

## DECLARATION OF THE ALMATY CONFERENCE

The conference, held on 28-29 August 2023 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, brought together key civil society representatives and experts to address global existential threats in Central Asia, including climate change, inequality and geopolitical shifts. The conference discussed the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on Central Asia, a region geopolitically located between Russia, China and the West.

### Key findings

- Central Asian countries should be perceived as part of an expanded concept of European security and co-operation. Central Asia is the only region in the world with no access to the sea. Therefore, the prospects for economic development are highly dependent on geopolitical factors such as the policies of China and Russia, as well as on the political and security situation in countries such as Afghanistan.
- The situation of independent civil society is characterized by restrictions and pressures from governments across the region. Recently, even Kyrgyzstan, which has been an island of civil liberties in recent years, has seen a serious backslide towards authoritarianism. At the same time, a strong civil society is a key factor in fighting corruption, strengthening legal security and pursuing an inclusive path to modernization.
- Continuous and targeted support to the activities of civil societies in Central Asia is an important element in strengthening relations between Central Asian societies and the rest of the world.

Recommendations on key issues of civil society activities are contained in the following part of the declaration.

### Central Asia between China, Russia and the West

Russia's war against Ukraine has put Central Asia at the centre of global attention, opening up both challenges and opportunities for the countries of the region. After 11 September 2001 and the West's involvement in Afghanistan, a multipolar regional order emerged, shaped by local elites adapting Western notions of human rights and civil society to their own norms. The invasion of Ukraine has led to an increase in civic activism in some Central Asian countries, notably Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where postcolonial discourses have merged with calls for liberalisation and democratisation. The future impact of the Ukrainian conflict on Central Asia remains uncertain, but Western support for these countries in their relations with Russia could have an impact on the region. International efforts to protect civil society, including media and dialogue with the authorities, are of great significance.

#### Recommendation:

Focus efforts on strengthening horizontal links between Central Asian civil society and international partners, and supporting projects aimed at empowering citizens' political, cultural and socio-economical rights and possibilities.

## **Human rights**

Central Asia faces a growing rift between inclusive governments and entrenched elites, leading to an erosion of democracy. Repressive legislation under the influence of Russia limits the role of civil society. Human rights face serious challenges due to restrictive laws and the excessive influence of security forces. Basic freedoms such as freedom of speech, association and assembly are restricted, and critics are persecuted. The civil rights situation in Kyrgyzstan is worsening, and reforms in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are accompanied by persistent repression. In Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, authoritarianism is deepening. Despite the challenges, supporting regional human rights defenders and fostering co-operation between activists remains vital.

### Recommendation:

It is prudent to make respect for basic human rights and rule of law standards a determinant of substantial economic and political gains.

## **The situation of women**

Recent studies show that the rights of women and girls in Central Asia are threatened by religious fundamentalism, migration, political corruption, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the lack of effective legal means against discrimination. They face obstacles in the political, economic and social spheres, in addition to high levels of violence, poverty, limited access to health and education, and participation in public affairs. To address these challenges, it is necessary to prioritise gender equality, support organisations fighting inequality, allocate resources for policy change, and create a network of experts on regional development and human rights protection. Advocacy should focus on equal housing conditions, acknowledging domestic unpaid work, reducing poverty, fighting discrimination using digital technologies with the involvement of global women and youth leaders. Support for women human rights defenders is vital in the face of new risks and challenges in Central Asia.

### Recommendation:

Direct targeted support to projects aimed at women's empowerment that cannot find funding in the region itself.

## **Ecology and climate change**

Climate change in Central Asia is causing significant environmental and social problems, including shrinking glaciers, diminishing water resources and security threats from "uranium tailings". These changes affect agriculture, migration and people's livelihoods. Regional cooperation and governmental efforts are crucial but require a more rapid implementation. In addition, addressing climate change is interlinked with human rights, gender equality and civic participation, which in Central Asia face constraints such as censorship and repression.

### Recommendation:

Link economic investments to positive changes for sustainable modernisation, ensure unhindered access to environmental information and allocate the necessary resources to ensure environmental security.

## **Human rights in the economic sphere**

Human rights in Central Asian business, especially with regard to foreign investors, are becoming increasingly important. Ensuring compliance with sustainable development standards is crucial, especially in the face of issues such as environmental damage and human rights violations resulting from certain investments. Efforts to circumvent Russia's sanctions through Central Asian states are

problematic, negatively affecting the stability of the region. To address this issue, major players such as the US and the EU should stimulate restraint on trade in sensitive goods with Russia, linking restraint to political and economic benefits, while violations should have consequences.

Recommendation:

Link economic investment to compliance with international standards of labour rights. New approaches should be put in place to reinforce civil society control over the implementation of labour rights.

Ensure funding for projects that help civil society to highlight civil society issues in front of international development banks and geo-economic initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway initiative.

## **Media freedom**

Independent media in Central Asia face constant challenges as governments impose new restrictions. These restrictions have intensified during events such as the COVID pandemic and political crises. While traditional media have long been controlled, non-traditional platforms such as social media and bloggers have proliferated. Governments have responded with new laws, which, however, have often resulted in the suppression of critical voices. Press freedom requires that Central Asian governments respect international standards and constitutional rights to freedom of speech, freedom of opinion expression and access to information. The international community should advocate for the vital role of independent media in ensuring transparency and accountability, and Central Asian citizens should recognise the importance of the media in exposing corruption and inefficiency.

Recommendation:

Provide support for independent media, investigative journalists and bloggers, both in Central Asian countries and elsewhere, to work professionally and safely.