

EXPLAINING THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND TRADITIONS IN FUNCTIONING OF CIVIL
SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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EXPLAINING THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND TRADITIONS IN BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Introduction

The question of cultural consequences that we explore in this paper is not new in anthropological, sociological, psychological, and organizational studies. The new turn in this study is to understand how culture may affect the development of civil society institutions. This inquiry is about the role of national culture in the adoption of Western-style civil society institutions in Kazakhstan, a new post-Soviet nation of Central Asia. Specifically, we intend to explore how various aspects of culture grounded in national tradition and Soviet custom help in understanding the institutionalization of newly established civil society organizations.

The major problem scholars face while studying civil society in Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries is how to approach the problem, from an ideological or social perspective. There is no universal definition of civil society, nor is there a clear understanding of the mission of the sector. Simon Heap (2003) argues that civil society has come to be synonymous with profound social change, as the term emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communist ideology.

Roy (2005) suggests an ideologically charged definition by saying that the “concept of civil society is used in very different cultural and political contexts, to offer some sort of tool with which to promote democracy and human rights in former authoritarian states.” The most common definition of civil society is often constrained to the space between the family, state, and market; its most common shape is a conglomerate of nongovernmental organizations of various purposes from garden clubs to political parties (Salamon, 2002; Dionne, 1997; Roy, 2005; Aksartova, 2006). Two schools of thought interpret the context of civil society from different, even diverging perspectives.

The exclusive view is based on an ideological perspective and focuses mostly on organizations promoting democracy and equality principles (Heap, 2003). In this case, informal groups and cultural associations are excluded from the civil society constituting groups. The exclusive view posits the relationship between formal power and civil society as antagonistic and oppositional (Hann and Dunn, 1996). The inclusive view recognizes the complexity of modern societies in terms of social structure and social institutions and would not limit civil society to only civil rights organizations. The inclusive view would see the relationship between the state and civil society as mutually interdependent rather than antagonistic (Heap, 2003; Hann and Dunn, 1996). The inclusive view also suggests that working against the powerful government is not the only way by which societies achieve the common good. Occasionally societies establish norms and institutional frameworks to engage government in serving society members and achieving agreed upon common goals.

Failing to recognize the alternatives to the Western types of social and society-state relationships as functional, and insisting on the single “right” way of doing good is “Westerncentric.” To correct the “Westerncentric” bias we suggest expanding the definition of civil society to include the informal social groups aimed at societal common good, following in the footsteps of Van Til (2002), who describes informal groups consisting of friends and family as the fourth sector of society. Examples of such groups are extended families and friends, ethnic groups, religious groups, community and neighborhood permanent and ad hoc collectives, informal youth groups by interests, etc. Typically such groups are characterized by shared values, norms of behavior, common goals and interests, internal cohesion, and support and assistance to the group members.

By accounts of local and foreign experts and scholars, civil society, conceptualized as an aggregation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by the Western school of political thought, has not lived up to the expectations Western donors have had for improved citizen participation in the republics of Central Asia (Aksartova, 2006, Howard 2002, Luong, 2004). In this paper we seek to explain the weakness of Western-style civil society in Kazakhstan using the national cultural framework, and to suggest a different and more inclusive definition of civil society.

Our research is a retrospective qualitative study of relationships between the traditions and culture of indigenous Kazakh people, the practices of the paternalistic Soviet state, and the emerging independent nongovernmental sector. To explore these relationships we collect perceptions and opinions of local and foreign experts of civil society in Kazakhstan through semi-structured interviews. In this paper we present results of a preliminary study of the interaction between national culture and the newly established civil society institutions in Kazakhstan. Our hope is to expand this study to other Central Asian republics in the future.

Background

Pre-Soviet culture in Kazakhstan was defined by a nomadic style of life. Ethnic or national identity was simply unknown to the majority of the Central Asian population up to the twentieth century. The people were distinguished according to their life style (nomads) or religion (Islam) (Carley, 1995). According to Kangas (1995), during the pre-Soviet period in Kazakhstan, power and authority was based on traditional norms and values passed over from one generation to another over centuries. These norms dictated behaviour, communal interaction, and perception of authority. Politics was the art of family ties and loyalties. The nomad culture and nomad life style had a profound effect on not only routine norms and traditions of Kazakh

society, but also the mentality of people. The key traits of the nomadic mentality were freedom, tolerance, a high degree of collectivism, flexibility, respect for elders, and a willingness to change (Osmanova, 2004).

Kazakhstan, in its recent history, experienced at least three models of modernization under the Russian Empire (1731-1920), the Soviet empire (1921-1991), and the post-Soviet Western empire (1992-onward). Each of the models brought profound changes in the life style (from nomad to settled), ideology (from Islam to communist, and then to capitalism and democracy), and mentality (from rural to urban) of Kazakh people (Abylkhozhin, 2007). Under the Russian empire most Kazakhs continued their nomadic lives, but Kazakh elites learned a new culture of luxury and education. The Soviet rule lasted for more than two generations; by the time of the 1989 census more than 90 % of the population had been born after the October Revolution in 1917. The effects of Soviet modernization were profound. The Soviet state eliminated illiteracy. The number of educated people have doubled by the 1960s and doubled again by the end of the 1980s. By the 1970s, this previously nomadic country had two-thirds living in cities and one-third working in factories (White et al., 1997).

The Soviet state is often characterized as protectionist and paternalistic with regard to the citizens' economic wellbeing. In line with the communist ideology, Soviet state offered free and universal services to its citizens in the areas of housing, education, healthcare, transportation and employment (Kaminskaya, 1928; Kiselev, 1962; Sirikh, 1999; Volkova, 1986). The establishment and development of NGOs¹ in Kazakhstan started when the country was still a part of the Soviet empire. The officially sanctioned organisations were financed by the state and closely tied to communist party organisations. Membership in some of them was characterised by required "volunteerism," while in others, like sports and culture clubs, membership was purely voluntary.

Large ideological bureaucratic organizations were established alongside small organizations that united people of similar interests. The first law regulating the public nongovernmental sector in Kazakhstan was adopted in August 1930. It was the law “On Public Organizations and Unions” (Ponomarev, 1994). The largest and most visible public organizations were partly supported from the government budget, and for this reason many were perceived by beneficiaries as part of government.

Republic of Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Because the economy of Kazakhstan was highly integrated in the Soviet all-Union economic relationships, the divorce turned out to be painful: thousands of jobs were lost because old economic ties were broken, and new ones were still to be established.

In 1994-95 the period of NGOization of Kazakh society started with the fast and massive inflow of donor organizations, trainers, and civil society experts from the West. The most active and visible among the promoters and supporters of the civil society model in Kazakhstan were governmental, international multilateral, and private nongovernmental organizations such as USAID, UNDP, INTRAC, Eurasia Foundation, TACIS, HESP, Hivos, Counterpart International, Soros Foundation, and many others. Given the opportunity and availability of vast and easily accessible resources, new Kazakhstan NGOs started to grow in number.² Naturally, donors’ vision of democracy and the role of civil society guided NGOs that tried to meet expectations of funding organizations. In other words, local NGOs received direction, training, and resources from Western civil society experts and therefore acted within the framework of the “Western model” of civil society. Ironically, new civil society organizations that aspired to be independent developed a strong dependency on donors and their ideologies and agendas (Howell and Pearce, 2001). Thousands of nongovernmental organizations established themselves within a short

period of time (ABD report, 2007); millions of dollars were disbursed by Western donors to institutionalize NGOs and build their capacity as advocacy organizations, primarily in the fields of human rights, women's rights, the environment, and electoral reform (Howell and Pearce, 2001). However, the initial excitement about the effects of civil society organizations started to cool in early 2000 when local and Western experts noted that most of new advocacy and charity organizations had become fully dependent on foreign funding, failed to develop local support, nurtured limited volunteer involvement, failed to establish close links with their own constituents, and alienated themselves from the general public (Aksartova, 2006; Howard, 2002).

The USAID website maintains that "Since 1992 the American people through USAID have provided more than \$500 million in assistance programs for Kazakhstan" (<http://centralasia.usaid.gov/page.php?page=article-73>). The bulk of this assistance money came to Kazakhstan in the late 1990s. Ever since, private donors and the American government have decreased their generous support for economic development³ and civil society proliferation in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, in 2008 the USAID reports that \$14 million is planned to support economic growth, people's health, and democratic governance in Kazakhstan. From this amount only few million will be available to support the growth of the nongovernmental sector. In its turn, the European Union has provided substantial assistance for the region, amounting to over 719 million euros, mainly in grant aid, to assist the region in sustainable economic development and poverty reduction.⁴ Nevertheless, the latest development in relations between donors and NGOs shows the disenchantment of Western reformers in the ability of imported organizations to influence political reforms in Central Asia.

In this paper we explain the limited success of Western political and civil society groups to nurture the growth of Western-style civil society in Kazakhstan by cultural differences

between Western countries and Kazakhstan. Another goal of this study is to briefly discuss the role of the Soviet state and the long-standing informal traditional networks in building a social support structure in Kazakhstan. We analyze results of a local population survey to understand the local attitudes to newly created NGOs, which partly explain the limited success of nongovernmental institutions in Kazakhstan.

Analytical framework

Our study of civil society institutionalization in Kazakhstan and the role of national culture is informed by the works of the prominent Dutch scholar Geert Hofstede. Hofstede (1984, 1991, 2001) created a national culture model, which helps in understanding how culture affects behaviors and institutional and organizational development across nations. Other scholars in various fields tested his model of national culture, building evidence that culture matters (Hall, 1984; Lowe, 1996; Hoppe, 1990). Applying Hofstede's model (2001) we describe the national culture of Kazakhstan and its effects on local acceptance of Western-style civil society institutions after the country achieved its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Hofstede (2001) maintains that institutions can only be understood and compared in terms of the cultural environment that nurtures them. He defines culture as "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another... Culture, in this sense, includes systems of values; and values are among the building bricks of culture" (Hofstede, 1984). Definitions by other scholars support Hofstede's views. Ritzer (1998) defines culture as institutionalized patterns in the social system. In other words, culture does not exist only at a social micro-level, but influences and forms social structures and institutions.

Description of the model

In order to study national culture, Hofstede (1980, 1984, 2001) builds a model that allows measuring and comparing cultures of different nations through the lenses of five basic problems of national societies: (1) relationships with power or authority, (2) uncertainty management, (3) individualistic versus collectivistic structure of societies, (4) prevalence of women's or men's values, and (5) the focus on the future or present, or short-term versus long-term orientation (2001). Hofstede, as the scholar of applied culture studies, has empirically discovered and validated these five dimensions of culture. He included more than 50 countries in his IBM studies and positioned each country on the scale constructed for each dimension. He found the dimensions to be statistically distinct and occurring in all possible combinations (Hofstede, 2001).

In this study we focus on three cultural dimensions to describe Kazakhstan's national culture: high power distance vs. low power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, and high vs. low uncertainty avoidance. After discussions with Kazakhstan social science experts we agreed that determining the masculinity vs. femininity dimension and the long-term vs. short term orientation posed certain difficulties in a transitional society.⁵ We assumed that these dimensions are volatile when society is in the process of comprehensive change, and excluded them from our analytical framework. Table 1 below briefly explains the three dimensions that we have selected to measure national culture in Kazakhstan.

Table 1. Hofstede's culture dimensions

Culture dimensions	Explanations
Power distance	Power distance describes the degree to which authority is decentralized and leadership is autocratic. Hofstede (1984) argues that "power distance represents the extent to which the less powerful people in a culture accept and expect that power is

	distributed unequally.” In a high power distance society the members express and usually feel a high level of dependency upon their leaders. Power is mostly centralized, and hierarchy and symbolic leadership are most important. In nations with low power distance, inequality in society is quite low and functions are most likely to be decentralized.
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Individualism versus collectivism describes the relationship between the individual and society as a whole and concerns the degree of horizontal dependence of individuals upon the group. In individualist societies ties between individuals are loose, and everyone is expected to look after his or her own interest and that of his or her immediate family. In contrast, in collectivist societies, people from their birth are integrated into strong groups, which protect them in exchange for loyalty. It is reflected in the ways families are organized: nuclear families in individualistic societies with only parents and children living together versus extended families that may include grandparents, uncles and aunts, or tribes, which usually consist of multiple families that live close and recognize a tribal traditional authority. Hofstede (1984) demonstrates in his research that the high individualism index is negatively correlated with the high power distance index.
Uncertainty avoidance	Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which a society perceives itself to be threatened by uncertainty, or, in other words, to what extent culture influences its members to feel comfortable or uncomfortable in unstructured situations. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situation by strict rules, codes of conduct, and laws. By contrast, people in uncertainty accepting cultures are more tolerant to change; they try to have as few rules as possible. There are three indicators used to evaluate this dimension: rule orientation, employment stability, and stress. Hofstede finds that high uncertainty avoidance is negatively associated with individualism and low power distance (Hofstede, 1984).

Hofstede developed the indices to measure national cultural dimensions from responses to a structured questionnaire, which asked the IBM employees worldwide about their relationships with managers, their relationships within groups, and their acceptance of formal and informal rules.

Hofstede finds a considerable difference between high and low power distance societies “with regard to political systems, religions, ideologies, and philosophical ideas” (Hofstede, 2001, 116). Describing the difference between high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures, Hofstede emphasizes the relative importance of rules that are socially enforced in families and other social groups. He finds a considerable difference among the groups of countries differentiated by uncertainty tolerance with regard to rule orientation and employment stability. By comparing individualist and collectivist societies Hofstede and other researchers (Hoppe, 1993; Helmreich and Merritt, 1998; Shane and Venkataraman, 1996) find serious differences in individual, political and work related behaviors of citizens from countries with high and low individualism. Hofstede also finds that the power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism indices highly and significantly correlate to each other. Therefore we expect to find differences in the behaviors and attitudes of Kazakhstan people to new institutions of the nongovernmental sector because they live in a culturally different context than Western supporters of civil society institutions.

In 1984 when Hofstede conducted his first international survey, communist countries were excluded from the study because IBM had had no operations in these countries. Hence no such indices of national culture for Kazakhstan can be found in Hofstede’s reports. Our definition of Kazakhstan’s culture is informed by the Hofstede’s theory, but our study uses a modified methodology to place Kazakhstan on the scale of three dimensions in Hofstede’s national culture model.

Methodology

We pursued two major goals in this research project: to understand how people in Kazakhstan understand the term “civil society” and their perception of the usefulness of newly

established NGOs, and to explain the consequences of Kazakhstan culture for civil society's institutional success. The term culture describes the system of values developed throughout the history of Kazakhstan including the modern history of comprehensive social change during the Soviet period from 1924 to 1991.⁶ We focus on three national culture dimensions from Hofstede's model (1991) to learn about the values that represent these dimensions.

To collect relevant information we chose a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. First, we conducted elite interviews with experts who study Kazakhstan society, such as historians, educators, sociologists, development specialists, and leaders of formal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). After discussing the open-ended questions during the interview, we asked the elite interview participants to answer a short structured questionnaire about the patterns of culture framed by Hofstede's theory of national culture. Second, we conducted a survey among several social groups defined in terms of occupation, socio-economic status, age, and level of education to understand their perception of newly established NGOs. Third, our study was located in Almaty, the largest urban center in Kazakhstan, with a population of approximately 1.5 million.

Our choice of site for interviews and surveys was determined by the fact that Almaty is a city with a growing economy, an ethnically, religiously, and occupationally diverse population, the highest level of presence of newly established NGOs (32 percent of all Kazakhstan based organizations) (Franz, Shvetsova, Shamshildayeva, 2002), and a high level of activities of international change agents working to establish Western style civil society in Kazakhstan. We reasoned that the urban context, higher level of economic development, diversity, and presence of international change agents must be conducive to successful establishment, growth, and popularity of new type of civil society organizations. If we find a limited recognition of new

NGOs in Almaty, we can safely assume that in more traditional small city and rural settings the level of local awareness about NGOs and the perception of their usefulness is lower, while the adherence to national and Soviet traditions is higher.

We started collecting data by organizing semi-structured elite interviews with the group of fifteen foreign and local experts, including a historian, sociologists, development specialists, a political figure, NGO leaders, researchers and educators. Many of them have published locally and some have published internationally on the topics of national culture, Soviet culture, civil society in Central Asia, and the socio-economic development of Kazakhstan after independence. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the current NGO situation and to place Kazakhstan on the scale of three of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The interviews solicited responses to open-ended questions about the role and social significance of the newly established NGOs, relations of local people and NGOs, government support to the new sector, local social traditions and norms of reciprocity, and social effects of the stress situation created by the economic transition on local people. The follow-up structured questionnaire was administered only to nine local experts because of particular questions that described the internal working of social and family relations, which we assumed many foreigners would have difficulty explaining. Responses to the structured questionnaire allowed us to tentatively define the national culture of Kazakhstan according to three culture dimensions. Instead of building a summated scale index for each culture dimension from large sample surveys, we followed another technique Hofstede (2001) used for calculating indices: we used the percentage of False/True answers that described a specific dimension. For example, we suggested four False/True statements to describe each cultural dimension and calculated percentage of True vs. False choices. By defining the level of culture dimension as low (below 40%) medium (between 40% and 50%) or high (above 51%)

we compared Kazakhstan national culture with the cultures of donor countries, the biggest of which were Germany, Netherlands, the U.K., and the U.S.A. This comparison was facilitated by the graphs constructed by Hofstede (<http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>) for each country he surveyed, including the four donor countries.

Following our interviews with the experts, we administered a large sample survey among selected groups of educated residents in Almaty. In our view, the educated people were more likely to have knowledge and higher level of involvement with established nongovernmental organizations. Among various occupations we selected engineers, doctors, bankers, and university students. This variety of occupations also describes the socio-economic status of our respondents. Engineers and medical doctors are among the low-paid occupations in Kazakhstan, while bankers are the highest paid group.⁷ To differentiate among students with various family income backgrounds, we administered the survey in two types of higher education institutions: an expensive English speaking private university, and an affordable state university with sizable scholarship programs. The selection of universities was purposeful, while the selection of professional organizations was random. Considering earlier findings (Nezhina and Brudney, 2005; Olinerov, 2001) that suggested higher levels of volunteering in youth nongovernmental organizations compared to other types of NGOs in Kazakhstan, we decided to use a disproportionate stratified sampling technique to include more students for better understanding of the attitudes of younger people to new NGOs. We expected to find high level of awareness among youth, as earlier research suggested (Nezhina and Brudney, 2005). However, for the purpose of analysis we have broken the students' sample into two halves, to factor in the income status.

The age groups aligned with occupations: bankers and students were mostly in the younger age group between 18 and 35, while doctors and engineers were in the range of 32 to 74 years of age. By constructing this purposive sample we achieved representation of the characteristics that we deemed important for understanding the relationship between societal culture and newly-established nongovernmental institutions.

The purposive sample selection may suggest limited generalization of our findings to the rest of Kazakhstan's population. However, we assume that if this sample with particular characteristics demonstrates high adherence to national traditional norms, the less educated population in Almaty and other urban and rural centers is likely to be even deeper engrained in the country's traditions.

The purpose of the survey was to find out (1) the level of awareness about the post-Soviet nongovernmental organizations, (2) the choice by participants of formal and informal institutions when help was needed, (3) and the perception of the NGOs utility. The survey was administered in the period April-September 2008, with an average response rate of 66 percent.⁸

To understand the legacy of the Soviet state on the formation and functionality of Western-style civil society we drew upon the theory of government failure (Weisbrod, 1981). The theory maintains that where the government fails or refuses to satisfy the needs of people, the nongovernmental sector is established to satisfy these needs. In our analysis we do not establish a direct relationship between the Soviet state functioning and the post-Soviet institutional development, although this relationship is logically and indirectly established by explaining the attitudes and expectations of the general population. To explain the relationship between the legacy of the Soviet state and the institutionalization of the nongovernmental sector, we included in expert interviews open-ended questions built upon the legal studies of Soviet laws

in the period of 1928-1999 (Kaminskaya, 1928; Kiselev, 1962; Sirikh, 1999; Volkova, 1986). The experts provided explanations of the meaning and functionality of Soviet laws, and of the Soviet state development dynamics.

The Qualitative Findings: Experts' Views

The goal of face-to-face interviews was to get insights from the experts concerning the effectiveness and future prospects for newly established NGOs in Kazakhstan. The answers to the open ended questions from fifteen interviewees, including six foreign experts and nine local experts, provided richness of information to decipher the role of traditional Kazakh and Soviet culture in the nongovernmental sector institutionalization in Kazakhstan. We present a summary of all fifteen interviews followed by a discussion of their insights.

Effectiveness of NGOs

The opening question was about perceptions of the effectiveness of newly established NGOs in Kazakhstan. The answers revealed almost unanimous opinion describing NGOs as ineffective political and social agents in terms of establishing support structure to the general population and recruiting local support for their advocacy. On the positive side, some respondents admitted that NGOs have developed internal expertise by employing well educated people. An education expert argued that one environmental organization has established a good educational program at several schools in Almaty. Yet, most experts argued that NGOs had limited effect as advocacy agents, did not create a visible social impact, narrowly defined their missions, appealed to a rather small constituency, and developed full dependency on foreign funding.

Explaining NGOs' lack of effectiveness

The experts suggested multiple reasons for the limited effectiveness of NGOs in Kazakhstan. The most frequent explanations suggested by foreign experts were: low profile, lack of initiative on the part of NGOs, lack of government recognition and support, donor driven agendas, and a lack of interest from young people. One foreign expert argued that the highly developed social capital in Kazakh society allowed people to find comparatively easy and fast solutions to their problems without turning to formal NGO or state organizations. Local experts provided additional insights in explaining limited NGO effectiveness in Kazakhstan such as: disconnect with local traditions, arrogance of foreign government representatives and NGO officials, self-serving goals of local NGO leaders, anti-Western sentiments of common people, donor driven agenda of local NGOs, indifference to the real needs of local people, and a lack of attention and trust of NGOs from locals, who traditionally relied on families and government for services and social protection. Local experts also explained the dependence of Kazakh people on state assistance by referring to the customs of the recent Soviet past, when most human, cultural, and economic needs were rather effectively satisfied through government administered social programs.

Foreign experts saw major obstacles for the NGO sector proliferation in unsupportive government, and lack of initiative by NGO leaders, who primarily relied on foreign funding and complied with foreign donors' grant conditions providing adequate reporting. Foreign experts also argued that relationships with authority in Kazakhstan resemble those of Asian countries, where respect for authority is traditionally high, and the top figure in power is typically recognized and revered no matter what. Local experts emphasized the bad fit between the nongovernmental sector and local tradition, which formed during the distant past of nomadic life, and the more recent past of extensive government support under Soviet regime. Both foreign and

local experts characterized Kazakhstan society as highly collectivist and deeply rooted in nomadic tradition of mutual support, which endures even in urban centers, although it is not immediately observable in a large city like Almaty. Most interviewees were skeptical about the nongovernmental sector's future growth, arguing that the lack of local resources and public support will affect the sustainable development of the sector.

The interviews provided information that helped put pieces of the puzzle together. First, experts maintained that NGOs worked in separation with local traditions. Second, local people did not understand the motivation of newly established NGOs and suspected a hidden agenda. Third, the government did not recognize NGOs as partners in serving the general public, which may mirror the common unfavorable attitude of the Kazakh people to the new institution. Fourth, people demonstrated high "path dependence" behavior by continuously relying on government support, even though the Soviet comprehensive social protection structure was almost fully dismantled in the early 1990s.

Expert assessment of culture

Two other goals guided our study. First, to determine where Kazakhstan stands in terms of national culture as defined by Hofstede's model (2001), and whether a significant difference exists between the national culture of Kazakhstan and the major donor countries Germany, Netherlands, the UK, and the USA, on three culture dimensions. Further, we analyze the impact of culture differences on Western-style civil society's institutional development with regard to Hofstede's logical analysis of culture consequences (Hofstede, 2001). To build our measure of culture dimensions we solicited survey responses from local experts. Table 3 below presents results of the structured interviews with nine local experts, and identifies Kazakhstan national

culture as high on power distance, low on individualism, and high on uncertainty avoidance measures.

Table 2. Culture measurement and responses

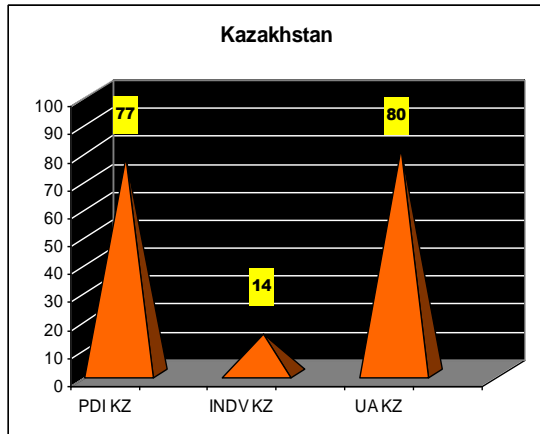
Culture dimensions statements	False-True	Percent measurement	Survey results
Power distance statements:			
1. Government elites can be characterized as authoritarian	If True	+25%	
2. Authority appointment is based on expertise and experience	If True	-25%	
3. Authority appointment is based on family connections	If True	+25%	
4. Political decisions in Kazakhstan are participatory	If True	-25%	
Average for nine participants			77.7%
Collectivism vs. individualism statements:			
1. According to Kazakhstan traditions people live in large extended families (with grandparents and other relatives)	If True	+25%	
2. Adult children become independent from parents early	If True	-25%	
3. Parents have significant influence over their adult children's important life decisions	If True	+25%	
4. People expect receiving assistance from formal state or non-state organizations instead of families	If True	-25%	
Average for nine participants			86%
Uncertainty avoidance statements:			
1. Kazakh people prefer stable and enforceable law system	If True	+25%	
2. Kazakh people do not expect having state entitlements to social protection	If True	-25%	
3. Majority of Kazakh people strongly prefer having stable continuous employment	If True	+25%	
4. Most Kazakhs are ready to risk their jobs to earn extra money	If True	-25%	
Average for nine participants			80%

Because we measured each of four questions for a particular dimension as one-quarter (25%) of the total 100 percent (4 X 25% =100%), by averaging responses we arrived at a proportional measure for each dimension. As Table 3 shows, the average percentage for the

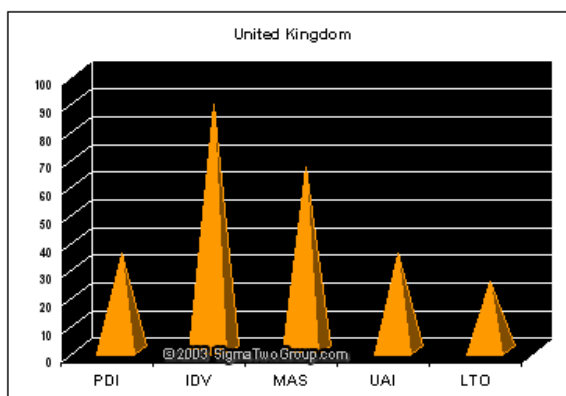
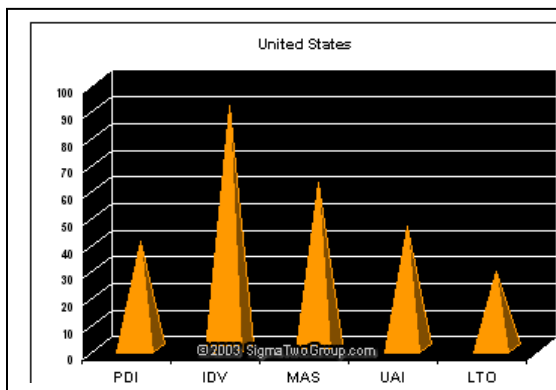
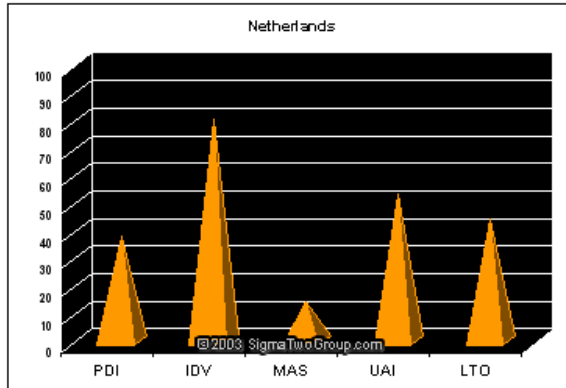
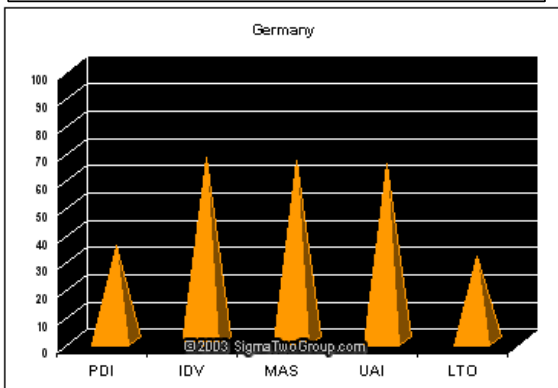
power distance questions was 77 percent showing a high level of power distance; the individualism average responses amounted to 14 percent - a very low level of individualism; and the average response to the questions about uncertainty avoidance was 80 percent - a high measure for the uncertainty avoidance dimension. By our definition, the dimension measure higher than 50 percent indicated a high degree on the existing culture dimension in Kazakhstan; the dimension measure lower than 30 percent indicated low degree of the existing culture dimension in Kazakhstan.

Although, we can make a limited claim for the generalizability of the above results because of a small size of an expert group, yet the reliability and validity was ensured by the fact that the responses were obtained in face-to-face interviews from widely recognized experts in the field. We had an opportunity to explain the meaning of some questions and to probe responses. Therefore we believe that these results are comparable to the measurement results Hofstede obtained from the organizational surveys in four Western donor countries that we use for comparisons, Germany, Netherlands, the UK, and the USA. Graph 1 below demonstrates results of culture comparisons.⁹

Graph 1. Kazakhstan three culture dimensions in comparison



Source: Kazakhstan culture survey 2008
Three culture dimensions
 PDI KZ – high Power Distance for Kazakhstan _____ **77%**
 INDV KZ – low Individualism for Kazakhstan _____ **14%**
 UA KZ – high Uncertainty Avoidance for Kazakhstan _____ **80%**



Source: Geert Hofstede™ Cultural Dimensions, itim International,
http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_germany.shtml

It can be seen in Graph 1 that the measures on three culture dimensions – Power Distance, Individualism, and Uncertainty Avoidance - have the opposite directions in Kazakhstan and in four donor countries: Germany, Netherlands, the UK, and the USA. In Kazakhstan Power Distance level is high (77%), the Individualism level is low (14%), and Uncertainty Avoidance level is high (80%), while in four Western countries we see the contrasting picture: the Power Distance Index (PDI) is moderate (30-40), the Individualism Index (IDV) is high (60-92) in all four, and the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) is moderate (30-40) in the UK and the USA, moderate in Netherlands (50), and high (60) in Germany. To answer the question why these variable levels of culture dimensions are important for our analysis of NGOs institutionalization in Kazakhstan we will discuss these findings in the next section.

Culture as a prerequisite of institutional functionalism

In countries with low power distance, associations have easier access to policy leaders. Low power distance creates incentives for people to organize and lobby policy decisions or engage in dialogue with authority. By contrast, in countries with high power distance citizens wait for authorities to offer solutions to perceived problems instead of organizing to influence government action. The difference between cultures with regard to relationships with political leaders has a major impact on the popularity and effectiveness of new NGOs in Kazakhstan. People do not recognize NGOs as useful in dealing with government and elected officials.

Low uncertainty avoidance cultures are more prone to change, while high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more conservative and have a stronger desire for law and order (Hofstede, 2001). Stable employment, social protection, and strict rules provide structure and reduce the level of stress in high uncertainty avoidance cultures. Kazakhstan as a high uncertainty

avoidance culture is not willing to take risks by changing their traditional support institutions that proved useful throughout the history, and to seek support from poorly understood nongovernmental organizations. There is too much uncertainty about these new organizations – the goals seem suspicious, the involvement brings unclear benefits, and the promise of help is short-lived. When after independence Kazakhstan changed its political system and established new illegible and unstable rules, people reacted by turning to traditional norms and relations because they viewed these relations as empirically tested, hence more reliable. As a result, newly established NGOs could not find wide support because they were different and posed a higher risk than well defined traditional family institutions.

Being very low on the individualism measure, Kazakhstan society is defined as highly collectivist. Collectivist societies approach problem solving by engaging the networks of loyal group members and extended family members. Collectivist culture defines relationship with state authority in a family-like fashion. The political organization of society often reflects the mindset of people. The collectivist system of values is in stark contrast to the individualist system of values. Whereas collectivists identify themselves as “we” or group members, the individualists from their early years learn to think about themselves as “I.” While in collectivist cultures children learn to rely on assistance from family group as their first resort, in individualist societies children are taught to “stand on his or her own feet” and be independent in their adult years (Hofstede, 2001). As many Western scholars of civil society argue, nonprofit structure and activities are firmly grounded in private initiative (Salamon, 2002, Van Til, 2002). The desire of individuals to fix a perceived problem leads them to establish an independent organization and recruit other unrelated individuals to support the cause. The formal structure is predetermined by laws and tax treatment; the by-laws regulate human behavior within the organizations. In a

collectivist society, people would seek support from friends and family first; they would act informally by interacting face-to-face with group members and relying on well understood internal moral codes. Hence, it is no surprise that NGOs -- private initiative-promoting institutions lying outside of the familiar circle of friends and family--did not find ardent supporters in Kazakhstan with its highly collectivist culture.

To sum, we conclude that culture, which embodies a system of values and beliefs, is a defining factor in the success of certain institutions and the failure of others. Culture takes long time to change as values tend to keep firm ground in the mindset of people. We explain the limited success of Western-style NGOs in Kazakhstan by its stark cultural difference from the donor countries.

Quantitative analysis: survey results

To measure public perceptions of and attitudes toward newly established NGOs we conducted a survey, which intended to determine familiarity with NGOs, the choice of an assistance provider in a problematic situation, and the reason for choosing a particular type of organization. The survey was conducted in five separate institutional settings in the city of Almaty in Kazakhstan during the summer of 2008: a hospital, the engineering department of a construction firm, a bank, and two universities. The number of professionals who responded was fifty, and the number of students from the two universities was ninety-four. Table 2 below describes the characteristics of respondents and the response rates:

Table 2. Characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Quantity/Percent	Response rate
Profession		
Engineers	22 – 15.3%	72%
Bankers	14 – 9.7%	49%
Doctors	14 – 9.7%	61%
Students	94 – 65.3%	84%
		Average – 66.5%
University type		
Private	47 – 50%	79%
Public	47 – 50%	88%
Characteristics	Quantity	Percent
Age range	17-74	n/a
Gender		
Female	91	63.2%
Male	53	36.8%
Ethnicity		
Kazakh	65	45.1%
Russian	49	34.0%
Other	30	20.8%
Family status		
Married	29	20.1%
Single	115	79.9%
Religion		
Muslim	66	45.8%
Christian	39	27.1%
Other	3	2.1%
No religion	36	25%

Source: Kazakhstan culture survey 2008.

The table demonstrates that the respondents come from groups within the age range 17 to 74 years, with student being the largest group (67.3%). There are 15.3 percent of engineers in the sample, 9.7 percent in each group of bankers and doctors. Ethnic distribution of respondents mirrors general ethnic composition of the Republic of Kazakhstan, with the largest groups being Kazakhs and Russians (45.1% and 34% accordingly). The larger number of young respondents

skews the picture to over-represent younger and single individuals. The religious composition of the sample reflects current trends in Kazakhstan, where people seek moral structure by turning to religion. From all respondents, 46 percent admitted knowing one or more nongovernmental organization. This level of awareness demonstrates at least a moderate proliferation of knowledge about NGOs. Yet, anecdotally, about half percent of respondents (50%) referred to NGOs as mafia groups. We assume that because the term “nongovernmental” negates government, it may seem suspicious to some local people, who traditionally respect authority and are accustomed to receiving support and protection from government.

The survey probed respondents to choose among the four institutions one that they would ask for help if a specific problem occurs. The suggested choice options were: (1) government agency, (2) nongovernmental organization, (3) commercial organization, and (4) friends and family members. Table 3 below demonstrates that, when asked about an institution of choice for help, the largest percent of respondents chose “government agency” or “friends and family members,” a smaller percent of respondents chose nonprofit organizations, and a negligible percentage selects commercial organizations.

Table 3. Choice of assistance provider

Problems	Institutions	Responses	
		Yes	No
Homelessness	Government	54.2%	45.8%
	NGOs	5.6%	94.4%
	Business	2.8%	97.2%
	Friends and family	49.3%	50.7%
No food	Government	11.1%	88.9%
	NGOs	5.6%	94.4%
	Business	1.4%	98.6%
	Friends and family	83.3%	16.7%
Gender discrimination	Government	48.6%	50.0%
	NGOs	22.2%	77.5%
	Business	3.5%	98.6%
	Friends and family	22.2%	76.4%
Ethnic discrimination	Government	59.7%	38.9%
	NGOs	24.3%	74.3%
	Business	2.8%	95.8%
	Friends and family	18.8%	79.9%
Violence at home	Government	46.5%	53.5%
	NGOs	8.3%	91.7%
	Business	4.9%	95.1%
	Friends and family	38.9%	61.1%
Any other (general)	Government	27.1%	72.9%
	NGOs	3.5%	96.5%
	Business	17.4%	81.9%
	Friends and family	72.9%	26.4%

Source: Kazakhstan culture survey, 2008

Table 3 suggests that a greater number of respondents chose to appeal to government or family and friends for help to solve the problems of a personal and legal character. For the survey respondents government is the preferred assistance institution in cases of homelessness (54.2%), gender discrimination (48.6%), ethnic discrimination (59.7%), and home violence (46.5%). Family comes first for food assistance (83.3%) and undefined problems (72.9%). In all other cases it is number two choice for help. Only in the case of gender discrimination we see a

comparatively large proportion of respondents - 22 percent – who choose a nongovernmental organization, and another 22 percent come for help to family members and friends, following 48.6 percent of those who select government.

The choice of nongovernmental organizations for gender discrimination is an interesting case by itself. Our explanation of this choice lies in the not-so-distant Soviet past. Soviet laws were the most liberal in the world to ensure equality between men and women in public and employment spheres. Women used to enjoy rights to have long vacations for fully paid children care, knowing that no employer will dare to fire them. Women were allowed a quota of 30 percent representation in any elected rule making government bodies. Women were well represented in medical and engineering professions. By contrast, under new capitalist regimes, women have gradually lost their rights as politicians revoked protective legislations under the pressure of organized business elites. As a result, women exceedingly feel unprotected and powerless, and finding little support from current government, some of them turn to nonprofit organizations for help. In the case of gender discrimination, Western nonprofit organizations have found an unmet need, and filled the growing assistance vacuum.

Another interesting case is the comparatively high percent of respondents seeking help from NGOs when experiencing ethnic discrimination. Open ethnic discrimination is also a new phenomenon under the new capitalist regime. In Kazakhstan with approximately 52 percent of ethnic Kazaks, 33 percent of ethnic Russian, and 15 percent of other ethnic groups (Ukrainians is the largest group represented by four percent), 98 percent of top level government positions are help by ethnic Kazakhs. Our analysis shows that the largest group of respondents that chose NGOs for help while experiencing ethnic discrimination was Russians (36%), as compared to 18% of ethnic Kazakhs, and 17% of others. Again, as in cases of gender discrimination, NGOs

proved to be relevant to 24.3 percent of respondents. Other responses discard nongovernmental and commercial organization as assistance providers.

Results of this survey suggest that for Kazakhstan people government and family, rarely NGOs, and almost never business organizations are the institutions of choice when help is needed.

To explain why respondents choose one institution over another we offered them three options: (1) trust, (2) reliable assistance, and (3) other. We ran bivariate correlations to determine the association between the choice of the institution for assistance and the reason for choosing it. Our findings are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Explaining choice of an institution

Problem	Pearson correlation	Institution	Reason for choice
No food	.301*	Family	Reliable assistance
Gender discrimination	.273**	Government	Reliable assistance
Gender discrimination	.277**	Family	Trust
Ethnic discrimination	.210*	Government	Reliable assistance
Violence in family	.346**	Government	Reliable assistance
Violence in family	.316**	Family	Trust

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Table 4 describes statistically significant associations between the institutions of choice and the motive to appeal to a specific institution. Our analysis suggests that survey respondents appeal for government help because they believe that assistance for a particular problem would be provided with more certainty. Under Soviet rule they grew accustomed to the fact that such issues as gender and ethnic discrimination, and violence in family were regulated and enforced effectively (Volkova, 1986; Kaminskaya, 1928; Kiselev, 1962; Sirikh, 1999). Although currently the enforcement system is less effective, in line with “path dependency” model of behavior (Pierson 2000; Arthur 1994) people continue appealing to government for help. Alternatively,

people in Kazakhstan come for help to family and friends for such issues as hunger, gender discrimination, and violence in family. It is important to explain that in a collective society like Kazakhstan, the notion of family extends beyond the nuclear family of parents and children. When problem of violence arises in a nuclear family, a victim may appeal to the oldest member of extended family for protection, and in most cases would get support and protection.

Dependence on government is a characteristic feature of high power distance in Kazakhstan. Hofstede (2002) argues that in societies with high power distance, people become increasingly dependent upon government decisions. Another explanation for high reliance on government is provided by the legacy of Soviet state. This cultural peculiarity cannot be dismissed just because in Western countries people are mostly suspicious and mistrustful of their governments. Extremely low level of reliance on NGOs suggests that this institution is out of the frame of reference for assistance in Kazakhstan society. However, when the problem of “gender discrimination” arises almost half of our respondents split evenly in their choice of assistance provider between NGOs and family (22.2 and 22.2 percent accordingly). This finding suggests that some nonprofit organizations are more effective than others in gaining local recognition. Some of the grassroots women’s organizations in Kazakhstan proved their usefulness in providing a network of support similar to an extended family group, with women helping each other to take care of children and find jobs.¹⁰

Another goal of this study was to determine whether the understanding of the term “civil society” would align with the Western definition, as new terms sometimes get new life in a different language tradition. We discovered some semantic and ideological discrepancies between the notion of “civil society” in Kazakhstan and in Western countries, and a variety of

definitions was suggested by respondents.¹¹ However, only six out of 144 respondents, or about four percent, defined civil society in terms of the Western framework of understanding.¹²

Conclusion

The expert interviews and survey analysis suggests that the institution of nongovernmental organizations imported from the West has a meager chance to get deeply rooted in the Kazakhstan cultural environment. From the expert interview and survey results we conclude that Kazakhstan exists in a very different cultural context from that of the donor countries that initiated the transfer of civil society ideas and practices from the West to the South, with the goal of changing the political system and peoples' mindsets about the role of government. However, such cultural characteristics as high power distance precludes frequent interaction of citizens with officials in power positions in Kazakhstan unlike in the West, where low power distance ensures the opportunity of dialogue between government and organized public. Instead, in Kazakhstan people personify the power figure and keep him in high esteem like one of the elders who is responsible for taking care of all people. Anecdotally, the nickname of the current president of Kazakhstan is "Daddy," which symbolizes the value of authority respect in Kazakhstan.

Collectivist traditions establish in the minds of people a belief in reciprocal relations and provide them with a sense of protection and stability. By contrast, the nonprofit sector is a creation of individual private initiative aimed at finding particularistic solutions to public ills. This individualistic approach does not fit well in a collectivist culture, which works in a subtle and sophisticated way to ensure groups' survival and the government's response to public needs.

A high uncertainty avoidance culture in Kazakhstan works to protect people from the stress of the unexpected. In Soviet Kazakhstan the level of government protection was high, from free health care to guaranteed employment. After independence, government significantly cut down expenses on social programs. Yet, people have accustomed to perceive governmental social support as an entitlement (Ghodsee, 2006). Experience suggests that old habits die hard. When under conditions of political and economic transition, political institutions proved incapable of establishing a stable and predictable system of support and protection, people turned to national traditions that code certain helping types of behavior as appropriate. The old codes of behavior and moral norms serve to ensure stability within groups and between groups as well. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian republic that experienced no ethnic conflicts since independence.

The cultural characteristics of Kazakhstan are different from the West, yet capable of creating a stable and reliable system of internal networking and support. Kazakhstan is rich in social capital, which for centuries served well to ensure the survival and peaceful cohabitation of multiple social and ethnic groups. We conclude with a quotation from the INTRAC conference in Kazakhstan by Howell and Pearce (2001), “Civil society does not lend itself to external manufacturing. It cannot be created via blue-prints from offices in Washington D.C. or London. Civil societies in any context have a history and must develop in tune with their particular historical, cultural and political rhythms.”

This study prompts development specialists and nonprofit assistance agents to recognize culture as an important factor in decision-making about development and assistance programs in different countries. We show here how culture can be measured by using a proven model of national culture, and what the implications of different cultures are for success or failure of

development or assistance programs that are expensive and human resource intensive. This research demonstrates that “one size does not fit all,” and suggests that cultural bias may be a factor of failure. To be successful development and assistance agents, people need to invest time to understand the culture of a specific region or country, and to apply this knowledge creatively to produce more benefits for recipients and donors alike.

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Notes

¹ The prototypes of modern NGOs were called “Soviet public organizations” under Soviet regime.

² The Ministry of Justice reports that, as of April 2006, 25,868 private, not-for-profit organizations were registered in Kazakhstan. However, many of these registered organizations are dormant or nonfunctioning. Overall, according to experts’ estimation, the number of active NGOs in the country totals only about 800.

³ Kazakhstan is an oil rich economy. In 2000 the President of Kazakhstan started paying back all external debts to multilateral development organizations from oil revenues to limit their influence on policy-making process in Kazakhstan parliament and government.

⁴ EU Assistance to Central Asia: General Framework, (2008), The European Commission's Delegation to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Retrieved on May 14, 2008, from:
http://delkaz.ec.europa.eu/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=60&Itemid=65.

⁵ Kazakhstan, as a former Soviet republic, is experiencing a major transition from the socialist to market economy. Currently, with little understand of market capitalism people experience a high level of uncertainty concerning the short vs. long-term orientation of the economy. New economic context resulted in a massive loss of jobs by men after many industries were shut down, while women demonstrated more flexibility, and started working in a variety of occupations far from their original training by consenting to lower pay and reduced status.

⁶ Modern history the Kazakhstan history books define as starting from the early Soviet period, when a large scale industrialization began. The history of Soviet Kazakhstan has ended in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

⁷ The income range for some professions in Kazakhstan reflects existing economy of supply and demand. Under the Soviet regime medical care was free; government subsidized all hospitals and doctors, who were trained in big numbers to assure access to medical service for all 260 million people at all locations. However, after independence in 1991, Kazakhstan started transition to market economy by reducing state subsidies and closing about 50% of the hospitals. As a result, many doctors lost their jobs, and the competition among them skyrocketed. Similar situation developed in the industrial sector. Many enterprises were shut down as uncompetitive after independence leaving highly skilled engineers jobless and competing for any available job in the profession.

⁸ To achieve higher response rate we have established collaboration with the top managers of the selected organizations; they endorsed the survey and helped distributing the questionnaire. University students were surveyed in class settings, which ensured the highest response rate of 84%.

⁹ Hofstede calculated indices and percentage measures from individual responses of a large sample of IBM employees, who were asked to express their personal opinions on specified relationships (Hofstede, 2002).

¹⁰ Example: a nongovernmental organization “Moldir - single mothers,” a grass root self-help organization established by five women to help with babysitting.

¹¹ Translation of the word “civil” from English into Russian is close to the notion of “citizen;” some of our younger respondents – university students – defined “civil society” as a political and geographical space where citizens of one country belong to.

¹² Civil society is often defined in Western tradition as a space between the state, market, and family populated by nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations.