developed marketing, pricing and service delivery skills and became engaged in fee-for-service activities, including paid trainings and consultations. This allowed them to increase membership numbers, as a result of members' high satisfaction with the services offered (USAID 2008, 137), to establish good relations with local businesses and to slightly raise the share of philanthropy and sponsorship in their budgets (USAID 2009, 138). The shift in the priorities of donor agencies and the scarcity of aid had a negative impact on the work of the Civil Society Support Centres that were specialised in providing NGOs with capacity-building and consultancy. Indeed, since less funds were available, less NCOs were now interested

in investing resources in the services offered by the CSSCs (Jailobaeva 2011, 155). At the same time, a new positive trend emerged with the help of international donors, which assisted NGOs in creating networks and coalitions to better coordinate their activities and advocacy actions. The Union of Civic Organisations and the Alliance for Women's Legislative Initiatives are just a few representative examples of this new trend.

The process of consolidation of the non-profit sector has continued also after the Revolution of 2010, which created more space for structured participation of civil society in the policy-making process. At the same time, as shown in the next section, new draft laws were introduced to improve the access of Kyrgyz CSOs to national and local resources, which, if approved, will increase the options that non-profit organisations have at their disposal to secure their financial sustainability.

3.4 Kyrgyz Civil Society and Current Trends (since 2010)

The Revolution of 2010 and the subsequent change of power have created a conducive environment for the development of the non-profit sector. The mixed presidential-parliamentary system, introduced in 2010, has allowed NCOs to

freely express criticism on the government and current legislation [and provided them with] relatively good access to the law-making process. (USAID 2013, 109)

Since 2010, CSOs have played an active role in the monitoring and advising of the government also through the involvement in *ad hoc* structures, such as the Committee of Civil Control and the Constitutional Council, as well as the Public Advisory Councils of the State Bodies, introduced by law in 2014. In 2012, a new Law on Peaceful Assembly was adopted, which was promoted by local NCOs, with the aim of strengthening the political rights to organise and participate in peaceful assemblies (USAID 2013, 109). The strength of Kyrgyz civil society is well exemplified by the public debate and mobilisation that took place around the Law on Foreign Agents. More precisely, in 2014, a draft law was registered at the Parliament, which, following the example of the Russian Law on Foreign Agents of 2012, introduced

a wide range of legal barriers impeding the operations of NGOs and their ability to access funding from foreign and international donors.⁷

7 <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/kyrgyz.html> (2017-11-20).

The discussion lasted over two years and eight months, during which civil society actively advocated against the law, by organising public hearings, roundtables, TV and radio debates and by formulating and publishing nine appeals. Both the original and the revised (less restrictive) versions of the law were rejected by the Kyrgyz Parliament in 2016.⁸

Nowadays, the activities of CSOs are still regulated according to the Law on Non-Commercial Organisations of 1999, although slightly improved. The law establishes clear procedures for the registration, operation and internal management of NCOs and includes a wide range of permissible fields of engagement, such as human rights, environment, education, art, media, youth and sports (USAID 2013, 109). Although registering an organisation is simple and can be completed within less than two weeks, the process is still highly centralised and small grassroots organisations from remote areas are forced to visit provincial centres, which makes the procedure costly and time-consuming (USAID 2014, 112). On the contrary, the procedure of de-registration is very complicated and requires an organisation to provide evidence that it has no debt to neither financial nor government institutions (112). This is one of the reasons why data on the number of active organisations in the country are not reliable and a significant gap exists between registered and active CSOs, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Number of registered Non-Commercial Organisations in the country between 2011 and 2014

Year	Number of registered organisations	Number of estimated active organisations
2006	12,173	2,000-2,500
2007	8,000	500
2008	8,000-20,000	n.a.
2009	n.a.	n.a.
2010	7,726	500/600
2011	n.a.	n.a.
2012	11,500	1,500
2013	12,720	4,198

Source: Author's own compilation according to the data made available from USAID 2007, 2010, 2014

Financial vulnerability still poses the main challenge faced by the non-profit sector in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz CSOs are still highly dependent on international donor funding, especially on behalf of USAID, the EC, various United Nations (UN) agencies, the Open Society Foundations, Danish Church Aid, and others. However, in the past years, the international support to civil society in Kyrgyzstan (and, more in general, in Central Asia) has been substantially reduced, due to a shift of geographical priorities.

⁸ Based on the interview conducted with ICNL representative (Bishkek, 9 November 2016).

Just to give one example,

the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) has withdrawn from the region and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) closed its country office in 2012. (USAID 2014, 114)

Nonetheless, although the US support to the country has slightly diminished - from \$ 48.1 million in 2008 to \$ 46.9 million in 2011 and \$ 47.3 million in 2012 - in 2013 USAID has introduced a new five-year-programme with a budget over \$ 8 million that, in line with the objectives of the Declaration of Paris, is focussed on improving the partnership between the public and non-profit sector and, in particular, the implementation of the state system of social procurements (114).

Similarly, the Kyrgyz government has further promoted the development of civil society following a neo-liberal model, by allocating funding to CSOs through the social contracting scheme introduced by the Law on Social Services Contracting of 2008. In 2014, the Ministry of Youth also started to use this mechanism of procurement, joining the Ministry of Social Development (USAID 2015, 125). As shown in Table 5, although in the past years a positive trend was registered in the government funding allocation for CSOs, the budget available for the social procurement mechanism remains very limited and is insufficient to meet the needs of the non-profit sector. This is due to the country's economic hardships as well as the deficiencies characterizing the implementation of this mechanism.

Table 5. State budget available for social procurements under the Law on Social Services Contracting for the period 2011-2014

Year	Amount in KGS	Amount in \$
2011	KGS 12 million	\$ 270,999
2012	KGS 13 million	\$ 276,595
2013	KGS 13.9 million	\$ 281,376
2014	KGS 22.5 million	\$ 409,000

Source: Author's own compilation according to USAID 2013, 2015

In order to improve their financial sustainability, Kyrgyz CSOs have recently sought to diversify their income sources also with the assistance of the international donor community. The practice of collecting membership fees - which is common in many countries - is *de facto* not a viable option in Kyrgyzstan, since most of the members and clients can simply not afford it. At the same time, the financial problems characterising the country have also affected the donations from the business sector, with the largest Kyrgyz charity foundation AUB Charity Fund - which in the past donated about \$ 500,000 annually - shutting down in 2010 (USAID 2011,

112). The lack of business skills and limited access to start-up capital make it very difficult for Kyrgyz organisations to carry out income-generating activities and the high-tax rates applying to commercial activities discourage their further engagement in this field (USAID, 2010, 131). Currently, only a limited number of CSOs are involved in providing for-profit services and products, such as consulting, training, renting of resources, Internet, photocopying, tourism, farming, handicrafts and furniture-making, but the trend is increasing also thanks to the support of international donors.

In the past years, new legislative initiatives concerning the financial situation of non-commercial organisations were drafted and are aimed at overcoming these difficulties by facilitating their access to local and national resources. The first initiative is the draft law On Charitable Organisations, which is focussed on ameliorating the regulatory environment of the non-profit sector through tax incentives for non-commercial organisations.⁹ Based on this draft law, Kyrgyz CSOs can apply for the status as charitable organisations, which will exempt them from the payment of income taxes, sales taxes, and VAT. The organisations that will decide to go through this certification process and agree on annual and independent financial audit will be eligible to conduct tax-free entrepreneurial activities and invest their entire earnings in charitable activities.¹⁰ The second proposal is the draft law On Social Procurement, which is built upon the Law on Social Services Contracting of 2008 and is focussed on improving the procedures for government financial support to CSOs providing social services to the population. On March 16, 2017, the draft law was adopted by the Parliament and now awaits the signature of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.¹¹ Once implemented, both proposals will enable NGOs to diversify the resources at their disposal and to create better conditions to ensure their financial sustainability and, thus, greater independence from the international donor community.

4 Discussion of the Results

This paper offers an historical overview of the development of the non-profit sector in Kyrgyzstan looking at the ways in which the national and international environments have influenced the shape and content of the post-Soviet Kyrgyz non-profit sector. In the article, the contribution of national and international actors is analysed by using the typology suggested by Babajanian et al. (2005), who describe four ideal-types of civil society:

9 <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/kyrgyz.html> (2017-11-20).

10 Based on the interview conducted with ICNL representative (Bishkek, 9 November 2016).

11 <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/kyrgyz.html> (2017-11-20).

neo-liberal, communal, state-led and global. Overall, the article identifies four different phases of development, which civil society has undergone since the independence of the country, and analyses the main strengths and challenges characterising its evolutionary trajectory.

Table 6. Types of civil society promoted during the four phases of development of the Kyrgyz non-profit sector

Phase of Development	National Context	International Context
First phase (1991-1996)	Neo-liberal Focus on social service provision	Neo-liberal/Global Focus on political reform
Second phase (1997-2002)	State-led Focus on social service provision	Communal Focus on political reform
Third phase (2003-2010)	State-led at national level Neo-liberal at local level Focus on social service provision	Neo-liberal Focus on political reform
Fourth phase (2010- onwards)	Neo-liberal Focus on social service provision	Neo-liberal Focus on social service provision

Source: Author's own compilation

As emerged from the previous pages and the summary in Table 6, the establishment of the Kyrgyz non-profit sector is strictly connected to the engagement of the international donor community in the country. In fact, from 1991 to 1996, Western donors invested millions of dollars in seeding a Western style civil society equated to NGOs according to a neo-liberal model. In this first phase, priority was given to initiatives, which were focussed on global issues, such as the protection of human rights, women's rights and the environment. As a result of the resource abundance, a mushrooming of organisations operating in these fields was registered. The rapid growth of the sector was also supported by a conducive national environment: indeed, the government considered a neo-liberal version of civil society made up of service organisations as a precious ally to address urgent socio-economic problems affecting the country. The main challenge faced by the non-profit sector in its first phase was related to its sustainability, since most of the DONGOs were completely dependent on the financial support of the international community and set up their agenda based on the availability of foreign aid, rather than on their own long-term mission.

Aware of the limitation of its previous strategy, in the second phase of civil society development, foreign donors adopted a community-based approach focussed on reducing the gap between Kyrgyz civil society and the national and local context in which it is operated. Through a participatory and community-driven approach, the international community sought to involve local population in the development process by engaging com-

munal and traditional forms of civil society. To this scope, over thirty Civil Society Support Centers were created by USAID in Central Asia, that began working as intermediaries between donor and local organisations, thus contributing to the decentralisation and a professionalisation of the non-profit sector in Kyrgyzstan. The quantitative and qualitative growth of Kyrgyz civil society was supported by the government, which was more inclined to a state-led model of civil society focussed on the provision of social services. Also in this second phase, financial sustainability represented the main challenge affecting CSOs in the country.

An active involvement of NCOs in promoting the reform process of the country characterised the third phase of civil society development, together with an intensification of their advocacy activities, in particular after the regime change of 2005. The politicisation of the sector was driven especially by the changes affecting the financial environment and, more specifically, by the new funding strategy adopted by international agencies, which was focussed on policy reforms. In this third phase, the state's approach to civil society became more diversified, with the government promoting a state-led model of civil society at the national level, and a neo-liberal one at the local level. Although the sector was still highly dependent on international aid, new alternatives to limit its financial vulnerability were made available, such as the system of social procurements, funding civil society organisations engaged in the delivery of social services.

Finally, the Revolution of 2010 has created a conducive environment for civil society and, since then, Kyrgyz NGOs have regularly been involved in monitoring and advising state bodies through *ad hoc* structures, such as the Public Advisory Councils. In this fourth phase of development, the international support has been focussed on improving the partnership between the public and non-profit sector and, especially, the implementation of the state's system of social procurements. A neo-liberal model of civil society has also been supported by the government through the allocation of increasing resources to non-profit organisations delivering social services. The two draft laws On Charitable Organisations and On Social Procurement are now awaiting approval (from the Parliament and the President respectively): if implemented, they can potentially open a new phase of development of the Kyrgyz non-profit sector, characterised by greater financial (and ideological) independence from the international donor community.

5 Implications and Conclusion

To return to the opening questions, this paper offers an in-depth study of civil society development in Kyrgyzstan by focussing on the influence of vertical relations in shaping the forms and manifestations of what can

be considered the strongest third sector in the Central Asian region. On the whole, three conclusions can be drawn from the analysis, which can improve our understanding of the conditions and mechanisms favouring the flourishing of the non-profit sector in Kyrgyzstan, and have important implications also for other Central Asian republics.

Firstly, the findings show that the development of Kyrgyz civil society took place in an overall conducive national and international environment. In fact, state actors recognised already in the 1990s the central contribution CSOs could make in the provision of social services, which they were not able to deliver. It was the liberal legislation in place that allowed the international donor community to freely operate in the country, by stimulating the development of a neo-liberal form of civil society made up of NGOs, which in the next years would specialise in the provision of services, thus becoming a strategic partner of the government. At the same time, Kyrgyz civil society was able to rapidly adapt to the changing financial and opportunity structure, as testified by the new function assumed by CSOs in the second phase of development, when they became intermediaries between foreign donors and local organisations. From the third phase onwards, civil society has significantly contributed in shaping the environment in which it has operated. Examples of this engagement are provided by its lobbying activities for the Amendments and Addition to the Tax Codes of the Kyrgyz Republic and the mobilization taking place against the Law on Foreign Donors. Although the relationship cannot be described as symbiotic (see Glasius, Lewis, Seckinelgin 2002), it is undeniable that a reciprocal influence was exercised between civil society and the political context, at least at the national level.

Secondly, this article points out the need of moving away from an 'either/or' logic, when dealing with civil society developments, by revealing how different forms of civic engagement can (co-)exist and simultaneously be promoted by national and/or international actors. The strength of the Kyrgyz non-profit sector is also the product of the interplay between the diversified, and sometimes even divergent, approaches adopted by the state and the international donor community that in the past twenty-five years, by following different agendas, supported the development of a variety of civil society manifestations.

Finally, the findings shed new lights on how our understanding of civil society dynamics could be improved by the use of a more neutral analytical lens. The notion of civil society clearly has its roots in the Western liberal tradition, which conceives it as a counterpart to the state (and the market). Although the typology suggested by Babajanian et al. (2005) has the merit of diversifying the discourse on civil society, it also shows the limitations of the use of a term originally referring to a specific state-(market-)civil society constellation. As a matter of fact, the focus of both national and international actors on organisations providing social services and the

increased government efforts in financially supporting these organisations are not only a Kyrgyz phenomenon, but affect also other Central Asian republics (see Pierobon 2016). This has important consequences in the region, in terms of the creation of new forms of cooperation and partnership between the government, and the non-profit sector at the national and local level. Therefore, the authors of the paper suggest to replace the notion of 'civil society' with 'civic engagement', which broadly refers to "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concerns",¹² bypassing the state-civil society issue. In addition, the term 'civic engagement' is more suitable to capture the complexity of the realities on the ground, where the different versions of civil society, promoted by the national and international context, interact with and are adapted to local structures and circumstances, giving rise to a variety of autochthonous forms of participation. This aspect has important implications also from a practical viewpoint. For instance, the programmes implemented by international actors in the region are targeted at the neo-liberal form of civil society and mainly addressed to officially registered organisations (i.e. NGOs), thus automatically excluding more informal forms of civic engagement from competition. This approach could be improved by introducing forms of assistance that are not based on the official status of the applicants but on their assets and possible impacts on the ground.

List of Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSSC	Civil Society Support Centre
DFID	Department for International Development
DONGO	Donor-Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
EC	European Commission
ICNL	International Centre for Non-for-Profit Law
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre
KGS	Kyrgyz Som
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NCO	Non-Commercial Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

12 <http://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/civic-engagement.aspx> (2017-09-20).

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