



GREEN PARTIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

From a small movement of environmentalists with sparsely distributed supporters across Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, the Greens nowadays have evolved into influential political parties and are currently an essential part of the political landscape in many countries around the world. Today green parties in Europe and other parts of the world are fully capable of competing with other political parties in elections and are often represented in local as well as national legislative. For instance, the success of Germany's Green party in the German Federal Elections of 2021, when the Greens won nearly 15% of the vote and the third largest number of seats in the Bundestag [Eu.boell.org, 2021], was viewed by many as another step forward in the advancement of environmentalist views in Europe. The situation is likewise in many western democracies, where an increasing number of people seem to vote for parties with an environmentalist agenda.

The support for green parties tends to be weaker in developing and less democratic countries where environmental agendas are usually hardly capable of competing with tangible bread-and-butter concerns [Grant, 2018]. Central Asia is certainly among the regions where the Green agenda is underrepresented in political life. For instance, Green parties are not represented in the parliaments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian state where Greens (The Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan (EMU)) have 10% of the seats in the national legislative body. However, it should be mentioned that the EMU has a permanent fraction in the lower house of the Oliy Majlis in the amount of 15 out of total 150 seats in accordance with the election law of Uzbekistan. This 10% of the seats in the legislative of Uzbekistan are not distributed on fully competitive grounds based on election results but rather came as a result of state regulation to promote environmental laws.

One of the most obvious technical reasons explaining the failure of Green parties to get into the national parliaments in Central Asia is the overall rigidity of political systems in

countries of the region. The political systems of the countries of the region vary a lot in this regard though, with Kyrgyzstan being the most liberalized one in terms of political life and Turkmenistan being on the other side of this spectrum. Thus, for instance, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan do not even have officially registered Green political parties, while Kyrgyzstan has parties that actively promote Green initiatives and participate in elections.

Fairly high electoral thresholds is another significant technical obstacle for Green parties to get into the parliaments in Central Asian states. For instance in Tajikistan, parties must overcome the 5% of electoral threshold in order to secure seats in the Tajik parliament. For Kazakhstan, the threshold is 7% and for Kyrgyzstan, it is 9%. Heavy regulations and various types of legal barriers make it uneasy for parties and movements with pro-environmentalist agendas to gain representation in legislative bodies.

Besides technical and formal barriers in addressing environmental issues at the political level, there are also implicit underlying factors explaining the limited success and little support for Green parties and other types of civil environmentalist initiatives in countries of Central Asia. Firstly, it should be admitted that although people in Central Asia are generally well aware of environmental issues [UNDP, 2020], they seem to be more concerned about visible manifestations of environmental problems that affect them directly [Makhanov, 2021]. However, these concerns often do not lead to the formation of complex social organizations such as formal movements, NGOs, and political parties, but sometimes lead to spontaneous protests in the most extreme cases.

Secondly, the heavy reliance of most Central Asian states on primary industries that traditionally are considered unclean entail that Green initiatives are often perceived more as a threat jeopardizing the corporate interests of major companies and the economic welfare of the countries. For instance, six out of ten

major corporate taxpayers in Kazakhstan are mining companies and the majority of them are at least partially state-owned [Forbes, 2021]. Strong anti-environmentalist interests and relatively weak civic and public institutions that could address environmental issues leave little chance for serious Green reforms to be implemented in countries of Central Asia.

The lack of effective political institutions capable of promoting Green reforms in Central Asian countries leads to poor environmental management with far-reaching consequences. According to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI) ranking list of 2022, which is a measure of the collective environmental impact of all of a country's policies combined, Kazakhstan is ranked 93rd among 180 countries, followed by (Uzbekistan 107th), Tajikistan (117th), Turkmenistan (118th) and Kyrgyzstan (126th) [EPI, 2022]. In the meantime, Central Asia is one of the world's most environmentally fragile regions prone to various types of disasters. The countries of the region run multiple risks associated with the environment and climate change. One of the acute problems that the region is very likely to face in the near future is scarcity. The situation is aggravated by the fact that it is the most environmentally hazardous industry, associated with the extraction of materials and use of energy, that countries of the region are the most economically dependent on.

The weak engagement of the population of Central Asian countries in proposing environmental initiatives and reforms remains to be one of the main structural problems in the effective implementation of Green reforms in the region. The eminent environmental challenges that Central Asia is about to face in the near future not only require effective communication between the population and governments but also well-calibrated regional cooperation schemes. In this regard, Green parties play an essentially important role in addressing environmental reforms at the political level.

In essence, supporting Green social and political institutions in Central Asia is part of the post-Soviet socio-political modernization of the region. The basic idea proposed by Green parties and movements should be the superiority of lucrative payoffs from Green political strategies implemented now over short-term gains from environmentally hazardous activities and the Green parties should play a key role in ensuring the participation of citizens in addressing and implementation of Green initiatives.

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