

## **From Shrinking Spaces to Shared Strategies**

### ***Insights from Central Asia on how to build collective action for conflict prevention and peacebuilding***

Out of 46 sessions at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Forum 2025, only one addressed Central Asia. On the one hand, that's disappointing — but on the other, it offered some hope. The Central Asia Peacebuilding Hub was keen to share not only specific challenges, successes and learnings from their context, but also to raise high the importance of maintaining investment in conflict prevention from a global perspective.

In a time of shrinking civic space, the region's story showed how trust, dialogue, and collective action can still be built in innovative and grounded ways.

At a time when civic spaces are narrowing worldwide and collaborative governance is increasingly under strain; the experiences of actors coming together to prevent conflict and build sustainable peace in Central Asia offer critical lessons for the global peacebuilding community. During the 2025 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Forum, the session “Beyond Shrinking Space: A New Model for Collective Action in Peacebuilding” showcased how actors in Kyrgyzstan and the broader region are not only adapting to a shrinking civic space but transforming it into a platform for resilience, dialogue, and systemic change.

One of the most striking insights from the session was the critical role of trust-building. In a context where government and civil society increasingly regard each other with suspicion, the Central Asia Peacebuilding Hub has emerged as a powerful example of how inclusive platforms can foster shared ownership over peacebuilding goals and strategies to reach them. The Hub was established in Kyrgyzstan initially, to overcome the challenge of fragmented peace efforts led by different international NGOs, UN agencies, and local CSOs, often with little interaction with other key actors such as the central government, local authorities and the private sector. The Hub was born out of the need to create a space where civil society, state actors, business, and international partners could co-create strategies for peacebuilding grounded in local realities. Here are some interesting ideas that had been shared by different sector representatives during the SIPRI forum session.

Ms. Kultaeva, member of Central Elections Commission, Kyrgyz Republic

*I strongly believe that peacebuilding now extends beyond security to education, culture, technology, business and elections. As you may know, in Kyrgyzstan's history, the election results triggered mass protests in 2005, 2010 and 2020. We have realized that to have peace and stability in Kyrgyzstan, we need to work not only on upgrading our electoral technologies but also focus on voters' education and building dialogue with all key stakeholders. The Yntymak week is such a space where dialogue with all key stakeholders are possible, therefore we participated actively and plan to continue our cooperation with the Peacebuilding Hub in the future.*

Mr. Sydykov, Head of International Business Council (business association), Kyrgyz Republic

*Businesses know that peace and stability go hand in hand with profits and lower risks, but may not see how they can be involved. Our role as a business association is to bridge this gap, be their voice in peacebuilding, and make them heard.*

*Platforms like Yntymak greatly help in launching this awareness in the first place and setting path for further cooperation between public and private sectors, civil society and internationals. For example, green policy incentives are far more effective than administrative measures for behavioural change not only in business, but for people in general and they contribute to conflict minimization efforts) – through creating the Central Asian Green Practices Platform, we aim to change people’s attitude to business community and vice versa, through this network we move towards joint actions for peacebuilding in CA region and beyond.*

*Ms. Aizat Ruslanova, Executive Director of IDEA CA*

*From the perspective of local civil society and youth, one of the most significant contributions of the Hub has been creating genuine spaces for intergenerational dialogue. At IDEA Central Asia, we have seen that sustainable peace and the protection of civic space depend on the ability of different generations to understand one another, share lessons, and collectively respond to challenges. Our programs bring together young activists, community leaders, and experienced professionals to co-create initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and protect civic freedoms. Through activities like Yntymak Week, young people do not simply participate as beneficiaries—they engage as co-leaders, shaping discussions and proposing solutions alongside older generations. This approach has not only amplified youth voices in decision-making but has also fostered trust and continuity in civic action, which is essential to maintaining open and resilient civic spaces in the region.*

What makes the Hub particularly relevant beyond Central Asia is its relational approach to conflict prevention. In a sector too often dominated by technical fixes and projectized interventions, this initiative highlights the importance of cultivating safe, reflective, and purpose-driven spaces. Its hallmark initiative, Yntymak Week, mobilized over 1,000 participants across multiple sectors and countries— enabling the sharing and active listening between different actors and sectors of their experiences, learnings and narratives regarding what building social cohesion and peace in Central Asia entails. This model underscores a critical lesson: conflict prevention is not simply about addressing symptoms; it is about nurturing the conditions for addressing root factors of conflict and polarisation through cooperation across divides.

For global actors navigating similar dynamics—from Eastern Europe to parts of Africa and Latin America—Central Asia’s experience reinforces four key takeaways.

First, **peacebuilding legitimacy grows from co-creation**. Initiatives must be shaped by and with, not for, local actors. The Hub succeeded because it avoided prescriptive designs and instead invested in building a collective “we” among stakeholders.

Second, **strategic communication is critical, not a nice to have**. Members and stakeholders in the HUB recognize that their efforts must resonate beyond expert circles. Through inclusive storytelling and media engagement geared towards a larger audience, they made peacebuilding accessible and

connecting with people's lived realities and identities —building broader public support in the process.

Third, **a culture of learning must be deliberately cultivated**. Reflective practice was not assumed; it was built over time, through shared experiences, the readiness to show vulnerability and share about failures and challenges, and using peer learning and peer-support as a way to find solutions and work through those difficulties.

Finally, **regional solidarity must grow organically**. Rather than impose structures, the Hub focused on visibility, dialogue, and relationship-building—planting seeds for long-term cooperation that respects cultural and political nuances.

As civic space contracts globally, and as attention is pulled to managing conflicts once they've become violent – and hence when it's hardest – rather than before, these lessons from Central Asia are more urgent than ever. Peacebuilders must move beyond siloed interventions and invest in ecosystems of collaboration that can withstand political turbulence. Central Asia's experience doesn't offer a blueprint, but it offers hope—and a compelling invitation to reimagine what collective action for conflict prevention and peacebuilding can look like in today's fractured world.