

1 Foreword

The legacy of the Soviet tradition of medicalisation of such social issues as alcohol and drug dependence is still preserved in the current drug policies and treatment practices across the states of Central Asia. The “zero-tolerance” approach to drug *use* translated into the “zero-tolerance” approach to drug *users*, aimed to protect society from the vice of addiction rather than to provide care and treatment to the affected people. This is reflected in the criminalisation of drug consumption, strict state regulation of treatment facilities and protocols, and restricted use of harm reduction methods. However, the systemic transformation that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for gradual (albeit still limited) expansion of actors in the field, development of more locally specific (culturally anchored) practices, and the introduction of international standards.

It is important to note that a lot of the change that has taken place in various institutional fields since 1991, including drug policy, aimed to ensure the political survival of Central Asian authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the economic burden of post-Soviet reforms prevented isolationism and allowed for foreign support and influence, which was especially consequential for developing more comprehensive procedures for statistical monitoring, sharing best practices, and establishing modern programmes for professional training. In addition, the combined effect of increased demand for prevention and treatment and bottom-up social mobilisation engendered non-governmental and non-profit engagement in the field of drug use prevention and treatment. NGOs built advocacy networks that promote the rights of drug users and fight to decrease the access threshold by reducing state control over treatments. They also became essential for cross-sectoral cooperation in service provision and the overall evolution of social work and community work across the region.

Against this background, it merits scholarly and practitioners’ attention to look beyond the remnants of the Soviet policies and understand the current conditions of practices for drug treatment and prevention in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. While

focusing on the role of NGOs in general and specific organisations in particular in each country, this book provides a detailed account of variation in legal frameworks, organisational tools, resource accumulation patterns, and communication strategies in the field. It also places the Central Asian experience in the international context by including studies on China and Germany and reflecting on similarities and differences between the local policies and practices and the global actors whose influence is significant in the region. As such, this publication can make an important contribution to the continued exchange of innovative (national) practices and rejection of obsolete approaches.

This volume may also be of special interest to those who study developments in community work, self-help organising, and volunteering as central tenets of civil society development in authoritarian regimes. Drug users and people with diseases related to drug use are subject to marginalisation and stigmatisation by the general public and professionals alike, and protection of their human rights is an uphill battle in countries where liberal norms and values are trampled on. NGOs working with these population groups are faced with the additional challenge of creating public awareness but also overcoming prejudice and building institutional trust. Withstanding the authoritarian coercion, restriction, and sometimes direct (extra)legal persecution, they find themselves on the frontline of the struggle for social justice and inclusion, leveraging professional expertise, transnational ties, and embeddedness in local communities against the precarity of civil society vis-à-vis the state. Their work can serve as an example and inspiration for human rights defenders across the world.

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