

Volunteering and Philanthropy in Central Asia: Fusion of Ancient Local Traditions and Modern European Values¹

Viacheslav Ivanov (Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Non-Profit
Sector, HSE University, Moscow)

Abstract

The historical development of volunteering and philanthropy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has been studied from ancient times to the present day. It was found that volunteering and charity in Central Asia have common historical roots. The tradition of collective mutual aid has always played an important role in the region's culture, evolving into modern volunteering and philanthropy over time. It is important to note that the modern revival of these civil society practices coincided with the period during which the above states gained independence. In the present day, the effectiveness, usefulness and significance of volunteering and charity for society has increased, as has the range of opportunities for their implementation. Support from state bodies and improvements to the legislative framework that took into account the interests of the volunteer movement, public associations of citizens and non-profit organizations played an important role in this activity. The development of legislation in all countries of the region took place in parallel and was influenced by various factors that led to the emergence and strengthening of civil societies, strengthened trust and interaction between parliamentarians and voters, involved academic circles and experts, and shared, considered and used each other's and neighboring countries' experience.

Keywords: Volunteering, Philanthropy, Traditions, Legislation, Central Asia

¹ Recommended citation:

Ivanov, V. (2026). Volunteering and philanthropy in Central Asia: Fusion of ancient local traditions and modern European values. In *ERNOP Conference Proceedings 2025* (pp. 90–95). European Research Network on Philanthropy.

1. Introduction

Central Asia is a territory comprising five neighboring states, most of which are traditionally considered part of the historical region of Central Asia: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan, located to the north of these countries, is also included in this group. The region was selected for the study in accordance with the geographical scheme of the world's regions as it described by *UN Statistics Division, 1999*. According to this scheme, Central Asia is one of six subregions that form the macro-region (continental region) Asia. For convenience and consistency with the different geographical classification used by UNESCO and its associates, the term region is used in this study instead of subregion for Central Asia.

The economic, political, demographic and cultural characteristics of the region are such that its territory was continuously part of a single state – the Russian Empire, later the USSR. During this period for a total approximately 160 years, from 1830s up to the end of 1991, the Central Asia region had no internal borders. At that time, the entire population of the region engaged in common economic activities within the framework of a single country. The peoples of Central Asia used, along with their own national languages, a single official language – Russian. To this day, it serves as the language of interethnic communication for all peoples living in the region.

2. Research Methodology

In this study, we defined how do historical precursors in five Central Asian countries shape the contemporary landscape of volunteering and philanthropy, as evidenced through public recognition, civic engagement, and state support via civil society legislation. This approach employs a historical institutionalist framework described by *Thelen, 1999* and *Pierson, 2000* to analyze the development of volunteering and philanthropy in Central Asia. This allows us to trace how historical precursors—such as Soviet mass mobilization, Islamic charitable traditions, and clan-based mutual aid—have created distinct institutional path dependencies. We examine how these legacies interact with contemporary critical junctures (e.g., independence, new legislation) to shape the current landscape of public engagement, civil society organizations, and state-civil society relations in the five countries. It also corresponds to the Post-Soviet context of the social origins of civil society by *Salamon, 1998*.

Various tools, methods and procedures were applied to conduct the qualitative study. These were based on gathering information from reliable sources for subsequent processing and analysis. The main research technique was based on collecting secondary data, which was the main source of available information related to volunteering and philanthropic activities, and their contribution to and impact on the societies, cultures and economies of the countries under study.

Sources of data included the official websites of government and regional authorities, local self-government bodies, statistical and research organizations, consulting agencies, commercial companies, public associations and foundations, non-profit organizations, charity foundations and volunteer support and development centers. During the course of the study, relevant materials were collected and analyzed from peer-reviewed scientific publications,

conference proceedings, literature reviews, analytical reports, laws and other regulatory acts, publications on social networks, online reference systems and data search engines. A number of regional experts from the non-profit sector were personally interviewed.

3. Historical Background

Since prehistoric times, the vast territory of Central Asia has been inhabited by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes who engaged in cattle breeding and agriculture where the climate permitted. The harsh living conditions gave rise of the social practice of *khashar* (an Arabic-Persian word that has become established in the Uzbek and Tajik languages) in local communities. This is a unique charitable tradition throughout the region, consisting of voluntary, unpaid, collective assistance to neighbors, relatives, friends and comrades, and in general to people living in the same area. In other regional languages, it is known as its linguistic variations *ashar* (Kyrgyz), *asar* (Kazakh) and *yowar* (Turkmen). During the period when Central Asia was under Russian rule, information about these practices of mutual assistance was not widely available. However, they were well known in local communities and were also studied by Moscow's ethnographers who published the results under supervision by *Tolstoy, 1963*.

Above tradition is considered the main philanthropy practice which is well-known over the region. There are discovered also a number of the other practices which used by population in different part of the region under study. One part of them are more related to volunteerism as giving a time and labor efforts and other part is a charity as giving a money of goods to other people in needs.

The above tradition is considered the main philanthropic practice in the region. A number of other practices used by the population in different parts of the region under study have also been discovered. Some of these are more related to volunteerism, involving the donation of time and labour, while others involve charitable deeds such as giving money and goods to people in need, gathered by *Ivanov et al., 2024*.

If we look beyond ancient traditions and search for historical parallels with modern philanthropy and organized volunteering, historians *Gorlova and Tumanova, 2022*, have convincingly demonstrated that these practices emerged in the region alongside the activities of public organizations in pre-revolutionary Russia. They have demonstrated that the social and moral values on which volunteering and philanthropic activities were based throughout the Russian Empire, including its Central European territories, were largely similar to European values, becoming particularly evident at the end of the 19th century and continuing until the end of the First World War.

4. Philanthropy and Volunteering in the Soviet Era

In the first half of the 20th century, the entire region underwent significant economic transformation, despite still essentially living in medieval conditions. In order to implement industrialization, collectivization and electrification projects, the leadership of the Soviet Union and its republics needed to attract huge labour resources. This was largely achieved by

recruiting local residents as voluntary laborers. v, provides multiple examples of some of the most notable projects involving volunteers in Central Asia, including the construction of the Great Fergana Canal in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (1939–1940), the Great Gissar Canal in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (1940–1942), the Karakum Canal in Turkmenistan (1954–1988), and the Vakhsh Cascade Hydroelectric Power Plant, also known as Vakhshstroy, in Tajikistan (1931–1955). Additionally, youth volunteer teams were dispatched from across the USSR to Northern Kazakhstan to develop virgin land (1954–1965).

It would be not correct to consider the mass recruitment of people for large-scale industrial and construction projects in the USSR to be the same phenomenon as modern volunteering. This is because there are differing opinions on the matter, including the coercive nature of such state-initiated activities. However, local scholars and experts from non-profits believe that these labour efforts embodied the spirit of altruism based on collective good deeds and, most importantly, the centuries-old khashar tradition. There is evidence that such mass public participation in giant construction projects was perceived positively by society, as their results improved the quality of life for millions of people, so this is worth agreeing with. Additionally, *subbotnik* — the name given to volunteer teamwork activities carried out on weekends, originating from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic — gradually became integrated into the everyday lives of people in Central Asia in the last century, and this tradition still exists today.

5. Renaissance of Philanthropy and Volunteering

After gaining political and economic independence in the early 1990s, each Central Asian republic and its people embarked on their own development journey. As civil society and the non-profit sector gradually developed in these countries, a growing awareness emerged of the need to adopt special laws and introduce legal norms aimed at supporting and regulating charitable activities and volunteer work.

In all countries of the region, the process of developing and adopting decisions to improve the legislative framework protecting the rights and interests of volunteers and the entire volunteer movement proceeded in parallel. The formation of modern legislation was influenced by many factors. These included significant economic and political transformations that contributed to the emergence and development of civil society institutions, strengthened trust between members of parliaments and the population, encouraged the active participation of scientists and specialists, and facilitated the exchange of experience within the region and with neighboring countries.

The process began in the early 2000s with the adoption of the first laws promoting civil society and the non-profit sector. These laws focused on charity, patronage, philanthropy, state social procurement, youth policy, non-profit organizations, non-governmental organizations, public associations, social partnerships and social entrepreneurship. Initially, the focus was not on volunteer activities. An example of this is Kazakhstan's 2001 law 'On Non-Profit Organizations', which includes volunteerism among the objectives of NPOs alongside charitable activities and activities aimed at achieving social goals.

The 2007 Uzbekistani Law on Charity explicitly defines volunteers as individuals who engage in charitable activities in the form of unpaid work or services provided for the benefit of a beneficiary or charitable organization. This definition remains in place today. For example, Tajikistan's 2018 Law on Charitable Activities defines volunteers as individuals who carry out charitable activities in the form of unpaid work for the benefit of a beneficiary or charitable organization. In Kyrgyzstan, the 2017 Law on Patronage and Charitable Activities provides a definition of volunteering, and the 2023 Law on Youth states that volunteering is one of the key areas of work for the authorized state body responsible for youth policy.

An important result of the development of civil society in Central Asia is that all countries in the region now have basic laws that regulate philanthropic voluntary activities separately. These laws are described in details by Ivanov et al., 2024: This indicates a steady trend among government officials and national parliaments, supported by civil society experts, to make philanthropic and volunteering legislation more effective and relevant.

6. Conclusions

Research has shown that volunteering and charity practices in Central Asia have evolved over the centuries. Modern forms of these practices in Central Asian societies are essentially a fusion of ancient local traditions and modern values based on the European concept of philanthropy.

Furthermore, the study revealed that public policy on philanthropy and volunteering in Central Asian countries is the responsibility of the highest legislative and executive authorities. In all countries surveyed, the state plays an active role in developing philanthropy and volunteering by introducing measures to support and financially assist the improvement of volunteering infrastructure, as well as encouraging citizen participation. All five countries have a regulatory framework for the legal management of charitable activities and volunteering. These laws and regulations provide a solid foundation for the development of philanthropic practices, including charitable and volunteering activities carried out by organizations, initiative groups, and individual citizens.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ms. Margarita Mersiyanova from the Center for Non-Profit Sector and Civil Society Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University), Moscow, Russia, for her valuable comments on the research outputs and manuscript for this article.

Funding

The work was supported by the Program for Basic Research of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

References

United Nations Statistics Division, 1999. Standard country or area codes for statistical use (Standard M49). Available at: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49> (accessed 31 December 2025).

Thelen, K., 1999. Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2(1), p. 369.

Pierson, P., 2000. Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 94(2), p. 251.

Salamon, L., Anheier, H. (1998). Social Origins of Civil Society: Explaining the Nonprofit Sector Cross-Nationally. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 9(3), p. 213.

Tolstoy S.P., Ed., 1963. Peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. Vol. 2. Moscow: Publishing House of the USSR Academy of Sciences — series Peoples of the World — 783 pp. (in Russian).

Gorlova N.I., Tumanova A.S. Historical Background to the Development of Contemporary Forms of Volunteering in Russia. In the book: Organization of volunteer activities and interaction with socially oriented NPOs: textbook. Mersiyanova I.V., Ed. — Moscow: National Research University Higher School of Economics, Ch. 2, p. 55-77. (in Russian). Available at <https://publications.hse.ru/pubs/share/direct/559569123.pdf> (accessed 31 December 2025).

Ivanov V., Asadova E., Amreeva E., Moldokeeva J., Mamytova S., Sagyndykova A., Salikhova M., Agabalaev S., Salakhodzhaev R., 2024. State of Volunteering in Central Asia Review / Lead author Ivanov V. — Bonn: United Nations Volunteers — 114 pp. ISBN 978-92-95-04621-4.

Official Documents Cited

Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 79 On patronage and charitable activities as amended on 10 May 2017.

Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 157 On young people dated 4 August 2023.

Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 142 On non-profit organizations dated 16 January 2001.

Law of the Republic of Tajikistan On charitable activities, as amended on 2 January 2018 No. 1491 and 24 December 2022 No. 1940.

Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-96 On sponsorship dated 2 May 2007.