

From Uncertainty to Unity: A Journey of Regional Cohesion in Central Asia

reflective essay





The journey to the workshop was filled with anticipation and a touch of uncertainty. As old friends and colleagues exchanged smiles and new connections began to form, the early morning bus ride to the venue was a mix of sleepy faces and curious minds. Participants wondered, "**Why am I attending this workshop, and who are all these people?**" This question would resurface throughout the workshop, gradually gaining clarity and affirmation.

The workshop, themed "*Sustainable Development and Social Cohesion in Central Asia*," seemed like just another jargon-heavy event typical of the civil society sector. However, the diversity of the group — including bloggers, influencers, and business experts — promised a fresh perspective on these familiar topics. The workshop's focus wasn't immediately apparent, prompting the need for further exploration. This sentiment was echoed in comments from participants, leading to the creation of a special board to unpack unknown words and concepts.

Facilitator Zaure set the tone with her friendly and inclusive approach, sparking enthusiasm among participants. By acknowledging each person's presence and showing empathy throughout the sessions, she created an atmosphere where participants felt free to express their views. Nevertheless, communication barriers arose at times, highlighting the diversity of opinions within the group.

The first day's sessions clarified the workshop's objectives, thanks to the organizer's skillful use of questions to guide the discussion. *What is social cohesion? Who are the actors and factors that foster regional sustainability?* These questions encouraged participants to reflect and articulate their visions.



Two approaches emerged in tackling these questions: some participants offered ready-made solutions, while others sought to construct answers from scratch. This distinction was crucial, revealing a tendency among some to rely on “mental shortcuts” and provide simple answers, while others delved deeper into the complexities.

*The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) often served as such mental shortcuts. When asked what factors might unite the region, the prompt and easy answer was "the SDGs!" However, a subset of participants sought deeper insights! “Let’s explore unconventional connections, unseen regional links, and a bottom-up approach to region-building”. Yet, one idea struck the organizers, but was overlooked by participants: **the path to regional collaboration involves constructing new solutions rather than replicating existing models.***





The second day began with a positive debriefing session, setting the stage for meaningful discussions. Participants explored unifying trends and factors in the region, dividing into four groups for a heated discussion. Formulating answers was challenging, requiring participants to agree to disagree and challenge each other's perspectives.

The discussions initially focused on expected topics such as water resources, climate change adaptation, and security threats as potential unifiers. However, these topics were often seen as "wishful thinking" rather than offering concrete solutions. Some participants argued that these factors often divide rather than unite the region and are used in political strategies for influence. A key challenge was defining what the "region" meant, as participants came from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and often questioned the inclusion of Tajikistan and Afghanistan in the discussion.





The most significant shift in the conversation came when business representatives took the floor, moving the discussion from **generalizations to evidence-based solutions**. Their insights had a profound impact, highlighting the importance of trade facilitation and business perspectives in region-building. They emphasized simplified visa procedures to ease movement across borders and regional business projects that foster economic ties and social cohesion. Bank reform and currency conversion were highlighted as measures to promote financial stability and growth, while regional tourism products strengthen cultural and economic bonds. Snapshots of collaborative civil society initiatives addressing gender-based violence and environmental social governance were also shared, but remained secondary.

This was a profound evidence-based presentation, full of reflective analysis. The ongoing process of fostering regionalism and social cohesion was clearly structured and presented. On the one hand, it highlighted the importance of trade facilitation for region-building, while also demonstrating how crucial it is to include business perspectives in discussions on social cohesion and regional development. **Businesses bring practical applications** and help to materialize regional development and social cohesion processes.



To continue the evidence-based discussion, the participants presented three analyses of civil society development in Kazakhstan, the role of state language in Kyrgyzstan, and the role of traditional Islam in identity building. Rather than providing answers, these presentations **raised several interesting questions**. While the state's use of language plays a clear and important role in building state agency and resisting colonialism, promoting the "right" interpretation of Islam remains vague. While aligning approaches to preventing violent extremism across Central Asian states is a promising area for collaboration, state control over religious practices varies, with some countries restricting certain groups while others allow them to prosper.

Another valuable contribution came from the blogger community, whose presence at the workshop brought fresh perspectives to the table. They highlighted the emergence of creative spaces where like-minded individuals across borders can gather, fostering collaboration and innovation. Improved digitalization in Central Asian countries was noted as a crucial factor in bringing transparency and trust to state services. These developments contribute significantly to **region-building by enhancing communication, promoting cultural exchange, and increasing accountability**.

On this very positive note, following the session, participants took a team-building boat tour full of jokes, drinks, and more photo sessions. **Some brave ones dove straight into meaningful discussions, as well as the lake**. This refreshing experience was a much-needed recharge before the concluding day.



Interestingly, as the workshop progressed, participants gained increasing clarity on social cohesion and regional stability. The diverse perspectives and exploration of unseen processes expanded their horizons. At the same time, multifaceted discussions inspired participants to generate new ideas. **Did they learn by doing, or did the process beget the outcomes?** In either case, the structured, in-person discussion generated ideas worth sharing.

The final, but no less important day kicked off with a debrief and recouped the previous day's discussion. The conventional mood to start reflection and serious discussion has been disrupted by the proposal to have an art therapy session. Training facilitator Zaure gave us full freedom to create and express our thoughts through drawing. Indeed, **art can express what words cannot.** While participants came from various regions, spoke different languages and had different perspectives, all shared the language of art. The exercise raised expectations and excitement to see the end product of the session.

This session warrants its own analysis, as what we saw in the artwork was precisely what participants hadn't articulated during discussions and group work. Let's take a closer look at what happened.

Facilitator Zaure asked participants to express what the Central Asian region means to them and imagine sending this message to future generations. She encouraged them to create artwork that would convey their vision of the region to those looking back in time. The participants engaged with focus and enthusiasm, each group presenting interpretations of other groups' paintings. This exercise tested whether the audience's interpretation matched the intended meaning of the artwork.



Turning to the artwork itself, all pieces articulated common identities shared by the region. Some participants highlighted **knowledge and enlightenment**, referencing past golden ages, while others focused on **trading routes and the importance of peaceful coexistence** and shared borders. A theme of **building horizontal structures** emerged, emphasizing equality and cooperation rather than regional leadership, though a few hints of leadership aspirations were noted and seemed to reflect a lack of articulation, rather than being the stated ambition of the artwork.

The notion of love and friendship appeared as another message, while the shared Soviet past was only mentioned once. Many participants incorporated elements of nature, the sky, and the sun into their art, showing the deep connection Central Asians feel to their environment and cultural heritage. This attachment was seen in objects framed with national ornaments.

With a sense of being heard and understood, participants moved on to the generation laboratory, where they crafted initiatives aimed at fostering regional social cohesion and integration. This exercise was marked by displays of agency, reflecting a genuine ambition to make an impact. Divided into groups, participants proposed a variety of initiatives, including attracting investment to regional business projects, promoting state languages through media, and creating platforms for expert discussions. They also suggested book clubs and creative festivals, with the latter emerging as one of the most popular ideas.



One particularly notable idea focused on promoting content designed to build a shared regional narrative. In my humble observation, this initiative leans towards constructing a unified regional identity and fostering regional thinking through content creation. It highlights the growing recognition of the importance of narrative in shaping a collective regional consciousness.

The evolution of regional thinking throughout the workshop was striking. What began as a vague concept of regional resilience and sustainability gradually took shape as discussions advanced, and it became increasingly clear that building regional cohesion is less about replicating existing models and more about nurturing local agencies. However, much remains to be defined and developed.

The next step will be to see if these **abstract ideas can be transformed into actionable initiatives**. The real test lies in implementing the proposals and measuring their impact.

