Chapter 15
The Role of Teahouses in Central Asia: A Case Study of the Ferghana Valley

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15.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that civil society in Central Asia does not fully fit into the conventional definitions of civil society—while the region does have a robust network of civil society actors and groups, they are less visible than typically seen in other regions and are less likely to manifest in large formally state-recognized organizations or through the "traditional" societal participation in the ways identified by indices such as BTI when completing analysis (BTI Codebook, 2020). This chapter uncovers the traditional nuances in the social structures that most studies and NGO reports acknowledge but seem to exclude from analysis when studying civil society in Central Asia (Roy, 2004). In fact, it is the connection between the traditional social spaces, like teahouses, which are found everywhere in the urban and rural spaces in the Ferghana Valley, that have been a platform for civil society groups to develop and transform. Through personal interviews and observations conducted in 2021, this research seeks to further explore the link between traditional social spaces and their effects on civil society development in Central Asia. The traditional spaces in this region, at the crossroad of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, are inherently where civil society best manages to grow and establish itself while under threat from hostile environments and political surveillance.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asian states, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, experienced periods of rapid political and social transformation. As these changes occurred, Western democratic nations, such as the US and the European Union (EU), often under the auspice of the OSCE and ODIHR, sought to introduce democratic ideas to influence and create social change, especially in the realm of human rights. While the West envisioned democracy taking hold in the region, the reality of Central Asian societal reforms have

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considerably dampened this enthusiasm. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are considered "hard-line autocracies" and Kyrgyzstan a "defective democracy," one quickly slipping in democratic ratings (BTI, 2022). A typical indicator included in democracy indices, such as the Bertelsman Transformation Index (BTI), is civil society development. While the BTI and other indices, like the Varieties of Democracy (v-dem), use multiple indicators to operationalize their findings, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the absence of structural constraints within social participation are considered the true indicators of a functioning democracy. A thriving civil society is a reflection of these indicators; as a result, civil society is used as a litmus test for studying democracy.

Independent civil society institutions and actors, such as non-government organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups, are largely absent from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, especially when compared to other post-soviet countries such as Georgia (BTI, 2022). Governments in the region fear that public displays of civil society could challenge the status quo. These countries' leaderships have, therefore, severely hindered the formation of civil society organizations and have instead supported the creation of ostensibly independent associations which are in reality under government control. These government-led civil society institutions do charity work and advocate on the behalf of certain "accepted" social movements, whereas topics that go against the traditional views of government can rarely manifest in the public view (Ziegler, 2015).

Previous studies and current conversations focus on what a vibrant civil society in the region should consist of, without considering the latent ways civil society forms and exists in Central Asia (Krizan, 1997). One way to understand the way civil society develops and maintains its functional ability—even while under threat by the government—is to consider less conventional modes of categorization and operability.

Teahouses can appear in rural and urban areas, along rivers, in bazaars, near the street, or among houses in a neighbourhood. They are more than just simple cafes or restaurants. As diverse as their locations are, their appearances differ even more—from indoor and outdoor seating to large open spaces or separate private rooms—no matter their aesthetic, teahouses offer a unique opportunity to understand the conditions under which civil society forms and integrates itself within the local, national, and international communities. Teahouses, as traditional spaces (and in some cases, re-invented "traditional" spaces) of regular, often daily, community gathering, among either men and/or women only or in mixed groups for family gatherings, provide not only a method to disseminate localized information, but offer the opportunity to discuss international ideas that are not typically covered in other spheres of society. As such, teahouses allow for the spreading of new ideas and the fostering of a community of interconnectedness, which ultimately lays the foundation for civil society development. Without a truly free civil society, the process of democratic transition becomes more difficult and, in Central Asia, teahouse gatherings allow for the creation of civil society away from the state, or at the very least, with limited interference from outside influence. Needless to say, state surveillance

is always present in authoritarian states, even among teahouse gatherings. Hence, these group gatherings require a certain level of confidentiality and trust.

Recognizing that Central Asia is a unique region with multiple cultures and societal traditions, customs, and values, in this chapter I focus on the development of civil society in teahouses across the Fergana Valley in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and the social conditions that allow this social space to operate even when under threat from the government.

15.2   Teahouses in Ferghana Valley in Central Asia

The three Central Asian countries that border the Ferghana Valley are Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Since their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, they have developed different political and social regimes. Whereas the Kyrgyzstan government has allowed more space for civil society, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have sought to limit the paths civil society could take. Yet, civil society in each country has been similarly relegated to the margins of society since 2015 due to the various changes in government leadership and realignment with countries such as Russia and China. According to the BTI data, Kyrgyzstan had a robust civil society and optimal conditions for its formation until recently, when the government began to monitor the sector more, especially with regard to foreign donations (Kyrgyzstan Country Report, 2020). Tajikistan has actively oppressed civil society, banned some organizations, and made civil society weak (Tajikistan Country Report, 2020). Likewise, Uzbekistan has had a tumultuous past with civil society, banning most organizations through legal means and making registration increasingly difficult (Uzbekistan Country Report, 2020). Therefore, these case studies consider the timeline of 2010 to 2021 and the transformation of the various government policies towards civil society which have led to its current state on the sidelines of society and pushed it into social spaces such as teahouses in order to function under tolerable conditions. I conducted primarily non-participant observations and interviews with civil society actors, teahouse owners, and security representatives in 2021, with the intention of filling the research and knowledge gaps in current literature on teahouses (Ernazarov, 2020; Ismailbekova, 2018; Urinboyev, 2014).

In my interviews, I aimed to find out how and whether teahouses, as a community-based social space in Central Asian society, provide the conditions for civil society to develop, and whether, despite the government and community surveillance which exist, these places still offer safety, accessibility, and key roles in local life that other locations fail to offer.

15.3   Civil Society and Teahouses in the Ferghana Valley

John Clark argues that civil society has three options, to "oppose the state, comple-
ment it, or reform it—but they cannot ignore it" (Clark, 1991). Following the collapse
of the Soviet Union and the difficult nation-building process in the region, the states
have experienced periods of various levels of democratization, coercion, and harsh
repression. Due to the political order in the region, these three options are the condi-
tions civil society actors in Central Asia must navigate. Additionally, a common
view of civil society is that it is "an intermediate realm situated between state and
household, populated by organized groups or associations which are separate from
the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed volun-
tarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests" (Manor et al., 1999).
Following these two ideas, the definition of civil society that is used for this research is
a group of individuals, outside the state, that use collective action to make a change in
the community. In order to operate successfully in Central Asia and avoid repressive
state controls, this civil society must stay on the peripheries of the general society.

Teahouses have long been an important aspect of Central Asian society, dating
back to the ancient Silk Road and caravanserai (Ernazarov, 2020). During the Silk
Road period, teahouses provided the opportunity for individuals to solve community
issues and come to agreements on such things as arranged marriages and business
transactions (Central Asian Architectural History, 2019). As such, teahouses repre-
sented the community centre for the town and, continuing to this day, teahouses
can be found in both large cities and regional villages, providing many benefits to
Central Asian life beyond their role as mere places to eat and drink. Since their
creation, they have been utilized for community support and political and social
purposes (Ernazarov, 2020). Teahouses thus coincide with the development of all
aspects of community (Ernazarov, 2020).

Teahouses, as informal spaces, allow for communication and the transmission of
information—whether official (i.e. government, business) or unofficial (e.g. gossip,
traditional fables, etc.) (Roberts, 2016). As such, when individuals meet in teahouses,
they can solve issues through unofficial channels—outside the government purview,
at a local level—or via official channels, as government officials use the space to
discuss ideas and other "advisory work" (Ernazarov, 2020). Historically, especially in
the cases of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, teahouses have been informal religious spaces
where mosques outside the control of the state can be disguised (Atkin, 1989). This is
important because it demonstrates the potential subversive nature of teahouses against
government and institutional forces, indicating that teahouses have the potential to
be used as a source of independent civil society development in Central Asia.

The layout of most teahouses allows for guests to have relative privacy—even as
some Central Asian countries function through a close network of surveillance and
espionage. The teahouses throughout the Ferghana Valley all have similar layouts,
with ample space between tables and the option for private rooms which allow for a
fairly high level of confidentiality. These private rooms are either completely enclosed
or have shades that can be pulled around the table so that other guests cannot see the

identity of those sitting around the table. In addition, teahouses with outdoor table options have individual canopies or yurt-like structures that provided nearly complete privacy from other outdoor guests. Teahouses are unique in providing these types of private experiences because most restaurants or cafes observed in this region do not have private rooms and, when they do, have only one or two rooms available at a time. During observation in Uzbekistan, several government-registered and un-registered civil society organizations utilized these private spaces for meetings. One member of the Red Crescent Society, an active civil society organization in Central Asia, mentioned that teahouses offer the best meeting space not only because of comfort but because it is a private sphere and allows for the community to see the Red Crescent Society in action (Interviewee A, 2021). Additionally, according to this same source, teahouses allow for the Red Crescent Society to identify further sources of information or funding as they are able maintain an active presence in society (Interviewee A, 2021). The fact that the Red Crescent Society uses teahouses as a way to seek privacy but also as a way to show the community that they are active may seem counterintuitive, but in fact, shows the dual nature of teahouses as a public space which can offer privacy in ways that other public spaces, such as libraries or parks, cannot due to the fact that security services would immediately take notice. The nature of teahouses throughout the Ferghana Valley allows for individuals to maintain a level of privacy and autonomy, whilst still granting the members who partake in teahouse culture to see other guests within the teahouse—this permits civil society actors, such as the Red Crescent Society, to show their continued presence within society, while also allowing for privacy not afforded in other spaces.

This privacy also creates the conditions for civil society to develop. One of the best examples of this is through the emerging formation of Islamic civil society. While Kyrgyzstan overall is more tolerant towards religious organizations and beliefs compared to the other Central Asian states (Engvall, 2020), authorities in the country still view religion cautiously (Kolodzinskaia, 2020). This is especially true when it comes to Islamic groups that are difficult to classify, like Tablighi Jamaat. This Islamic organization or network is apolitical and, in Kyrgyzstan, does not have a clear goal beyond spreading and teaching Islam in the country, helping the Islamic community through charitable works, and connecting Kyrgyzstan's Muslims to the wider global community of Islamic followers (Mirsaitov, 2013). Since this organization relies on building connections with the local community to help further develop and support itself, it can be viewed as a civil society organization.

The works of Tablighi Jamaat are controversial throughout Central Asia because some view its teachings as extremist (Mirsaitov, 2013); however, in Kyrgyzstan, where religious legislation is more lenient than in other Central Asian states, the political authorities tolerate the organization, watching it carefully to monitor its activities (Mirsaitov, 2013). Thus, when this organization gathers with many individuals, they do so in relative anonymity, without any obvious signs of Tablighi Jamaat membership. The members of Tablighi Jamaat that I found gathering in a *chaikhana* (the local word for a teahouse) in Osh told me that teahouses are the best location to meet in order to limit any outside interaction from authorities, not only because anyone can visit a teahouse, but also because it is safe to meet in teahouses

as they can simply stop talking if someone enters their private dining room. In addition, they are able to easily explain away their meeting—a simple meal with friends. This was also evident in Tajikistan where one interviewee mentioned, "I would never host meetings at my home because it could endanger myself and others. If police arrive and see my Quran, then they could create links that are not there" (Interviewee B, 2021). This interviewee is a member of a local NGO involved with giving free legal advice in Khujand. However, with the political and security dynamics in the country, hosting meetings with other members of his legal aid service could become dangerous. As such, he only hosts meetings in his office or at teahouses. In his own words, teahouses "offer a more common place where police cannot associate one immediately with a religious agenda" (Interviewee B, 2021).

Under widespread surveillance of personal activity, teahouses throughout the Ferghana Valley allow individuals, especially those who are religious and fear being associated with banned groups, to meet. Civil society is already a sector that the government monitors heavily, and if the government has an opportunity to connect it with banned religious groups or any minor infraction, it will take that opportunity to shut down the group ("Tajikistan Rights Group Forced to Close," 2012). Therefore, teahouses allow for a safer refuge than private homes because teahouses do not have religious materials lying about, such as the Quran, for police to incorrectly associate with the people meeting there, as they can in private homes. Teahouses provide the opportunity for civil society to gather without individuals worrying about their homes being raided under the suspicion of religious extremism. While people still gather in teahouses as they would in private homes, civil society groups garner less suspicion from the security services because these social spaces are public. Additionally, individuals meeting together in teahouses worry less that their neighbours will call security services over activity incorrectly deemed to be suspicious, as all individuals, especially men, are welcome to meet in these spaces. Therefore, teahouses in the Ferghana Valley in this context provide not only protection from unwanted attention but can serve as an easy explanation for a meeting—whereas a meeting in a public place, like a park, or a private home would require a much greater effort to explain.

Despite this, as mentioned earlier, teahouses in Tajikistan, and perhaps all throughout Central Asia, do not fully escape the purview of the state; in fact, they sometimes become tools of the state to gain further evidence or blackmail against opposition figures or members of society who are deemed to go against social norms. For instance, in 2020 two gay men visiting a part-teahouse, part-hookah bar found themselves in the middle of an online scandal when videos of them emerged kissing thanks to secretly hidden cameras in their private room ("In Tajikistan, Two Men," 2020). The teahouse owner used these private videos to blackmail and kick the two men out from the establishment ("In Tajikistan, Two Men," 2020). While this incident occurred in Dushanbe and not in the Ferghana Valley, it demonstrates the risk that individuals in Tajikistan face even in teahouses. This risk was also established during the research observations where security cameras could be seen in teahouses, though the owners claimed that audio could not be heard and these were for security purposes only (meant to protect against burglaries) (Interviewee C, 2021). For this

reason, while teahouses are seemingly safe spaces, there are times this safety can and should be put into question. Even if the surveillance is not conducted by the Tajik government agencies, the threat posed by private individuals, especially in terms of blackmail, is still high.

While it is normal to have security cameras inside and outside of businesses, it is unusual to find them in private rooms, especially if guests do not know they there present. This has serious implications for civil society development in Tajikistan because, even if the state is not using these cameras, as the above example demonstrates, private owners of the teahouses can use these videotapes as leverage for extortion, blackmail, and other nefarious goals. The implications are even more dire if the state is directing the placement of these cameras in teahouses, particularly in ones frequented by civil society actors deemed religious or oppositional in nature. It would thus be wise for civil society actors to take further steps to protect their safety, even in teahouses. While it is important to consider these scenarios, during the research there was no evidence or interview testimony given to support the notion that the state is using security equipment in teahouses. Even with the risk of security cameras being in private rooms, teahouses still offer an important social space for civil society to meet, especially as all aspects of society in Tajikistan have become ever more securitized.

15.4 Government Interaction with Teahouses

Throughout the Ferghana Valley it was also evident that, even as governments try to prevent civil society from forming or becoming too independent, these same security services and other government officials meet regularly to discuss their business in teahouses. These meetings occur on and off the official record (Interviewee D, 2021). During observations, uniformed security services and police officials were seen eating and discussing topics, including issues concerning work, in the teahouse. One police official in Margilon—a city in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley—stated that "Teahouses are the usual place to meet and eat because they are quick, but also because there are private rooms out of range from others who want to listen to our conversations" (Interviewee D, 2021). These private rooms allow government officials, including the same security services who monitor civil society, the privacy they require to discuss topics that the public should not or cannot know about. The fact that even officials use teahouses to conduct business, including possibly the sharing of secret information, demonstrates the reliability of most teahouses as safe places from encroaching ears. Because several different groups meet in private rooms, or even in the general dining areas, there are simply too many people to target and monitor. Thus, it is highly unlikely that individuals or small groups of random civil society actors will be actively monitored. The same interviewee above summarized the situation in his comments that "teahouses offer the ability for one to merge with the crowd, and it is not uncommon to see high-ranking officials amongst the crowd of the general locals enjoying talks about recent weddings" (Interviewee D, 2021).

It is widely acknowledged that teahouses are a common social space for all, including those in government and security positions who normally oppose and monitor the social spheres of society. This situation seems to indicate the relative safety of teahouses for all members of society. The fact that even low-level government employees are unafraid to attend meetings and speak freely in teahouses reinforces the notion of teahouses as a safe space for all members of society, including civil society actors.

In fact, one can conclude that civil society is further developed in parts of the Ferghana Valley due to the interaction between teahouses and government officials, albeit sometimes in indirect ways. Since the ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010 in Osh, many Uzbek teahouse owners pay police officers to both protect their businesses and to essentially buy off the ethnic-Kyrgyz police officers who might otherwise take a predatory approach towards Uzbek businesses, thereby essentially creating a patronage system for survival (Interviewee E, 2021). As one Uzbek teahouse owner stated, "Paying police is a small price to pay to keep my business running" (Interviewee F, 2021). The tensions resulting from the ethnic violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in 2010 can still be felt today—even the teahouse owner interviewed fears that such an event might occur again. These 2010 events helped to spur a rebalance of patronage networks to ensure safety in areas the state had failed to provide for safety before. Most important for this research is the way this corruption between local police and teahouse owners impacts the development of civil society.

While Uzbek teahouse owners pay police to protect, and ultimately not to interfere in, their businesses, this has the unintended impact of creating an environment outside police interference and monitoring of civil society within the teahouse as well. By not having police always inside the teahouse, civil society can freely develop and discuss ideas. Local police indifference towards teahouses, due to the payments received from the Uzbek teahouse owners, creates an environment of freedom for civil society to meet in these locations. Conversely, the giving of local police bribes to stay away from the operation of Uzbek teahouses in southern Kyrgyzstan, gives, at least in theory, these same police officers more time to interfere and monitor other social spaces such as universities, parks, and online platforms. Therefore, in these spaces civil society cannot operate under such private conditions. This process creates a cyclical effect that results in civil society actors meeting more in teahouses than in other social spaces. While this situation occurs in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, specifically due to the unique social conditions in the city, it is likely that, in other parts of the Ferghana Valley, teahouse owners also pay local police bribes, although for other reasons, and that the impact on civil society development in teahouses would be the same.

15.5 Charity or Corruption

Central Asia is developing and has an endemic corruption problem (Roy, 2004). As a result, not all the allotted government funds reach their intended destinations,

particularly when it comes to the furthest regions and villages from city centres. In other countries, this would lead to major issues, especially in terms of social welfare. However, many in the region have unified around common community networks which serve to fill in the gaps of government indiscretion, such as the *mahalla* networks (local social institutions typically embedded within a small community or neighbourhood in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) (Urinboyev, 2014).

As central tenants of the community, teahouses allow space for the *mahalla* leaders to gather and discuss their plans, including charity for the community. It should be noted that many of these leaders are on the payroll of the government (Urinboyev, 2014). While not a formally recognized and registered organizations of civil society, these informal gatherings of leaders represent the ways civil society manifests in the region. Furthermore, it demonstrates the unique role teahouses play in society as a place for gatherings around social improvement. As one *mahalla* leader in Ferghana, Uzbekistan, suggested, "Teahouses represent the very essence of Uzbek society—filled with hospitality, friendly faces, and the tendency to help" (Interviewee G, 2021). In this sense, teahouses provide not only a place for local council members to meet but also a social mechanism to further their intended goals.

In addition to providing a space for community leaders to meet, teahouse owners also recognize the need to help community leaders fulfil their charitable initiatives. Not only do teahouses help to occasionally feed the poor or homeless, they sometimes also donate money or other resources to these *mahalla* leaders to help with the community's needs. One teahouse owner in Khujand, Tajikistan, so described his participation in a recently created civil society group in his neighbourhood, "during the pandemic I witnessed the devastation that the dire economic condition was having on my friends and neighbours, so I started donating food from my business to the poor and volunteering to raising more money for my community" (Interviewee H, 2021). This teahouse owner, like many others, realized the important role the teahouse plays in the community, as well as how important the community is to keeping the teahouse financially stable—the two are interconnected. The community uses teahouses as a social space and, as a business, teahouses need the community in order to maintain a good working environment. Thus, while teahouses provide a safe and confidential space for the development of civil society, the owners of teahouses also help to further the causes of civil society in their respective communities. In return, civil society also reinforces the financial stability of the teahouse by giving it customers. For example, the aforementioned teahouse owner indicates that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he allowed a local group of teenagers to use his teahouse as a base to collect and distribute masks, which also attracted more customers to his business (Interviewee H, 2021). To this end, teahouses not only help to develop civil society, they, through their very existence in the Ferghana Valley, can be seen as a unique civil society actor in their own regard.

15.6 Conclusion

Teahouses in the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia have enabled civil society actors to develop and further refine their organizations' goals and initiate change in their respective communities. This is an impressive feat, as the governments in the region actively try to create hardships for or prevent civil society from forming entirely. Governments in the region are highly suspicious of foreign involvement, including funding, and any individuals who seemingly represent the possibility of forming an opposition to the status quo. As such, civil society is the target for repression because of the foreign involvement and occasional oppositional ideas that these groups engender. While, according to the constitutions and government officials of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, civil society is able to freely form and operate, very few truly independent civil society organizations are able to receive official recognition; instead, most of the formally recognized civil society groups are state sponsored. This is not to discredit the diligent work that civil society groups engage in throughout the region; in fact, there is a vibrant civil society in Central Asia, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, but one must look in the casual peripheries of society to recognize it. Although civil society has had to develop and operate outside the scope of the government, it actually develops in one of the most social spaces imaginable—the teahouse.

   In this chapter, I aimed to underline the role of the teahouse as a social space and examined the ways they help create the necessary conditions and environments for civil society to develop and create change in the Ferghana Valley of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Central Asian teahouses and the social culture that they have spurred have outlasted Russian, Soviet, and modern-day government repression. The study of teahouses offers the unique ability to understand not only government oppression and the ways they use security services, but how teahouses act as an intersection between the political sphere, a business enterprise, and a community space. The dynamic roles that teahouses play in Central Asian societies make them key assets to civil society development. However, as governments in the region begin to administer stricter regulations for civil society registration and international funding and to target key pathways for information sharing such as the internet, it would be surprising if the social situation surrounding teahouses does not become scrutinized as well. As the security situation in teahouses in Tajikistan has increasingly become more tense, it can only be a matter of time before other Central Asian governments begin to take notice of the unique role that teahouses play in society, especially for civil society.

   Teahouses in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley significantly contribute to enhancing the ability of civil society to develop and advance their agendas. The prevailing ways these social spaces accomplish this is through a combination of safety, privacy, and charitable giving. The inherent components and structure of teahouses, which allow for comfortable and basic social gatherings, also allow for more dynamic instances of human interactions that are necessary for civil society—especially in consideration of the repressive environments that they must operate within. While other social

spaces, such as parks, restaurants, and private homes, offer some of the same things as teahouses, they do not contain the complete components that teahouses can and do provide. These public spaces have also previously been known to be surveilled by the state, which means that these other places are not as conducive to civil society development. The safety of teahouses is shown by the fact that even security and police services use these space for their private lives and work discussions. The fact that even these security and government officials are comfortable having private meetings in teahouses is a prime indicator that teahouses are a safe option for civil society development.

Furthermore, teahouses are distinct in their ability to promote civil society development due to their close ties to the local community. Teahouses in the region take on a charity-like role, enabling business-community improvement by giving to the community, allowing civil society organizations into their businesses, and occasionally giving money to these organizations to help improve the local environment. They play a unique role in civil society development by helping to fund various actors or groups who they view as a force to help improve the local environment. Thus, teahouses enhance the ongoing civil society building process in Central Asia, even in the light of increasingly hostile government actions towards these individuals and groups. The findings of this research are not specific only to the Ferghana Valley; instead, they can be more generally applied to the entireties of the countries that share the Ferghana Valley as teahouse culture is present in nearly all parts of these countries and provides the same level of protection and safety. It is imperative that these spaces are protected region-wide in order to provide for the further the development of civil society in Central Asia.

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