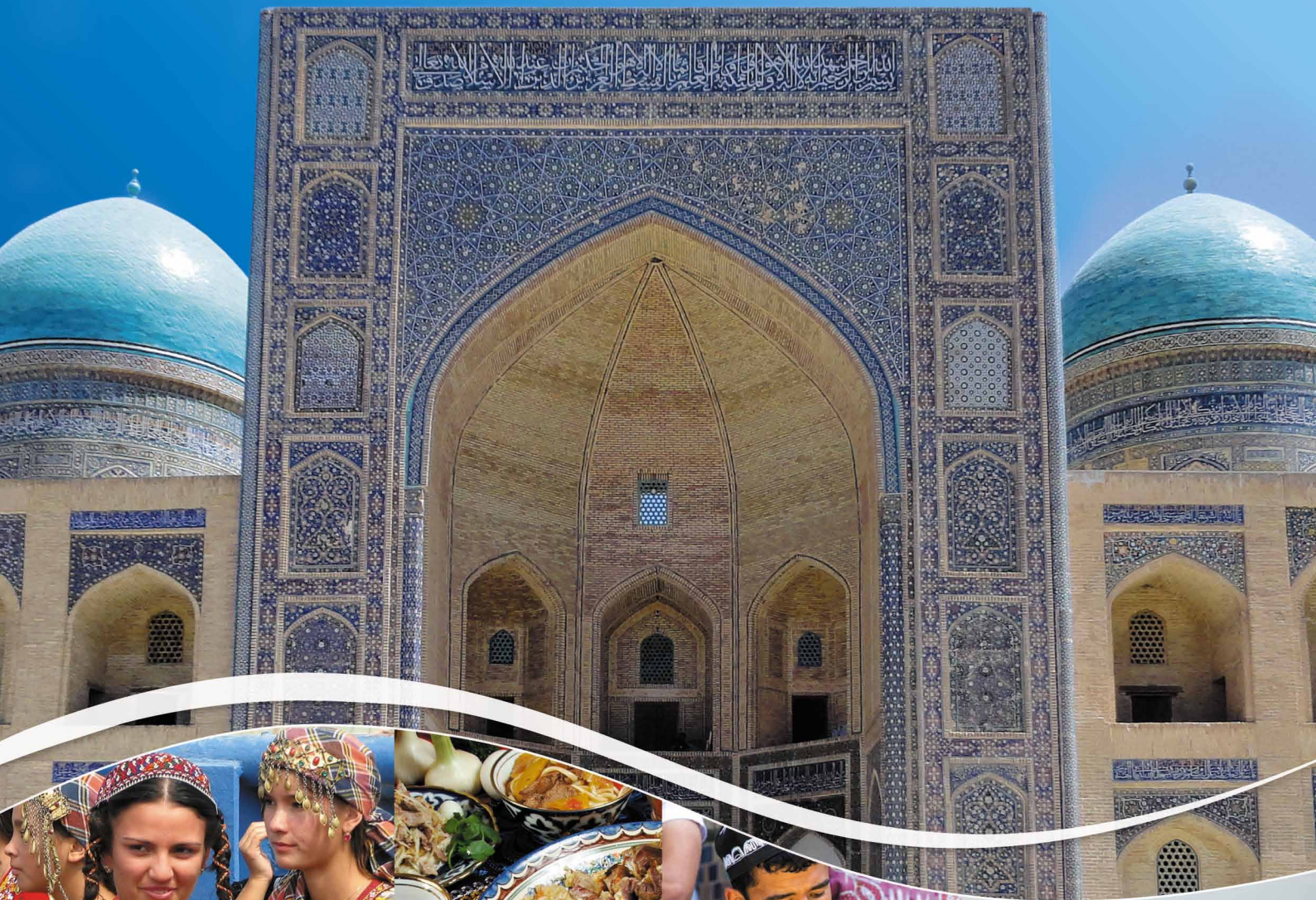


# CENTRAL ASIA AT 25: LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

**A collection of essays from Central Asia**



**EDITORS:**  
Marlene Laruelle  
Aitolkyn Kourmanova

Central Asia Program  
Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies  
Elliott School of International Affairs  
The George Washington University

MAY 2017

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This edited volume includes essays from experts, journalists, and practitioners who work in Central Asia and reflect on what they consider the main successes and failures of these 25 years of national sovereignty, as well as the challenges their societies face in the near and long-term future.

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# INTRODUCTION

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In the twenty-five years since the collapse of the Soviet Union catapulted the Central Asian states into independence, knowledge of the Central Asian region has primarily been produced by US and European scholars. Russian academic research—so rich during the Soviet decades—largely collapsed, and has only just begun to get back on its feet. Japan has emerged as a new hub for state-of-the-art knowledge on the region, but is still only loosely connected to the main, predominantly English speaking platforms of exchange and therefore does not—yet—influence the broader picture. China, India, Iran, and Turkey all have great specialists working on the region. Yet, with the potential exception of India’s scholars, these specialists tend to work individually, without producing a distinct “school of thought.” More striking still is the lack of Central Asian voices to be heard in the West. Particularly in the United States, the influence of Central Asian scholars is limited a mere handful of renowned academics from the region, often from Soviet generations. This state of affairs is nonetheless changing thanks to the rapid organization of a new generation of transnational scholars who are generating knowledge that is largely detached from national contexts, and who are either “Westerners” based in Central Asia or Central Asians based in the “West,” while all prefer patterns of academic “nomadism.”

To reflect on a quarter century of independence, we have decided to give the floor exclusively to local voices. In the following pages, Central Asian scholars express what they consider the main successes and failures of these 25 years of national sovereignty, as well as the challenges their societies face in the near and long-term future.

The first part of the book insists on three critical elements of the last 25 years: processes of integration of the new states into the international scene; an ideology that absolutizes the sovereignty acquired in 1991 as the quintessence of national achievement; and, domestically, a political path that is shaped by presidentialism and a fear of pluralism of opinions, which all these countries see as a threat to their stability and essence.

These scholars also mention the difficulties involved in setting up a functional market economy: each country’s economic path has been shaped not by

its institutional design choice (privatizing or not) but by its access—or lack thereof—to raw materials and to the rent to be gained from them. The positioning of the region as a “hub” for big players and regional actors to engage in is a key international drawcard for Central Asia: for better or worse, the region sees itself and is seen by others through a geopolitical lens. While in the 1990s Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Iran all vied on the Central Asian scene, today China directs a large part of the action, and new actors such as the Gulf countries, South Korea, and Malaysia all have a rising footprint in the region.

Local scholars often express disappointment at the lack of regional cooperation and unity. Some discuss the disintegration of Central Asia, while others note, more optimistically, the emergence of new trends that, at least partly, reunite the region, such as economic complementarity. Several scholars mention the revival of a kind of Turkic unity feeling among younger generations: contrary to narratives in the early 1990s, where Turkicness was linked to a possible project of regional integration, contemporary calls to Turkicness do not necessarily imply a regional dimension but instead an anti-Russian identity project associated with state nationalism.

The second part looks at the transformation of identities and societies in their “post-Sovietness.” The search for a national ideology has been a crucial element of state policy for the last quarter century. Such policy has to accommodate not only ethnic diversity but also an even greater divergence of historical memories as well as often conflicting interpretations about what comprises a nation’s “essence.” National ideology contributes to the structuring of a dual process of retraditionalization and modernization. As the Central Asian states are historically new, their developing nationhood has been closely interlinked with state-building; difficulties in governance and institution-building have contributed to challenging the state-sponsored narrative on the nation. If Central Asian public policies have been obsessed with promoting “national culture,” their upshot has been ambiguous. The image of culture has tended to become frozen, a static expression of an inheritance, a legacy, or a patrimony instead of being a living reflection of society. Added to this is the challenge of education in the whole region: the collapse of Soviet welfare drastically impoverished primary and secondary education, with long-term implications that we are still unable to measure. While higher education appears to be in better shape and more globalized, it remains plagued by endemic corruption and diminishing academic standards.

The third part looks at the new social forces at work. Key here is probably labor migration. Migration has dramatically changed the socioeconomic landscape of many rural regions, and provincial and capital cities in Central Asia. It has also drastically modified the relationship of Central Asian countries—especially Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—to Russia, increasing their need for regional integration and free population movement. But the current “diasporization” of Central Asian societies extends beyond mere labor migration to Russia. It also includes a growing globalization of the population and new connectivity with South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Europe, and the United States. The Uzbek diaspora in the US is probably the most impressive example of this new trend. Other social forces are at work domestically: civil society in the Western, liberal sense of the term has seen limited development and is often considered an imported product, while one notes the formation of a more state-controlled, GONGO-style civil society such as the mahalla in Uzbekistan. The new trend seems to comprise the rise of traditional solidarity networks, informal justice inspired by a loose definition of Islam, and an Islamic-inspired civil society. This trend is accompanied by the social media’s growing role not only in contesting the authorities, but in developing new platforms for professional or non-professional sociabilities. In all of the ongoing transformations, Islam seems destined to be used or referred to as a yardstick or a value system, even if the term “Islam” covers multiple realities and meanings. It goes from being used as a cultural reference to being claimed as a driver of social justice or as a slogan to be brandished for violence, especially in the name of a “geopolitical Islam” as used by Central Asian fighters in Syria.

The fourth part looks forward and investigates the new ideological trends that will shape Central Asian countries, or at least some of them, in the future. Political pluralism still may be late to arrive on the Central Asian scene, Kyrgyzstan excepted, but ideological pluralism is already present in different layers of society, especially among the younger generations. Several trends and their social bearers can be identified: some call for public space and public morality to be regulated by Islamic norms (whatever that may mean in terms of interpreting Islam, from a cultural reading to a Sharia-based legal system); others promote a kind of Eurasian civilization in which Central Asia would continue to interact closely with Russia and project itself as part of a broader “Euro-Eurasian” continent; others still hope for a kind of Central Asian unity inspired either by a mild pan-Turkic ideology or by realities on the ground, such as growing connectivity between small entrepreneurs; and some believe in a more ethnonationalist doctrine, which can be either favorable to a compromise with Islam or prefer a secular and liberal ideology. The mainstream trend that encompasses almost all these new ideological arsenals is the rise of illiberal values: a majority believe in the need for strong leadership, the preservation of supposed traditional cultural values and state sovereignty, maintain a certain cautiousness toward the international community and its institutions, and desire a conservative way of life, especially on gender issues.

The future of Central Asia is open. Whatever the established authoritarian regimes may hope, Central Asian societies are on the move and will be shaping their own destinies.

## PART I

### INDEPENDENCE AND (DIS)INTEGRATION

# 25 years of Independence in Central Asia: Challenges from the Past

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After 25 years of independence, the situation in Central Asia can be characterized as significant in the regional, but not in the global sense. Given the dynamics of international processes, this is not an understatement. International experience has shown that regions and countries with comparable potential to the Central Asian states, and that are located in the ‘epicenter’ of global geopolitics, are often associated with conflicts, wars, and the avid vying for power. Such clear examples include Afghanistan, Ukraine, Syria, and the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, the “non-central” location of Central Asia in world politics has helped it avoid difficult and pointed questions in international relations. Moreover, countries in this region do not have a great deal of unresolved conflicts between themselves or external actors. The other usual threats (e.g. military) are also insignificant.

Though the region’s role in the world grew after the events of September 11, 2001, some experts and political scientists are still reassessing this role. Afghanistan has also provided observers of the region with an opportunity and this often gives the official powers in Central Asia a reason to play up their own importance.

In the global context, the significance of newly independent states ought not to be overstated. Their economic and political potential as a whole contributes to the international mosaic. However, in terms of interregional relations, the role of Central Asian countries is naturally more significant, and this creates space for new opportunities and challenges. Such is evident in the resource potential and geopolitical situation of countries in the region. Given these reasons, during the initial period of independence inflated estimates of the role and significance of the region were often heard, and still are today.

Many interpretations claim that the countries of Central Asia absolutize independence. Herein perhaps lies an exaggerated perception of the political-diplomatic side of this fact of independence. For while independence did arrive, whether the countries and

people themselves really became independent is less straightforward.

#### **The Internal Situation**

The Soviet Union may have collapsed, but its political, ideological, cultural, and geo-economic legacy still prevails over its former constituents. Additionally, those who carry the legacy (and baggage) of the past are now key figures among the political and economic elites.

Formally speaking, all the countries in the region have the attributes and characteristics of democratic regimes. However, the structures of governance have absorbed many Soviet approaches and reflect more of a neo-Soviet model. Even the arrival of relatively new and young faces in the current, warped system has not changed its nature. Therefore, all the power and property remain with the elite, who have been socialized and institutionalized in the values of a bureaucratic and quasi-egalitarian Soviet society. Moreover, having been inflected with a national character, neo-Soviet approaches and institutions are being revived and gaining an institutional footing.

Though a change in orientation is noticeable, no real deep changes in consciousness or paradigm have taken place. Yes, communist ideology was replaced by the priority of independence, and the power/authority of former republican party leaders became a system of presidential rule. The positions of first secretaries within the oblast-level party committees were transformed into mayoral positions and supreme Soviets were changed to parliaments. But representative and judicial institutions did not become independent, and instead retain an imitative aspect in formally legitimizing a quasi-system of separation of powers. In addition, the logic of developing similar political constructs demands control of, and subordination to, the ‘fourth branch of power’—the media.

For the most part, the political structures in the countries of the region are personalized and built in accordance with their president’s preferences. The super-presidential political regimes arising in Central Asia were initially driven by self-preservation, and by those matters in which the regime’s interests coincided with the country’s own interests, such as, for example, protecting sovereignty, creating a balance of interests in relations with external actors, and so on. The actions of



these countries' leaders as regards strengthening sovereignty, often routine, have been overpriced.

Importantly, the series of reforms required in the economic sector were readily implemented, but their impact has been overestimated. The formula of prioritizing economic reforms over political ones may be acceptable for a short, clearly defined transitional period, but the political elite's exploitation of this idea without having provided any concrete deadline over the last 25 years is clearly unreasonable.

In situations lacking realistic mechanisms of civic control, the checks and balances in public policy are diminished and transformed into a bureaucratic system based on clan relations in which presidents become supreme arbitrators. All the referenda to make political and legal changes to extend presidential power by regular or early elections and the constant amendments to basic law have served one purpose: to preserve and strengthen presidential power. In this regard, conflating concepts, such as the stability and security of the country with the stability and security of the regime, the national interests with the interests of the regime, has made loyalty a politician's or manager's loyalty more important than their competency and effectiveness.

The decline in the function of public policy mechanisms has strengthened the significance of informal institutions and connections. The phenomenon of re-traditionalization of politics, therefore, has bolstered the clan's factor as a natural and unavoidable result of replacing public policy with the fight for influence and resources. In this warped system, maintaining loyalty to the regime is the only opportunity for individuals, groups, and clans to realize their own interests. The regimes of the countries may be ranked by their degree of authoritarianism—from a complete taboo to a relative one on politics in public—but the process of re-traditionalizing the political sphere has become a feature of all the regimes in Central Asia.

Against this backdrop, Kyrgyzstan's experience became a call or summons for other countries in the region. After the change of power in 2010, Kyrgyz society strove to overcome this trend and strengthen the role of representative and public mechanisms in politics, the results of which have been clearly positive. But situations wherein one dominating clan is replaced with a consensus between several clans—even by means of legitimate mechanisms—still does not guarantee the whole society a quick recovery.

Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz experience itself seems promising. Since modern Kyrgyz politicians are guided by beliefs, needs, or instincts, public mechanisms of control in time have every chance of becoming actual and legitimate instruments, rooted in society's con-

sciousness, and thereby of becoming an integral part of the social contract between authority and society.

With strong democratic institutions in place, a market economy can have a strong impact. A functioning system of checks and balances controls often unavoidable collision between private and public interests. A constant search for consensus is a method of harmonizing these interests among an active opposition, one involving real political pluralism/a multi-party system, and independent courts, and is achieved through political channels of dialogue, representative authorities, and free elections.

Thus super-presidential regimes have proven links to large-scale corruption, since they gave those who were close to powerful figures and groups key advantages during the privatization process, thereby ensuring their control over the most profitable sectors of the economy. The history of post-Soviet privatization has yet to be written, but it is already obvious that increasing presidential power is clearly accompanied by the rapid expansion of control over property. In this way, authority-property were joined together in order to establish the political systems of Central Asia, so that a push toward increasing presidential powers and the transition to super-presidential regimes became a feature of all the countries in the region.

Another important trend in Central Asian societies is the growing role played by Islam, while the system of government and state relations is based on neo-Soviet principles. In the Soviet period, the spiritual rule of Muslims of the same type and as an institution was designed not only to regulate relations between a secular regime and believers, but for the atheist state to exert control over the religious sector. The hierarchical structure of the spiritual boards is in many ways cut out of the neo-Soviet bureaucratic model. Retaining their "birth defects," these organizations have often failed to keep up with the rapid, dynamic processes underway in the religious sector.

### **External conditions**

The external environment is largely favorable for conserving the political situation in countries of the region. It should be noted that Central Asian countries do not face serious problems from their neighboring countries. The frequently used example of Afghanistan serves as a convenient excuse to strengthen the political regimes in Central Asia. Before the start of the twentieth century, Russia was not active in the region. China was watchful and it feared for the stability of its northwestern periphery and adjacent territories. It is no coincidence that the resolution of border problems with China was relatively quick and mutually agreeable. In the first decade of independence, countries in the region did not face the difficult questions of choosing between a path of development or building alliances. This could be seen in the example of

the civil war in Tajikistan, as neighboring countries in the region invested in stabilizing the situation.

The first relatively serious test came after the events of September 11, 2001. While these events clearly did not place Central Asia in the forefront of world politics, the importance of the region increased significantly. US military presence in the region could not but increase Russian, Chinese, and Iranian activity and interest. However, countries in the region were largely able to avoid making difficult choices as key external actors had a relative consensus, although they exhibited mutual suspicion and distrust toward one another. The closure of American military facilities in Uzbekistan in 2005 and Kyrgyzstan in 2011, though Washington may have been displeased at losing this informational support, was not a painful move for the US on the geopolitical chessboard.

Before this, countries in the region could play off US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan to pursue a multi-vector approach in foreign policy. Even after 2011, the countries of Central Asia were able to draw commercial and political dividends from the logistical issues surrounding the export of military equipment from western countries through Afghanistan—known as the Northern Distribution Network. After 2014, Afghanistan's foreign policy importance waned, especially against the backdrop of the Syrian and Ukrainian crises. Western interest in Central Asia accordingly decreased, hence China, Russia, and South Asian countries stepped up their interest.

Russia has continued its tradition of taking the region as part of its zone of strategic interests. The promulgation of the Eurasian Economic Union became a priority for Russian foreign policy. China's revival in the region was expected and Beijing announced the large-scale 'Economic Zone of the Silk Road' project, which received the appropriate financial and economic resources. This stood in contrast to the abstract American New Silk Road initiative, which the countries of Central Asian were nonetheless interested in.

Given China's growing economic potential, countries in the region are very interested in taking advantage of, and participating in, the "One Belt One Road" mega project designed to solve infrastructure issues and diversify its international ties in the near future. In this context, the project provides countries in the region with new challenges and opportunities to bolster their point of distinction in the world and find their own optimal niches. The other issue is China's growing economic presence in the region, predictively enhancing Beijing's geo-political influence, which may intersect with the ambitions of other major external players.

Having a distance from world politics has its obvious advantages. It provides countries a chance to better understand their own interests. Countries in the region

often overestimate their own significance. Central Asia is clearly far from being a key region of the world in an economic and geopolitical context. Accordingly, Central Asian countries depend upon external relations.

A combination of external and inter-regional factors provides a chance to strengthen the significance of a country and of the region as a whole. It is no coincidence that when embarking on the path of independence, Central Asian countries looked to find support from one another. Institutions and even organizations were created to deepen cooperation between the countries. Nevertheless, despite periodic declarations on the necessity and importance of regional integration, Central Asian countries have not managed to create an actual regional organization. The key reason for this is that, in my view, there is a lack of understanding and willingness among the current generation of elites to achieve strategic objectives and make compromises as regards national sovereignty.

Inactive regional cooperation in Central Asia, therefore, is also reflected in political regimes seeking greater self-preservation, rather than resolutions to long-term problems. Moreover, the national elite's monopolistic control over several exports sectors involving raw materials—such as gas, oil, cotton, gold, and aluminum—provides no incentive to deepen regional cooperation.

Given Central Asia's prevailing geopolitical situation, the best way for Central Asian countries to strengthen the paradigm of regional unity is to deepen cooperation by synchronizing political and economic reforms. Such would allow for more adequate responses to current geopolitical and economic challenges. We should recall here that the region's countries are comparable to one another across a number of key parameters, so that, by cooperating, they can strengthen their regional distinction, and thus also their national positions.

In the coming decade, the region's countries will obviously face key tests of independence and stability. Above all, they will face questions about transfers of power, which will become more pressing while moving toward 35 years of independence. Central Asian societies will need their authorities to provide more transparency and to be held accountable. There are tangible signs that the new, younger generations, who were born in the era of independence, are more open to information and will not conform to current political and economic realities, in contrast to the older and immediately post-Soviet generations.

In short, the coming decade will be no less of a cause for concern. Without major any political or economic reforms, and given the current tendency to try and preserve the status quo, the risks and challenges will only grow.

# Central Asia at 25: Uncertainties of the Quarter-Life Crisis

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**Nargis Kassenova,**

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The birthing circumstances of the five Central Asian states were generally fortunate. The republics had not strived for independence but, once endowed with it, could embark on nation-state building with no major hindrances. Internally, the institutions that were inherited from the Soviet Union worked to maintain the order of things, with the exception of Tajikistan and its civil war in the early 1990s. Externally, Central Asian states were not seriously challenged by their neighbors. Territorial disputes with China were resolved in a friendly manner, and a state of mutual accommodation was achieved in their relations with Russia. The United States, the distant but locally active superpower, supported their sovereignty. All Central Asian states and all their neighbors were interested in stability in the region. To ensure the security and development of the region, major international donors provided assistance to carry out reforms and build infrastructure.

Importantly, the newly independent Central Asian states were socialized in global affairs under the conditions of the liberal world order. Liberal democracies, the political West, played the dominant role, providing the development model and a set of norms. While the Central Asian states did not fully internalize these norms, they tried both to copy and simulate liberal-democratic constitutions and practices. They did not deny the ultimate goal of democratization, but rather argued that the pace of reforms ought not to undermine stability. They did not challenge the rhetoric of universal human rights with a clearly defined, alternative set of values (Turkmenbashi's Ruhnama was a quirky exception in this regard). While reinforcing their authoritarian mechanisms of repression and cooptation, the Central Asian governments have continued to pay lip service to international conventions and agreements. This has provided some leeway for the internal and external promoters of liberal democratic values.

But after two decades of independence, this relatively benign state of affairs seems to be coming to an end. External actors have an ongoing interest in the stability of the region. However, the rules of the game seem to be changing. Russia, which for two decades perceived the post-Soviet space as its “near abroad” and “sphere of privileged interests,” has shown that it is ready to use methods of “hybrid war” to assert itself and block Western expansion. For the West, this shifts the dilemma from the dichotomy between one of promoting values against hard-core security and economic interests, to one of leaving or not leaving the post-Soviet space to Russia. The latter option is now framed as respecting Russia's “real and legitimate interests in its border areas.”<sup>1</sup>

One problem with such a “respectful” position is that Russia does not have sufficient resources to organize and advance itself, let alone to do so in areas beyond its borders. Its governance know-how is old-fashioned and reminiscent of that of a Machiavellian principality,<sup>2</sup> and its economy is in crisis. Moscow has mastered state-of-the-art techniques to manipulate opinions and subvert “enemy” systems, but its constructive potential is low. In Central Asia this governance and investment shortage creates challenges and opportunities for other actors, and first of all China, with its financial resources and ambitions (in pursuit of the “Chinese dream”).

Another problem is that Central Asian states are used to independence and feel comfortable with the adopted “multi-vector” foreign policy that balances the interests and influence of Russia with those of other actors. Their governments might be happy with the weakening of the West's democracy and human rights agenda and with the ongoing reformatting of “soft power” in the world due to the West's internal problems, but they will not like the weakening of the West as a vector of their foreign policy.

If the external environment is changing rapidly, domestic developments have been unfolding in slower motion. It is apparent that the five Central Asian states have developed differently in the political, economic, and social spheres due to a multiplicity of factors rang-

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1 Leslie H. Gelb, «Russia and America: Toward and New Détente», *The National Interest*, 9 June 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-america-toward-new-detente-13077>; See also: «The Russia Question: Sovereignty and Legitimacy in the Post-Soviet Eurasia», Chatham House, 8 December 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russia-question-sovereignty-and-legitimacy-post-soviet-eurasia>

2 Alessandro Frigerio and Nargis Kassenova, «Contemporary Security Challenges and Sources of State Resilience», *Security and Human Rights*, Volume 24, Issue 2, 2013, pp. 123-1356 [http://www.shrblog.org/journal/Central\\_Asia\\_\\_Contemporary\\_Security\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Sources\\_of\\_State\\_Resilience\\_.html?id=412](http://www.shrblog.org/journal/Central_Asia__Contemporary_Security_Challenges_and_Sources_of_State_Resilience_.html?id=412)

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ing from structural matters—such as resource endowment and ethnic and demographic composition—to agency issues—such as the worldviews and personalities of their political leaders. Policy makers and experts recognize the current diversity and the low levels of regionalism. Levels of intra-regional trade are the lowest in all Asia, comprising less than six percent of total trade.<sup>3</sup> No purely Central Asian organizations exist, and regional identity is weak.

However, Central Asian states have their Soviet past in common. Though in all five this Soviet heritage is, for better or for worse, in decline. While reconnecting to the world and acquiring independence at the national level, as well as substantial freedoms for individuals, can be considered positive outcomes of the post-Soviet period, the decay of some elements of the Soviet project is problematic. As aforementioned, Soviet institutions have helped to sustain the order of things.

The new Central Asian states were not built from scratch. They were able to use the physical infrastructure inherited from the former USSR (buildings, railways, roads, electricity grids, etc.), but they were also able to draw on Soviet “soft infrastructure”: government institutions and developed systems of public services, including universal and fairly homogenous education and healthcare systems. After twenty-five years of independence, these systems are not in good shape and increasingly breed inequality. Receiving a good education has become a privilege, and good and timely medical care is a matter of wealth. Upward social mobility has next to disappeared, as has the system of meritocracy and thorough preparation of cadres.

Physical infrastructure is decaying throughout the region. In Kazakhstan, which has Central Asia’s largest economy, the degree of wear of production capacity in the metallurgy industry, which is export-oriented and therefore attractive for investments, reached 46.5 percent in 2014.<sup>4</sup> The degree of wear of railway transport was assessed at a critical 60 percent in 2013.<sup>5</sup> In poorer the Central Asian states, the situation is even worse. For example, in Kyrgyzstan the degree of wear of railway transport was estimated to be 70 percent in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

The decline of the Soviet heritage is also taking the form of a retreat of enlightenment values and spreading social conservatism at the expense of gender equality, which was one of the proudest achievements of the Soviet project. National tradition (largely manufactured) is venerated, and morality is allocated to the religious domain. Trying to move forward, states and societies are increasingly looking backward, and the visions of future greatness proposed by the states are lacking in inspiration.

These trends and developments indicate that the next ten years will be more difficult than the two decades prior. We are witnessing major changes in our external environment: the major powers are becoming less predictable, and if significant tensions among them increase, it can turn small countries like ours into “apples of discord,” or “token-money” in their bargaining with each other. The danger is aggravated by the internal weaknesses of the Central Asian states themselves. To deal with these challenges Central Asia needs a set of far-sighted, smart, and dedicated elites to steer their countries in today’s turbulent waters and create better conditions for the lives of their citizens.

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3 Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of IMF, “Kazakhstan – Embracing the Next Transformation,” a speech at Nazarbayev University, 24 May 2016, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sp052416>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

4 Kazakhstan Development Bank, “Metallurgical Industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan: Statistical Data,” 2014, p.18, [www.kdb.kz/file.php?id\\_file=5991](http://www.kdb.kz/file.php?id_file=5991), (accessed 29 March 2017).

5 Zhanat Romazanov, “Railways: Facts and Numbers,” National Business, 12 December 2016, <http://nb.kz/6392/>, (accessed 20 March 2017).

6 Marat Musuraliyev, “Problems of Kyrgyzstan in the Sphere of Power Generation: Is There a Way Out?,” Central Asian Bureau of Analytical Reporting, 19 April 2016, <http://cabar.asia/ru/marat-musuraliev-problemy-kyrgyzstana-v-sfere-elektroenergetiki-est-li-vygod/>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

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## 25 Years of Independence –Uzbekistan

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Many countries around the world have chosen their own paths of historical development. A key aspect in comparative research on this issue is determining the features and differences in the policies of various countries.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the modern history of Uzbekistan, being a part of recent history, is closely intertwined with global and regional processes. Since declaring independence, Uzbekistan chose the difficult path of establishing institutional foundations for a new political system with a legal separation of functions and with legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power. Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations as well as Customs and Tax Committees were formed, along with other specialized agencies and institutions. The liberalization of political and socioeconomic life in the republic came about gradually, without revolutionary rifts, the emphasis being to secure systemic stability.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Uzbekistan's path of development is based both on the creative use of collected international experience and on a comprehensive study of national characteristics, traditions, and cultures. Civil society is progressively strengthening. Although the process is slow and not without its problems, a mere few dozen NGOs alone existed at the beginning of the 1990s, whereas more than 8,000 had developed by the start of 2015. With deep roots, the unique and important instrument of local self-governance—*mahalla*—was resurrected and transformed into an important civil society institution. At the same time, political parties are slowly emerging in Uzbek society and becoming integral by playing a noticeable role in legislative and executive initiatives.

The state strategy envisaged gradual economic reforms aimed at an industrialized and export-oriented style of economic diversification.

It is possible to say that despite the challenges of globalization, the republic sufficiently and actively mod-

ernized on the foundation of structural perestroika and diversification. And as a result, over the last ten years, annual GDP growth stood at eight percent. Former President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, noted: "We achieved significant success in many ways thanks to following the principle of 'measure thrice and cut once.'"<sup>9</sup> Changes in the economic sector were reflected in the structure of society: new social groups appeared, and the dynamic of vertical and horizontal movement among the population changed, especially for the youth.<sup>10</sup>

In the important educational sphere, Uzbekistan has adopted a national training scheme based on international experience. Several university branches have opened in the United Kingdom, Russia, South Korea, Singapore, Italy, and elsewhere. The key objective of the training scheme is to train a highly educated and highly skilled cadre of citizens with knowledge of foreign languages and advanced technological skills.

No less important is the broad study, preservation, and development of the cultural history of the population, including the rebirth of national traditions, languages, and the cultures of the peoples of the republic. Maintaining inter-religious and inter-ethnic harmony in the country has been the most important objective, not only in education but in all internal politics in Uzbekistan as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state.

We note that these trends in the development of modern Uzbekistan have received a minor assessment from international observers, such as the World Bank, the IMF, the Asian Development Bank, UNESCO, Gallup (USA), the Davos Forum, and others. They give an overall positive assessment, while at the same time a number of human rights organizations are very critical, and sometimes have biased coverage of the level of democratic development and the human rights situation in the republic.

Facing difficult geopolitical realities, Uzbekistan developed its own foreign policy priorities, including both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Uzbekistan's foreign policy has adjusted to take into account transformations in contemporary international and regional relations, including the escalating problems of security and stability in Central Asia. Uzbekistan stands at the

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- 7 J. Kopstein and M. Lichbach (eds.), *Comparative Politics: Interests, Identities and Institutions in a Changing Global Order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- 8 S. Jonboboev and M. Rakhimov (eds), *Central Asia Today: Countries, Neighbors, and the Region*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2014.
- 9 Islam Karimov's Speech at the first session of the legislation Chamber of Republic of Uzbekistan. <http://uza.uz/ru/politics/informatsionnoe-soobshchenie-o-pervom-zasedanii-zakonodatel-n-12-01-2015>, (accessed 29 March 2017).
- 10 M. Rakhimov, and N. Makhkamova (eds.) *Socialnaya stratifikatsiya sovremennogo obschestva Uzbekistana v kontekste istoricheskikh processov*, Collective edition, Tashkent, Navruz, 2014.
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center of this important geo-political region, in which geo-strategic interests are both global and regional. The republic has established balanced and pragmatic relations with Russia, China, USA, the European Union (EU), Japan, South Korea, Kazakhstan, India, and others. Following the path of developing multilateral relations, Uzbekistan has become a member and co-founder of dozens of international, and many major regional, organizations, and actively participates in various projects to revive the great Silk Road, and promotes economic cooperation with Central Asian governments, and with other Asian and European states.

### Challenges and difficulties

By achieving independence, the Uzbek government created the conditions for the free development of the republic, bringing with it a huge responsibility. The future depended on whether or not the republic would be able to realize new opportunities and successfully resolve the difficult problems of reviving state and society. Therefore, the first years of independent growth were about stopping economic decline, preventing the emergence of inter-ethnic conflicts—as was seen in the Fergana (1989) and Osh (1990) tragedies—and ensuring the republic's security. During this period, creating a separate state development strategy and building the will to implement it consistently were of utmost importance. In December 1991, a group of radically oriented individuals seized the building that housed the Executive Committee in the Namangan region. The group demanded that Uzbekistan be declared an "Islamic state," that secular laws be abolished and sharia law be introduced in its place. Fulfilling such demands would clearly have curtailed secular development. The incident became "a moment of truth" in determining the path of future development in Uzbekistan. It revealed the gap between reviving religious values and using religion for destructive purposes. It allowed for the development of a clear position to identify groups of extremists and prevent violent acts. This position is still relevant today, judging by the chaos that has enveloped many countries in the Middle East, Africa, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

During the initial phase of systemic upgrade in Uzbekistan, power came, as also occurred in neighboring post-Soviet states, to be majorly concentrated in

the hands of the president. In the difficult conditions surrounding this political transformation, this step was objectively necessary, and it was also appropriate, given that Uzbekistan first declared the creation of a democratic society, founded on universal values, as well as on its unique national culture and historical traditions. As professor L. Rue justly noted, the paternal nature of the Asian political cultures is characterized by dependence on authority, overcoming open conflict, and a focus on stability.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, this shift reveals a natural trend in societal growth during a transitional period. Liberation from totalitarianism requires great efforts and gradualism. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years in Uzbekistan, many powers were transferred to the president, while taking into account requirements to ensure a system of checks and balances, executive power, and a bicameral parliament.

Over the last 25 years, Uzbekistan has attracted tens of billions of US dollars in foreign investment to implement several complex economic and structural reforms. However, some areas have wanted for financial resources and qualified staff. Additionally, the world financial-economic crisis and political destabilization in several regions, such as Ukraine, have negatively impacted the foreign economic indicators of Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan. Considering the uneasy regional dynamics, former Uzbek President Islam Karimov noted that it is extremely important to "evaluate swiftly and critically [Uzbekistan's] place in today's world and to keep up with the continuous and growing demands of the times—to see one's own prospects."<sup>12</sup> According to the renowned political scientist Carl Deutsch, among all the goals that individuals and governments pursue, the broadest and most common is security.<sup>13</sup> The key issues for practically all newly independent states in our region have been to have stable and dynamic political systems, and to deal with the emergence and worsening of regional and ethnic conflicts, international terrorist threats, narcotrafficking, and economic, social, and ecological (for example in the Aral Sea) problems, which threaten to destabilize not only the countries of Central Asia, but the planet as a whole..

### The future

As Robert Cox has said, no single model is able to explain past, present, and future.<sup>14</sup> The variety of ongo-

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11 L. W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: Cultural Dimensions of Authority*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1985.

12 Islam Karimov, Speech at the twenty-first anniversary celebration of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, <http://www.press-service.uz/ru/news/4533/>, (accessed 12 December 2013).

13 K. Deutsch, *The analysis of international relations*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1988.

14 R. W. Cox, "On thinking about future world order," in S. Chan and C. Moore (eds), *Theories of International Relations. Volume 3. Approaches to International Relations: Structuralism*, London, Sage, 2006.

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ing transformations in the post-Soviet sphere and the world in general testifies to the ambiguous dynamic of interstate, inter-regional, and inter-civilizational relations, as well as to their influence on the development of individual countries and regions. To study these complex processes, and develop a comparative analysis of parallels and development patterns in societies and states, one requires in-depth historical knowledge. And having such knowledge of history helps us to identify alternatives for the future development of relations.<sup>15</sup> Uzbekistan's history is young and it is thus required, first, to develop interdisciplinary approaches to studying the history of independence. Secondly, this history should be grounded in a study of national, regional, and global aspects to analyze systematically modern processes on the practical and theoretical levels. A comprehensive and integrated study of recent history allows one to predict a country's medium- and long-term development, both at the local and global levels. In this case, studying Uzbekistan's modern history helps us to identify the republic's development paths, and those of interstate relations in Central Asia, in the coming decades.

Global processes are highly interrelated. Countries can learn from each other and create their own models, or borrow from foreign ones, to improve their institutions. Comparison allows positive lessons to be gleaned from successful experiments, and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> In terms of Uzbekistan's prospects, the priority to ensure political and economic stability in the country will remain key, together with the gradual broadening and deepening of democratic reforms. Relatedly, the further implementation of legislative, executive, and judicial reforms is required to create an effective system of checks and balances among the branches of power. Important issues bear on the further diversification of the economy, expanding the private sector, attracting investment, and the widespread adoption of alternative energy sources, such as solar energy. Deepening education sector reforms is likely to continue, especially in higher education, thanks to the emerging trend towards internationalizing universities and scientific institutions, and the strengthening of autonomy and academic freedom in universities. The youth face concerns with increasing and broadening mobility—vertical, horizontal, and transnational. In international relations, we may hope for an end to the process of legal registration of the interstate borders of Uzbekistan with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as for the start of several new interna-

tional communications projects to link Uzbekistan with other Central Asian countries and regions of the world. Despite the geopolitical upheavals, Uzbekistan, together with other world governments, will strive to continue on its path of gradual development, including by reviving all spheres of society on the basis of national priorities and international experience. In future, perhaps a new elite will appear in the political and economic spheres. However, difficulties may arise over the next decade, ones that challenge our security and stability – overcoming them may demand improving and mobilizing not only the system of governance, but also financial and human resources.

### **Regional environment in Central Asia**

The new Central Asian states set out on the path of national statehood and launched development strategies. Each republic chose its own particular path based on its specific societal and political situation, historical and cultural characteristics, and economic and political opportunities. In this way, Kazakhstan achieved results by implementing economic reforms and attracting foreign investments. Its reforms were concentrated in the energy sector, a critical one for the country's economic diversification. Kyrgyzstan pushed through democratic reforms, but also encountered many negative aspects in its state functioning and system of governance.

Since its civil war, Tajikistan has gradually formed its own development model, though it has encountered a number of economic problems and challenges due to its poverty. Turkmenistan chose the path of strict neutrality, but at the same time is actively involved in international energy and communications projects. The Central Asian states also have similar reform trends, such as, in the higher education sector, where masters and doctoral programs have been introduced. However, in the process of introducing them, practically all the republics in the region have encountered identical problems connected with the quality and level of these reforms, since further improvements are required for training masters and doctoral candidates. Speaking in general about the reforms, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev recently claimed that, "This question of a nation's survival in difficult circumstances is the new global reality."<sup>17</sup> In the complex international processes of today, a nation's survival has become a genuine issue for nearly every country around the world.

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15 R. E. Neustadt and E. R. May. *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, New York, Free Press, 1986.

16 J. Kopstein and M. Lichbach, "What Is Comparative Politics?" in *Comparative Politics: Interests, Identities and Institutions in a Changing Global Order*, J. Kopstein and M. Lichbach (eds.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

17 "Kto hochet prinesti v Kazakhstan ukrainskie sobytiya, pust' slyshat – my primem samye jestokie mery – Nazarbayev," CA News.org, May 6, 2016: <http://ca-news.org/news:1186583> (accessed 21 November 2016).

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The process of formalizing interstate and multi-lateral relations between Central Asian countries was not easy. Both successes and some failures occurred. On the one hand, the republics in the region have collaborated on ideas like “Central Asia—A Nuclear Free Zone,” and created an international fund to save the Aral Sea; on the other, the level of interregional trade is low and needs expanding. Water use issues and unresolved border disputes remain pressing. Objective factors for integrating environmental policy among the region’s states are the common climatic, geographical, and environmental issues, and the interests of the peoples inhabiting those states. For example, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all face the problem of having to provide water and farmland for their populations. In Tajikistan and in Kyrgyzstan, glaciers that feed all the major rivers in the region are rapidly disappearing. Environmental safety problems are also a concern in a zone of high seismic activity, one that covers practically the whole territory of Central Asia. Relatedly, the formation of a sustainable development scheme for our region requires a new approach to, and joint efforts in, resolving environmental issues in accordance with the principles of international law.

The Central Asian republics are trying to determine their place and role in often unpredictable and complex international processes. They face new challenges, including the growing competition and conflict between major geo-political players over the region’s

considerable mineral resources. In this way, a major factor of ensuring regional security and stability is now to maintain a geo-political balance in Central Asia, including forming a balanced, multi-faceted system of strategic partnerships with the world’s leading governments and international organizations.

The current set of problems in Central Asia requires a broadening and deepening of the whole spectrum of relations, including fruitful political and economic cooperation, as well as a rich cultural-humanitarian component with creative and economic ties. In order to achieve stability in bi- and multilateral relations, the Central Asian republics have intensified joint efforts to implement integration projects, including on international and regional tourism. Central Asian countries have a rich and unique cultural legacy, which is listed in the treasury of world culture. Such shows the shortcomings of one-sided conceptions of development in the East and West alike, and instead demands that we affirm the thesis of unity, and of the interrelatedness of historical processes in the various regions of the world.

I will conclude with the words of Solon: “If we want to know where we are headed, we should know what we want.” To know this, we must expand dialogue and improve our mutual understanding, which is the only way to resolve the region’s major problems and achieve peace and sustainable development for all the peoples of Central Asia.

## 25 Years of Tajik Sovereignty: History and Prospects for Development

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### **The Formation of Tajik Statehood: Stages of Development and Achievements**

Over the last century, the Central Asian region has undergone serious structural changes. The Soviet republics integration within the USSR worked to strengthen economic ties, create a basis for industrial development in the region, promote the westernization of culture, accelerate the process of transformation of traditional Central Asian societies, and form a unified Soviet identity. The end of the twentieth century marked the formation of new Central Asian states in

the post-Soviet space. Their sovereignty declared, the new Central Asian states governed according to the principles of the Westphalian system of international relations, principles such as the mutual recognition of sovereignty, of territorial integrity, and of the priority of international law in international relations.

At an extraordinary session of the Supreme Council of Tajikistan on September 9, 1991, a decree “On State Independence for the Republic of Tajikistan” was adopted. By February 1992, 83 governments around the world, including all the permanent members of the UN Security Council, had recognized Tajikistan’s sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> This period in the history of the Republic of Tajikistan can be called “the phase of diplomatic recognition.” At this stage, the process of integrating Tajikistan into global and regional organizations took place through the UN, the IMF, the EBRD, the OSCE, the CIS, and the CSTO.

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18 T. Nazarov and A. Sattorzoda, *Diplomatiyai muosiri tochik*, Dushanbe, 2006, p.90-92.

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Tajik state formation occurred during a period that included its bloody civil war, a series of ongoing disruptions to its traditional economic ties, the transition to a market economy, reforms to the state organization to match the new conditions, and systemic socio-economic crisis. During the civil war, the country had to solve crucial domestic and foreign policy issues. From 1991 to 1996, Tajikistan's real GDP decreased by almost 68 percent. The GDP in the sectoral structure decreased between 1992 and 1994 by 14.3 percent and in transport by 2.1 percent. In industry, production in 1994 dropped 41.9 percent as compared to 1990.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the state apparatus and approaches to governance changed significantly. During this period, changes in the government structure, the formation of the new state's diplomatic corps, of military forces, and the reorganization of the intelligence services took place. On December 28, 1993, for the first time in Tajikistan's history, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, outlined foreign policy guidelines for the now sovereign state and established foreign policy priorities: the zone of highest priority was the CIS, then came Central Asia, followed by the Farsi-speaking states, Muslim countries in the East, and, lastly, the global community.<sup>20</sup> In 1994, the first constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan was adopted, and in 1995, the "Majlis Oli" started operating as Tajikistan's first parliament. During this period of state-building, the settling of the Tajik-Chinese, Tajik-Kyrgyz, and Tajik-Uzbek border disputes, where they existed, became urgent.

After the fifteenth session of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Tajikistan in November 1993, as clashes continued in the Karategin Zone and Pamir, the government conducted large-scale work to stabilize the political situation inside the republic, returning refugees and displaced persons to their places of permanent residence, reviving the battered economy, and connecting the international community to these processes. During the inter-Tajik talks, which began on April 5, 1994 and ended with the signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan on June 27, 1997, the government succeeded in negotiating a temporary ceasefire with the opposition, including an exchange of war prisoners, and a convergence of opinion on many issues.<sup>21</sup>

The signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord was one of the most important achievements in the history of sovereign Tajikistan, and it led to the creation of a cer-

tain political balance in the country and to protecting national unity and state integrity. As a result of implementing the Agreement, 30 percent of members of the United Tajikistan Opposition (UTO) were included in the state political system. In 1997, the work of the Committee on National Reconciliation began to implement the agreements to disband armed opposition groups and eliminate criminal gangs. These processes laid the foundation not only for a peaceful political process, but also contributed to economic reform. By 2000, the republic had come to enjoy a relative political stability. By the latter half of the 1990s, the transformation of the former inter-republican ties into international relations was complete. The new states outlined their foreign policy priorities, and a new subsystem of international relations was formed in the Central Asian region. The completion of the implementation process of the inter-Tajik Agreement on Peace and National Accord on April 1, 2000, was also the start of a new era in the history of sovereign Tajikistan, as well as being an important political achievement of the new government. The international community recognized Tajikistan's sovereignty by adopting the Tajik Republic's initiative—the International Year of Freshwater 2003—at the UN General Assembly in December 2000.

The first decade of the young Tajik state was a step in forming and stabilizing the political system, integrating into the world community, realizing national interests, establishing a foreign policy strategy, and elaborating foreign policy concepts. At the start of the second decade of independence, a partial economic recovery served as a further basis for launching structural reforms, including the reconstruction and privatization of enterprise, agrarian reform, communication projects, and a development strategy through 2015.

The civil war in Tajikistan demonstrated the need to adopt measures to consolidate the nation and protect the country's territorial integrity. Tajikistan's national interests were molded in accordance with the supposed leading role of the Samanid Empire in forming the Tajik nation obtained by the Tajiks after millennia of their own statehood. Therefore, issues to do with preserving historical memory, traditional culture, and moral values played an important role in determining national interests and forming the country's internal and external policy. The need to preserve and strengthen the nation-state became of vital importance to the government, given that the existence and preservation of Tajik identity is only possible within the framework of

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19 Z. Dadabayeva, "Respublika Tajikistan: nekotorye itogi za 25 let nezavisimosti," *Rescue-org.ru*, 3 June 2016: <http://rescue.org.ru/ru/news/analytics/1906-respublika-tadzhikistan-nekotorye-itogi-razvitiya-za-25-let-nezavisimosti-3b1d84>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

20 E. Rakhmonov. *Otvetsvennost za budushee natsii/Nezavisimost' Tajikistana I vozrozhdenie natsii*, vol 5, Dushanbe, 2006-2010, p. 120.

21 H. Zarifi, *Mnogovektornaya diplomatiya Tajikistana*, Dushanbe, 2010, pp. 15-16.

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a nation-state. It has become apparent that the lack of a communications system, a decline in economic relations within the country, the close cultural ties between the population of various regions in the country, and the gap in the information space hinders unity between the people and government.

In 2002, Tajikistan, now a geopolitical agent out to stick up for its national interests, proclaimed its first, three-pronged approach to geostrategy: 1) achieve energy independence for security and economic growth and strengthen the information space; 2) withdraw from the transportation-communications impasse in integration and geopolitical space, and consolidate the nation; and 3) achieve food security and reduce poverty. To achieve these goals, domestic policy was aimed at preserving political stability and economic growth, and reducing poverty among the population. To develop the country's economy, they started to actively attract foreign financial investments. On September 24, 2002, the first Foreign Policy Concept for the Republic of Tajikistan was approved. The Concept outlined the country's foreign policy priorities as well as mechanisms for their implementation. In December 2002, the Tajik government proclaimed for the first time it would henceforth be guided by national interests and thus opt for a multilateral foreign policy as a way of solving in-country problems, primarily economic ones. This multilateral foreign policy, it was emphasized, was founded on principles such as 'de-monopolization', the diversification of ties with foreign partners, and maintaining an equal distance, or proximity, to the world's major powers.<sup>22</sup> In April 2003, the president of Tajikistan declared to the parliament that the country's foundational foreign policy is "an open-door policy," i.e., a readiness to cooperate with all parties in international relations in accordance with international norms and principles.<sup>23</sup> This foreign policy principle was dictated by the need to preserve and develop the nation-state, and also served as a way out of the socioeconomic crisis.

Over the last ten years, more than 90 state investment projects have been implemented, totaling 12 billion somoni. As part of implementing the communications strategy for Tajikistan during the years of independence, 45 state investment projects totaling more than 12 billion somoni have been implemented in the transportation sector. During this period, more than two thousand kilometers of roads and more than 190 kilometers of railroad have been built. By implementing its energy strategy, Tajikistan has carried out 32 state investment

projects, attracting more than 12 billion somoni. During this time, the Sangtuda 1 and Pamir 1 hydroelectric power plants were built; 249 small hydroelectric stations were created; and the North-South power line in 500kW, along with Lolazor-Hatlon in 220kW and Nurek hydro-power plants, were modernized. Sangtuda 1 and 2 began operation and the Rogun hydropower plant is being progressively built. Before 2020 the country plans to build another 190 small hydropower plants.

As part of the food security strategy of the last 15 years, the agricultural sector has implemented 42 state investment projects totaling more than 3.7 billion somoni. In 2015, per capita GDP increased by almost 56 percent in comparison to 1990, but it is still low compared to other world economies. An economic slowdown in the country has limited growth and job creation, which in turn has forced more than 40 percent of the country's working class to seek employment abroad.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the economic difficulties, Tajikistan adopted a course of industrialization through which it plans to become an industrial-agrarian country by 2030. In the near future many large industrial enterprises will be put into operation: cement-making plants; factories for producing plasterboard, cryolite, aluminum fluoride, and sulphuric acid in the Yavan region; an industry to produce gold in the city of Vahdat; a number of textile industries in the Dangara and Farhor regions; a metallurgical plant in Gissar; a railway line in Vahdat-Yavan; and the second stage of CHPP-2 in Dushanbe. In total, 161 industrial enterprises will be commissioned.

Since its independence, Tajikistan has gone about gradually reducing poverty. In 1999 the percentage of people living below the poverty line was 81 percent, and in 2015 this has been reduced to 31 percent, though this is still high.

Thus, the main achievements of sovereign Tajikistan include: 1) creating the foundations for a domestic economy; 2) forming the state and achieving stable political development after the civil war in the country; 3) defining and implementing its own national interests; 4) creating an international legal framework for foreign policy cooperation; 5) integrating into the world community by strengthening its international position in Eurasia and stabilizing bilateral relations with leading governments worldwide; 6) defining and adapting the mechanisms to implement its own geostrategy; 7) resolving Tajik-Chinese border issues; 8) creating a bicameral parliament and a multi-party

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22 Z. Saidov, *Aktualnye aspekty vneshnepoliticheskogo mekhanizma i mejdunarodnoi deyatelnosti Respubliki Tajikistan*, Dushanbe, 2010, pp. 8-9.

23 E. Rakhmonov, *Otvstvennost za budushee natsii/Nezavisimost' Tajikistana I vozrojdenie natsii. Volume 5*, Dushanbe, 2006-2010, p. 120.

24 Dadabayeva, "Respublika Tajikistan".

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political system; 9) reviving and strengthening the role of traditional culture in the life of Tajik society; and 10) increasing the level of integration into global cultural space.

### **Problems of State Formation and Key Challenges for Tajikistan's National Security**

State-building in Tajikistan has seen some achievements, but many unresolved problems remain. Tajikistan faces problems that are typical for governments of the region, problems related to the recurrent economic, political, and cultural crises. Some economic reforms have been only partially implemented, since they were recommended by the World Bank and IMF without taking into account the realities on the ground, including the country's economic basis, and its quality of human resource potential, or civil society. Due to financial difficulties, serious shortcomings affect the development of education, healthcare, science, cinematography, and theatre, all of which require serious state support. Attracting highly qualified young professionals to work in state institutions is difficult due to the extremely low salaries on offer. All of these factors work to inhibit the fulfillment of national interests and the protection of national security.

If, before 1999, security was understood only as ending the civil war and protecting against any spread of destabilization from the Afghan conflict, now threats of terrorism have come to the forefront, in addition to organized crime, political and religious extremism, separatism, interethnic conflict, informational wars, and illegal trade in arms and narcotics. These topics represent today's real threats to the stability and safety of not only Tajikistan but the world community at large. With their transnational and cross-border nature, these factors now threaten international and national security. The Afghan factor and ethno-political issues in the region have created problems for Tajikistan as it seeks to implement concrete development projects. If a series of minor Tajik projects—such as building the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan railroad (Mazur Sharif), a gas line along this route, and also the accelerated construction of the electricity project LEP CASA-1000 and Rogun-Mazur-Sharif-Herat-Meshed, which could connect the electricity networks of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan—to be carried out, it would contribute greatly to the development of northern Afghanistan, and strengthen regional cooperation and security. However, the current geopolitical dynamics in Afghanistan hinder the effective implementation of such projects. Tajikistan's real problem today concerns the acute ethnic and territorial conflicts in the Fergana Valley, along with social issues, and its unresolved border disputes with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

### **Development prospects in Tajikistan over the next 10 years**

With stable development among Central Asian states over the next ten years, as well as a responsible human resources policy, and the effective implementation of the National Strategy for Development through 2030, Tajikistan will, given its potential, become an industrial-agrarian country. It is important for a multi-party system in Tajikistan to play a significant role in political life. Independent media and civil society should play a stronger role in the country. Projects should be carried out for the country's secondary industrialization. This step would help to achieve greater total reprocessing of raw materials, increase the volume of domestic, competitive production, and further the export potential of the country. It would thereby create a real basis on which to balance foreign trade and protect employment for citizens, and thus reduce working-class migration and its attendant social problems.

The foundation of modernization in Tajikistan will facilitate the transition from securing energy independence to effective use of electricity, from withdrawing from the communication impasse to transforming Tajikistan into a transit country, and from ensuring food security to providing the population with access to quality food. Tajikistan will strive to stimulate exports in foreign trade, develop export-oriented production, and boost trade facilitation. As part of this process, priority will be given to the effectiveness of institutional strengthening and the development of the country. Considering its hydropower resources to be a national treasure, Tajikistan, in cooperation with international partners, has defined the sphere of hydropower as a priority area for cooperation. And this has ensured Tajikistan's role and place in international organizations such as the CIS, the CSTO, the SCO, the OIC, and others. Tajikistan may also join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The trend toward meridional integration between South and Central Asia is strengthening, and Tajikistan's role as a transit state should be reinforced accordingly.

### **Geopolitical realities and fundamental challenges to the security of Central Asian states**

Currently, Central Asia is one of the most dynamic regions in the world. The countries have successfully passed the stage of building new states. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan have each chosen their own development model by taking into account their geo-political potentials. Overwhelming historical, ethnic, religious, economic, administrative-territorial, and other factors have produced the current geo-political situation in the region. All of these factors play a significant role in shaping the

national interests of the new states in the region. Geopolitical uncertainty in the Central Asian region is growing in connection with acute in-country issues. On top of these, Central Asian countries face unpredictable socio-political situations, growing corruption and cronyism, a lack of mechanisms to transfer power at the government level, increasing pressure on their secular regimes, a continual decline in effective governance, and weakening state mechanisms for carrying out national interests and ensuring national security, as well as a lack of effective mechanisms for social mobilization. The region already has separate security elements. The initiative to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone can be considered an element of the regional security system as well as the conference on cooperation and confidence building measures in Asia, the ECU, the CSTO, and the SCO.

Today's geo-political situation in post-Soviet Central Asia is defined by the following factors: the ever-present potential for conflict in Afghanistan; noticeable tension in Tajik-Uzbek relations; latent potential for conflict in the Fergana Valley; acute risks and challenges connected with the decline in socioeconomic development in the states of the region; a clash between the interests of leading world governments in the region; and the influence of the geopolitical triangle of Russia, the US, and China. In the bilateral relations within this

triangle, these actors seek to balance interests in the region along with non-traditional threats to security, and periodically exacerbate problems concerning water, ethno-territorial tensions, borders, inter-ethnic issues, clannism, tribalism, cross-border trade, unregulated migration and transit, not to mention traditional military threats (the threat of foreign forces coming from Afghanistan). Moreover, narcotrafficking routes begin in Afghanistan, and from there illegal arms groups, illegal migration, and fundamentalist ideology infiltrate into the neighboring states. Common interests, such as combating terrorist networks, criminal organizations, and the narcotics trade, as well as in developing Afghanistan, create the foundations for enhancing regional cooperation. Developing cooperation between the CSTO, the SCO, the OSCE, and NATO over the Afghan conflict in order to secure global security can be the basis for forming a Trans-Eurasian Security System. The security system of Central Asia, which involves the UN, the CIS, the SCO, the EAEC, the Customs Union, the CSTO, the OSCE, the OIC, and others, should have effective mechanisms for securing long-term regional stability. The most important task for regional development in the near future is to prepare for the creation of a free-trade zone in Central Asia that includes the EAEC, as well as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and India.

## 25 Years of Independence – Kyrgyzstan

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### Talant Sultanov

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#### The path of the last 25 years

In 2016 Kyrgyzstan will celebrate 25 years of independence, as will the other countries of the former USSR. This year is also cause for the celebration of other events, both good and tragic. First, this year we, in Kyrgyzstan, will celebrate 1,000 years of the great Turkish leader, Yusuf of Balasagun, who lived in the city Balasagun (Tokmok) on the territory of modern-day Kyrgyzstan. At the state level, we will celebrate 100 years of Urkun, i.e., the tragic events of 1916, which caused the death of thousands of people. We will also celebrate 90 years since the creation of the Kyrgyz Republic and 80 years of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. More than ten years have passed since the Tulip Revolution, and more than five years since the April Revolution.

In a relatively short period of time, an independent Kyrgyzstan has been through difficult challenges and been placed in a very vulnerable position. As a result,

the country's leaders have placed achieving political stability at the top of their agenda.

In 2010 Kyrgyzstan became the first—and to this day only—country in the region to adopt a parliamentary system of government. Very few believed that this system would endure. In 2010 many predicted that, given the conditions of Central Asia, a parliamentary democracy would be unable to last and would collapse in crisis within a few years. However, the successful parliamentary elections held in the fall of 2015 showed that Kyrgyzstan has remained a democratic country and that it has finally achieved political stability.

With political stability achieved, the country's economy has started to show positive results. Among Eurasian Customs Union members as of 2016, Kyrgyzstan recorded one of the highest GDP growth rates, with low inflation, and a relatively low devaluation. This process was observed around the world. Moreover, the Kyrgyz som did not have the kind of inflation spikes that were seen in other countries, where people woke up to find their currency worth 50 percent less.

Last year Kyrgyzstan received a sovereign credit rating for the first time in the country's history. This

rating came from two of the three largest independent rating companies: Moody's and Standard & Poors. The country was given a B2 rating with a stable forecast. This can be called an historical event. When a large investor plans to invest money in a given country or company, the investor first looks at the ratings and reads the report about the country or company in question. The B2 rating shows what the situation is like now, and places the country on the same level as Mongolia, which is considered one of the most progressive and sought-after investment places in the world. Many EU countries have a rating two to three levels lower than Kyrgyzstan. The second component, "stability," speaks to the country's prognosis. Most importantly, these ratings are independent, showing that the economic situation in Kyrgyzstan is not as bad as it may seem, especially given the conditions of the crisis.

Kyrgyzstan has achieved much success in global economic terms. Not long ago, the European Union afforded the country GSP (Generalized System of Preferences) status, which allows for goods to be shipped to European markets duty free. Only ten countries in the world possess this status. To obtain it, an applicant country has to ratify and adopt fundamental international human rights conventions and labor rights, as well as sustainable development and good governance practices. In addition, according to World Bank classifications, Kyrgyzstan is no longer a poor country. It is now on the list of countries with a slightly below average level of per capita income. Since obtaining independence Kyrgyzstan had been listed among the poorest countries, but in 2015 it succeeded in reaching the group of middle-income countries.

Kyrgyzstan's achievements are also reflected in world rankings. For example, the international organization Freedom House recognizes Kyrgyzstan as one of the freest countries in Eurasia. Achieving such a status is quite a difficult task, considering that two of the five republics in Central Asia were placed on the list of the ten most unfree countries in the world, one of which has had the worst ranking in the world according to this system.

New opportunities are opening up for our country. After many years of planning, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) came into being, uniting five Eurasian countries in a 180 billion-dollar market. In 2013 at Nazarbayev University in Astana, and then in Bishkek at the SCO Summit, the idea of the Economic Belt of the Silk Road (EBSR) was launched. And a year ago in Moscow, President Putin and Xi Jinping signed an agreement on linking the EEU with the EBSR.

At the same time, in Astana, President Nazarbayev announced the "Nurly Zhol" strategy and the EBSR. Thanks to these integration projects, Central Asia is once more becoming a key region of the world.

### **Difficulties and challenges**

Despite this success, our country still faces challenges. Unfortunately, some note that "the first two decades of independence turned out to be a time of missed opportunities" for Kyrgyzstan.<sup>25</sup>

There are many reasons for this, including objective ones such as: geographical location, which means communication isolation from fundamental transportation arteries, and includes a lack of outlet to the sea; and the subordinate and mainly raw material nature of the economy. Kyrgyzstan has failed to carry out radical structural reform of the economy or to diversify it to help more in overcoming poverty. As a consequence, the republic still has not found its own niche in the global division of production, labor, and services. The government needs to work on several issues in the short term, but without deciding on them, the country will not be able to move forward, and will remain terra incognita for investors, tourists, and the rest of the world. Some of the many challenges facing the country include:

**Corruption.** The issue of corruption is an acute one for the Kyrgyz authorities. Owing to the high amount of money circulating among corrupt elements, the state simply lacks the resources to allocate similar amounts to combat this evil. However, today more efforts are being made and are leading to results. The situation is gradually improving. For example, Transparency International has noted that the level of perceived corruption in the country has decreased. In 2014, Kyrgyzstan ranked among the top three countries for rate of improvement on the Corruption Perceptions Index. And in 2015, the country ranked in the top ten.

**Migration.** The issue of labor migration is a difficult one. According to some estimates, nearly half a million Kyrgyz citizens work abroad. That is almost ten percent of the entire population. A large surge in migration occurred in the first years of independence. Also, migration surges occurred after certain political upheavals, including the Batken events, and the 2005 and 2010 revolutions. When there is political and economic stability, people do not want to abandon their homes, relatives, and friends, and leave to a foreign country, so today they are less willing to forsake their native country.

**Energy.** Since 2014, Kyrgyzstan has become an importer of electricity. Despite its enormous hydro-

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25 Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic "Announcing 2014 as a Year of Strengthening Independence."

power potential, the country generates less energy than it consumes, a fact connected to its economic growth. For several years now, obtaining electrical power has become a problem for businesses. Meanwhile, the price of electricity in Kyrgyzstan is almost the lowest in the world, at almost one cent per kWh. New energy sources must be introduced and alternative sources used to electricity, or else the growth of electricity consumption must be stopped. The very first step, however, should be to reduce losses.

**Politics.** Political instability must also be mentioned. In over 25 years, the country has had 25 prime ministers and 16 speakers and the constitution has been changed 10 times. However, some positive trends are emerging. The current edition of the constitution is the longest acting, having remained unchanged for six years. From 1993 to 2010, the constitution underwent changes at an average of every two years. Kyrgyzstan is practically the only CIS country where the president willingly resigns after a term of office, and is one of very few countries in the world where a woman has served as president.

Recognizing the complexity of the problems that the Kyrgyz people have faced in the process of building and strengthening their sovereignty, one would hope that frank dialogue with deep introspection and constructive criticism of the actions of representatives from various levels of government will transform the next decade into a period of realized opportunities and major victories.

### **The next 10 years**

A period of 35 years is not long for a post-Soviet country in conditions of increasing globalization to achieve lofty goals. In political terms, Kyrgyzstan will remain committed to the ideals of democracy and freedom. The country is soon to be led by its sixth president and eighth parliamentary council.

It must be acknowledged that, during the first 25 years, the state has been used as a rhetorical tool by which the people have been governed. However, in truly democratic societies, the state becomes a part of the internal and personal domain so that the people can govern themselves. There is hope that in future we will achieve true popular sovereignty and will begin to build a new historical course.

### **Central Asia's regional challenges**

The regional environment remains difficult. All its countries face common challenges.

**Lack of Trust.** The foremost challenge between Central Asian countries is the low level of cooperation and trust. Unresolved issues stemming from the USSR hinder the countries from improving their level of cooperation. These include issues with borders, water, and energy. Concerning borders, it is important to note that of Kyrgyzstan's four neighbors, only Kazakhstan and China have fully resolved this issue. This year there was a significant breakthrough in negotiations with Tajikistan, and with Uzbekistan the process is continuing.

**Extremism.** The problems of extremism are becoming more acute for Central Asia. All five countries are included on the list of countries with nationals fighting in the ranks of ISIS. The radicalization of society is growing in each country of the region as well. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a vacuum appeared in the minds of people that, for a time, was filled with various ideas, unfortunately not always constructive ones. The ideologies of extremism and terrorism are among the most dangerous to afflict the minds of some of our fellow citizens.

**Narcotrafficking.** In 2013, according to UN data, the production of opium in Afghanistan totaled 6.4 thousand tons. Today, Afghanistan accounts for approximately three quarters of the world's heroin supply and an increasing proportion of these drugs are being trafficked through Central Asia (the "northern route"). According to experts, the northern route is mainly used for opiate supply to the Central Asian and Russian markets, and between 14 to 25 percent of the narcotics produced in Afghanistan are transported along it. The region experiences all the negative consequences of this transit through its territory, including an increase in drug abuse as well as greater involvement in the criminal narcobusiness.<sup>26</sup>

**Climate change.** January 2016 set a record as the warmest month in world history. And in Central Asia that month experienced significant warming—the deviation reached 13 degrees, according to the website [climatecentral.org](http://climatecentral.org). According to experts' predictions, our region is subject to the highest risk from climate change in the future. This means that problems of water access will increase. Global warming leads to glacier melt, and it is possible that at some point in the future there will simply not be enough fresh water to go around.

**Technology gap.** Besides traditional risks, non-traditional challenges also present themselves. For example, although the "fourth industrial revolution" is taking place in the world today, in our region it has not especially been felt. For example, even in comparison with Russia and Kazakhstan, Internet speed in Kyrgyzstan is ten to 1,000 times slower, and the price is ten times higher. As a

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26 <http://www.nisi.kg/ru-researchesinkg-644> (accessed 20 December 2016).

result, the level of Internet penetration is low—less than half the population uses it. Moreover, in 20 years' time new technologies and robots will occupy up to 50 percent of the labor force in the USA, 40 percent in Australia, and 35 percent in Great Britain. If the most technologically advanced countries face such a threatening statistic, then what should countries such as Kyrgyzstan expect?

### Conclusion

For a quarter of a century, Kyrgyzstan's political openness and orientation towards democratic values

has meant that a new generation of free, young citizens, with knowledge and foreign-language ability, have emerged, and they are one of the country's most obvious assets. The percentage of citizens born and raised free grows every year; their voices can be heard to grow ever louder and more confident. That is the threshold, or point of no return, of the authoritarian past. This new generation is both the condition and guarantee for Kyrgyzstan's future success, since the world has long passed through the stage of intellectual competition, where all will define the quality of human capital.

## Central Asia: The Disintegration Theory

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### Introduction

In this short article, I attempt to review the issue that can conditionally be referred to as the disintegration theory. This theory is of course not one in the strict sense of the word, but rather a specific set of theoretical propositions that serve to reveal the causes and patterns of the phenomenon, unique to Central Asia, of the abrupt suspension of the integration project after an otherwise successful launch in 1991. If we really want to understand the prospects for integration in the region, and develop conceptual and practical suggestions for resuming this process, we need first and foremost to analyze the driving forces behind disintegration.

The range of theoretical research tools on this issue extends from schools of political realism, liberalism, and Marxism, to newfangled, constructivist approaches. It seems that not only does the process of regional integration/disintegration require critical analysis, but so does the theory that we apply to it.

After examining the theory of disintegration, I go on to discuss the opposing theory, that of integration in Central Asia, since it is impossible to continue to build regional relations between states without the proper theoretical and conceptual support.

### Eclecticism in theory and policy

For the past 25 years, the five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and

Uzbekistan—have trodden quite a difficult path, or "transitional period." This transitional period was one not only for these five countries, which were all occupied with building their own states and the region as such, but also for the external powers and international organizations engaged in building these countries both as individual entities and as a group of states comprising one region.

If you view these countries individually and as a group of five countries, a quite contradictory reality may be found: on the one hand, attempts at confronting modern-day challenges, and, on the other, archaic nationalism. Both the challenges of globalization and archaic nationalism alike were adopted by the public and national elite in their pure form—as ideal types and historical constants. What do we have after 25 years of political research and political zigzags? We have an eclectic mix of impressions, ideas, concepts, and theories, both outdated and new. As part of this brief analysis, I will focus only on the most prominent approaches to studying the region.

It is worth noting that from the first years of independence, a fascination with geopolitics dominated the analyses of the post-Soviet transformations in Central Asia. A whole collection of works on the geopolitics of Central Asia emerged in the spirit of classical geopolitical schools of thought.<sup>27</sup> Research on Central Asia asserted unquestioned understanding (and thus tacit approval) of geopolitical rivalries between the great powers. This understanding was formed in scientific and political consciousness and was reflected in the well-known balancing maneuvers of the Central Asian states between the great powers.

As a side-effect of such exercises, the small states of Central Asia developed their own micro-geopolitics

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27 A. Banuazizi A. and M. Weiner (eds.), *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.

both in their relations with the implementers of the macro-geopolitical agenda, with the major powers, and especially in their internal cooperation in the region.<sup>28</sup> Expressing the seeming advantages (often far-fetched ones) that geography had granted them, Central Asian leaders began to cordon off their territories and peoples from each other. Each of these states began to portray itself as a bridge, a crossroads, a center, or an island.<sup>29</sup>

Constructivist thinking also supported classical thinking, with its attention to social conditioning and subjective identities, values, and individual ideas. But having found where “the shoe pinches,” constructivism was seemingly unable to overturn the dominant schools of political realism and liberalism, since the behavior of states that we are studying differs little from what the aforementioned classical schools have already long described. After all, if constructivism theorizes on the basis of individual and social (elitist) constructs, values, and things, then these constructs and values ought to lead us to developing a wide ranging critical reflection, and to adopt the appropriate action. But what does constructivism give us? It gives us discourse over “national interests,” “balancing powers,” a “big game,” a “new cold war”—but such themes were in fact clearly graspable as objects of study without constructivism. The latter, in my opinion, is unlikely to attain the status of a new, more fundamental theory, although only because it does not standardize our knowledge and approaches to the subject, but instead muddles them up, by supposedly demonstrating that one leader can make one decision based on his or her ‘views and ‘identities,’ and the another, on other views and identities.

This recalls an old Soviet proverb, “regardless of what we build, in the end it turns into Kalashnikovs.” No matter how we combine theoretical principles and strive to find new aspects and patterns to studying the process, more often than not it ultimately turns into a product of political realism (though I am not completely committed to this outlook).

As a result, many began to characterize the behavior of Central Asian states with such epithets as pro-American, pro-Russian, pro-European, pro-Chinese, and pro-Iranian, in their foreign policy orientations. Additionally, many researchers of the region have adopted a mechanistic approach to the issue of the differing political and economic systems that were created after independence, in inexperienced states with differ-

ing interests towards regional issues. This is reflected in the problem of dualisms, such as that of the upper-lower reaches of rivers, of Turkic-Persian peoples, of settled-nomadic lifestyles, of democracy-authoritarianism, and of others that ostensibly serve to radically divide the region and form an obstacle to its unification.<sup>30</sup>

However, few pay attention to the fact that the actual integration process in Central Asia has acquired impressive assets, accumulated from the previous period, especially as the integration process was artificially interrupted.

### **Compatibility of state-regional construction**

This is also a complex issue of which simplified and stereotyped judgements on the incompatibility of these two seemingly opposed processes are unlikely to receive validation. The dialectical approach that I propose to use in this analysis asserts their compatibility not only as a union of opposites, but also as a movement from the simple to the complex, and as a cyclical process of mutual transactions of these two processes to a higher level of their own development.

Many predicted that the fate awaiting the Central Asian states was that of becoming “failed states.” This prognosis was found wanting. All five states in the region have become full-fledged members of the international system, and contribute significantly to the emerging new world order. Central Asia is now tempting fate as it edges toward becoming a failed region. In reference to the aforementioned dualisms, as well as to the fact that all the region’s states have built different political and economic models, many argue that these states are increasingly divided over regional affairs, and consequently, that regional integration in Central Asia is not possible.

It must be noted that little research has been done on issues such as the type of post-Soviet state built by Central Asians, and specifically on their political and economic systems, and on the level and characteristics of regional cooperation among the five countries. Many studies on these countries are limited to statements of facts, visible on the surface, and place an emphasis on the conflict, or potential conflict, in their relations, while at the same time creating new myths about them.

Without a doubt, the fate of regional cooperation and integration depends on the two key states in

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28 F. Tolipov, “Micro-Geopolitics of Central Asia: A Uzbekistan Perspective,” *Strategic Analysis*, Volume 35 Issue 4, July 2011.

29 F. Tolipov “Micro-geopoliticheskaya semiotika Tsentralnoi Azii: perekrestki i mosty,” *Tsentralnaya Aziya i Kavkaz*, Volume 18, Issue 2, 2015.

30 A relatively full analysis of these dualisms is available in the work of the Almaty Club: “Pyat’ gosudarstv i/ili odin region? Nacionalno-regionalnyi dualizm v Tsentralnoi Azii” (“Five states and/or one region: National and regional dualism in Central Asia,” Almaty, Ebert Foundation, 2015.



the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. These are the biggest, most economically developed, and militarily strongest states, and they have more stable systems of governance. As peoples, Kazakhs and Uzbeks are closely related.

Today, however, these two Central Asian states and their leaders are alleged to be engaged in a secret struggle over leadership of the region. Many in various political and expert circles write and speak of this notorious rivalry, so much so that it is almost believed in the countries themselves. It appears, however, that seemingly obvious signs of rivalry did actually not manifest in any political benefits or one-sided advantages to one or other country in the region. Moreover, those who claim that this rivalry exists do not bother to give concrete examples of how it is manifest, and thereby simply generate new myths about the region.

The leadership of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan did not eventuate in any institutional sense, as these states strived for leadership for the sake of their own national and not regional interests. Kazakhstan's pseudo-leadership was distorted, so to speak, by an eclectic, multi-vectored foreign policy, and the desire to look like a leader, not only of Central Asia but also of Eurasia, i.e., both Europe and Asia. And Uzbekistan's pseudo-leadership stalled because of its egotistical isolationism in the region and its ideologically biased belief in its self-evident superiority. As a result, regional integration was forfeited when the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC) was discontinued in 2005. In a sense, then, Astana and Tashkent, gave up their regional leadership ambitions.

Since independence, state-building in Central Asia has been carried out as part of region-building. Both processes can be said to complement one another. Not only did we see the euphoria of independence and sovereignty, but also a strong optimism in connection with the political unification of all the region's states. In April 2007, the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proclaimed: "The best thing would have been a Union of Central Asian states, in which I include Kazakhstan and Central Asia...As God himself ordered: 55 million people with no linguistic barriers, complementary economies, in one space with transport and energy ties. This region can fully provide for itself in terms of food and energy needs and others. It could even be a self-sufficient market. The question is: what else is needed?"<sup>31</sup> It turned out that something else was indeed needed.

### Elitist disintegration

The process of regional cooperation slid from integration to disintegration, which is inherently elitist in nature. This elitist component in regional relations began to dominate the public sphere. Even at the start of the independence-era, the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, wrote: "This integration always was and will remain inherently the people's...We note that integration of the Central Asian peoples is not a dream project for the future, but *it is a given*, it is a reality, which only needs *organizational and political forms*" (my emphasis-F.T.).<sup>32</sup> However, the people's integration soon evolved into the elite's disintegration.

The democratic reform process has stalled in these countries. The consolidation of the region's autocratic regimes has created (or rather nourished and strengthened) a class of privileged national political elites as the source and pillar of authoritarian power. This class is involved in such things as creating national ideologies, rewriting national histories, sanctifying power, creating national capitalism, formulating national interests, rousing ethnic tensions, creating the image of an external enemy, and so on.

All discussion about the expediency or inexpediency of one or the other states acceding to this or that international or regional organization were conducted, and the policy decisions on these issues adopted, in express isolation from what we call the will of the people. The decision to end the activities of the unique CACO was decided in the exact same way. In this way, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Union through non-democratic means. In addition, it has been noted that after terminating the CACO, conflict increased between Central Asian countries.

In summary, I would like to discuss the notion that the key factor that has determined the fate of the integration project in Central Asia is neither "failed state," nor "failed region," but rather the phenomenon of "failed democracy." It is important to recall that the phenomenal success of European integration proved successful largely due to the fact that European countries are democratic. It is interesting to hypothesize that the recent crisis and discrediting of democratic and liberal values in Europe (due to the hypertrophied form of their present incarnation) has in many ways caused the trend towards EU disintegration.<sup>33</sup> It is also interesting to note that, with the crises appearing in the world and the weakening of European identity, calls for democratic reform in the EU have already arisen.

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31 Interview with the President of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev on 12 April 2007, <http://www.ng.kz/modules/newspaper/article.php?numberid=21&storyid=1201>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

32 Islam Karimov. *Uzbekistan na poroge XXI veka: ugrozy bezopasnosti, garantii i usloviya progressa*, Tashkent, 1997, p. 310.

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A strong interdependence exists between the process of integration of these states and their political-democratic development. In addition, the issue of economic interdependence and interdependence between the countries of Central Asia has been little researched. Most of the works that raise this issue are mainly limited to ascertaining the differences among economic systems in these countries concerning small-scale intra-regional trade and the existing artificial barriers to such trade. But this is not enough to understand the prospects for economic cooperation in the region. Moreover, in the beginning of the 1990s declarations had already been made about creating a united economic space and joint consortia. All of this requires more careful consideration.

### Conclusion

Today we can observe many of the entangled issues over the existence, nature, and direction of regional relations in Central Asia, starting from the geographic boundaries of the idea of Central Asia, to the issue of interdependence, including the mutually interdependent prospects of unification.

The states are seriously tested at the macro and micro-geopolitical levels, and this significantly complicates the process of normal development of regional integration. It is important to understand that, when analyzing (geopolitical) behavior among the Central Asian states, one should not only attribute the causes and patterns of this or that behavior to the derivative identity and (subjective) will of its leaders and political regimes. Instead, such behavior must also be seen as pertaining to international systemic and structural causes and patterns. It is not enough to say, simply, that Uzbekistan, or Kazakhstan, or some other state in the region, is drafting its own specific regional and international policy at the behest of I. Karimov or N. Nazarbayev; it must also be seen that such policy has to do with the character of the emerging world order, the conduct of the great powers, and especially the unfinished transformation of the post-Soviet space.

The theoretical approach to Central Asian political research also needs improving. Neither political realism, nor liberalism, nor constructivism yet provide us with the best research method. What we need, it seems, is a more dialectical approach to such research.

## Central Asia: The Integration Theory

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*«Building Union among people,  
not cooperation between states»  
(Jean Monnet)*

### Introduction

In the previous article, “Central Asia: The Disintegration Theory,” I attempted to discuss the issue of the lack of strict theoretical and conceptual developments in Central Asian studies, which still is unable to fully explain the process of disintegration, or that of integration, among the region’s states. The previous article could have even been symbolically titled “Onwards — To Disintegration.” And this article could have been symbolically titled “Backwards to Integration.”

Indeed, it may seem strange that the all round success of the initial phase of unification among the countries of Central Asia up to 2005 was so suddenly, but without violence or any kind of major internal conflict, interrupted. Was it a natural or artificial process? Is the question of regional integration in Central Asia still relevant? How, on what basis, and in what form can this process be revived? Do we have suitable scientific tools to analyze these questions?

### Too much integration

Not all that is called integration is in fact integration. Scholars often define this term as ordinary multilateral state cooperation in the framework of international organizations, but this leads to a terminological confusion. The various scholars, many of whom are well-established, researching phenomena of integration have provided a number of definitions of it.

One of the founders of the theory of integration, Carl Deutsch, defines it as “the process by which political

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33 This question, understandably, requires a separate discussion and analysis. I confine myself to demonstrating that there has been a crisis of liberal values in Europe, a crisis that has hit the foundations of European unity. The British exit from the EU followed by a surge in public discontent with Britain’s decision and growing Scottish separatism to rejoin the EU is only the tip of the iceberg of the crisis of liberalism and democracy.

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actors in several distinct national entities decide to transfer their loyalty, expectations and political activity to a new center, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the preceding nation states. The end result of the process of political integration is a new political community superimposed on the previous one.”<sup>34</sup> Deutsch believed that this process takes place by developing cross-border communication and cooperation. In addition, he coined the term “security community” to describe that which is formed during such cooperation.

Not one of the various associations of states appearing in the post-Soviet space, starting with the CIS itself, meets the definition of integration. Interestingly one can say without exaggeration that the only association with real potential for regional integration was the unification of the five Central Asian states that existed from 1990 to 2005. The attempt lasted nearly 15 years, surpassing the length of time during which all other ad-hoc associations of the former soviet republics managed to last.

Constructivism is not able to explain what happened to the short-lived Central Asian union using concepts and values such as identity, perception, and other such phenomena. This is because the explanation lies with geopolitics. However, even taken together, political realism and liberalism themselves do not possess enough cards to have a fundamental discussion on this issue, since, despite their differences on a number of regional issues, the region’s countries did hold together as part of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). However, they stuck to their own positions on regional issues until the bitter end, until they no were no longer contributing to the CACO as individuals.

It is necessary to move to a new (and perhaps an old), more dialectical level of consideration of the totality of issues in Central Asia’s regional relations. I would describe this approach as a sort of dialectical universalism.<sup>35</sup> *By and large, any integration process is a dialectical reaction and unification of centripetal and centrifugal forces.* Disregard of this leads Central Asian research to underestimate the fact that integration took place, or to distort the causes of disintegration.

As a result, after 25 years of independence, the Central Asian integration process, which was declared immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, has encountered five main problems, which are ontological, doctrinal, conceptual, institutional, and political in nature.

### **The ontological problem**

The crisis of Central Asian studies in terms of regionalism has resulted in it throwing doubt on the very existence of the region known as Central Asia. The authors of such statements, however, are not even consequential as to their doubts about the region and its integration, since they continue to write and specialize in what they call Central Asia. Moreover, the fact that the region is recognized in the world as such—i.e., as a separate territorial, historical, and political entity—often goes unnoticed. The Almaty Club analyzed the matter and came to the conclusion that “Central Asia has its own significance and self-worth.”<sup>36</sup> Sometimes even Central Asians themselves fail to notice what outside powers see: namely, the region as the space of their co-existence.

This denial of the region’s existence recalls Krylov’s fable *The Fox and the Grape*.

### **The doctrinal problem**

By problems of doctrine, I mean: questions about how to define the region; the recognition of the historical co-existence of peoples in the region; the rejection of destructive geopolitics and acknowledging of new democratic prospects; and the declaring of a commitment to the idea of region-building. This is essentially a problem of paradigm.

One can endlessly discuss the futility of integration in Central Asia, lose heart in face of the problems it presents, and seek to take a much easier path by simply denying any extant unity between the region’s countries. But research and other work can also be conducted on the basis of a more thorough paradigm. Such a paradigm might involve accepting the region as five states and their integrated development as predetermined. A doctrine is a strategic statement on a higher level about the main decision for a *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*; therefore, the integration doctrine should declare that the Central Asian states will forge their own internal, regional, and international policies in accordance with the goals and values of regional integration.

### **Conceptual**

The problem of conceptualization refers to the development of decisions about the model, size, and level of regional integration. On the one hand, Central Asia can be viewed as an independent region that develops

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34 E. B. Haas, *The Uniting Europe: Political, Social and Economic Forces, 1950-7*, London, Stevens, 1958.

35 The presentation of this approach will be given in another paper. Here I will only briefly outline the importance of the dialectical approach and the abandoning of post-modernist criticism, as well as of the prevalent reductionism and relativism of key theories of international relations.

36 Haas, *The Uniting Europe*.

in accordance with its own internal laws; on the other, it can be imagined as incorporated into larger structures, such as the Eurasian Economic Union.

Regionalism can be thought of as open or closed. For example, EUCAM, a group that monitors European strategy in Central Asia, has drawn attention to the particular dualism of external-internal regionalism. An external regionalism is understood as open, and an internal one is understood as closed. In the first case, the countries adjacent to Central Asia would be involved in regional cooperation. In the second, the scope remains limited to the five Central Asian countries.<sup>37</sup> EUCAM has rightly noted that, with a relatively small total population, intraregional cooperation has limited potential if does not become part of wider cross-border economic dynamics.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the EUCAM report states that, in spite of this, the possibility of regional cooperation in Central Asia should not be exaggerated.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the desire for a new, modern Central Asian regional identity deserves support in the hope that it will eventually lead to the creation of a genuine legal basis for integration.

From this analysis and many other works on Central Asia, it can be said that Europe, the US, Japan, and other great powers that a priori recognize the regional commonality in Central Asia, are clearly prepared to support the building of one region. Astana, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, and Tashkent need, of course, to get out of the closed and narrow circle in which they are exclusively absorbed with their own, so to speak, fundamentalist sovereignty, and start building a common region. For this to happen, however, a decision must be taken on the form of association involved. A number of conceptual approaches to this problem exist, such as federal, confederal, cooperative, and community approaches. Many models have shown varying degrees of success, such as the EC, ASEAN, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, and the CIS.

Some believe that the ASEAN model is the most applicable to the Central Asia situation. I think that, with the distance traveled in the integration process so far, and the positive experiences accumulated, we must set the bar high from the outset and gear up for the EU model. This requires both a rapidly changing surrounding reality and increasing international turbulence before the centrifugal tendencies in the region go past the point of no return and cannot be reversed.

### **Institutional**

The institutional problem is reflected in the weakness or inadequacy of existing institutions, and the

necessity of creating new ones that are designed to ensure true integration. The European experience of institutional integration could serve as a proper guide for the countries of Central Asia. Central Asia could consider this experience in its own integration project, since nothing (or very little) in this experience is foreign to Central Asian conditions and today's political realities (from the perspective of dialectical universalism). Neither culture, religion, history, nor geography provide us with convincing or conclusive against comparing the two regions as regards unification. On the contrary, we can discover many instructive parallels and similarities.

At the same time, there is one important difference between the two regions. While European integration was not an easy process—it had its crises and setbacks as well as its steps forward and major successes—faced with the difficulties of integrating and cooperating the Europeans did not fall into despair, “throw up their hands,” and go off in other directions. But in the case of Central Asia, we unfortunately often observe greater despair and frustration on cooperation over regional integration given some of the challenges and crises. Within the expert community, it has become trendy now to attribute the failure of the countries to cooperate to differences in identities, values, ideas, economic and political models, and so forth—thereby distracting public attention, political decisions, and analysis with postmodernist exercises.

But the Central Asian countries have already had basic platforms for integration at their disposal, such as the CAC, CAPS, the CACO, the CA Parliament, the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of Ministers of Defense, not to mention an agreement for a nuclear free zone, the Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion, the Fund to Save the Aral Sea, and functional consortiums. In case of an acute terrorist attack, at least three of the countries that are directly exposed to terrorism have created a joint headquarters for counter-terrorist operations. But, as the poet asks, “And what now, and where is all this?”

In this regard, it is notable that the attempt to transfer regional problems to the level of extra-regional institutions (such as the CIS, EurAsEC, and the SCO), and also the institutionalization of the great powers as mediators to help with resolving these problems, has proven ineffective. Uzbekistan's stance on this issue (although not fully shared by the neighboring states) is that regional problems in Central Asia should be resolved by the countries in the region themselves with-

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37 *Into EurAsia—Monitoring the EU's Central Asia Strategy*, Brussels, CEPS/Madrid, FRIDE, 2010, p.112.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

out any outside mediator getting involved. This is obviously true, but still remains at the declarative stage.

“Nothing is possible without people, and nothing will be sustainable without institutions.”<sup>40</sup> So, institutions and once again institutions—that is what Central Asia needs.

### Political

Finally, the political problem reflects a lack of political will in countries of the region with respect to the prospects of regional associations, including the mythical problem of rivalry between Central Asian countries for regional leadership. Allow me to make a hypothetical proposition: on the one hand, the leadership of the states, as we have observed, has not requested or received any substantial assistance from the expert community, scholars, or analysts to help with developing policy for regional relations in a Central Asian framework. On the other hand, the expert community in these countries has yet to innovate and come up with viable concepts for future development. Meanwhile, greater cooperation between the expert community and politicians harbors significant potential for the better and more effective management of regional relations in Central Asia.

Many researchers of the phenomenon of integration point to the importance of building practices with joint appeal for existing regional problems, and of resolving them through united efforts. To describe the nuances of this process, such terminology as functional economic spillover, political spillover, and cultivated spillover was introduced. In the first case, functional industry associations, such as the European Association of Coal and Steel, increased in number thanks to the positive impact of successful cooperation of this industry with another. In the second case, more and more issues get delegated to, and resolved on, the supranational political level, for example, the European Commission, gradually leading to the effective transfer of loyalty, and the expectations of individuals and interest groups, from national governments to supranational bodies. Finally, in the third case, supranational bodies increasingly involve the representatives of interest groups to discuss and find solutions for regional problems; such involves a kind of co-opting of the elites and civil-society representatives on a formal and informal level—the upshot being that various representatives of society show greater interest, and participate more actively, in the integration process.

The lack of political will to strengthen the integration process in the Central Asian states is naturally a serious concern. But many experts fail to go beyond this, and the ensuing narrative, to promote more innovative

ideas. However, even if you are a skeptic about integration, you cannot deny that regional problems exist and must be resolved. After all, it is clear that it is impossible to leave these problems to resolve themselves or simply have them resolved by authoritarian rulers. I am personally very interested in seeking, finding, and implementing new policy decisions to address the backlog of regional problems that have been breeding mistrust, tension, and sometimes conflict in the relations between Central Asian countries, in order to set these countries on the path of integration.

### Conclusion

During these years of independence, scholars, and analysts have accumulated quite a few descriptive works on Central Asia. However, there are fewer explanatory works and even fewer prescriptive ones. Why is this latter type of research important? In our dissertations we all write about the practical relevance of our work. Well, now is the time to demonstrate this relevance.

From the moment the countries gained independence, governments in the region have shown that they can easily fight amongst themselves, but have not really shown how they can become strong friends. But that is all, I believe, a matter of growing pains; everything is transitory, and the process is a delicate one. It is necessary not only to search for new solutions to reduce factors that contribute to conflict, but also to strengthen unifying factors.

When they speak about the lack of political will to resolve regional problems inhibiting integration in Central Asia, then they see only one side of the coin. It is necessary still to influence political will through referenda, public opinion surveys, political parties, and civic activity. It is worth remembering that this political will, which seems so lacking today, did exist in the first days of independence prior to the sudden and artificial freezing of the CACO.

In conclusion, I would like to recall the European experience once more. One of the most prominent founding fathers of European integration, Jean Monnet, stated that, “Europe will not be at peace if states are revived on the basis of national sovereignty, which leads to a policy of prestige and economic protectionism.” Prosperity and social development would be unthinkable without European countries coming together to create a federation or “European configuration” around economic unity.<sup>41</sup> European countries are too small to provide the required levels of prosperity for their people. The same applies in full to the relations between Central Asian countries.

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40 Quote on [http://www.azquotes.com/author/36946-Jean\\_Monnet](http://www.azquotes.com/author/36946-Jean_Monnet), (accessed 20 March 2017).

41 See, [http://www.azquotes.com/author/36946-Jean\\_Monnet](http://www.azquotes.com/author/36946-Jean_Monnet), (accessed 29 March 2017).

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# The Economy of Central Asia in Retrospective, Past, Present, and Future

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Exactly a quarter of a century ago, in 1991, new independent states in the region of Central Asia appeared on the political map: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. This happened fairly unexpectedly and in a rather cut-and-dried fashion. The so-called Single Union State, as a quasi-inheritor of the USSR, to which the republics of Central Asia held on until the bitter end, itself fell apart after the so-called parade of sovereignties in the second half of 1991, during which the Parliaments of the republics of Central Asia declared themselves independent states. With the ultimate fall of the USSR at the end of 1991, the states of Central Asia began to feel the fruits of independence in practice as of 1992. The region, once Moscow's resources base and referred to as "Middle Asia," a place about which few had known anything in practice, loudly announced itself as a full-fledged association of independent states. However, foreign partners to this day call the countries of Central Asia the so-called "stans."

It is obvious that the ambitious elites of the new independent republics faced many challenges and difficulties during the first years of independence.

In comparison with the Baltics, Ukraine, Belarus, and even the Caucasus, the economic inheritance of the newly independent countries of Central Asia was perhaps the most unenviable. For, in the framework of the centralized economic system of the USSR, Central Asia had the undesirable position of being a source of raw materials, such that 80-90 percent of the raw materials that it produced, including raw cotton, fruits and vegetables, metals and minerals, were sent for manufacturing in the central regions of Russia and the Baltic republics. Moreover, as a means of compensation for this, the budgets of the Central Asian republics received so-called centralized subsidies and grants from Moscow in the form of capital investment. These capital investments made up to 60 percent of Tajikistan's budget and up to 20-30 percent of Kazakhstan's. Potentially productive agricultural and irrigation systems were wholly concentrated on the monoculture production of cotton, 80 percent of the profits of which were generated by textile producers in the central belt of Russia.

In this way, the main challenge over the course of the first stage of economic development of the independent states of Central Asia, which lasted from 1991 to

1997-2000, was macroeconomic and budget stabilization, and establishing economic stability, as well as the creation of independent financial and monetary institutions. The economic crash of the first years of independence saw a fall in GDP of 30 percent in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and of 50-60 percent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Rich in oil, gas, and with more developed manufacturing sectors, all of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan weathered this stage somewhat better than Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which were extremely poor countries and deprived of export revenues, and which thus experienced severe economic shock, further aggravated in Tajikistan by civil war, from which losses are estimated to be in the area of 7 billion USD. The consequences of "shock therapy," through which all the independent Central Asian states had to pass, led to unhealthy restructuring, a pauperization of the population, the closure of a great number of businesses, job losses, a tightening-up of government spending, and a steep rise in inflation. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s, with the support of international financial institutions, macroeconomic stability had largely been restored in the countries of the region; they acquired their own national currencies and independent economic institutions to pave the way for future growth.

In the early 2000s, the policies of the Central Asian governments were directed at carrying out serious economic reforms, with a view to transitioning from resource production to more diversified models. In nearly all countries, ambitious goals were declared for diversifying the economy away from a resource-based model toward a greater manufacturing of their own agricultural and mineral resources. The policy instruments, however, were confined to government interference and regulation, the prioritization of separate projects and sectors by means of so-called cherry picking, the destruction of the norms and rules of competition by allowing high-level corruption to go unchecked, the creating of barriers to private-sector development, and allowing opaque and ineffective institutions. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, for their part, have pretty much preserved an economic model that is based on a strong government sector with an emphasis on import phase-out and the development of domestic production, as we see notably with automotive manufacturing in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan all allowed more freedoms to the private sector, and prioritized the development of foreign trade, of the financial sector, and of regulation. Perhaps the most liberal economic reforms took

place in Kyrgyzstan, which was the first Central Asian country to join the WTO already back in 1999. Notwithstanding some fundamental institutional reforms, with old institutions run by the former Soviet elite, high levels of corruption, and a lack of transparency and accountability, neither Kyrgyzstan, nor any of the other countries of the region have been able to build a new, dynamic economic model based on free competition, a small and effective government sector, and a developed private sector. The succession of crises from 1998 to 2008-09, and the present moment, clearly indicates the failure of attempts to change the natural resource-based economy and transform it through domestic resources and potential. As soon as countries encounter an external shock like the fall of oil prices—in the case of the hydrocarbon-rich countries of the region—or the lowering of external income from labor migration—in the case of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are not resource rich—an immediate shock hits the economy. The current crisis does, however, offer a unique and, to date, unrealized opportunity finally to undertake serious structural reforms in the economy and state government, to reign in corruption, and to create a more inclusive model based on the equitable distribution of resources.

In this way, the future development of the Central Asian states' domestic socio-economic models will largely depend on the extent to which the region's governments are able to turn around the existing serious challenges, which are both external and internal in nature, by creating a domestic economy that is impervious to external shocks, is competitive, diversified, effectively regulated, and free.

The current systemic, and, unlike its predecessors, clearly long-term crisis, impels the political elites to undertake radical solutions, but it is far from given that the path of transformation they choose will involve an inclusive economic model with liberal regulations, and not a continuation of austerity measures designed to adapt to the external shocks, which will in all likelihood only grow stronger, to limit economic freedoms, and to thwart institutional reform and governmental regulation. In fact, the choice is a rather simple and obvious one. It depends primarily on whether those in power are willing to share the dwindling assets and resource rent with the rest of the population, or whether they will continue to try to take advantage of their access to an ever-shrinking pie of economic and financial assets. The first path is a win-win solution, since by increasing the size of the common pie, everyone wins. The experience of Georgia under Mikhail Saakashvili is perhaps the most vivid example of a country's turning challenges into possibilities. The second path leads to nowhere, or what in game theory is called the "prisoner's dilemma."

The current ruling elites of the region, burdened with the legacy, responsibilities, and personnel of the past, are unlikely to show any real political will to bring about such reforms. What is more, the countries of the region do not have powerful enough civil societies to introduce into government new, more creative elites who would have the political will to engage in the transformation to an open economy based on the private sector and on laws that are predictable and applicable to all. A real transformation of the economic model can begin only when it is understood that the existing model of development is completely unviable. However, this stage could last many more years and is perhaps subject to external factors such as the development of the security situation in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and the level of political and economic support from world and regional superpowers.

Furthermore, the development of the situation both in the region as a whole and in each individual Central Asian economy will come under serious pressure from external factors, including modern trends in globalization and IT penetration, for the next ten years or so. Associated with the latter are: 1) further shifts of geopolitical preferences, diversification, and a strengthening of cooperation with the regions of South-East Asia and the Middle East; 2) climate change and restrictions on water throughout the region; 3) increasing instability on Central Asia's southern borders, especially as related to possible developments of the situation in Afghanistan; 4) the strengthening of China's role and power in the region, and likewise the possible appearance of other new players such as India, Korea, Malaysia, and others; 5) the strengthening role of regional financial institutions and development organizations, such as the Asian Infrastructure bank, banks from BRICS countries, and the Islamic Development Bank, which is occurring against the backdrop of the diminishing role in domestic politics of traditional international financial institutions; and finally 6) the development of information networks and the strengthening of so-called knowledge-based economies.

With regard to the first three points: given the tendency toward diversification and entering the South-East Asian and Middle Eastern markets, a boost will clearly be given to the road and electricity projects. These may be implemented under the auspices of CAREC ADB, or the "New Silk Road" project that is promoted by the US and western countries to engage Afghanistan, or the "Belt - Road" project that the People's Republic of China is pushing for the economic development of the XUAR region in China and access to the rich oil and gas reserves of Central Asian countries. It is important that countries of the region receive the possibility to export surplus electricity to the south through the

ADB-financed TUTAP (Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan) and CASA1000 (the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade project), which is financed by the World Bank and other donors, to export surplus summer hydroelectric energy from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan. But the security situation in Afghanistan remains a serious threat to both projects. In spite of great efforts and multibillion-dollar investments in domestic aid from western countries, Afghanistan remains an extremely fragmented and broken country, politically, ethnically, and economically. Economic and cultural ties with Afghanistan could be deepened by developing the potential of Central Asian countries. Unfortunately, however, for the time being the governments of Central Asia are trying to fence themselves off from cooperation with Afghanistan due to security considerations, even from potentially mutually beneficial trends such as border trade and the import of goods in which Afghanistan has an obvious competitive advantage.

The rise in annual average temperatures and glacier melt in the highland countries thanks to climate change will obviously lead to a further aggravation of regional water-energy cooperation between the highland countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, on the one hand, and the lowland countries of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, on the other. Considering the collapse of the Unified Electric Power System of Central Asia in 2009, the ambitious projects of highland countries to build giant dams to solve the problem of energy shortages and economic losses will not rule out further tensions in relations, and the emergence of local conflicts over access to, and control of, water. Indeed, these conflicts are already occurring on a local scale in border areas. Success in developing hydroelectric energy cooperation in Central Asia will depend on whether the countries of the region can manage to create a trusted platform of internal dialogue, reinstate the unified electric power system, agree on specific water-usage norms, and reform the extremely ineffective irrigation system that has led to such significant water loss, especially in Uzbekistan.

In the long term, it is just as important to reduce electricity losses and implement new energy-saving technologies, as well as to develop solar energy and wind energy. These trends will depend on how soon the

countries of the region recognize that their oil and gas reserves, and water reserves in glaciers, are finite, and that alternative sources of energy need to be developed.

With a view to making progress on liberal reforms, retreating from the mega-project model would provide the economies in the region with a unique opportunity, especially businesses in the extractive and mining sectors, which would benefit from an economic model based on liberal regulation, as this would encourage development on all sides by supporting the private sector, various chains of added value in agribusiness, textiles, and tourism, and the creation of logistics centers and 'hubs'. In the long run, this model could lead to breaking down trade and investment barriers in the region, especially of a non-commercial type, and subsequently also to an increase in the attractiveness of Central Asia for foreign investors. It would also encourage regional value chains, unified markets, and free economic zones. Of particular interest in this relation is the appearance of a free regional economic zone in the Fergana valley, where many economic and transport corridors intersect and open unique prospects for the development of effective value chains in agribusiness, tourism, and other sectors. However, such requires political will on the part of Central Asian governments, which hitherto have shown no such inclinations.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the countries of the region have not yet entered the global trend toward a "knowledge economy," by which is meant the economy around information networks, and the development of knowledge assets and skills, as opposed to the exploitation of assets in the form of natural resources. Moving toward a knowledge economy will demand great efforts from Central Asian governments in modernizing their education systems, supporting the IT sector, implementing principles of electronic government, and developing innovation and liberalization in the information market. Classic examples in which this model has succeeded, and from which Central Asian countries could learn, include Korea, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Pakistan. To enable this model's success, governments and regulators need to recognize that strict control of the information market leads to the stagnation of a potentially extremely effective model of electronic economy and electronic government, and does not allow for them to be the sole beneficiaries of it.



## PART II

# TRANSFORMED IDENTITIES, TRANSFORMING SOCIETIES

## On the Question of the Formation and Development of Identity in Kazakhstan and the Central Asia Region

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The international community's recognition of the independence of the newly formed states of Central Asia; and support from sponsors and investors in the political-economic projects of the new national elites, which formed their status quo through immature, at times even plundering, forms of privatization and social contracting, turned out to be external and not fully conscious factors of their legitimization in the overall political process, the characteristic signs of which became corruption scandals and the selling off of national interests. But protected by their own legislation, which more closely resembled sorts of self-indulgence, the political elites, concentrated on implementing their own mercantile goals, began to replace national goals with the hypertrophic phenomenon of their own importance. The ideals, principles, and standards of developed societies, as well as anything resembling an authentic national doctrine, were replaced with imitations, a façade of democracy; promises of national plans to develop government language policy, history, and the culture of the people became merely decorative.

In the Soviet period, the people of Central Asia, as it were, «stepped from feudalism directly over to socialism,” and was thus unable to amass the colossal experience of socio-economic life that began in the West long before the French Revolution, which marks the period of crossover to a new political-legal system based on market-capitalist relations. Moreover, after the Reformation, the capitalist form of social development acquired a new system of international relations grounded in the sovereignty of nation-states (Westphalian system), and this major experience became the fundamental basis for further progress, something that remained beyond the interest of the ethnic consciousness of Central Asian peoples as they were obtaining and establishing their political independence.

The independence inherited by Central Asia peoples upon the USSR's collapse was thus in essence not achieved through struggle.

The process of state- and nation-building became increasingly convoluted, all too often ignoring global trends in socio-economic progress. The states, each in their own way, began empirically to determine their own national interests. Central Asia as a whole is thus very far from having a strong and functioning state nationalism for want of time to establish the worldview of a nation that has reached a state of liberal self-recognition in a natural historical way. The Central Asian states had limited sovereignty, information, and military control, and significant economic dependence, all of which resulted, albeit in weakened form, from the times of parent-state domination in the USSR. But this has not yet prompted civil societies to reform national religious sentiment, push for economic independence and competitive ability, or establish a new political-legal system in accordance with economic capacities of capitalism.

Capitalism and democracy as contemporary realities remain out of reach of Central Asian governments.

Generally adopting the authoritarian method of governing civil life in the transition from totalitarianism to democracy, the new Central Asian nations did not overcome the barrier of cultural-civilization choice. The rare calls to join the European path of nation-state building have largely gone unheard. The Central Asian governments did not provide havens for their own emerging nations either; nor did the nations become exponents of the will of the governments. Consequently, *the process of state- and nation-building in these countries can be characterized as authoritarian, as founded on the paternalism of the government over society, and their very system of rule as market-oriented authoritarianism*, to cite V. Havel.

All this has great significance for the question of the identity of people living in Central Asian states.

The commonsense idea is that identity means belonging to an ethnic group, that it is a group determination or understanding. However, from the individual, or ethical, point of view, identity is first the identity of an individual in his self-understanding, since groups, being formed from the choices of individuals, come second. Moreover, identity is not an ethnic understanding, but a poly-socio-cultural or

civilizational understanding, insofar as the general metaphysical platform of people's consciousness in a state, such as Kazakhstan, is by definition a nationwide Kazakh (or national Kazakhstani) identity.

The individual's identity in a state, or the citizen's identity, is the unification in diversity (ethnic, cultural) which makes all people representatives of one national fate, and of a common and enduring historical perspective, in which all becomes shared ideological and mental phenomena. In Kazakhstan, unlike in Uzbekistan, where the native population is significantly larger than the non-native one, people are thus alienated from power. For example, a single choice of fate will be felt to a far lesser extent, since people are historically separated by different ideologies and cultures.

For one thing, the lack of strict institutionalism in a democratic system, the dominance of the executive branch of power, the inability of the courts to fulfill the function of guarantor of constitutional rights and freedoms—these are the main barriers to developing new forms of civil-legal identity. These barriers significantly impede the modernizing goals of parameter identifications in economic, social, and political modelling, by dragging them out over an undetermined amount of time. Institutional weakness and governmental disorganization leads to the functional weakening of modernization processes, and disintegrates society even according to formal indicators.

Further, multiculturalism appears in practically all the main spheres of public life. Part of an unstructured attitude to modernity, eclecticism and the heterogeneity of identities continually undermines the native national base and the formative relationship to history, to government language policy, and to a subconsciously dominant culture. The only quantitative indicator of the growth of unitarianism remains the indicator of the changing ethnic composition in the country—Kazakhs now form a majority of 65 percent of the population. Nevertheless, even here multicultural politics makes the ethnicity forming the government a hostage to by-gone times, when Kazakhs were merely part of an artificially formed historical community—the Soviet people. In other words, the Soviet and post-Soviet ideological trends have to date seriously hindered the establishment and development of national identity, the formation of authentic national patriotism, and national social capital. Today, the main indicator of a nation's cohesion appears to be the unification of spiritual and practical bases for social and personal life.

Third, after the fall of the USSR, Russia sought, at first unintentionally, and then rather deliberately ("Russkii Mir"), to employ measures, such as those

deployed in Ukraine, to preserve socio-political supremacy and the Russian Orthodox civilizational code over post-Soviet space. Domestic political pressures will long continue to be decisive in forming common civilizational-cultural identities for people of various ethnicities in the Central Asian region in general, and in Kazakhstan in particular.

So, the axiological format or common values will initially shape a deep commitment, in each country of the region, to national history and culture, to those models of culture that previously functioned on the base of blood-relative relationships and ethical codexes of behavior, such as those that united Turkic ethnicity. This process may be called, on the one hand, *re-traditionalization*, where the attempt is to restore the cultural traditions of the people in full. Nevertheless, in such a case the traditional identity of the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz, bolstered by authoritarian means of governing, should be modernized in an essential way through innovations of a political-legal and socio-economic character, by relaxing and freeing people from profoundly traditional and partially archaic means of realizing unity, and endowing them with rights and freedoms characteristic of modern and postmodern societies. On the other, this very process may be called *modernization*, i.e., a process wherein innovation in all spheres of life, and foremost in the cultural sphere, begins to predominate over tradition. Changes to cultural models and deep reforms of the kind begun, for example, with the Meiji restoration and ending after the destruction of Japan in World War II, must also come to form modern nations in the Central Asian region, which will, in this way, be written into the universal cultural-historical and global political context. And although what lies ahead of the region are the stages of free-market development and the corresponding stage of overcoming xenophobic pains, as well as reforms to religious feeling and the national philosophy, without the aforementioned changes it will be impossible to attain authentic national freedom, wherein each member of society looks forward each day to participating in one kind or other of national plebiscite.

On the flipside, we ought to recall that the development of identity and its apparent expression always results in emergent qualities, functional abilities, and possibilities for cooperation, whether with an ethnic group or a separate individual. The ethnic group, as a subject of an evolving identity, can demonstrate its readiness to be included into the wider cultural-civilization groups of the nation, and the individual, into the wider societal group or social milieu, but only if the widening and deepening system of rights and freedoms by the government enable social, economic and politi-

cal integration of citizens in the state. Just as processes of spontaneous socialization and solidarity may gain momentum and lead to broadening social and personal freedoms, so too identity may be displayed in international relations. And if Kazakhstan, for example, is not a member only of the EEU, then that is the best indicator of its identity characteristics, which we need to learn how to interpret correctly. Whatever opponents to the EEU might say, the majority of simple citizens of the state do not see anything amiss in Kazakhstan's membership, though the real goals of Kazakhstan's entry exceed our everyday understanding.

The EEU is held together by the pragmatism of an authoritarian elite; this key feature provides the regulative format for processes of identity integration. After all, everyone over 25 has seen that, without "smart" and "clever pragmatism," without abandoning "dignity and respect for the past," the nation-states of post-Soviet space have become places of conflicting geopolitical interests, and their territories, regions of longstanding conflicts and instability. Wars that shed the lives of ordinary people are the result of a simple fact: politics are a concentrated expression of economics, and war is the continuation of politics by forceful means. In this way, the deciding factor in the creation of the EEU, just as with the creation of the EU, has become a "fear of conflicts" in post-Soviet space, a fear that, through the current evolutionary order, has determined precisely the method, forms, and trends of integration that are currently available to us. This quasi-intergovernmental unification has in essence become a temporary form in the ongoing peaceful and calm disintegration of post-Soviet space; it is a means of further separation, independently of the results it showed from the very beginning. Integration did not come about intrinsically (it happened under pressure). Though in coming about, it played its own formal, internally unifying role. Since neither the elites of the countries, nor the general population, had any experience in the workings of capitalism, the societies were not prepared for what capitalism brought. And today's post-Soviet integration is leading to a merely temporary political cooperation between economies and societies unable to compete in the marketplace. These countries desire to become competitive but cannot seem to permit themselves to become so. Ultimately, this is because the EEU is the ideological product of a construct that dominates in Eurasia—that of the "Russian world," which is to say, a kind of virtual reality in an unearthly world. This illusion is a dangerous one that can only be escaped

by moving toward the political, legal, economic, and social standards of leading countries. In Kazakhstan, the authorities understood this sooner than others in the post-Soviet world.

According to the famous financier and philanthropist George Soros, "It is a very interesting question to which there is no simple answer. In other words, these are not simply post-Soviet countries: they are something else. And more than the others, Kazakhstan surprisingly managed to separate itself from Russia. Nazarbaev was always a bit more enlightened than others in earlier times. In spite of the fact that he has been in power for a very long time and has made a great many mistakes, an educated middle class appeared in the country, having received education in part also abroad. And even in the state university... there are higher standards than in other universities in the region. There are many instructors there from abroad. The regime entered into a very important agreement for cooperation with the OECD. They try to attract foreign capital to get into the Russian market. Kazakhstan tries very hard to stand apart from Russia, and I would say that particularly Kazakhstan is the most developed and independent of these countries."<sup>42</sup> Thus, the next ten years looks promising for the future of Central Asian or Kazakh identity, since the nation-states of Central Asia, each in its own way, and in part following the example of Kazakhstan, have learned to overcome geopolitical pressures from the former parent country, and have cultivated a united world view. They understand that such overcoming need not take an oppositional character toward the inheritor of the previous empire, namely Russia. This unity, just like the growth in the Turkic population in the region, will most certainly be determining for the formation of yet another civilizational identity along a common cultural base—the common ancestry of the Turkic peoples of the new nation-states. As these states share a single archetypal culture, past and recent history, have related languages, and fairly similar socio-economic and political-legal systems, this process can benefit from a greater focus. The centripetal impulses that push toward the formation of a predominantly Central Asian regional integrated structure will turn into political results with the development of a Turkic cultural identification.

The question of a superethnic pan-Turkic organization will, in all likelihood, be put on hold. Not having resolved the issue of organizing Central Asian regional-ethnic integration, it will not be possible to settle the further question of pan-Turkic integration. After all, true identity and integration begin with the simplest

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42 "Soros: Kazakhstan prilagayet bol'shie usiliya chtoby obosobitsya ot Rossii," Forbes.kz, June 28, 2016, [http://forbes.kz/news/2016/06/28/newsid\\_114937](http://forbes.kz/news/2016/06/28/newsid_114937), (accessed 29 March 2017).

steps and move toward the more complex; they go from an abstract, poor and functionally weak condition to a concrete, rich, and functionally powerful one.

Ultimately, the center of identity/integration process will comprise intranational factors of cohesiveness on a new civilizational-legal and cultural basis—reforms are required in order to change the face of the coun-

tries, to make them not only attractive but an example to other nation-states of the region, but essentially also to help them become developed and competitive ‘for their own sake.’ Only in this way, to paraphrase Barack Obama, is it possible to preserve and develop both individual national identity and the advantages of a freely chosen integration.

## Kyrgyz Nationalism: Problems of Nation-Building and a Plan for the Future

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### Context

Nationalism is an incredibly complicated topic. For, in addition to the term ‘nationalism’ itself, various approaches can be taken to determine what a nation, ethnic group, ethnicity, or state, is. This article attempts to look at particular qualities in the process of self-identity in conjunction with processes of state- and nation-building in Kyrgyzstan.

Regrettably, discussion at the expert level about problems of nationalism, nation- and state-building in Kyrgyzstan progressed rather weakly and sporadically throughout the transitional period. Kyrgyzstan does not boast serious scholarly research on such matters. A simple comparison of Kyrgyzstan’s breadth of research in this area with that of its neighboring countries reveals a significant gap. Problems of nationalism are discussed largely in the press, among public figures, ethnic community leaders, and sometimes among average people, but expert voices get lost in the din.

Many reasons explain this situation. First, the very problem of nationalism was long taboo. Such a situation unfortunately did nothing to encourage scholarly study on problems of nation-building in Kyrgyzstan. The theoretical approaches, attitudes, ideological clichés of Soviet times concerning the so-called national problem all remain fairly strong, even today. As a result, in academic discussions of nationalism, a heterogeneous mixture of various conceptual and doctrinal approaches and attitudes prevails. This mixture comprises partly leftovers from Soviet scholarship, and partly present-day efforts to assimilate global theories and practical experiences in nation-building. On this topic, the historian Elery Bitikchi wrote, “We must

admit that our nation-building has failed to gain traction because of the terms and ideas fixed in the historical past and modern present.”<sup>43</sup>

Any attempts by experts at discussing the building of a nation-state, the prejudices and nature of Kyrgyz nationalism, and its current manifestations, are inevitably met with criticism from various sides. Experts get accused of promoting the idea of a Kyrgyz ethnocratic state, of splitting apart society, of discrimination against ethnic minorities, and other sins. This can be explained, largely, by the deeply embedded Soviet conceptual apparatus in common consciousness. In Soviet times, nationalists were thought of as chauvinists and xenophobes, or else as disagreeing with the political center. Consequently, the discussion of nationalism was a priori considered to be bad. Another reason for the existence of cautious attitudes the discussion of problems of nationalism must be noted: namely, the tragic experience of interethnic conflicts in Kyrgyzstan’s recent past.

In 2010, interethnic conflict in the south of Kyrgyzstan sparked renewed discussions of nationalism. However, the difficult context of the time left an even bigger mark on the flow and content of such discussions. Questions of nationalism became exceedingly sensitive. Just speaking about them became more difficult and more painful. Considering that the country had just lived through a major political upheaval and that the primary task of political stabilization and establishing peace among ethnic groups ahead lay, the fear of provoking and complicating what was already a complex political situation—and especially of heightening tensions in interethnic relations—prevailed.

Importantly, also, the reaction of international organizations to the conflict played a particularly negative role in the extremely tense post-conflict situation. In their attempts to facilitate the restoration of peace and protect the rights of ethnic minorities, the international

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43 E. Bitikchi, “Grazhdanstvo kak bratstvo,” *Kg.History*, 26 January 2016, [http://kghistory.akipress.org/unews/un\\_post:2365](http://kghistory.akipress.org/unews/un_post:2365), (accessed 15 December 2016).

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community, albeit without intending to, exacerbated an already difficult situation and worsened the standing of the Uzbek population. At that time, the international press and the reports of various commissions studying the reasons and consequences of the conflict, harbored a clear accusatory bias against the Kyrgyz government, which turned out to be unable to prevent the conflict, insofar as they deemed Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism its main cause. Such a simplified interpretation of the conflict by international organizations was unacceptable to many in Kyrgyzstan, especially the main political forces acting in the south of the country. Representatives of international organizations (OSCE, Amnesty International, and others) were accused of supporting the separatists and trying to break apart the Kyrgyz state. Suggestions made by the representatives of international organizations that the Uzbek population had suffered to a much greater degree during the conflict were seen by the Kyrgyz as biased and as serving only to deepen nationalist feelings. Some local political scientists spoke of the intentional “demonization” of the Kyrgyz and of Kyrgyzstan by the international press.

Presumably it would have been unrealistic at the time to expect an objective assessment of the reasons for the conflict from the international community, which knew little of the difficult political context in 2010, just as it knew little of the deep historical and social-economic reasons for interethnic friction in Kyrgyzstan.

To date the theme of nationalism remains a difficult one to discuss. However, it is a rather pressing one for Kyrgyzstan, since it is connected with the unfinished processes of state- and nation-building. Today we have a situation where foreign researchers are writing more about nationalism and nation-building in Kyrgyzstan than local scholars. The research of foreign scholars is naturally useful and allows us to look at issues of nation-building from the position of outside observers. However, it is much more important that an understanding of the processes of self-identity and nation-building appears within the country itself. Only in this way will we reach an understanding of the paths and instruments by which to transform nationalism in a healthy direction, so that societal integration can be achieved.

The main question of state-building is: Can we, the community of people living in Kyrgyzstan, govern ourselves independently and without external pressure? In other words, the issue is one of Kyrgyzstan’s independence in global politics, of its ability to provide security and prosperity to its citizens, and likewise of the validity of the state qua political institution. But without a fully formed self-identity as a nation, this will be almost impossible to achieve. So, the question of whether we,

the country’s residents, can become a unified state, in which one sovereign authority is recognized, and a people united by a common consciousness, values system, culture, and history, remains the key question concerning nation-building.

What characteristics must the Kyrgyz model of nation-building possess? Will it be a model based on the principles of exclusion, or will it be maximally inclusive? What mechanisms and instruments will be used to forge a common identity?

For the time being, there are no clear answers to these questions, though this merely reflects the unfinished state of its state- and nation-building endeavors. And the fact that political leaders promote the concept of strengthening interethnic agreement, or engage in rhetoric about creating a strong civil nation, does not change the fact there are no answers yet. Society in Kyrgyzstan remains severely fragmented along many lines, including ethnic and subethnic, religious, ideological, and so on.

### **Questions of Kyrgyz nationhood and self-identity during the transitional period**

With the fall of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan found it necessary to build an independent state. It was a fairly painful process. Though it had been a member of the USSR, and seemingly had all the formal requirements of a state, it did not have real sovereignty and could not conduct independent policies. The political elite of Kyrgyzstan, consisting of Soviet nomenklatura who were used to receiving orders from the “center,” found themselves in complete disarray upon unexpectedly receiving “independence.” They were unable to provide adequate solutions to the challenges of the times, and the society itself was far from ideas of building a nation-state, since the Soviet ideology of “friendship of peoples,” and the formation of the new historical community of the “Soviet people,” had exerted a fairly strong impact on societal consciousness.

The Soviet period objectively played a positive role in the consolidation of the Kyrgyz people. Soviet nationhood, in spite of its truncation, had still been a step toward establishing a proto-state. Kyrgyz historian Nur Omarov once praised the processes of national self-determination and national-territorial boundary settlement in Central Asia that occurred in the 1920s, as having laid the foundations for a nation-state. He noted: “In this sense, the modern Kyrgyz ethnic group can only be grateful to the Soviet leadership, thanks to whom they managed not only to survive but also to preserve for itself the original settlement territory.”<sup>44</sup>

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44 N. Omarov, “Suverenneya etokratiya” i poiski nacionalnoi identichnosti, APN.kz, 9 October 2007, <http://www.apn.kz/publications/article6002.htm>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

Kyrgyzstan's economic modernization in the Soviet period, as well as the development of education and culture, created the prerequisites for the formation of a common identity. However, the idea of the Soviet melting pot became a hindrance to the development of national consciousness and the creation of a full-fledged state. Even today there exists a "younger brother syndrome" in Kyrgyzstan, though almost a quarter of a century has passed since it received independence. Becoming the titular, or, as they say today, the state-forming ethnic group, the Kyrgyz have nevertheless not ceased to view themselves as a "minority."

The minority syndrome is complemented by a feeling of guilt deep in the conscience of the people, by the syndrome of the "thankless younger brother," the one who was put on the path to civilization, who was helped to develop his economy, but who is nonetheless not entirely loyal and allows himself to take pot shots at the "older brother." This complex ethno-psychological problem is redoubled by other syndromes that formed during independence, such as that of the poor, small, frustrated, or degraded state, of a partially, or fully corrupt state, of a state in which a significant number of citizens have no choice but to become migrant workers.

Additionally, the younger brother syndrome is multi-layered and manifests itself not only in relation to the Russian ethnic group, but fairly commonly in relation to Kazakhs as well. The reverence of our political leadership for the leadership of Russia and Kazakhstan is, without a doubt, politically motivated by the decision to join the EEU, as well as by Kyrgyzstan's dependence on these two countries concerning work migration. Nevertheless, this reverence remains a reflection of ethnic complexes that have their basis in the memory of the inferior ranking that the Kyrgyz republic had among the formally equal republics of the Soviet Union. The more powerful economy of present-day Kazakhstan, the size of its GDP, and the widespread perception of a strong and internationally distinguished Kazakh state, also influence the formation of the collective image of Kazakhstan as a strong neighbor. But it is important to note, at the same time, that there is a place for the citizens of Kyrgyzstan to perceive their country as more democratic as compared to Kazakhstan (and other neighbors), and as a dynamic, open country with a politically active population capable of demanding accountability from their government. These kinds of perceptions among Kyrgyz and members of other ethnic groups alike may provide favorable elements with which to forge a common identity.

It is further necessary to note that the geopolitical fears of the Kyrgyz also influence the processes of national self-identity and state-building. These fears are characteristic both of ordinary people and of more highly educated individuals.

Fear of the "Chinese threat" is also manifest in the country's anxiety about its territorial concessions to its powerful neighbor. One reason for the 2002 Aksy events is reputedly that citizens blamed the government for signing over approximately 150 hectares of land to the Chinese.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, the "Chinese threat" is seen as a process of "quiet colonization" of the territory by Chinese citizens who come to work and start families. This process is sometimes referred to as crawling migration or expansion. In addition to such fears is the Kyrgyz population's fear of displacement from border territories by citizens of neighboring countries, especially by the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. These fears are strengthened by demographic indicators, as well as by the comparatively higher population growth rate in neighboring countries. These fears are especially strong vis-à-vis Uzbekistan, which is a much stronger state militarily, and which, moreover, has a significant diaspora in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The unsettled border disputes and rather frequent incidents along the Tajik and Uzbek borders fill up the cookie jar of fears.

The Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan is seen as a territorial threat to the unity of the country especially as its "big motherland" is not far away. Such a view is based on suspicions about other ethnic communities showing possible disloyalty to the Kyrgyz government. Similar fears exist, albeit to lesser extent, about the disloyalty to the Kyrgyz state of Russians and so-called Russian-speaking citizens, since they also have a "big" ethnic homeland. However, in this second case "historical grievances" against Tsarist and then Soviet Russia also come into play and are mistakenly projected onto contemporary representatives of the Russian ethnic group. These "grievances" stem back to 1916, to the biases of the Soviet nationalities policy, to the political terror of the 1930s, to the driving of the Kyrgyz language from the governmental and educational spheres, and so on.

Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Eurasian Economic Union can partly be explained by geopolitical fears. As regards Russia, Kyrgyzstan hopes for help from it ally to provide national security, defend its borders, and fight terrorism. Minimizing Chinese economic expansion in Kyrgyzstan is a further stated argument for Kyrgyzstan's membership in the EEU. Interestingly, in this case

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45 U. Bestai, "Aksuiskim sobytiyam v Kyrgyzstane — 10 let", Radio Azattyq, 16 March 2012, [http://rus.azattyq.org/a/aksy\\_kyrgyzstan\\_Akayev\\_bakiev\\_beknazarov/24517258.html](http://rus.azattyq.org/a/aksy_kyrgyzstan_Akayev_bakiev_beknazarov/24517258.html), (accessed 29 March 2017).

Russia (and not China) is perceived as a friendly country with which the Kyrgyz share a common history.

In all likelihood, the existence of a significant number of geopolitical fears in part explains why conspiracy theories are so widespread among local experts who aim to explain the political processes happening in Kyrgyzstan by means of the influence and actions of so-called external forces.

As for the nation-building paradigm and concrete nationalist practices, it must be noted that the states' approach and policies have changed over the last 25 years.

After the USSR collapsed, nationalism noticeably intensified in Kyrgyzstan, as it did in other republics of the former USSR, but mostly at the level of daily interactions. Questions were raised about the self-confirmation of the Kyrgyz as the titular ethnic group, but such ideas were poorly formed, and played no real role in the political sphere. If, in some Soviet republics, Gorbachev's Perestroika presented the conditions for national unification, and social movements appeared that demanded the right of national self-determination (for example in the Baltics and Kazakhstan), in Kyrgyzstan there were no organized political forces or movements with a nationalist platform, though some individual politicians did use national rhetoric. The Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK), formed just before the fall of the Soviet Union, though it stepped forward to defend young Kyrgyz villagers' rights to work, plots of land, and housing, was more of a movement for social and economic rights than a nationalist one.

Around the second half of the 1990s, nationalistic discourse noticeably diminished and calls for unity among ethnic groups, for the need to build a multicultural society in which all ethnic groups were equal, increased. Akayev tried to place the values of interethnic and intercultural harmony at the head of his ideology. In 2004, the Framework of Ethnic Development in the Kyrgyz Republic was drawn up and enacted to promote principles of equal development among all ethnic groups. In sociologist Nurbek Omuraliev's vivid expression, Akayev's rule was "a golden age for interethnic relations."<sup>46</sup> As confirmation that such an ideology of unity among various ethnic groups was a sincere value of the Kyrgyz, references were made to the seven commandments of Manas, one of which calls for the unity of nations and harmony between all ethnic groups.

Not for nothing did Akayev's slogan become "Kyrgyzstan is our common home," which, however, would become counterproductive and a source of criticism for the first president. After Akayev's flight and the so-called Tulip Revolution in 2005, a number of politicians began to criticize Akayev around interethnic relations; they deemed that his position ran counter to national interests. The head of the Department of Ethnic and Religions Politics and Cooperation with Civil Society from the Office of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Mira Karybaeva, noted in an interview that, in reality, this positive idea spawned negative associations of the following sort: "Kyrgyzstan is a walk-through," "Kyrgyzstan is a communal apartment," or "We are tenants in our own home."<sup>47</sup> In other words, the phrase "Kyrgyzstan is our common home" was seen to raise the profile of the ethnic minorities, while pushing the titular ethnic group, its language, and culture into the background. Some politicians and other figures, seeking to position themselves as patriots, exaggerated similar opinions. Moreover, terms such as *ulutchulduk* (nationalism) and *mekenchildik* (love for the motherland) came to be used interchangeably, though questions were raised as to possible differences in meaning between these words, and where the line was to be drawn between being a nationalist and a patriot.

Another of Akayev's slogans, "Kyrgyzstan is the Switzerland of Central Asia," can be seen as an attempt to strengthen the common identity of the citizenry not on an ethnic basis but on around a positive, collective image of the country. The exact role that Akayev's slogans played is perhaps a topic for another discussion. In my view, they played a positive role insofar as they prevented the emergence of more extreme forms of nationalism. Besides that, however exaggerated the language question became, linguistic nationalism in Kyrgyzstan likewise never took on extreme forms. Russian was declared an official language, business was and is still conducted in Russian, and in general its use has not been restricted. What is more, in recent years, many Kyrgyz endorse bilingualism and clamor for improvements to the teaching of Russian in Kyrgyz schools. The republic has also rejected the idea of changing from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet.

Overall, we ought to note that supporters of the idea of Kyrgyz ethnic exclusivity did not find mass support among the citizenry during the period of transition. As

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46 N. Omuraliev, *Mejzhenicheskie konflikty v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike: sociologicheskii analiz*, Dissertation abstract of a PhD candidate in Sociology, <http://lib.kg/omuraliev-nurbek-ashimkanovich-mezhetnicheskie-konflikty-v-kyrgyzskoj-respublike-sotsiologicheskij-analiz/>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

47 M. Karybaeva, "Nacii, kotoraya gorditsya soboi, svoim proshlym, znaet svoyu istoriyu, stydno pozoritsya v nastoyaschem," *Novye Litsa*, 9 June 2015: <[http://www.nlkg.kg/ru/interview/mira-karybaeva-nacii\\_-kotoraya-gorditsya-soboj\\_-svoim-proshlym\\_-znaet-svoyu-istoriyu\\_-stydno-pozoritsya-v-nastoyaschem](http://www.nlkg.kg/ru/interview/mira-karybaeva-nacii_-kotoraya-gorditsya-soboj_-svoim-proshlym_-znaet-svoyu-istoriyu_-stydno-pozoritsya-v-nastoyaschem)

far as the government is concerned, no ethnically oriented nationalist has occupied a position of power, not even after 2010, when a certain number became parliamentary deputies called for Russian's status as an official language to be revoked and pushed the idea of building an ethnic nation.

Looking forward, it is possible to note that the presence of these politicians did in fact complicate the process of drawing up and enacting the Framework for Strengthening Unity of the People and Interethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic. Before the president signed the decree to accept this framework, the document had existed in two versions. One version was drawn up by a group of deputies called Zhogorku Kenesh, which gathered under the leadership of Nodira Nurmatova, a deputy from the "Ata-Zhurt" fraction, and the other version by the Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan. The discussion in civil society over both the frameworks was rather lively. Many called Nurmatova's proposal nationalist since it determined the Kyrgyz ethnic group as the central element of nationhood. Neither was the second document totally acceptable, however. In the end, the Office of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic worked on a compromise version of the document on the basis of the two preceding proposals. Critics lambasted this new version for being eclectic, conceptually confused, and lacking any mechanisms for implementation.

Experts from the National Institute for Strategic Research note that the accepted framework became the state's first ethnic policy document, founded on the idea that building a civil nation in Kyrgyzstan on "the basis of the unifying role of the state Kyrgyz language is the most important element of consolidating society and preserving ethnic diversity and the ethno-cultural traits of the ethnic groups of Kyrgyzstan."<sup>48</sup>

It is crucial to note that, for Kyrgyzstan, 2010 provided a major test in terms of nation-building. Up until that time, no one in the state had given serious thought to relations between the Kyrgyz and the other ethnic groups, and there were no institutional mechanisms to deal with these relations. Thus, in cooperation with civil society the Department of Ethnic and Religious Policy was established in the office of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic only in 2011, followed by the State Agency for Local Governance and Interethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic, in 2013.

The tragic events of 2010 made entirely clear the importance of the following questions: "Who are we?", "What choices do we make as a country?", "What is our model of self-identity?", "Do we have a common identity?", "What kind of a state are we building?", and "Is

there a Kyrgyz nation and what does it entail?" Significant geopolitical fears remain, and together with them fears of the territorial disintegration of the country. In fact, these questions are complex and answers are yet to be found.

### **Contemporary nationalist discourses in Kyrgyzstan**

This section focuses on the appearance of nationalism in public discourse. To speak of Kyrgyz nationalism, with the Kyrgyz being the ethnic majority in Kyrgyzstan, has become hackneyed. In my view, however, we must also discuss the nationalism of the other ethnic groups, since it also exists though is possibly less visible. In recent times, we can likewise note forms of nationalist discourse that are connected with the political context and not based on criteria of ethnic affiliation.

What does the contemporary Kyrgyz nationalistic discourse entail? Does it point to a strengthening of Kyrgyz nationalism?

Today Kyrgyz nationalist discourse is represented by various views and ideas, at the base of which lies a conviction as to the need to defend and promote the interests of the Kyrgyz as a nation. This discourse exists largely in the realm of Kyrgyz language printed media, electronic media, and television. These media sources largely advocate a return to national traditions, culture, and values. A longing also exists to "restore the Kyrgyz spirit," and this is contained in mythical and historical components of self-identity, which by design should serve to strengthen feelings of national pride in one's ethnic group, and at the same time facilitate the strengthening of a common identity. There is nothing wrong in and of itself with this longing to return to such sources and restore the spiritual roots of the people. But the means, methods, and resources to achieving this return are far from clear, and in part promote resentment among the other ethnic groups.

Nationalist discourse also harbors ideas about the renaissance and development of the Kyrgyz language, about the raising of its role in public and political life. It addresses to the powers that be for the fact that after two decades very little has been done to restore the status of the language. Much in this discourse is justifiable if we consider that the Kyrgyz language suffered serious setbacks to its position during Soviet times, becoming atrophied, and made to stand as a symbol of backwardness. Indeed, in Kyrgyzstan's capital, only one school (out of 60) taught lessons in Kyrgyz. And all the higher-education institutions taught exclusively in Russian.

As regards language, it is important to note the problems with forming a single information space in

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48 *Interethnic relations in the Kyrgyz Republic: Analysis of the Situation and State Policy*, Bishkek, NISI, 2013, p. 42.



Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately, the information space is seriously fragmented, and this is a serious factor in the society's division along ethnic lines. Linguistic differentiation, whereby the Russian-speaking and Kyrgyz-speaking segments of the population comprise two different sets that do not interact with each other, does not facilitate societal consolidation. A similar problem exists in the south of the country, where residents tend to watch and listen to Uzbek television and radio channels.

To a lesser degree than the discourse on reviving traditions and language, the information space also includes nationalist discourses that call for a reassessment of the Soviet legacy and its sense of values and moral principles.

In recent times, however, in connection with the centennial anniversary of the event, noticeable interest has arisen in the historical re-evaluation of the Kyrgyz uprising of 1916 (Urkun) as a national freedom movement against Tsarist Russia. The government's intention to mark the centennial of these tragic events through various activities elicits the resentment of sections of society, a move that outside viewers openly see as an attempt on the part of nationalists to restore or remake history, create historical myths, and sew seeds of division in ethnic relations.

When discussing nationalist public discourse, it must be emphasized that no party contains a clearly expressed political agenda around Kyrgyz nationalism. In spite of the nationalist rhetoric of individual politicians, no political parties in the country have ethno-nationalism as their basic platform. Even parties who have positioned themselves as protectors of the interests of the Kyrgyz people are unable to put forward a plan for the future that differs from the official one. Politicians tend to use nationalistic slogans mainly during election campaigns as a way of attracting a certain electorate. On the whole, the mobilization potential of nationalism as political ideology is rather weak. No leader in the country possesses much potential to rally people based on ethnic nationalism. This is unsurprising, however, as most of those in power hail from the Soviet system, and they think and rule in Soviet style. A certain amount of renewal is happening among the political elite, but this is slow and it is not always driven by the new generational segment, but in part by the additional numbers of nouveaux riches and comprador elements. We should also not lose sight of the fact that sub-ethnic identity, which is first and foremost based on regional divisions (South-North), remains the key element of political struggle.

Unlike previous forms of ethno-nationalist discourse, this trend is connected with criticisms of the leadership of Kyrgyzstan's decision to join the Customs Union and the EEU, and to refuse to adopt a multivec-

tor foreign policy. Representatives of this discourse stem from various ethnic groups, inhabit a predominantly virtual environment, and also communicate their ideas through television. This group is not institutionally formalized, but is rather tentative and diffuse. We could provisionally call this trend the "Defenders of Sovereignty," since they place the utmost importance on Kyrgyzstan's right to conduct independent policies without taking into account the more powerful regional players' attempts to limit the country's sovereignty by drawing it into unequally integrated alliances. Though this trend is weak, it may gather steam since some preconditions for it do exist, namely, society's growing disappointment with EEU membership, the country's worsening economic situation, and the possibility of growing social tensions, as well as several laws and schemes that are unpopular with the population. In early 2016 very telling and turbulent discussion appeared on social media over the proposed "Agreement between the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the Russian Federation for Cooperation in the Area of Mass Communications," according to which the federal television channels "Pervyi kanal," "World Wide Web," and "RTR Planeta" would be given special status. This agreement was met with strong criticism in civil society, which said that the government had made the wrong move and created a threat to national information security.

With the exception of this last discourse, which unites all representatives of various ethnic groups, the dominant idea in Kyrgyzstan is that nationalism promotes a traditional view of Kyrgyz ethnic nationalism and essentially goes to strengthening the interests of the Kyrgyz ethnic group. As far as the nationalism of other ethnic groups is concerned, open talk about such is considered unacceptable in Kyrgyzstan due to extant stereotypes about ethnic minorities not being nationalist.

### **A plan for the future and problems of consolidation of the Kyrgyz nation**

Problems of national consolidation are connected with many things in history. For centuries, the Kyrgyz lived under various foreign governments and remained a peripheral ethnic group, including during the Russian Imperial period and subsequently in the USSR. A fully formed economic, cultural, and political dependence on the parent country prevented the local political and intellectual elites from developing skills for setting targets and framing their own policies. As a result, after little more than two decades of independence, Kyrgyzstan has been unable to devise its future plans. It has not managed to put together a state ideology or strategy that resonates in the minds of, if not the majority than at least, a significant portion of the citizenry. But there have been attempts.

It is precisely this lack of a plan for the future in Kyrgyzstan that has generated a significant return to history, a search for a Kyrgyz “golden age” and nationhood, so that some ideas might be unearthed for the modern era. The 1000-year anniversary of the epic poem *Manas*, the 2200-year anniversary of Kyrgyz nationhood, the 3000-year anniversary of the city of Osh—all of these are revealing examples. In this context, it seems to me, another dividing line is appearing in society. It is no secret that when Kyrgyz traditions and culture are discussed in Kyrgyz language media outlets, the idea is often expressed that the Kyrgyz are *uluu el*—a great people. According to my recent observations, the Kyrgyz themselves are starting to form critical ideas about such sayings, and some even refer to this phenomenon as *uluu*-mania. The main criticism of *uluu*-mania is that it is an extreme exaggeration of the nation using criteria of ancientness and particular moral characteristics that take no consideration of modern realities, of the inadequacies of this nation in its modernity. It is emphasized that, if no attempt is made to get rid of these inadequacies, no development is possible.<sup>49</sup> It seems that these criticisms can be considered the rudiments of a healthy discussion and understanding of the importance of the nation’s development, a sober judgement of the present-day experience, and demonstrates a willingness to seek out the best experiences of other countries.

There can be no argument about the need to revive interest in the history of the Kyrgyz and Kyrgyzstan. But apart from mythological and ethnographic material, it is important to use the documented material available in other languages. For this our historians must possess the corresponding proficiency (scholarly, linguistic) and resources. The woeful state of funding for our historians, as for the rest of our scholars, is a well-known fact. The announcing of 2016 as the Year of History and Culture in Kyrgyzstan unfortunately did nothing to alter this situation, as was predictable.

Attempts to strengthen national pride through the popular epic poem “*Manas*,” searches for a national brand for the country, the shooting of historical films, attempts to revive Tengriism as the native religion of the Kyrgyz—these are all examples of the steps being taken to strengthen common identity. However, all of these attempts are oriented towards the past and not the present, let alone the future.

The lack of any proper plan for Kyrgyzstan’s future sums up a view about the place that our country occupies in the modern world order. In the context of joining the EEU, it is interesting to ask whether or not this

choice is a vector of the future, and whether it corresponds to the choice of the majority of citizens?

On the one hand, a significant number of people approve of Kyrgyzstan’s turn back toward partners from the former USSR. They see joining the EEU as returning to square one. The agitation of our government and the allies’ exertion of “soft power” has played its role in this. But does this mean that Kyrgyzstan has grown tired of searching for its own formula of sovereign development, and that it once again prefers to end up as a “younger brother”? Or was this step a forced choice, even as it formally appears voluntary? If the latter is true, how will it affect the process of state-building? Or is this membership indeed part of a plan for the future?

On the other hand, a growing number of people see Kyrgyzstan’s EEU membership as a mistake. These people claim that this step threatens the preservation of the country’s sovereignty. Can this stance be said to be the germ of state nationalism, especially considering that this camp unites representatives of different ethnic groups? Does this trend of nationalism have any chance of being implemented politically?

These questions demand serious expert discussion and possibly even specialized research.

A key reason for the lack of a future plan lies in the lack of a political elite that could get behind a big idea of this kind. Political figures with access to the power structures are for the most part a self-appointed elite with no moral authority. The intellectual elite prefers to remain silent on the question of nation-building, fearing that opprobrium will be directed at them. As a result, the tone of such discussions is often set by unqualified people or outright bigots.

An extremely important question concerning national consolidation is the question of the elite’s and the entire society’s preparedness to build a civil nation. In spite of the enactment of the Framework for Strengthening Peace and Interethnic Cooperation, it is impossible to claim that the country’s society has come to any kind of consensus about the need to build a civil nation. This society is not yet ready to understand the Kyrgyz nation as one that includes all the ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan. Neither the Kyrgyz, nor the other ethnic groups, are prepared for this. A June 2016 initiative of the State Register Service (SRS) to remove the line that mentions nationality on newly issued passports is very telling here. The reaction to the initiative was stormy and divisive. Many Kyrgyz registered strong opposition to this idea: they expressly wanted their passports to reflect that they were ethnically Kyrgyz and not

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49 “*Uluumania ili chto nas delaet velikimi?*”, Bekturush Salmagani, “Kyrgyzdar chyn ele “uluu elbi”, Sayasat, 22 September 2015, [http://www.sayasat.kg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=43343&catid=9&lang=kg&Itemid=224](http://www.sayasat.kg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=43343&catid=9&lang=kg&Itemid=224) (accessed 29 March 2017).

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just citizens of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>50</sup> Some citizens suggested that everyone have “Kyrgyz” written in their passports regardless of ethnicity, but this also met with criticism. Due to the ambiguous public reaction, the SRS abandoned its initiative.

The ethnonym “Kyrgyz” is not yet attractive enough for members of other ethnic groups. This is due both to Kyrgyzstan’s level of economic development (which is nothing to boast about) and to stereotypes about *Kyrgyzchylыk*, a phenomenon that, even among the Kyrgyz themselves, is associated with ideas of being “shoddy,” “so-so,” “unprofessional,” “not legal,” and other such negative associations.

Kyrgyzstan missed its chance to create an attractive image of itself, both for its relations with the outside world and its own citizens, when it slowly but surely lost its reputation as an “island of democracy.” It was unable to take advantage of the advance of trust that the global community afforded it after the Tulip Revolution of 2005. The powers that be created a situation that hardly bolstered the country’s image. And Kyrgyzstan has instead developed a reputation as a failed state. For all that, however, the country’s leaders prefer to place blame for the situation on proverbial “external powers.”

Questions arise here about how to consolidate the nation and devise a future plan concerning the diverse identities of Kyrgyzstan’s citizens, as well as about possibilities of including the country in the plans of external players.

What role does Islamic identity play for the Kyrgyz in nation-building? Does Islam contradict the existence of the nation-state? Is it dangerous from the point of view of the strong influence of Islamic religion and religious socialization that is gaining more traction every day? What role do Turkism, nomadism, tribalism, or regional identities play in the process of nation-building? So far, the discussion of these themes remains fragmented and does not allow us to draw any conclusions.

In this context, it is highly interesting that in June of 2016 discussions broke out around an initiative of the Office of the President to hang up banners around the country saying, “My poor people, where are we going?”, including pictures of women in Kyrgyz national costume together with pictures of women wearing the hijab.<sup>51</sup> Discussions have still not quieted down about the true motives behind this public message. But it is interesting that these discussions, which raged in social media and the printed press, showed that society is strongly divided

over the religion question. No less important is the fact that, while not wishing it themselves, the initiators of this idea with the banners gave a powerful stimulus to discussions about the trajectory of Kyrgyzstan’s development, about the elite’s responsibility for the condition of the country, and about the economic and spiritual crises that the society is enduring.

## Conclusion

Questions of nationalism in Kyrgyzstan have always been complex, no less so than after 2010. This is because, owing to a certain amount of inertia, attention inevitably focusses on the issue of interethnic relations and in that context nationalism always has a negative connotation.

The conceptual confusion and lack of consensus over what to consider the nation, and also the separation of the field of discussion into Russian and Kyrgyz language segments, present serious barriers to public dialogue. These latter worlds run somewhat parallel to each other, rarely intersecting. They bear different ideas and signals, and this tends to create more potential for conflict than for consolidation.

In spite of these difficulties, questions of nationalism remain critically important for Kyrgyzstan today and demand discussion from all sides, particularly at the expert level. The 2010 interethnic conflict shone a spotlight on the need to find answers to questions such as “Who are we?”, “What kind of a state are we building?”, “How do we relate to our past?”, and “What kind of future do we want for our country?”. This period has been a very dramatic one for us, a time when the fragility of our nationhood has become obvious.

Processes of government and nation-building are important for Kyrgyzstan. Only recently having set forth on the path of independence, the issue is whether Kyrgyzstan can become self-governing and form a citizenry that is united by a common consciousness, identity, and system of values and culture.

This short analysis allows us to say that, at the current stage, these processes remain incomplete. The process of national unification and consolidation, and likewise the search for identity, are progressing chaotically and with difficulty. The hybrid identity or multi-layered identity of the people of our country does not yet allow the centripetal forces to outweigh the centrifugal ones. This societal condition not help the consolidation and strengthening of nationhood. As a result, it is difficult to

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50 For further information, see: “Obzor otmeny grafy “Nacionalnost” v passporte: za i protiv”, *Ca-Portal.ru*, 16 June 2016: <http://www.ca-portal.ru/article:27907>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

51 “Bannery ‘Kairan elim, kaida baratabyz’ nachali vyveshivat’ po vsei respublike,” *Radio Azattyq*, 22 July 2016, <http://rus.azattyk.org/a/27872844.html>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

speak of our building a nation with a unified citizenry.

The fact that over the course of the transitional period supporters of extreme ethnic nationalism could not attain a dominant position speaks of the potential for creating Kyrgyzstan as a civil nation.

In many ways, the problems of national consolidation are connected with the history of the Kyrgyz, with the history of nationhood. Kyrgyzstan having been placed under the tutelage of various other empires over

the centuries, the country lacks capabilities in goal setting (most of all among the elite) and still has to form its own development models. Kyrgyzstan's lack of plan for the future serves as a barrier to understanding the place that our country occupies, or could come to occupy, in the modern world order. Hitherto processes of self-identity have been directed only towards the past, and are largely based on unhealthy geopolitical fears and worries.

## Nation-Building in Kazakhstan

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### Challenges

Our country, Kazakhstan, faces many questions related to nation-building today, and it is crucial that the nation provides its own answers. There is a great deal of conceptual and terminological confusion; while the culture of political dialogue, debate, and compromise has not taken deep roots yet. Taken together this eventually leads to even more mayhem and conflicts of interest. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the government has been trying to avoid any serious debate, since it might have a negative impact on the social environment.

When we talk about nation-building, three semantic concepts arise: "nation," "national state" (or "nation-state"), and "nationalism." Each of these key concepts has thousands of meanings and definitions. In order to fathom, live through, and come to terms with all of these, one human life would not be long enough. Additionally, all the three terms are so essential that it would be difficult to accept officially established meanings and definitions. I believe the Kazakh society should develop this terminology in vivo. It might take months or years until we reach a new provisional formula, which would inevitably be reviewed by the next generation of Kazakh citizens, who would not accept the rules and formulas developed by their parents' and grandparents' generation anymore. The likelihood exists that this will happen.

Contemporary Kazakhstan's nation-builders have committed a huge terminological mistake by trying to establish the Kazakh nation, the Kazakh national state, separate from capitalism, from the state as a complicated mechanism of cohesion and implementation of the private and public interests of citizens. Without comprehending, living through, conceptualizing, and implementing the two aforementioned phenomena, it is

impossible to grasp the complexity of the issue, let alone go further in nation-building.

### The "Western" and "Eastern" concepts of nation

Political science presents us with two concepts of the nation. First, the so-called "Western" concept implies studying the lengthy processes of shaping and transforming nations, as well as the very term "nation" itself, which was originally a synonym of the Greek term "ethnos." As a result of its evolution and transformation, the term "nation" ceased to be fully identical to term "ethnos." In fact, the increasing contextual complexity led to the synonymization of the terms "nation" and "state." The concept "nationalist" thus also evolved, and its old meaning of "a champion of his/her ethnos' interests" came to be replaced by "an advocate of a strong state."

I should stress that many of my colleagues and I accept the latter interpretation of the terms "nation," "nationalism," and "national state." In other words, we believe that our society should perceive and digest all the complexity of these concepts, accepting fully the institutional element of the contemporary Western national state. By no means should the state imply an ethnocracy.

Experts are of the view that the Western tradition "is based on the formational approach of social order to the process of social-economic development." According to this tradition, a nation is a phenomenon exclusive to early modern and modern times. The emergence of a nation as a historical phenomenon is closely related to the creation of "nation states," and to the development of capitalism and the emergence of the bourgeoisie. A common view is that nations emerged in the process of development of industrial societies. According to Ernest Gellner, for example, the creation of the nation is a direct result of modernization, i.e., the transition from a traditional agrarian society to an industrial and postindustrial society. Prior to modernization, nations did not exist as such.

Second, the so-called Eastern concept of the nation is not based on Eurocentric progressive positions, but on a polycentrism. The “Eastern” (ethnic) tradition (popular in Germany, Eastern Europe, and Asia) interprets the term “nation” as synonymous to “ethnos.” The nation (or ethno-nation) is an ethnos, which might include foreign ethnic groups (“xenias,” according to Lev Gumiliov), which share the same basic national interests. According to this tradition, the understanding of the ethnic nature of the nation, its character, and the way it expresses itself in culture, cannot be avoided.

### **Do the concepts of “national state” and “political civil nation” contradict each other?**

As I’ve already mentioned, many debates in our society are based not on the nature of the issue, but on a different understanding of the terms. Our social scientists ought to get together and hold a couple of conventions in order to develop a common glossary of political definitions and terms. When we (i.e. nationalist movement in Kazakhstan) say “national state,” some people accuse us of trying to create an “ethnocratic state.” Or else they contrast “nationalists” to supporters of a “political civil nation.” People still confuse “nation” and “nationality,” “nationality” and “ethnicity.”

For my part, I advance the following definitions:

*Nation* can be defined as a cultural-political, socio-economic, and spiritual community of people who traditionally inhabit a certain territory, and have emerged as a result of the establishment of a state, and the development of a supraethnic cultural and political tradition. A common literary language, history, traditions, culture, etc., can distinguish a nation. A nation is also a community of people who share common memories and ancestral myths, and is linked to a (historical) land by common past sacrifices and suffering, and a willingness to go through new suffering again, if required, in order to stay together. Before the law, every member of the community has the same rights and responsibilities. In the constitutions of English and Romance-speaking countries this term is usually associated with the words “state,” “society,” and “community of all citizens.”

*Nationality* refers to a citizen that is a member of a specific state.

The *nation-state* is a constitutional-legalistic type of state implying that it is a form of self-determination and organization of a nation on a specific sovereign territory and that this expresses the will of this nation. When a state’s territory matches with the territory where a nation inhabits, we have a national state. Most states are not homogeneous in national terms and have different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic communities on their territories.

The *nationalism* is definable as an ideology and policy based on the idea that the nation is a value, a supreme form of public unity, a primordiality in the nation-building process. Nationalism as a political movement strives to defend the interests of a specific national community in its relations with the state. Nationalism promotes loyalty and commitment to the nation, political independence, and efforts for the common good of nation, cultural and spiritual growth, and the unification of a national identity for the practical protection of a nation’s life, its territory, economic resources, and spiritual values.

As we can see, all the aforementioned definitions perfectly cover and contain the concepts of “civil nation,” “political nation,” “civil political nation,” and “civil society.”

It is worth noting that contemporary Western science has two main approaches for studying and understanding nations: one is constructivist, the other, primordialist. The former claims that a nation is a product of political engineering, the latter that the nation is a biological and evolutionary phenomenon.

I am convinced that both approaches can be applied while studying, describing, and understanding the Kazakh nation: the primordialist one could be used for the period prior to early modern and modern times, while the constructivist approach can be used for the contemporary period, during which the concept of “Kazakh nation” strictly surpassed ethnic categories. Therefore, the main task for academics and politicians is to secure a synthesis of both approaches, so that they do not contradict each other.

### **The “Kazakh nation” versus the “Soviet people”?**

I claim that without the lengthy colonization of Kazakhstan by Tsarist and Soviet Russia, the Kazakh nation could have developed through evolutionary means. The ethnogenesis and statehood of the Kazakhs led to the formation of a Turko-Islamic nation in Kazakhstan, which consistently followed the stages of clan-tribe-ethnos-nation. Two cases emerged of the supraethnic national idea of “Alash.” The idea of Kazakhness was launched by Abay, a national bourgeoisie began to emerge, and, as happened in many countries in Asia and in Africa, capitalism began to take its natural course, leading to the creation of a powerful national-liberation movement called “Alash.”

Nobody should be misled by the texts of representatives of the Kazakh enlightenment and politicians of the early twentieth century. All the national-liberation movements of Asia and Africa went through a complex process of intellectual development, in which

political ideas evolved from partial autonomy to full and unconditional independence. Early on, for example, the founders of the Indian National Congress demanded the introduction of British laws and rights; later, however, they asked for autonomy and home-rule, and eventually they demanded full independence. This process lasted more than a century.

In other words, the natural flow of history brought Kazakhs to the same road along which all the anticolonial movements of Asia and Africa have also travelled. If not for the global cataclysms of the early twentieth century, Kazakhstan would have naturally grown to develop a national bourgeoisie, following the path from moderate autonomy to radical calls for independence and the establishment of its own national-state identity. For this reason, I reject the pseudo-theories of the special character of Russian colonialism, the unique Eurasian destiny that amicably united Turkic peoples, first around Tsarist Russia, and later around Stalinist-Bolshevik Russia.

The Kazakhs managed to hold onto their identity even in the darkest years of the Soviet period. Scientific and cultural developments significantly helped this endeavor. A global-scale experiment of creating a new community of citizens—"the Soviet nation"—failed. Despite many intensive and complex processes, Kazakhs did not cease to be Kazakhs, did not lose the sense of their common destiny, or the unity of their traditions, culture, and language. Culture, art, and education were actively employed for the purposes of Sovietization and assimilation of the Kazakhs. But Sovietization was implemented in the Kazakh language, and this doing secured a continuity of cultural codes, traditions, historical memories, and elements of religious culture on a minimal scale.

I am also convinced that the Soviet Union was doomed. Its collapse would have happened anyway, due to incommutable laws of history around the rise and fall of great empires. Let me repeat: there was no unique Soviet or Eurasian nation and there will never be. Any attempt to artificially rehash the ideas of Eurasianism (no matter by whom and under what circumstances) should be interpreted as neo-imperialist discourse, which will be always doomed.

### **"Kazakh nation" or "post-Soviet Kazakh nation?"**

In 1990, Kazakhstan declared its sovereignty, and in 1991 Kazakhstan proclaimed its independence. Both proclamations bore on the creation of the Kazakh national state. While many other post-Soviet nations faced the challenge of ethnic and domestic social conflicts during or after their declarations of independence,

Kazakhstan went through this stage earlier, back in 1986. This development froze the process of rotation of the ruling elites for many years, and as a result the national-liberation movement never came to power.

In the first decade of independence, the government did not bother with metaphysical existential endeavors and the dreams of its citizens. People simply tried to survive and adapt to the market economy. In the second decade, our society clashed with the consequences of the decade of soullessness, which was underpinned by the period of the Soviet stagnation, which was the main source of lack of principles, soullessness, and decadence (present-day corruption is not something new, but a mere continuation of Soviet corruption). But what we lacked most of all were moral values. As a result, both elites and society became polluted with corruption, theft, degeneration, and suicide. Another result, one that makes our elites very nervous today, was the growth of religious radicalism and extremism.

In the new environment, given the cultural and spiritual vacuum, people started to look for alternatives: people of means emigrated, while the less prosperous opted for spiritual migration.

Human society is a living organism that does not tolerate void spaces. The lengthy vacuum of the mid-nineteenth century brought the Abay and Alashorda generations onto history's stage. The vacuum of the early 2000s brought with it a similar need for soul-searching. Kazakh nationalism actually originated in the early 2000s. People could not accept the alternatives offered by the government anymore. Every ideological concept proposed by the government had two significant flaws: it was devoid of moral values, and did not meet either the interests of the Kazakhs or of the Russians.

### **Why is it so important to answer the question: "Who are we?"**

Meanwhile, Russia's attempts to recreate or preserve its influence in some fashion in the post-Soviet republics has also accelerated many debates. The Customs and Eurasian Unions were and continue to be neo-imperial projects. Russia has morphed from a security guarantor in the region into the main threat to regional security, into one of the potential sources of destabilization in the region. That morphing has scared our governing elites, who have begun to look for possible ways to preserve the regime and reinforce state institutions. A nation cannot continue to grow and develop without answering essential questions. Even the paradigm "First the economy, then politics," proved useless. In order to implement the new motto, which can be rephrased as "First the strong state and the economy, and then politics," one needs a policy. The questions "Who are

we?” and “Where are we heading?” are of an essentially political nature. A strong state cannot be built without a strong society. A strong state cannot be built on fear. A strong state cannot be built in an environment in which a majority of the society is disloyal, in which this society does not share the concept of a strong independent state. Politics, as a rule, takes place in the sphere of the media on the symbolic level. All the latest events and data leaks confirm this point.

Presently, Kazakhstan has entered into a unique period of its history, which my colleagues and I call the second stage of the struggle for national independence and statehood. The era of primitive accumulation of capital is about to come to an end, after which the usual capitalist rules should enter into force, establishing greater national capital and a new type of bourgeoisie. The biggest fortunes are made either during collapse or building of states. The collapse of the Soviet Union is about to become complete; so is the first stage of building of the newly independent states. The overlapping of these two stages can generate both new problems and new opportunities. Our task is to multiply the positive effects and reduce the downsides. Are we going to make it? I hope we will.

#### **Finally: who are we?**

A key question, one that occasions the most debate today, is: who are we? Are we a Kazakh nation or are we a Kazakhstani nation?

I think that the very concept of the “Kazakhstani nation” is an attempt to fudge over the concept of the “post-Soviet Kazakh nation.” Is this attempt successful? My colleagues and I do not think so. The simple reason “why not” is just because it provokes fierce debates and is a pathway to conflict.

We should, we must, build the “Kazakh nation,” the “Kazakh national state.” This would be right not only from the point of view of philology but from that of history as well. It would be right from the legal point of view, too, based on the founding documents of our country: The Declaration of the State sovereignty and the Law of the State Independence. These two documents, which cannot be found easily on government agency websites, clearly state that all the laws and the Constitution that is supposed to be based on them, should be faithful to the letter and spirit of the founding documents, or risk being rendered illegitimate and abolished.

What is the “Kazakh nation?” Does it mean that all the citizens of the country, bar the Kazakhs, will be discriminated against? The answer is no. Our opponents frequently accuse us, the Kazakhs, of being promoters of the ethnic exclusivity, of an ethnocratic state. This is not true. So why does it happen? I think

that one of our major problems is that we have not left behind the stage of decolonization and de-totalitarianization. During the Soviet period, a “nationalist” was an Empire’s foe, a member of a national-liberation movement. Xenophobes and chauvinistic people were also deemed “nationalists.” I wonder why we still have recourse to the old terms to designate new concepts and phenomena? I think that this is done deliberately, in order to hide our own fears and phobias.

These fierce debates hinder the development of our society. They prevent us from developing a positive Kazakh nationalist program, since these arguments take too much effort and energy. Meanwhile, we have to consider a serious upgrade of the Kazakh discourse. It does not have to mean any revision or abandonment of basic values. It means a making a u-turn toward the future; it means a modernization of Kazakh discourse. It means taking into account the demands of the ethnic diaspora and minorities to a greater extent. The idea of “Mangiliq Yel” (Eternal State) is great, but it should be filled with true Kazakh content. And unless we get a detailed road map for a future acceptable future to everybody, the essential elements of the future will be drawn by anybody, but the citizens of Kazakhstan.

In fact, today we have two Kazakhstans. Kazakh-speaking Kazakhstan is growing and gaining strength, while Russian-speaking Kazakhstan is shrinking due to natural causes. The so-called melting-pot model does not work. This model implies that the components being melted in a common pot should have similar capabilities and fire-resistance. However, in our case only the Kazakhs have the fire-resistance potential, where no one else can stand the high demographic and other kinds of heat. In other words, there are two models of nation-building. The first one is a metallurgic one, the second an architectural one. Let me tell you that the metallurgic model has failed.

Two discontinuous “worlds” with limited communication with each other is too much for one state to handle. There are many historical and other watersheds. Of course the government is trying to do its best in order to limit the historical past with only the last twenty years, which, according to the official point of view, has been less controversial. However, not even these two decades are free of problems. The very denial of the historical path provokes discontent among the Kazakhs. And if we penetrate the depths of history, we will discover more “problematic areas,” which do not help us to enhance the official “interethnic concord.” Kazakhstan is a very young nation, and is about to start groping for and feeling its borders. The process of historical wandering in the wilderness is reaching its end.

According to the Constitution, Kazakhstan is a unitary state. However, Kazakhstan will never be a monoethnic state. Natural historical and demographic reasons mean that Kazakhstan will grow less complex and eventually more ethnically homogeneous, since the Turko-Islamic component will take the upper hand. In ten years, the Turko-Islamic population will make up 80-85 percent, or more, of the

country's population, the major ethnic groups will be, in the long run, after Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, etc. It is going to become a quite different society from the one we know today. We have to prepare ourselves for this new society in advance, to develop the right kind of options and friendly interfaces. We need to look for good models of interactions today in order to be able to multiply them tomorrow.

## Objects and Subjects of Gendered Temporalities

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In 1996, Katherine Verdery wrote that socialism “promised laboring people dignity and freedom, women equal pay for equal work, and national minorities equal rights in the state,” and that, “by making these promises, it drew attention to major problems that capitalist liberal democracies had not adequately resolved” (1996: 330). The Soviet fixation on equality and women’s liberation in the “backward” colonial periphery of Central Asia, as much as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, directly influenced the ways in which being a woman was Sovietized. But what happened to this project of emancipation when the Soviet state collapsed? And how did the process of seeing women as “women” and as objects (and not subjects) of emancipation influence the ways in which gendered perspectives survived the post-Sovietness of gendered temporality?

In this short essay, I mainly endeavor to criticize the dual approach of the Soviet state’s attempt to objectify gender, and the post-Soviet state’s aims to continue a similar framework of social and gendered cohesion. In both approaches, the gendered perspective of difference (biological, status, economic, and even socio-psychological) is embedded in the perception of power, and in the state’s power to divide people based on their “gender” and gendered differences. Women, as represented through literature, art, propaganda or other media, play an important role in this differentiation and in state capability. As Choi Chatterjee (2002: 4) writes:

*Public literature converted Soviet women from object to subject, stripped them of an historical passivity, and endowed them with a formidable capacity for action. Women’s lives were narrated synchronically and encoded the transformation of the female character through revolutionary time and space constituted the main organizing principle.*

If the Soviet state clearly divided and separated women from men and largely objectified them as

“objects” of emancipation, then the post-Soviet state attempts to sustain this gendered differentiation, but also to provide “gender equality.” As a result, however, women remain marginalized from political life and public office, and instead are given roles as “symbolic representatives” of the proclaimed equality. Similar to “Soviet power,” which “promised freedom and equality, but did not deliver” (Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2008: 15), contemporary Central Asian states proclaim the discourse of gender equality to be cemented in place, whereas the gap in inequality is heightening by the year.

Moreover, the contemporary state, as much as the Soviet state, does not even place womanhood and females at the core of the national or state representation. In the male-dominated, official paradigm, womanhood is marginalized to the views of male representatives holding various offices, through which official discourses of nationhood are formed, censored, shaped, and channeled to the public. In post-Soviet Central Asia, the public sphere is still highly gendered and dominated by male agency despite calls for gender equality.

*The rationality of the newly constructed allegoric ethno-historic myth founded the basis of the new post-Soviet and postcolonial discourse of the state culture [in the post-Soviet space]. Nationalist monuments of this type [male conquerors] appeared in many new states on the wave of euphoric feelings of [post-Soviet] independence. These monuments are usually defined by theatrical pathos and are eclectic; they replicate classical European-style monuments; they are usually megalomaniac, and it is impossible to evaluate them as art products but rather as political decisions [whims]. Monuments like that [of male conquerors and dominant male figures] trace a specific period of state-building—nationalism as an official institution which probably is the necessary element of compensating practices [of the state] to overcome the inferiority complex. This is not the best representation of high art but it is still not the most aggressive way of solving [Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet state-building] dilemma (Ibrayeva 2014: 52-53).*



The everyday influence of nationalism and gendered norms of nationalism through monument-building continue to influence the daily lives of male and female citizens of the post-Soviet states, not only in Central Asia. This is why the gendered, nationalist discourse of the post-Soviet era is as important as the Soviet legacy that largely influences its development. This “banal nationalist” approach to the hierarchy of men and women also influences the processes of re-traditionalization that are affecting gendered temporalities and perceptions. When a number of public scandals rocked Kazakhstani social media in spring 2016 (the veiling of the monument of a female figure in Astana or naked pictures of feminist bloggers) nationalist views of banality, and established gender norms, played an important role in condemning “non-traditional” behavior. Proponents of this view claimed that a “real Kazakh woman” should not behave in any way that might embarrass and shame her nation. While this is an old argument, which many feminists actively reject and criticize online and through various media, this same argument continues to influence individual and collective decisions in rural Central Asia and in its major cities. Re-traditionalizing discourses, together with banal nationalism, which continues to propagate the vision of a gendered distinction into “male” and “female,” is influencing the whole system of social and cultural relations, pushing and pulling the “subjects” of this debate into numerous conflicting situations. By this, what I mean is the harassment that follows if one’s “body” or “self” is deemed “inappropriate,” i.e. not to comply with the gendered perspectives and temporalities of re-traditionalists, who are backed by the state’s gendered discourse.

The frames of “inappropriate” are, in turn, constantly shifting, and can change in accordance with the context, interest, and power of the actor who imposes this judgment. In fact, the context is a very dangerous one, in which any individual or group may objectify the other based on the state’s proclaimed “aim to ‘re-traditionalize’ society” (Cleuziou and Dierenberger 2016: 196). This affects most vulnerable groups—not only women who are expected to “reproduce the nation” and keep its “sacred” (although invented and re-invented) traditions alive, but also represent the honor of the nation through their bodies; but it also concerns other groups who actively resist the state’s and society’s discourse of re-traditionalization. Moreover, it affects queer groups, which either remain “silenced,” or else marginalized, harassed, and condemned. The public exposure (through social media) of these groups to police harassment influences their objectification. Re-traditionalization is entering even more dangerously into the domain of private life, but also has appropriated the free media, as these ideas are exported and gendered control is established even in the globalized social media sphere.

The upshot of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the further nationalization of states, regimes, societies, and public spheres, is a gendered temporality wherein one is defined as an object on the basis of his or her becoming a subject of his or her gendered position, bereft of all agency. The new reality of nationalization and re-traditionalization leaves little space for difference, pluralism, or resistance.

## One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: 25 Years of Turkmen Women’s Rights

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**Ainabat Yaylymova**

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Although not everything was perfect, the Soviet period is considered by many to be a Golden Age for women’s rights. During it, Turkmen women and girls had access to equal and quality education, professional development, and later in life had significant state support for raising their families. Over the last 25 years, Turkmen women have experienced changes that affect their private and public lives. These changes do not make headline news. They are not dramatic when seen from the larger scale of developments in Turkmenistan. But today a Turkmen woman faces fewer educational opportunities, increased pressure to hold several jobs,

widespread gender-based violence, weak family planning organization, and an erosion of state support. There is little meaningful, public discussion on the challenges that Turkmen women face today. The international and independent Turkmen organizations working on women’s issues are few. And statistics are rarely made public.

### **Context: Turkmenchilik, Islam, and Western consumerism**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmen women began losing ground as traditional gender stereotypes returned. With the collapse of Soviet socialist values and the erosion of state support, interpretations of Turkmenchilik (“Turkmenness”), Islam, and the new desire for a material “good life” driven by western consumerism have started to fill the void. One’s Turkmenness is defined by his/her loyalty to Turkmen

traditions and cultural practices. Its interpretation varies from person to person.

Government policies have promoted a reversion to old-fashioned, or traditional, ideas about women, and encourage traditional gender stereotypes. For example, traditional Turkmen dress was chosen as a compulsory dress code for women in the state offices and schools. The dress code for men, on the other hand, is western attire. Debates on social platforms focus on the significance and value of Turkmen traditional dresses as a marker of the identity and modesty of Turkmen girls and women. If, on the surface, this seems like an entertaining call for Turkmen women to have the opportunity to wear beautiful, long dresses as a qualifier for Turkmenness, the heart of the issue bears on Turkmen women's autonomy and respect for the choices they make.

The dowry or *galyň* tradition is practiced in a current form that inflict a crushing debt on the groom's family, and it contributes to promoting gender inequality, domestic violence, and stereotypes in Turkmen society. Interestingly, *galyň*, which was fiercely combatted in Soviet times, has returned to Turkmen society in a disturbing form in which conspicuous consumption is glorified.

This drive toward the traditional is exacerbated by the complementary revival of Islam in Turkmenistan. It is hard to know how many Turkmen Islamic scholars accept and promote the idea that Islam grants equal rights to women and men. Different interpretations fill the void in knowledge, and today it is easy to meet young Turkmen men who claim that women are subservient to men in Islam, and that women are supposed to be controlled and relegated to being good mothers and homemakers.

With the rising consumer middle class in Turkmenistan, the relentless pursuit of the latest fashions in expensive clothing, appliances, cars, and homes has become glorified, and even normalized. The international media further objectify women, and reinforce the notion that her needs and desires can be satisfied by purchasable, glossy goods. This does more harm to a woman's situation than good. This materialistic pursuit shifts the conversation from the urgent structural problems women face, and the limited opportunities they have, to the cosmetic changes that the next new makeup kit or dress will provide them. This also serves to strengthen the gender stereotype, according to which women are increasingly seen by Turkmen men as "temptresses" looking for patrons to support their shopping desires.

### **It was easier to be a woman in Soviet times**

Turkmenistan ranks 109<sup>th</sup> out of 188 countries on the UNDP Human Development Report for 2015.<sup>52</sup>

Although there is no ranking for Turkmenistan on the Gender Inequality Index, patriarchal attitudes are deeply held in the country. Turkmen women lag behind men on educational attainment and labor force participation, with female participation at 47 percent, and male participation at 77 percent.

### **Education**

Although primary education is available to Turkmen girls, they have very limited educational opportunities later in life. Higher education in Turkmen universities is out of reach for many girls, something that was not the case during Soviet times. In families with many children, the preference is to educate sons. The good news is that there is a growing societal acceptance that it is okay for parents to allow their daughters to travel outside of the country to get education, a development that breaks with a strong cultural tradition of not allowing girls to leave the house before marriage—one of the few steps forward for women since Soviet times. Thus, some young women, particularly those with means or strong aspirations, do get a university education outside of the country. But overall, limited educational opportunities result in each successive generation of Turkmen mothers being less able to be role models for their daughters in terms of education and professional development.

For a lot of young Turkmen women, delaying marriage is a not an option due to the limited educational and employment opportunities. This strongly contributes to a cult of marriage and purity in Turkmen society, meaning that "virginity" and finding a virgin bride are central topics of today's discussions on youth platforms.

### **Economic opportunities**

Burdened with stereotypes and strongly prescribed gender roles, Turkmen women have to cope with economic hardship. Many have had to become their family's main breadwinner. Interestingly, women are expected to be both homemakers and breadwinners at the same time. This economic reality has affected the dynamics in Turkmen families, as well as conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Where, in many cases, the men may be long-term unemployed, the women in the family are busy juggling several jobs at once. In the rare cases when an unemployed husband takes care of the children and helps in the household, this is seen as *unTurkmen* and is deeply traumatizing for the majority of Turkmen men.

Women in general have non-flexible work hours, endure conditions of hard labor, and compulsory, unpaid participation in state-organized mass events, such as marches, community clean-ups, and cotton

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52 UNDP Human Development Report: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TKM>

harvests, thus eating into their already limited time to interact with their families. This creates a lot of stress and burden on women, and affects their physical and psychological health.

As a result of high unemployment rates, women have become involved in the most accepted kind of private enterprise—trading in products from overseas, and migrating to neighboring countries, such as Turkey and Russia, to do menial service jobs. This has led to families having to separate: mothers must leave their children to go overseas for work and this is creating a class of children who are being left behind. Although it is hard to estimate the exact numbers,

Turkmen women are becoming vocal about the negative and traumatizing impact of this separation between their lives and their children's.

### **State social support and mechanisms for public engagement**

The government introduced medical insurance and fees for medical care in 1995. Disease prevention and access to a range of free medical services have dramatically deteriorated. This has led to the erosion of social support for families. Former President Niyazov abolished almost all state support to mothers, while president Berdymukhamedov reinstated some of this support. A mother with an infant receives state pay of \$45 a month for her child up to the age of three. Mothers are also guaranteed three-year unpaid leave. Affordable childcare is available in the major cities, but in rural areas there is no childcare support for working mothers.

During Soviet times, forums to learn and engage with the Turkmen public on women's problems and challenges existed. The *Zhensovet*, or women's councils of Soviet women for public participation, have disappeared in post-independent Turkmenistan. An average Turkmen woman is not able to name any groups or organizations that actively promote Turkmen women's rights. The absence of fora for genuine public participation creates a culture of secrecy around the most basic public health issues and information concerning women's rights. This leaves many women ignorant or misinformed about the major public threats.

### **Domestic violence: a private family matter**

No official statistics on domestic violence are available in Turkmenistan, but local and international observers say the problem is widespread.<sup>53</sup> Reporting the abuse is not an option for many Turkmen women. Despite laws to prohibit such violence, physical, sex-

ual, verbal abuse and harassment are widespread. The incidence of abuse does not get covered in the media, and it is hard to know how many cases make it successfully through a court system that is mired in bureaucracy. Being a victim of domestic violence comes with a deeply embedded societal view that shames the woman having suffered the violence. Most Turkmen women do not want to take their family problems outside of the house, so the problem is looked upon as a private family matter. There is no understanding at a societal level that violence against women is a public health problem with serious adverse effects on women's physical, mental, and reproductive health.

### **Access to family planning and sexual health information**

As in many countries today, Turkmen women have fewer children than four decades ago, when the fertility rate was 6.2 children born per woman. Turkmen women's use of contraception is central to this development. At present, the fertility rate is 2.3 children born per woman.<sup>54</sup> We might see a spike in the number of children being born both in rural and urban areas in recent years, as unofficial reports claim that during visits to gynecologists women are now encouraged to have more children and that abortions are discouraged. It is reported that doctors no longer volunteer information about contraception. Family planning in Turkmenistan seems to be shifting to serve state demographic policies on achieving a high birth rate.

Starting in August 2015, abortion is only available in the first five weeks of pregnancy. If a woman wants an abortion after five weeks of pregnancy, her case must be heard by a special medical committee at the clinic, during which it has to be proven whether the woman has a medical condition or whether she wants to terminate the pregnancy due to social problems such as poverty, her husband's unemployment, or drug addiction. Anecdotal evidence exists that this system creates additional opportunities for bribes (already an endemic problem in Turkmenistan). It is unclear how high fertility coupled with low educational and economic opportunities for women is going to affect women's life expectancy, or benefit their children's health and education.

Gendered social norms are learned by Turkmen girls and boys from their families and communities, and affect their choices in adult life. In Turkmen culture, it is considered inappropriate for women to learn "too much" about matters related to sexuality. There are taboos around sexual activity for both boys and

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53 NHC: Women second-class citizens in Turkmenistan: <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/18665.html>

54 <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>

girls. Notions of purity prevent the Turkmen youth from learning about anatomy, sexuality, relationships, and contraception. There is a lack of scientific, unbiased, and user-friendly information on these topics in the Turkmen language.

Bloggers at [www.saglyk.info](http://www.saglyk.info) provide Turkmenistan's residents with access to information on cutting-edge issues concerning gender equality, sexuality education, women's sexual and reproductive health, culturally taboo topics, and the impact of Turkmen traditions on public health. [Saglyk.info](http://www.saglyk.info) is the first and only website with credible public health information in the Turkmen language.

Societal taboos around these issues, low public health literacy, and an absence of well-funded and implemented programs all affect the fertility, sexual, and reproductive health of a Turkmen woman in profound ways, contributing to high maternal and infant mortality rates. Maternal mortality is 61 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>55</sup> Turkmenistan's high maternal mortality rate is second only to Kyrgyzstan's in Central Asia.<sup>56</sup> The mortality rate for children under five in Turkmenistan is 55 deaths per 1,000 live births, the highest in Central Asia.<sup>57</sup> The underlying causes of this tragic situation are low public health literacy, poor implementation of existing laws and regulations, low civic participation, and corruption.<sup>58</sup>

Poor nutritional habits and rapid environmental degradation, combined with high air and water pollution<sup>59</sup> also creates a dangerous situation in Turkmen society. The majority of young women of childbearing age suffer from preventable conditions such as anemia and iodine deficiency.<sup>60</sup> Medical professionals report increased incidences of miscarriage and stillbirth. According to the IFPRI's Global Nutrition Report, 55 percent of Turkmen women are overweight, 23 percent of them obese—reflecting a shift to a more processed western diet. These serious public health threats affect Turkmen women, their children, and their futures.

### **Looking forward: making it more concrete than inshallah!**

Making a substantial impact in the lives of Turkmen women requires making deep changes to the Turkmen mindset. In the next ten years, Turkmen women and men together will have to understand the challenges and act on creating alternative models of thinking and behavior, values and attitudes, towards a sex that constitutes a half of the population. If this does not happen, our daughters will have fewer opportunities and choices in accessing education, and making choices and decisions about their bodies, and their lives. Their space in public life will shrink. This will negatively affect life expectancy and quality for many Turkmen women and girls.

The government can achieve greater gender equality by opening up venues and public platforms where women's concerns, challenges, and stories can be heard. The first change that needs to happen is that Turkmen women themselves must understand the issues at stake and demand that dialogue be opened to identify the areas where women's rights are slowly eroding.

One of the first government initiatives should include the registration of independent women's rights organizations and groups. Such independent organizations should be viewed as a part of the solution to the complex issues that women face today. Reinstating and forming a *Zhensovet*-esque institution tailored to the traditions and needs of today's Turkmen society could provide the first valuable initiative for Turkmen women to voice themselves and learn about issues. This might be a way to organize, mobilize, and empower Turkmen women. A bottom-up approach to problems might lead to better outcomes, and provide real cause for celebration on March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day, which has remained in our calendars from Soviet times and is loved by Turkmens regardless of their country's ideological transformations.

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55 See, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TKM>

56 See, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/89006>

57 See, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TKM>

58 Turkmenistan's ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (out of 168 countries) is 154.

59 See the Environmental Performance Index: <http://epi.yale.edu/country/turkmenistan>

60 See the 2015 Nutrition, country profile: Turkmenistan, IFPRI: <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/2015-nutrition-country-profile-turkmenistan>

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# Uzbekistan's "Cultural Inheritance" in Constructing "Collective Memory" in the Age of Independence<sup>61</sup>

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Summarizing the 25-year existence of an independent Uzbekistan became, by a twist of fate, more than just an anniversary event with added fanfare for having a nice round number to celebrate. I. A. Karimov's death closed the chapter on this first—what can now undoubtedly be called "Karimovian"—period in the existence of independent Uzbekistan. It has clearly shown just how polarized Uzbek society is in relation to its first president: on the one hand, we see official, allegiant eulogies interspersed with the "eternal thanks" of the Uzbek intelligentsia; on the other, we find harsh assessments condemning the activities of a dictator and the authoritarian regime he built.

Behind these mutually exclusive assessments it is possible to discern the various trajectories of lives that were distinguished by a particular "individual memory." Their simple arithmetic sum will hardly provide a unified "collective memory." At the same time, formulating this memory was one of the Karimov regime's main preoccupations: one tenth of all programs aimed at forming a "cultural heritage" around a few, specifically Uzbek state symbols, the formation of which was to become a solid base for that very "collective memory" of Uzbek citizens.

I argue that, contrary to the deeply rooted perception in the republic, of cultural heritage as a fact of life inherent to Uzbekistan from its inception, one that objectively reflects the country's great history and the national mentality of its population, cultural heritage is to be understood, in line with the essential idea of Critical Heritage Studies, as a construct that is not native, but rather the result of the concerted actions of a contingent of people pushing specific aesthetic, intellectual, and political ideas. Such action, which transforms artifacts freed from all concrete definition into monuments, and then, in turn, into cultural heritage, is defined in much French-language research from the 1900s on as patrimonialization, the equivalent of which in the English-language literature are phrases like invention of heritage, practices of heritage-making, or processes of

listing, conservation and heritage management. As for it, the German scholarly tradition underscores the idea of monument preservation—Denkmal- and Heimatbewegung—which dominates debates concerning monument-concepts (Denkmalbegriff or Kulturerbe).

Recognizing the constructed nature of a cultural heritage also underscores that the final product of such activity, despite the canonization of the body of cultural heritage in official lists, beginning with the UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage listing, are in essence a sort of bricolage: in their genesis, it is possible to trace both political platforms—imperial or national—and personal ambitions. At the same time, this construction possesses incredible durability: once an object is listed as cultural heritage, it is practically impossible to have this status removed.

This peculiarity of cultural heritage—existence over a long duration—makes it interesting to analyze the results of the Karimov regime's 25 years of patrimonial activity. This regime's efforts were directed, on the one hand, at the destruction of "undesirable" elements from the past, and, on the other, at the hypertrophic protrusion of historic episodes chosen by the powers that be, along with their associated artifacts, which were transformed into national symbols.

I emphasize that, in speaking here of cultural heritage, I limit the analysis to the *material cultural heritage in its official version* (i.e., that which has been confirmed by government agencies and supported by government programs). Natural monuments and non-material heritage items—from oral literature up to gastronomic traditions—remain beyond the scope of this account, as does that which relates to unofficial heritage, such as folk customs.

## **Karimov's patrimonialist activities: cultural heritage and Uzbek identity**

As the first president of independent Uzbekistan, Karimov's cultural policies pursued a two-pronged goal from the outset. On the one hand, he desired to expunge the Russian Imperial heritage, both Tsarist and Soviet, which were united into a single "traumatic past" devoid of any nuance to differentiate these eras. On the other hand, he aimed to formulate and cement intrin-

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61 This article was published as a policy document by the Observatory: "Alerte Héritage: In Defence of the Central Asian Cultural Heritage" (see, <http://heritalert.wixsite.com/alert/tekst-1-sg>).

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sic Uzbekistani—or something sold as such—cultural values, which were to be transformed into recognizable symbols. It was believed that every resident of Uzbekistan could easily identify with this select group, which logically would be made part of current policy initiatives. According to this plan, the creation of a Uzbek cultural identity began in post-Soviet Uzbekistan immediately following the declaration of independence and it moved in several directions simultaneously.

The retroactive re-writing of history around the idea of national independence, and the emphasis placed on a host of government decrees (see, in part, the presidential decree from January 27, 2012, “On the creation of a General Council for the recent history of Uzbekistan under the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Trade Education”), and on the president’s “fundamental” works, led to the elimination or maximal abridgment of whole strata of history connected with the Russian-Soviet presence in Central Asia at the level of school and college textbooks, academic research, popular publications, museum exhibits, and television shows. In this context, new topics were omitted—in whole or in part—such as the tense political relations on the eve of the Russian conquest of Turkestan, the so-called Basmachi movement, the national boundary settlements of 1924-36, Uzbekistan’s role in WWII, and its tenure as part of the USSR in the Khrushchev-Brezhnev period. Counterbalancing this, separate episodes of new Central Asian history—like, for example, the Jadid movement—were written into the historical narrative in hypertrophic *haut-relief*, leaving practically unwritten both *Cadimism* (an earlier and far more influential religious-intellectual trend), and the activities of various types of revolutionary social-progressives of non-indigenous backgrounds. Regarding antiquity and the middle ages, a just as ideologically driven and selective approach led to a new sampling of protagonists and key episodes: a succession of anniversaries, shored up by expensive government programs, formed, on the one hand, a pantheon of “great ancestors of the Uzbek people,” according to which, Tamerlane, Ali-Shir Nava’i, Kemaleddin Behzad, Ulugh Beg, and Baha-ud-Din Naqshband and others symbolically raised up the whole Uzbek nation. On the other hand, pompous celebrations of 1000-year anniversaries of cities like Samarkand, Termez, Tashkent, Bukhara, and others literally competing for ancient status, were designed to underscore the importance of Uzbek relics “in the development of world civilization.”

Parallel to the process of creating a new national history ran the destruction of the old, Russian-Imperial-Soviet one: from libraries of all levels over the course of many years, publications dating to Tsarist or Soviet times were removed, including maps, statistical tables, and travel descriptions as well as works of archaeology, literature, history, and geography. The relocation, in 2003, of the National Library named A. Nava’i from the solid historical building on Mustakkilik Square to several run-down structures<sup>62</sup> dispersed across both that square and Tamerlane Square, served as an ideal excuse to “cleanse” the holdings of this important collection of books for Uzbekistan. The same fate awaited the largest library of TashSU, and those of several lesser libraries located throughout the country. The books eliminated from the repositories only in part landed on the trash heap. A large portion of them ended up on the shelves of the many used book stores in Tashkent, for which the end of the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s became a golden age: labels with incredible prices were glued right over the library stamps, and, accessible only to foreign researchers and tourists, Tsarist and Soviet books flooded unobstructed out of the country.

The censoring of a Soviet past increasingly associated with “trauma” also unfolded in a city context. Beginning with the renaming of streets and squares,<sup>63</sup> bureaucratic institutions soon moved to a radical revamping of the urban landscape. Buildings from Tsarist or Soviet times, whether they were examples of provincial nineteenth-century Art Nouveau or 1920s and 30s constructivism, were torn down or remade in a newly invented style characterized as national: its distinguishing features were dark mirrored windows, pseudo-classical architectural details with gilt Oriental elements, interspersed with mosaics, blue cupolas, ‘eastern’ arches, innumerable marble veneers, and stalactite cornices. This, among other things, happened with almost all of the buildings adjoining Mustakkilik Square in Tashkent. Monuments born out of Soviet propaganda were destroyed, and in their places arose a gallery of new symbols, as exemplified both by the sculpture of Karl Marx reminiscent of a burning torch in the center of Tashkent’s Revolution Square, which was transformed into a monument to Tamerlane on horseback to adorn the square that also now carries his name. Squares associated with Soviet ideology were re-planned, reconstructed, and radically rearranged, such as Lenin Square with the Avenue of Parades, and the statue of Lenin on the Friendship of Peoples Square. Even the vegetation was radically trans-

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62 The supposed new building for the library on the corner of Sharaf Rashidov Prospect and Nava’i Prospect was never completed. As a result, in 2007, this *dolgostroi* was converted into a business center for the Nava’i gold mining plant.

63 To this list we should add the renaming of a number of Soviet holidays: for example, May 9 turned from Victory Day into the Day of Remembrance and Honors, itself only loosely connected with the ideology of independence.

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formed. The hundred-year-old sycamores on Tashkent Square, associated by the powers that be with colonial programs for landscape gardening of the Governor General of the Turkestan region, K.P. von Kaufman, were mercilessly destroyed on the pretext of a sudden onset of parasites. The precedent of completely cutting down all of Tashkent's trees was more or less repeated in the streets, squares, and parks of provincial cities throughout the country, from Samarkand to Fergana, and in their places were planted grass plots that quickly dried in the sun or evergreens that were so poorly adapted to the Central Asian climate that the municipal powers were forced, from time to time, to paint them green.

The ideological work behind reformulating the collective memory and appropriating the past also hit the museums, and the manner in which history was presented as texts, visual materials, and showy artifacts were used that those in power thought were the most understandable. The first step was clearly to rename the museums: the existence of a museum named after V. I. Lenin, the republic's main museum in Soviet times, would have been an ideological oxymoron against the backdrop of the crystallization of Uzbek identity. After the unavoidable renaming, radical renovations of museum exhibits followed, whereby the period of Russian presence in Central Asia was either truncated to a minimum or came to be missing entirely. This period yielded its place, in accordance with the logic of omission and compromises, to demonstrations of the hypertrophically rapturous accomplishments of the present, and frequently also to utopian plans for the "great future." Later, at the end of the 1990-2000s, a host of absolutely new museums appeared, exclusive reflections of the national ideology, such as the Tashkent Museum of the Timurids (1996), which references the great culture of earlier generations, or such as the Museum in Memory of Victims of Repression (2002), which references recent emotional experiences that are invoked to facilitate the perception of independence as a lawful liberation from the colonial yoke. At the same time, a variety of new art galleries appeared that were obliged to present Uzbek art in a more "full-bodied" way as compared with how it had been in Soviet times. Galleries such as the Gallery of the National Bank of Uzbekistan, or the Gallery of Fine Art of Uzbekistan under the Academy of Arts of the republic, and also a variety of foundations such as the Forum Foundation, which works in the area of traditional and contemporary art, Oltin Meros, an international charity foundation, and the Association of Folk Craftspeople called Khunarmand, called upon to restore and support traditional crafts and facilitate the active development of the republic's modern art.

Forming a new vision of the history of Uzbekistan brought to life a whole variety of projects connected

with the museumification of large-scale architectural complexes. The desire to use ancient and medieval monuments as symbols of "the genius of the Uzbek people," both in domestic ideology and in the area of the global tourism industry, led to turning them into Disneyland style projects. Ill-considered, coarse restoration work in Samarkand, Shakhreizabs, Bukhara, Tashkent, and other cities, as a consequence of which the modern replica effectively swallowed the medieval structure whole, compels international experts to talk with increasing frequency about removing Uzbekistani monuments from UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage List.

### **Contradictory conclusions and paradoxical contradictions: is Uzbekistan's cultural heritage under threat?**

The search for "heroic ancestors" in the deep past and the negation of any positive characteristics of the Imperial and the Soviet periods was common not only to Uzbekistan but also to many other post-Soviet countries, from the Baltic republics to Ukraine and Georgia. Just as in certain other republics, old Soviet methods were used to form a national identity and new collective memory in Uzbekistan. The style of their implementation can easily be surmised: all projects passed through bureaucratic procedures, were fueled by state ideology excluding any critical outside perspective, and relied on state administrative financial and technical resources. Sovietness, assiduously banished, was also examined at the level of intellectual and artistic interpretation of new historical concepts: pressed into service in the new museum exhibits were the same materials used by Soviet propaganda only in a new context. Theses were the same materials introduced into circulation by Soviet researchers and approved by Soviet cultural-educational institutions, the same intellectual schemas of history, of hackneyed phrases of anti-colonial Marxist rhetoric of the 1920s and 30s, and of the panegyric, patriotic nonsense of the Brezhnev era. Sovietness was also detected in the urban environment: the orientalized stylization of architectural elements and symmetric "classical" compositions reference the aesthetic prototypes of the Stalinist era. Just as obvious in Karimov's newly constructed cultural heritage are the impressions of the Imperial era: the choice of most of Uzbekistan's key ancient and medieval monuments trace back to the first stages of construction of cultural heritage that Kaufman initiated in times of colonial Imperialism. The "long period" over which this cultural heritage was formed allows for the coexistence of these asynchronical elements.

At the same time, when summing up Karimov's patrimonialist activities over 25 years of independence in Uzbekistan, it is impossible to leave out the internal

dangers that threaten the country's cultural heritage, in addition to its being surrounded on all sides by armed conflict and religious vandalism. Some express well-founded concerns that the artworks held in state museums could easily be stolen, that archives will continue to be squandered and libraries "cleansed," and that many architectural sites (from medieval monuments to modernist complexes of the Soviet period) and archaeological sites are under actual threat of destruction due to programs for urban redevelopment, economic development, or ill-advised restorations. Having appeared more than twenty years ago on the international art market, the cultural heritage of Central Asia today

is seen as a source of income, and is a coveted object for individuals and organizations connected with the international trafficking of art and cultural treasures. Recent examples of this include the thefts from the Tashkent Museum of Art and the Angren Gallery, as well as the personnel scandal at the Savitsky Museum in Nukus. The vulnerability of Uzbek art and cultural institutes is compounded by a specific condition inherent to all of post-Soviet space, where the destruction and plundering of cultural heritage happens against the backdrop of complete corruption, poverty, and the desire of the leaders of newly independent states to radically rewrite the region's history.

## The Culture of Kazakhstan: An In-Between Story

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The area of culture and cultural practice in Kazakhstan was open to significant influence and interference on the part of the Soviet regime for the entire period of existence of the USSR. Apart from collectivization and modernization in the 1930s, the Soviet regime in Kazakhstan conducted forced sedentarization, altering the population's way of life from nomadic to settled, something that led to huge human losses. Kazakh culture further experienced significant influence of the Soviet regime and the ideology it spread through propaganda. Relegating all concepts of ethnicity to the social sphere, the regime interfered in the customs and traditions of the people, and implemented harsh language policies. Consequently, upon obtaining independence at the beginning of the 1990s, the search for a new national identity, disassociated from that of the Soviets, and attempts to return and revive pre-Soviet cultural codes and practices, became key priorities in the area of culture. The search for, and formation and construction of, a new national identity; reflections on the inheritance of the Soviet period and attempts to come out from under it; the appearance of a new government; attempts at integrating into the international arena—these questions were taken on both by the powers that be and by the intellectual elite and creative circles, who distanced themselves from the government agenda.

### Official cultural domain

One important event for Kazakhstan's culture was the transfer of the capital to Astana in 1998. This event was important for the cultural domain insofar as the powers that be intended to give a certain amount of symbolic power to this new capital; the Astana project was called on to transmit a sense of moving from the Soviet period toward an independent Kazakhstan, to embody this independent Kazakhstan itself, together with its accomplishments, its participation in global processes, including through the appearance of a new visual language and new architectural sites. More than once in his missives to the people, the president of the country, Nursultan Nazarbaev, listed the main values of Kazakhstan when speaking about Astana post independence, referring first to both developments as achievements, and secondly, placing them on the same level.<sup>64</sup> The formation of symbolic power was equally valued by the government together with gaining political power. Small and provincial Akmola was turned into a modern town after the government invested many millions in it, to turn it into an important landmark for the ruling regime.

Analyzing the significance that Astana's creation had for the culture of Kazakhstan, it is worth noting not only the goals of the Astana project, including the aforementioned formation of symbolic power, but also the strategies and instruments used to achieve these goals. In the first place, Astana as a project was addressed to two audiences—domestic and foreign. For the foreign audience, the government used western and modern forms of cultural capital familiar to that audi-

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64 Missive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbaev to the people of Kazakhstan "The Kazakhstan path—2050: A singular goal, singular interests, a singular future," January 17, 2014. [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/postlanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nnazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-17-yanvarya-2014-g](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/postlanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazahstan-nnazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana-17-yanvarya-2014-g)

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ence in order to solidify its own political power, and, at that same time, created an attractive image of Kazakhstan. Having a modern city was necessary to improve the country's international image. For the domestic audience, Astana and its symbolic power were used as instruments to legitimize the existing regime.

In order to create a modern architectural landscape for the new capital, the government invited world renowned architects. Among them was the Japanese architect Kise Kurokawa, who had participated in drafting the general plan for Astana, the Briton Norman Foster, who devised the Palace of Peace and Accord (the Pyramid) and the Khan-Shatyr trade-entertainment center, and others. Astana became filled with grandiose, futuristic structures, absorbing a variety of architectural styles and directions—the Palace of Independence, the National Museum, the Astana Opera Theater. It was a city of dreams; a city brought into existence through political will, and not one that developed naturally under the influence of social and economic factors. The architectural and aesthetic face of the city was likewise dictated by political ambitions. This spectacle of showmanship, along with the “big names” and projects were an approach to governing and development of culture in large part taken from approaches to the creation and development of the new capital as an object of cultural capital.

The big name projects received sizable state financial support. Their organizers attracted foreign participants to create an international image for the final project. Such foreigners started to appear in practically all areas of culture. The blockbuster film *Nomad: The Warrior*, whose budget was exceeded more than once, was produced by a team of specially invited foreign specialists, including two directors. A great deal was spent on sumptuous celebrations and festivals, wherein priority was given to appearances over factual substance—the curse of excess oil profits affected not only the economy but also culture. From these profits arose demands for quick and marked results that would evidence the country's development and achievements via various forms of cultural capital.

The powers that be attempted to rupture their connection to the Soviet past, create their own cultural space, and restore a culture that had been lost during the Soviet period. But in its approach to the development of this culture the current regime has in many ways proven the successor of Soviet traditions: culture and art are meant to uphold the legitimacy of the existing political order, providing it with a fitting narrative. Soviet “heritage” exerted structural influence on the development of culture in Kazakhstan

as well. If we use post-colonial theory on post-Soviet Kazakhstan, which “for an extended period of time experienced the interference and influence of another dominant culture, and saw its own traditions and customs denigrated and taken as less developed, backwards,” then the desire to be accepted in the international arena by borrowing forms of cultural capital is the effect of the “post-Soviet” situation in Kazakhstan. As Partha Chatterjee writes,<sup>65</sup> post-colonial societies develop cultural forms that “anti-colonials [use] in their discourse, but which have been produced by the dominant culture.” In Kazakhstan, the post-colonial effect manifested itself in the regime trying to find acceptance at international level, receive recognition from another external culture, and borrow from it certain forms of cultural capital—in this case from the western world. Not defining the borders of that world, the regime in independent Kazakhstan was nevertheless moved by a desire to be noticed and accepted by it. The condition of being reliant on a dominant and more developed culture is part of the Soviet heritage in the culture of Kazakhstan.

#### Unofficial cultural domain

Searching for individual identity and disassociating from the Soviet became an important aspect of processes happening in the cultural domain. Cultural awakening, attempts to return to pre-Soviet “roots,” the desire to remember and restore a destroyed culture, to work on narratives and forms that would not be borrowed by, or added to, the dominant culture—all these became important trends in the creative thinking of cultural figures and artists. To analyze the processes happening in culture, it is interesting to take a look at the development of modern art, which juxtaposed itself to traditional painting not only by its form but also through the themes and questions it raised. Modern art is understood to be multi-layered and to possess a number of attributes. Some of its characteristics include: the use of various media, mixed techniques in the creation of works, topicality, a reflection of surroundings, the connection of those surroundings to the past, addresses to the future, and to the audience.

From the beginning of the 1990s in Kazakhstan artists and creative collectives began to appear that worked in the genre of modern art. First and foremost, we saw this with the art collective, “Kyzyl tractor,” which was founded in Chimkent in the early 1990s. Members of the art collective include Said Atabekov, Vitalii Simakov, Smail Baialiev, and Arystanbek Shalbaev. Moldakul Narymbetov was also among the initial members, but he passed away in 2012. Kyzyl tractor was one of the first

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65 P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.

to begin working in the field of modern art. The group's members experimented with painting, created installations and flow-through sculptures, worked with forms of exceptional size, and staged performances. Referencing pre-Soviet cultural codes and traditions, Sufi philosophy, philosophy of the Tengri religion, and reflection on painful themes of the contemporary world—all these narratives became intertwined to a surprising degree and formed a creative grouping. Pioneers of modern art, artists created a new visual language by relating to nomadic symbols and themes, and wove them into the history and tradition of western European art. Kyzyl tractor's body of work can be seen as a group effort, but each member also formed a separate creative unit each with his/her own style and visual language.

Among the pioneers of Kazakh modern art, some significant figures are Rustam Khal'fin, Sergei Maslov, Saule Suleimenova, Kuanysh Bazargaliev, Galym Madanov and Zauresh Terekbai, Elena and Viktor Vorobiev, Yerbosyn Mel'dibekov, Almagul Menlibaeva, and Aleksandr Ugai. Rustam Khal'fin is an incredibly important figure for art in Kazakhstan. Born in Tashkent, educated in Moscow, a student of Vladimir Sterligov—one of the last representatives of the Russian avant garde—and based in Almaty, Khal'fin's work brings together traditions of the fine arts worldwide with the poetry of the space in which he lived. He researched nomadic culture and particularities of the world around him through artistic practice. For the artist, it was important to understand and define a strategy for writing Kazakhstan into the global art world, how to make the modern art of Kazakhstan interesting to an international audience. His was a search for means of expression, themes and phenomena that would be existential and reflect the nature of the local cultural code, but that through this localness would lead to the universality of the language of art. Khal'fin's work lived in unison with the overall picture of modern art by reflecting the challenges that stood before it.

The nomadic past and its artifacts, reviving their own culture, and creating a new visual culture that reflects the particularities of the surrounding space—these are the themes that run through the work of all the aforementioned artists. Some, like Galym Madanov and Aleksandr Ugai, work more on social problems, on trying to make sense of what was happening in contemporary Kazakhstan, on the economy's gaining independence from natural resources, on that very “mythologization” of history that sometimes occupied the official regime, which was trying to restore a pre-Soviet past. In his series, *When All People Were Kazakhs*, Kuanysh Bazargaliev reflects in an ironic manner on Kazakhstan's desire to write itself into world history with broad

strokes by borrowing formulas from western cultural codes. But, by opposing the official discourse, the artists reflect, ruminate, and lead their work into that very area—the creation, understanding, and expression through visual language of the existence of a local culture. “Returning” to a nomadic past in many ways became not so much a return as a creation and invention, wherein the past is woven with the present, and with the artist's artistic utterances and thoughts.

### **New Horizons**

The development of culture is a difficult and multi-layered process, one that directly depends on the development of infrastructure and corresponding institutions, the state policies governing this sphere, and financial and other forms of support. Investment in short-term projects cannot provide the incremental development of an area in which long-term planning is critical, and which requires the creation of new, and support and development of existing, organizations of culture such as theaters, museums, art centers, specialized institutions of higher education, and likewise work to develop an audience, popularize art, incorporate art institutes into city life, and into the life of the city's residents. The role of the government and its policies have been significant for the development of culture. At the same time, the utilitarian approach to art, its reduction to an instrument of propaganda and transmitter of government ideology in order to “design” a cultural inheritance and thus legitimize a political faction—all this impedes development in this sphere, making it an instrument of propaganda. Art demands not only infrastructure, but also a free space, wherein creative thought and ideas can be born.

Nevertheless, the future of this sphere of culture is connected not only with the institutional support of the state, but it is fed by the efforts, energies, activities, and synergies of creative collectives, intellectual elites, artists, musicians, and writers. In large part, the nature of the cultural landscape that awaits us over the next few years depends on these people, on their reflections, the strength of their utterance, their ability to oppose and withstand state ideology, while also working in cooperation with the state, to bring their works before the public, communicate with them, and develop their creative strategies. Can Kazakh art find and create its own visual language, absorbing into itself the poetics of the local space, the mythologems of the steppe, and a language that can reflect the contemporary world with its problems and challenges? Can Kazakh art find its coordinate points on the map of the global art world, overcoming all the difficulties related to a post-situation? The outcome of this process is absolutely open and depends on the collective efforts of the participants in it.

# Still Post-Soviet: The Challenges of Education in Kyrgyzstan

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While proud about being home to some of the best academic institutions in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has struggled to offer quality education services to the public. Retaining the reach and quality of the Soviet education system was hardly possible, while reforming it proved no easier. The task requires funds, ideas, and implementation capacity, none of which have been in abundance in the country since independence. Success stories came where the state loosened its regulatory grip on selected private and foreign initiatives. But these remain ad hoc in nature and limited in scale, which says a lot about the state of affairs in the education system. In what follows, I reflect on what I see as the major achievements and challenges of the education sector in Kyrgyzstan. These are based on my personal and professional experience, but the essay by no means provides a comprehensive overview of the subject.

## **Achievements: too few, too fragile**

Kyrgyzstan's past 25 years have produced little in the way of path-breaking policies or encouraging statistics in the education sector. Along with other state-run sectors, such as healthcare, education became a burden on the already struggling state budget. Economic crisis and post-independence waves of migration left schools without much of its qualified workforce, leaving the survival of many institutions down to the entrepreneurial skills of their directors.

Yet, in the context of this generally gloomy picture, some new academic institutions stood out for their quality education, intolerance of corruption, and respect for academic freedom. The political and economic liberalization policies of the early 1990s brought some benefits to the country's crisis-stricken education system, creating space for foreign assistance projects and investments. Many donor agencies prioritized supporting and reforming education, while the government often took a back seat. Some initiatives led to visible and sustained success, including the emergence of innovative academic institutions, mostly in higher education.

In 1997, the Kyrgyz-American Department of the Kyrgyz State University became the American University of Kyrgyzstan (AUK), a standalone institution offering an American-style undergraduate curriculum

in a range of social science disciplines. The emergence of the AUK owes much to the ideas and hard work of its founding leader, Camila Sharshekeeva. Yet, the favorable political and, one might say, geopolitical situation, also helped to raise and maintain the profile of the new institution, as Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev and the First Lady of the USA, Hilary Clinton, were present at the official opening. This university brought more than just a Western/American curriculum and faculty: it taught and promoted critical thinking and academic honesty, and built relations and practices free of corruption, something unique in all of Kyrgyzstan's education industry to this very day. With the turbulence in Kyrgyz politics in the early 2000s, the AUK (renamed the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in 2004) gradually lost top-level political support. After rounds of political pressure, the AUCA was forced to vacate the building in central Bishkek, a building that the Akaev government had provided free of charge. Despite this, the AUCA remains in a good shape today, having completed state-of-the-art academic building in southern Bishkek and remaining the only school to offer US-accredited undergraduate degrees in Kyrgyzstan.

Another university known for its quality of teaching infrastructure and corruption-free environment is the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, which was established through a bilateral agreement between the respective governments in 1995. The Kyrgyz side supplied a large building in one of the main streets of Bishkek, and this was later complemented by an extraordinarily large area of over 80 hectares in the capital city. With massive funding from the Turkish government, the university has built a large campus, with standards of teaching, research, and student life that are unmatched anywhere else in the country. Manas University does not charge tuition and offers a monthly stipend to most of its students.

In 2002, the Kyrgyz government and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) established the OSCE Academy, an academic institution that offers graduate programs and professional development workshops to younger generations of Central Asians. Thanks to dedicated support from a wide range of OSCE participating states, including the government of Kyrgyzstan, the Academy became a lasting project. It offers fully-funded MA programs in politics and economics, with international faculty members and students who come from all Central Asian states and Afghanistan.

Government-funded projects are not the only ones that enjoyed increased international exposure. In 1992,

a network of Kyrgyz-Turkish lyceums was opened in accordance with an agreement between the Kyrgyz education ministry and the Turkey-based Sebat Association. These schools, locally known as “Turkish,” “Sebat” or, more recently as “Gülenist,”<sup>66</sup> became the first alternatives to the state-run schools, and quickly developed a reputation for providing better educational infrastructure and quality teaching experience. Initially offering secondary education only, the Gülen-affiliated network gradually expanded, opening preschools, and primary schools, as well as the Ala Too-Ata Turk University in Bishkek. In the context of the plummeting quality of education in state-run schools, these institutions have developed into a much sought-after alternative for many despite the considerable tuition fees, and even the more recent political controversies.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, the introduction of a national admissions test (NAT) for secondary school graduates is often cited as one of the rare successful efforts to curb corruption in state-run higher education institutions. Funded and initially implemented by USAID, the NAT helped axe the universities’ admissions examinations, widely known to be a highly corrupt exercise. Actively promoted by the-then education minister, Camila Sharshkeeva, and also supported by the-then president Akaev, the project has subsequently survived concerted efforts to close it, as ministers and presidents have come and gone. Testing remains mandatory for enrollment in higher education institutions and is currently administered by a local NGO.<sup>68</sup>

However, given the general context of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia the aforementioned “accomplishments” are to be taken with caution. These institutions stand out in the country for offering better educational experiences for aspiring young men and women. The list is not exhaustive, and indeed more inspiring and promising stories could be cited. Striking, though, is that most of the above achievements came about through the initiatives and hard work of non-state actors. All the Kyrgyz government offered these initiatives was politi-

cal support, often in the form of simply allowing their implementation. It might be argued that this is the way forward for development, were it not that such achievements are so few in number and fragile in standing. Furthermore, if the existence of one or two corruption-free universities (and system of testing) is widely cited as an accomplishment, one may surmise the magnitude of the problems facing the rest of the education sector.

### Remaining problems and challenges

Unlike the achievements, the challenges in the education sector are much harder to list and taxonomize. They are numerous and interrelated. Still, any conversation on the topic brings up a familiar list of the most obvious problems.

Preschools, the earliest education level, suffered most immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Mostly nonexistent until considerable state investments in the later years of the Soviet Union, kindergartens proved very easy to dismantle. The buildings were privatized en masse or transferred to other public offices. Preschool enrollment, which was reported to be between 30-50 percent in the late Soviet years, plummeted to a meagre 10 percent by 1995.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the report suggests that preschool enrollment levels in Kyrgyzstan were then the lowest in Central Asia.

Secondary schooling has its own story of crisis.<sup>70</sup> As the largest part of the education sector, it is apparently the most difficult in which to conduct meaningful and sustainable reforms. Some problems are basic and foundational, such as the shortage of teachers and teaching materials. The economic hardships of the early 1990s drove many teachers away from schools. The luckier ones joined donor-funded NGOs and their “projects”;<sup>71</sup> others went to work at bazaars or left the country in search of better wages. The massive departure of the Slavic/Russian population in the 1990s hit schools offering instruction in Russian heavily—such schools had previously been regarded as the strongest

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66 For the name of the founder of the Hizmet movement, Turkish-born and currently US-based Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen.

67 The Turkish government found Ferhullah Gülen and his Hizmet movement to be behind the failed coup of 15 June 2016. In the following days, Ankara called upon the Kyrgyz government to shut down the schools affiliated with the Gülen movement. The Kyrgyz government snubbed Turkey over the tone of the call, reminding it, literally, of Kyrgyzstan’s independence. See, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, “Zayavlenie MID KR ot 25 iulya 2016 goda,” 25 July, 2016, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.kg/zayavleniya/view/idnews/35> (accessed 8 November 2016).

68 For more background on this, see Alan J. Deyoung, “Ownership of Education Reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic: kto v dome hozyain?,” *European Educational Research Journal*, 4:1, 2005: 36-49.

69 UNICEF (no date provided), “Education in Kyrgyzstan: Country Profile”, available at <http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Kyrgyzstan.pdf> (accessed 8 November 2016).

70 School education in Kyrgyzstan includes general primary (7-10 years), general basic (10-15), and general secondary (16-17 years). In education systems abroad, “secondary school” refers to institutions that offer all three levels.

71 In rural areas one may easily find references to “proekt” (project) as a form of employment, a generic term designating better-paid assignments for donor-funded NGOs.

link in the system. Low salaries for teachers meant the younger generation did not rush to replace those who had left, as the vacancies were filled by less qualified candidates. Few in Kyrgyzstan would be surprised upon hearing stories about a teacher who combined teaching with selling tomatoes in the nearby market, or about a German-language teacher who was forced to teach English but had no English proficiency.

A report in 2016 claims that secondary schools have less than 80 percent of the required textbooks, another ongoing problem since 1991.<sup>72</sup> The figure, if true, is a drastic improvement on the 52 percent cited by the Education Minister in 2010.<sup>73</sup> Schools with Russian- and Uzbek-instruction suffered most. Finally, in the mid-2000s they were allowed to use textbooks produced in Russia and Uzbekistan, respectively. This led to political controversies, as some of these books apparently featured the national symbols of other states, such as anthems, flags, and portraits of presidents.

Assessments of learning outcomes in secondary education appear to correlate with the problems just mentioned. In 2006 and 2009, Kyrgyzstan's 15-year old pupils took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, which assesses proficiency in reading, mathematics, and science. In each instance Kyrgyzstan's students ranked lowest among participating states, with over 80 percent of them scoring below the baseline (Level 2). Commenting on the results, then-education minister Kanat Sadykov linked the scores to the country's overall economic situation as well as to the shortage of teachers and of textbooks. Independent experts argue that technical shortages are only a part of the problems, another being that teaching techniques are focused on rote learning instead of encouraging critical thinking and learning.<sup>74</sup> Though Kyrgyzstan did not take part in the following rounds of PISA assessments, little suggests that anything has changed since 2009.

A related problem with learning outcomes is the widening gap between urban and rural schools, as well as between schools with instruction in Russian and Kyrgyz. In 2005, the national testing outcomes among sec-

ondary school graduates showed that Russian language schools had an average score of 136.9 as compared with 103.1 for Kyrgyz-language schools, the threshold for university entrance being 110.<sup>75</sup> Ten years later, in 2015, the figure had changed very little (131 to 105.5).<sup>76</sup> A very similar gap can be seen between the average scores of high school graduates of Bishkek and those of remote rural provinces, such as Batken or Osh.

Reflecting the economic situation, most private kindergartens, schools, and universities are located in the capital city, Bishkek, and offer somewhat better opportunities for those who can afford to pay the higher tuition fees. As of 2016 most private kindergartens in Bishkek were charging about 10,000 soms a month (about \$150), with groups of about 15-20 children and decent meals. The state-funded nurseries are much cheaper, but severely overcrowded and under-resourced. Comparable quality and cost differences can be found between state-funded and private schools at the secondary and tertiary education levels, pointing to a very considerable (and unfortunate) tendency of heightening inequalities between children of rich and poor families in accessing education.

### On moving forward

Problems in education in Kyrgyzstan have been known for a long time. New and actionable policy suggestions are therefore difficult to make. Some may consider the exercise futile given the chronic deficit of economic resources and of competent governments over the past 25 years. Notwithstanding, I shall point out two large-scale problems that must be addressed before any more particular actions can be possible and meaningful. These are the problems of corruption and administration.

Corruption comes in a variety of forms, including in the teaching process itself, as well as in admissions or public procurement. That student marks have price-tags attached to them is common knowledge, particularly in the higher education institutions. University admissions are tightly linked to bribery and/or the use of personal connections as opposed to merit-

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72 N. Kalmambetova, "V shkolah smotryat tol'ko na formu, ob obrazovanii zabyli?", *Zhany Agym*, No.36, 10 September, 2015.

73 Education Minister, Kanat Sadykov, cited in K. Kasymbekov, "PISA: Kyrgyzstanda bilim sapaty tomon," *Azattyk*, 9 December, 2010, available at [http://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan\\_pisa\\_education/2242594.html](http://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_pisa_education/2242594.html) (accessed on 8 November 2016).

74 Kubat Kasymbekov, "PISA: Kyrgyzstanda bilim sapaty tomon," *Azattyk*, 9 December, 2010, available at [http://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan\\_pisa\\_education/2242594.html](http://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_pisa_education/2242594.html) (accessed 8 November 2016). See also Alan J. Deyoung, "Problems and trends in education in Central Asia since 1990: The Case of General Secondary Education in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 25:4, 2006: 500.

75 Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods, "Obscherespublikanskoe testirovanie dlya postupleniya v vuzy Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v 2005 godu," 2005, available at [www.testing.kg/files/Report\\_2005.pdf](http://www.testing.kg/files/Report_2005.pdf) (accessed 8 November 2016).

76 Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods, "Rezultaty Obscherespublikanskogo testirovaniya i zachisleniya na grantovye i kontraktnye mesta vuzov Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v 2015 godu," 2015, p. 22, available at [www.testing.kg/media/uploads/files/...2015/reportR2015.pdf](http://www.testing.kg/media/uploads/files/...2015/reportR2015.pdf) (accessed 8 November 2016).

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based selection, at least until the adoption of the NAT. In 2014, the-then Education Minister Kanat Sadykov was dismissed amid reports of his illegitimate involvement in arranging the admission of 24 students to a medical department of the Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University. Another recent corruption scandal involved the tenders put out by a district education department in Bishkek on procuring meals and office supplies. Eagle-eyed activists spotted the use of Latin letters of “o,” “e,” “p,” and so on, in the tender texts instead of the similar characters in Cyrillic.<sup>77</sup> Invisible to the layman, the trick would have prevented potential bidders from finding the tender announcement through a key-word search on the web, especially given the short deadlines. None of above cases reached the stage of a criminal investigation—another common characteristic of corruption-related incidents in the country.

The problem of corruption ought to be a key priority of the government and other interested and responsible parties. Comprehensive and actionable plans must be implemented that aim at minimizing all forms of interpersonal transactions in violation of the rule of law. Purchased driving licenses are as dangerous in the streets as the purchased medical diplomas allowing one to become a hospital doctor. Schools that provide a hands-on experience of how connections and money

trump rules and merits have even more damaging long-term implications for the society. The country’s successive governments do indeed talk about and act on corruption, but all too often this is done on a very selective basis, in a non-transparent manner, and on a limited scale. Such approaches pay mere lip service to addressing the problem.

The second problem is an administrative one. Only two or three former education ministers (out of 12 since 1991) are known for their reform-oriented views and actions. All of them had short tenures, and were preceded and succeeded by conservative ones, most of whom came from the top ranks of state universities and had little interest in making deep reforms. Apropos of this, Alan DeYoung has aptly written that, “[r]apid turnover and little planned changes seem a fact of life in the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC). New programs and policies are controlled from the top and come and go quickly; sometimes in the middle of the academic year.”<sup>78</sup> Developing an education system that provides an internationally competitive quality of education to all will require a dedicated and visionary political leadership with a strong resolve to push through the needed reforms against the resistance of those heading the educational bureaucracies and academic institutions.

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77 K-News, “*Rassledovanie K-News: kak voruyut den’gi na obrazovanie cherez goszakupki?*”, 21 June, 2016, available at <http://knews.kg/223825/rassledovanie-k-news-kak-voruyut-dengi-na-obrazovanie-cherez-goszakupki/> (accessed on 8 November 2016).

78 Alan J. Deyoung, “*Ownership of Education Reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic: kto v dome hoz'yain?*”, *European Educational Research Journal*, 4:1, 2005, p. 40.

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## PART III

### NEW SOCIAL FORCES AT WORK

#### Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan: Paradoxes of Development

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##### In Retrospect

Civil society is a highly contested term and there are several competing approaches regarding its definition. Yet, two main concepts dominate the interpretation of civil society.<sup>79</sup> The first concept views civil society as a set of formally registered organizations that carry out activities for their target groups. These groups often act as intermediary agencies between the state and citizens by advocating the concerns of the latter. Proponents of this view regard civil society organizations (CSOs) as important actors in building a pluralistic society. Many aid agencies promote this approach so as to assist on the emergence of CSOs. The second concept lays emphasis on genuine and routine civic actions, but not as part of an organization. Proponents of this view claim that civil society emerges from within the community when citizens address their problems in a voluntary manner. These actions can be ad hoc and spontaneous, but what matters here is that the civic engagement brings about positive change. Despite the differences between these two concepts, they also have much in common. Both groups define civil society as a domain placed between the state and the market. CSOs are referred to as independent citizen-based groups that promote people's interests. Thus, civil society encompasses a wide array of organizations (e.g., advocacy groups, professional associations, community organizations, clubs, and many others). This middle-ground approach is often used to portray civil society.

In Kyrgyzstan, the emerging elements of civil society can be traced back to the late Soviet period, when, during perestroika, the first independent movements and discussion clubs appeared (e.g., the Demos and Position discussion clubs, and the Ashar (Mutual Assistance) settlers' movement). After the Soviet Union

disintegrated, the first Kyrgyz government led by Askar Akayev chose a path toward democracy building. Many believed that for Kyrgyzstan, as a landlocked, resource-poor country that was heavily subsidized by Moscow during Soviet times, proclaiming a democratic course was the only way to survive by attracting foreign aid, since its economic ties with the other ex-Soviet republics ceased completely. Kyrgyzstan was one of the Soviet Union's least developed economies, and it faced a sharp economic downturn after independence. To promote democracy, the Kyrgyz authorities welcomed Western aid agencies and liberalized the country's legislation.

As part of democracy-building programs, donor organizations have poured huge amounts of funding into Kyrgyzstan in an attempt to create an independent civil society. This supply of aid fostered the emergence of hundreds of new CSOs, known better as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). During the first years, donor funding mostly targeted specific issues such as the environment, women's initiatives, and human rights, at a time when NGOs in these three areas mushroomed. Overall, the number of NGOs increased from 611 in 1993 to 1,550 in 1996 and to 4,669 in 2000.<sup>80</sup> NGOs were initially urban-based and staffed with educated people (e.g., former university faculty members and doctors). On the whole, intellectuals supported democratic reforms in the country, and feared a possible return to a totalitarian regime, as old communist party bosses and nomenclature apparatchiks still retained power. In response, many intellectuals joined new political parties and NGOs.

Due to the collapse of the country's economy and deteriorating living standards, the first CSOs were about distributing humanitarian aid provided by foreign countries. Later, assistance of international agencies resulted in the creation of a large cohort of Western-type NGOs promoting democratic values. By the early 2000s, these NGOs became significant players in the public sphere by shaping policy-making. For example, several NGOs initiated a number of legislative acts regarding the rights

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79 J. Giffen, L. Earle, and C. Buxton, *The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia*. INTRAC, 2005.

80 E. Shishkaraeva, *Obzor stanovleniya i razvitiya sektora nepravitelstvennykh organizatsiy v Kyrgyzstane [Review of the birth and development of non-governmental organizations in Kyrgyzstan]*. Bishkek, 2006.

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of children, disabled people, and women, as well as concerning an open media, free elections, the environment, and access to information, consumers' rights, and many others. NGOs were successful in setting a quota for women, ethnic minorities, and youth at the legislative bodies. NGOs also initiated a new Law on Non-Commercial Organizations, which the parliament adopted in 1999 and which allowed informal civic groups to exist and precluded unwanted state control over CSOs other than authorized inspection bodies, such as tax agencies. For a period until the mid-2000s, NGOs virtually replaced political parties in the public sphere. Due to the lack of a proportional system, parties were sluggish both at the electoral level and in the public domain.

Unlike other Central Asian countries, civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan have not faced widespread repression or been issued with state threats, with the exception of a few journalists and human rights activists, several of whom sought political asylum abroad during the late period of Askar Akayev's rule, and again then during the semi-authoritarian regime of Kurmanbek Bakiev's presidency. Overall, the state's role in supporting CSOs has been unsteady and dualistic. On the one hand, the government has instituted liberal legislation for civic groups—mainly out of a concern to conform to international agreements. Kyrgyzstan's heavy dependence on aid from donor agencies has impelled the country to support the democratization agenda and ratify international conventions. On the other hand, political leaders have neglected CSOs, which they fear can jeopardize their legitimacy, since CSOs are quite free to criticize the government and address serious matters of public interest.

Attitudes to CSOs have also varied from one ruler to another, and are also heavily dependent on the international context. Civic groups enjoyed the first years of independence, when democracy building in the post-communist bloc was the mantra not only of Western aid agencies, but also of the first Kyrgyz president, Akayev, who backed democratic reforms in the country. Later, when his policy was fiercely criticized by local independent media groups and CSOs for nepotism, corruption, and failed economic programs, Akayev encroached on freedom of speech. He also started to patronize a few CONGOs (pro-government puppet NGOs), which acted as mouthpieces of the state. The next president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, who ruled the country from July 2005 until April 2010, harassed opposition forces, controlled the

media, and curbed civic groups that were vocal at policy level. In the meantime, NGOs delivering social services to vulnerable groups continued their cooperation with government agencies such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Protection. Roza Otunbayeva, the interim president from July 2010 until December 2011, had a contrasting strategy; she was cooperative with CSOs and carried forward many of their initiatives. One of her first decrees mandated the creation of public councils in ministries, with a view to exercising civic oversight over the government. She also supported the transformation of a government-controlled national TV/radio company into a public service broadcaster.

The current president, Almazbek Atambayev, has been neither benevolent to, nor supportive of, CSOs. During the recent process of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, pro-democratic CSOs were harshly attacked by Kyrgyz government-controlled, as well as Russian, media outlets. President Atambayev also accused some CSOs for their links with contentious opposition leaders, who were later prosecuted. Moreover, he publicly expressed his support for a bill on foreign agents, a bill proposing to cluster CSOs receiving overseas funding as foreign agents, mirroring a law previously adopted in Russia. During Atambayev's rule, some civil liberty indexes have worsened in comparison with those during Otunbayeva's presidency. For example, the Civil Society Organizations Sustainability Index run by USAID, which measures strengths and weaknesses in civil society development, deteriorated in 2014.<sup>81</sup> In 2015, the Freedom Index, a survey issued annually by Freedom House to assess political and civil liberties, was downgraded mainly due to "a government crackdown on freedom of assembly and the ability of NGOs to operate."<sup>82</sup> Atambayev re-directed Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy primarily towards authoritarian Russia, while the US reduced its presence in the country and Central Asia as a whole. This geopolitical change, with Russia revitalizing its role in the region, is jeopardizing the efforts of pro-liberal civil society groups to consolidate democracy in the country.

Today, the number of registered non-commercial and non-governmental organizations such as public foundations, associations, alliances, and unions is approaching 15,000.<sup>83</sup> However, the Association of Civil Society Support Centers, a Kyrgyzstan-based NGO, reports that only one third of them are active.<sup>84</sup>

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81 The 2014 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, USAID, 2015, [www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia\\_FY2014\\_CSOSI\\_Report.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia_FY2014_CSOSI_Report.pdf), (accessed July 15 2016).

82 Freedom in the World, 2015. Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/kyrgyzstan>, (accessed July 20 2016).

83 The 2014 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, USAID, 2015. [www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia\\_FY2014\\_CSOSI\\_Report.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia_FY2014_CSOSI_Report.pdf), (accessed July 15 2016).

84 Ibid.



Many scholars are skeptical of the prospects for civil society in Central Asian countries due to the Soviet legacy and limited pre-Soviet experiences with self-governance (e.g., Starr, Akiner).<sup>85</sup> These scholars remark that Central Asian societies are very hierarchical, which obstructs civic engagement, but nurtures clientelism.<sup>86</sup> The example of Kyrgyzstan demonstrates that civil society is feeble, anemic, and sparse, but does exist to some extent. At the policy level, civil society, as represented by a handful of vibrant and dynamic urban-based groups (e.g., human rights organizations, advocacy groups, business associations, and professional unions), has become a notable part of the public sphere. These civic groups influence agenda-setting and law-making by drafting, commenting on, and advocating, numerous bills, strategies, and policies, including the country's new constitution. They partner government agencies in developing area-based policies, including the Drug Policy for the Health Ministry, the Children's Code and Social Protection Strategy for the Labor Ministry, the Youth Concept for the Ministry of Youth and Employment, and many others.

At the community level, civil society groups are also known for delivering social services to vulnerable groups. Many such associations work with disabled people, the elderly, internal migrants, unemployed youth, victims of domestic violence, and other marginalized groups. The government recognizes their contribution, especially so during times of crises. After the so-called April Revolution in 2010 and the interethnic conflicts that occurred in Osh and Djalal-Abad in June of the same year, the interim government was paralyzed. A group of NGOs were the first to respond to these crises. During the April events, NGOs helped to establish volunteer patrol squads to ensure public safety. During the inter-ethnic conflict, NGOs launched telephone hotlines to provide psychological and legal advice to the victims, undertook humanitarian actions, and detailed the needs of victims. Later, they monitored the court trials related to this conflict. Due to political reshuffling in 2010, civic groups set up the Committee of Civic Control, an ad-hoc structure to monitor the interim government.

At the grassroots level, citizens in Kyrgyzstan are often mobilized to advance their political and social rights. Two so-called revolutions, one in March 2005 and one in April 2010, as well as numerous demonstrations, which totaled 1,193 in 2011 and 1,286 in 2012,<sup>87</sup> indicate the extent to which the country's citizens

undertake collective action to protect their interests. Petition-signing and media appeals are also common. Online social activism is growing and various civic-minded social media groups have successfully shaped local policies. For example, the Mayor's Office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, revoked several of its decisions under pressure from social media groups. One such decree concerned the logging of trees (willows) near the TSUM shopping center. However, the Mayor of Bishkek later rescinded the decision to log the trees. Citizens in Kyrgyzstan have established many issue-based advocacy movements like the Citizens Against HIPC (World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative), which was set up in 2007, the Movement for Lustration of the Judicial System created in 2011, the Civic Platform for Parliamentarism in 2013, Kyrgyzstan against the Customs Union in 2014, the Initiative Group Against Houses Demolition in Bishkek's Center in 2016, and many others.

These examples signal the multidimensional nature of civil society in Kyrgyzstan. And while the number of active NGOs is few, they have established themselves as flagships of policy changes. They were the prime actors in articulating the needs of many of Kyrgyzstan's citizens and set the agenda when parties were dormant until the mid-2000s. Western-type NGOs have also continuously defended liberal values from attacks by authoritarian power holders, foreign media outlets, and internal populist groups. At the grassroots level, community groups are not widespread, as Kyrgyzstan's population has been apathetic about forming associations. Many civic groups face challenges to evolve—a problem I describe in more detail in the next section.

### Key challenges

The actors in civil society have been changing in Kyrgyzstan in the last few years. A gradual transformation has occurred from liberal to illiberal civil society. Pro-democracy-oriented civil society organizations are now being replaced by nationalistic and religious groups. The orbit of Western support for civil society has sharply reduced since the mid-2000s, while pro-liberal values are not overly cherished by an impoverished and largely poorly educated population. Poverty and low quality civic education brings a huge number of people to turn to religion in the hope of finding answers that have been neglected by authorities. This, in turn, has resulted in the re-birth of religious groups as active purveyors of

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85 F. Starr, "Civil Society in Central Asia," in H.M. Ruffin, and D. Waugh (eds.), *Civil Society in Central Asia*, Center for Civil Society International, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, John Hopkins University, in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2011; S. Akiner, "Prospects for Civil Society in Tajikistan" in A. Sajoo (ed.), *Civil Society in the Muslim World*, London, IB Tauris, 2002.

86 Ibid.

87 A. Isaev, *Kyrgyzstan buzyashiy* [Buzzing Kyrgyzstan], *Delo №.*, 2014, delo.kg., (accessed 10 February 2015).

education, charity, and counselling services for the population. As of late 2014, 362 religious entities were registered with the Justice Ministry, but due to bureaucratic registration procedures instituted for religious organizations, many have remained unregistered.<sup>88</sup> Thus, the true number of religious groups, including community and charity ones, is unknown. Self-governed and self-organized nationalistic movements are also common, and enjoy great support among the rural ethnic Kyrgyz population, especially young people.

Religious and nationalistic groups emerge from within communities. They can enrich civil society, but they often ignore the rule of law, and question the role of secular institutions. For example, Kyrk Choro (Forty Worriers) is a nationalistic movement that promulgates the primacy of Kyrgyz traditions over legal foundations. They have challenged the role of law enforcement bodies in securing public safety, and have launched ad-hoc parallel operations. Owing to the chronic government corruption, the continued economic hardship faced by the general populace, and the deteriorating quality of education, the risk is that more and more citizens will begin to favor nationalist or religious rhetoric over secular principles of governance.

This growing support for religious and nationalist groups helps to explain the failure of pro-liberal, Western-type NGOs to build local constituencies. Most of the NGOs created by using a top-down approach, and functioned for the sake of receiving grants from aid agencies. In addition, they maintained only loose connections with the populace. Consequently, NGOs now enjoy low credibility among Kyrgyzstan's population. Furthermore, Russia's increasing role in the region, its propaganda machine now in full force, has nurtured people's distrust towards liberal values.

The shifting landscape of civil society actors attests to the fragmentation of Kyrgyz society where more and more from the rural areas are espousing religious and nationalistic groups. Pro-democracy civic groups, meanwhile, are mainly supported by a small group of the urban population. In addition, political parties have

a weak attachment to notions of democracy consolidation, thus preventing alliances from being built between civic groups and parties for joint actions aiming to promote democratic governance.

### **Future prospects: Kyrgyzstan in ten years**

It is unlikely that the next ten years will see Kyrgyzstan's economy undergo a rapid boom, so social indicators, such as employment or education level, are unlikely to improve significantly. This will prevent the creation of a sizeable middle class, which currently composes less than 10 percent of the population.<sup>89</sup> The absence of a strong middle class and worsening levels of education do nothing to foster a civil society that can serve as the vanguard of a pluralist society. Rather, having only a feeble civil society will allow the political elites to usurp power, continue their corrupt behavior, and remain unaccountable to citizens. Such circumstances will slowly result in weak government and crisis-prone institutions.

Illiberal civil society will thus expand, leaving less space for pro-democracy civic groups to affect policy making. To bolster their own legitimacy, the political elites will be inclined to support nationalist movements and favor the titular nationality in the distribution of jobs and other public resources. Religion will come to play a greater role in the everyday practices of Kyrgyzstan's population, with power structures struggling hard to delineate between secular and religious spaces. Finally, competition between secular and religious actors in public life will increase.

In ten years from now, Kyrgyzstan will have had two new parliaments and two new presidents. It seems unlikely that the new forms of leadership will change the current paradigm of rule, which is cemented around patron-clientele networks. Kyrgyzstan will remain a neo-patrimonial state where political elites rely greatly on patronage networks to win elections and rule the country. In sum, inertia will be the key element of Kyrgyzstan's future unless it experiences significant, and unexpected, external or internal upheavals.

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88 *The 2014 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, USAID, 2015, [www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia\\_FY2014\\_CSOSI\\_Report.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/EuropeEurasia_FY2014_CSOSI_Report.pdf), (accessed on July 15, 2016).

89 "V Kyrgyzstane 'srednyi class' sostavil 10%" (In Kyrgyzstan the "middle class" comprises 10 percent), [rus.azattyk.org/a/3025010.html](http://rus.azattyk.org/a/3025010.html), (accessed 10 February 2015).

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# Is the Mahalla the Uzbek “Prototype” of a Civil Society?

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During May and June 2016, Uzbekistan elected the chairmen and advisers of its mahallas, which function on the mode of self-governance. Voting is a democratic process, and so, claim our officials, the mahalla is the Uzbek “prototype” of a civil society and is part of a democratic development.

The mahalla is a self-governing organization and has its own place in the state governance system. During the period independence, nearly 10,000 self-governing organizations were established, of which 8,142 are mahallas. If we take into account the fact that more than 5,100 NGOs exist in the country,<sup>90</sup> the mahalla clearly surpasses them in number and scope. The mahalla is a quintessential part of the “From strong state to strong civil society” policy paper, which is designed to transfer state duties to civil society institutions in order to advance democracy, and it epitomizes the decentralization process in Uzbekistan.

The mahalla, as a self-governing organization of citizens, is not limited only by its role in the decentralization of power; it also gives the government a tool of control over various areas of community life and individuals. This control is, moreover, perceived as natural because the mahalla enjoys legitimacy as an inherited tradition. It helps to develop trust in state policy, on the one hand, and to protect the interests of those who are neglected by the state, on the other.

The state validates the mahalla as it allows citizens to solve their problems without appealing to state organs, such as the police or courts. Thus, many minor issues are dealt with directly by a mahalla, and special commissions are established under mahalla committees. For example, a reconciliation commission may be set up to settle disputes between citizens in a legal way. This mechanism of reconciliation is a very efficient and democratic one as compared to the state courts and police.

But state also uses the mahalla to prohibit social rules and customs that it sees as harmful to society. For example, the state can place implicit restrictions on the celebration of weddings, and does it through the mahalla to avoid discrimination.

## **Is the mahalla an NGO?**

It is debatable with the mahalla can be classified as a civil society institution in the full sense, since its features were historically formed. Civil society institutions express the interests of certain social groups in society. They may be organizations of workers, political actors, women, youth, or the disabled, who differ from each other in certain ways in accordance with their social base. Support from certain social bases enables them to resolve their issues effectively, but also enables them to mediate between state and society. However, the mahalla fails to perform this function; it is thus clearly designed to act in a different way from an NGO.

The mahalla’s place in the political system is similar to that of a ruling party in a one party system. The status of a ruling party is that of the sole representative of the entire society’s interests, which usually means that it hinders the emergence of other alternatives and decreases its ability to address critical issues. The communist party in the former USSR was exemplary in this regard. Similarly, being the purported representative of all social groups complicates the mahalla’s tasks, but it is still possible to integrate the functions of power with the tasks of an NGO. But if it applies its power locally, the mahalla may come to perform such a role. So it is even more of a local self-governing institution than an NGO.

Assessing the efficacy of the mahalla’s role as a mediator between government and society is not easy. Usually an NGO, due to the rules established in the political system, may influence the legislative process in various ways such as by supporting or opposing the decisions of a central or local government, as it acts on behalf of the interests of its residents. But the mahalla has a limited authority for such things. It plays an essential role in addressing local issues by advising local governments. Mahallas are subject to strict guidelines for participating in the legislative process and are only allowed to do so in areas outside the realm of official policy. As an institution to protect members’ interests vis-à-vis the state, it is very limited, since it has no political authority, mechanisms, or resources to do so. Its only capability is to exert public control over local governments and public officials. But no evidence is available to assess how effectively it works in this fashion either.

A feature of NGOs is that they contribute to creating a system of social-political values and relations on the basis of mutual interests, and to shaping a politi-

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90 Одилкориёв Х.Т. *Конституция ва баркамол жамият орзуси*. Тошкент, 2012, p.194.

cal identification among followers. Such identification inspires people to realize their interests and defend them. As a result, political activity emerges. In turn, political activity guarantees that a strong civil society survives. In this way citizens can integrate into a political system. But the mahalla also works to shape another type of identification. It functions not only as a social institution, but also as a cultural one. Different from other NGOs, the mahalla is regarded as an efficient mechanism for preserving and advancing Uzbek national values and traditions. As it oversees the daily lives of individual, the mahalla has a central role in people's socialization. In turn, national values and norms serve as a foundation for shaping a national identity in a way that no other NGO can.

Such processes occur at the same pace of development as the state. More than half the population lives in villages and is employed in agriculture. Considering that this rural population is more conservative and less active politically, the mahalla suits the needs of a rural life style. The mahalla also serves as a unique tool to exert control over rural areas. As Samuel Huntington emphasizes in his work titled *Political Order in Changing Societies*, in periods of transition it is crucial to control rural areas so as to avoid extreme changes. He also acknowledges that such control mechanisms were key to the achievements of the Communist party.

Political participation is not a primary function of the mahalla. Its main emphasis is on moral issues. It supports, for example, traditions according to which youths must obey their elders at all times, and it encourages elders to reconcile the sides of a dispute. In addition, the mahalla is unable to bring up social issues that are pertinent to the entire society directly at the state level. It is unable to organize mass mobilizations to protect the legal interests of its constituency as an NGO does. Consequently, the members of a mahalla have very weak political power; their sole power is to elect the mahalla's chairman and its advisers. This means that the mahalla never shapes a political identification as a civil society institution does. Its organization is too scattered and fragile to participate in political processes. It cannot extend its authority outside of its territory. The success that it has in rural areas is explained by the fact that other NGOs are largely absent there. No civil society organization can have as deep a penetration in the village life as the mahalla.

Therefore, the mahalla, which includes all social groups and is key in shaping national identification without political mobilization, can be defined as a "major" civil society institution with a wide scope of functions that differ from the other institutions of civil society. In addition, it outperforms many NGOs in dealing with people's social concerns. And all these things

taken together provide an apt reason for accepting the mahalla as an organization that is able to act as a sole alternative to the whole of civil society. If confronted with political challenges, the mahalla can actually be a political actor in future, but for that to happen it will have to evolve as an institution and it will have to inhabit an isolated sphere in which there are no rival NGOs. Realizing both conditions is difficult, however, as they are mutually exclusive.

### **Bringing state and society together**

Democratic regimes have a specific feature according to which social conflict is accepted as a necessary condition for development; state-society relations take a dialectical form. But in nondemocratic regimes, this is not tolerated. This complicates NGO functions. Despite the fact that nondemocratic regimes acknowledge NGOs as nominal actors of policymaking, in practice they require and expect an NGO to serve as a tool for harmonizing society and state, not as one for disintegrating them. This harmonization is a key duty of the mahalla. That is why there is a significant difference in understanding the role of mahalla by the government and public. In fact, officials perceive it as a service provider, while the public wants to see act as an organization of policy advocacy. Despite these expectations, the mahalla seems to be bad at performing both of them.

The mahalla brings together the antagonistic interests of the regime and the society, and this is realized in two ways:

First, by supporting and advancing cultural norms that do not contradict the political and judicial system. There is a tradition called *khashar* that has been passed from generation to generation in Uzbek society for a long time. *Khashar* means a mass mobilization for the purpose of benefitting the community. Today, the government has formalized the tradition and uses it widely. *Khashar* is never about making political demands, like other mass demonstrations, and is only directed at causes that have a social importance. It is usually invoked for clean-up campaigns, for planting flowers and trees surroundings organizations, neighborhoods or parks on weekends before national holidays, such as *Nouroz*, Independence Day, and so on. And not only local communities, but staff from different organizations, and officials attend it, too.

Second, by discrediting cultural institutions and norms that are incompatible with the regime. There are independent institutions that would compete with the authorities in certain aspects of life. For example, in pre-Soviet times mosques taught the Islamic canons and also disseminated them among the population in areas where no religious schools existed, especially in

remote places. Today, as with the Soviet era, mosques are banned from performing this function. The main reason for that, the officials claim, is to obstruct radical Islam. By banning mosques from teaching, people are deprived of the right to get religious education. Due to a lack of knowledge about Islam, many young people get involved in radical sects that pose a great threat to stability (this process is still ongoing). So the government has empowered mahallas to control religious communities by propagating a moderate version of Islam and advocating a secular life style. For this a commission on affairs of spirituality and religion was established and has replaced the mosques in this function. However, by doing this, ordinary people perceive the mahalla as an agent of the security services and this decreases its credibility, alienating pious Muslims from the state.

Another example of countering “undesirable” traditions is the case of early marriages, which, although banned by law, are very common. By engaging the mahalla, the government has managed to lower the rate of early marriages.

### **The future**

The future of the mahalla depends on how it combines its two diametrically opposed roles as a dependent organization and as civil society representative. In the past it functioned as an independent body and performed its duties effectively without getting involved in administrative units. But when its importance increased, it became engaged in governance matters and evolved as a local self-governance organization under the central administration. So the mahalla has gone a long way. In this respect, Timur Dadaboev was right when he emphasized the following:

*The mahallas survived the Soviet era and maintained their traditional functions in Uzbekistan in part because they remained separate from the government and were relatively autonomous structures that relied on voluntary participation by mahalla residents. In modern mahallas, which have been transformed into “official” institutions, mahalla committees have effectively become administrative organs; these committees are resident self-governance organizations that attempt to guarantee*

*resident rights. Occasionally, governmental intervention in the elections, policy-making procedures and general activities of the mahalla committees will occur, creating the impression among the public that these committees function more as government subcontractor bodies than as resident self-governance organizations.*<sup>91</sup>

The almost official status of the mahalla gives its residents certain powers, as aforementioned (the possibility to have some issues dealt with outside court or police involvement). In principle, however, this may alienate the society from mahallas in the future. As Timur Dadabaev mentions in his article,

*the mahallas, which previously functioned as working structures on an unofficial basis, are being made official and placed under the administrative wings of national government agencies. As a result, attachments to these communities, which were already weakened by the Soviet governments’ policies towards mahallas, have further deteriorated. The mahalla has become a residence-based unit of administration and is no longer perceived as an aspect of the “private” sphere. Increasingly, residents have shifted from considering mahallas to be “enlarged” family structures and to regarding them as governmental institutions.*<sup>92</sup>

There are already emerging dissent groups that not only present an alternative to the mahalla but even oppose it, as they provide solidarity and support for its members. This was seen in Andijan events, where the mahallas failed to manage to uphold the rule of law on its own territory and were unable to win over the dissent groups.

It is clear that the mahalla plays a constructive role in preventing societal tensions, as it has accumulated immense historical and practical experience. But if it is prevented from operating independently, if the government continues to interfere in the mahalla’s affairs, this historical mission will be jeopardized. Furthermore, with advances in democracy, including fewer boundaries between the authorities and society, the mahalla may lose its leading role. The mahalla should stop being “an agent” of the government, and instead become a servant of society.

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91 T. Dadabaev, “Community life, memory and a changing nature of mahalla identity in Uzbekistan,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4, 2013, 181–196.

92 Ibid.

# 25 Years of Independence: Civil Society and the State in Tajikistan

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The civil war, which began in 1992 (immediately after the fall of the USSR) and lasted for five years, represents a singular moment in the history of independent Tajikistan—in comparison with other post-Soviet republics. The war inflicted incredible damage on the country's economy and society; the overall level of economic losses exceeded the budget by almost ten times; 40,000 homes were burned and more than one million people fled the country. As a result, the level of development of Tajik civil society fell far behind similar indicators for a majority of CIS countries.

The situation changed after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1997; with political stability and a centralization of power, the country's economy began to grow at 7 percent of GDP. Economic growth contributed to the development of civil society. Over five years, the number of NGOs grew almost fourfold. Dozens of independent and private newspapers appeared in the country.

This period of growth in civil society came to an end at the beginning of 2014, along with the economic crisis in Russia, the decline in oil prices, and the closing off of the Russian labor market, in which most Tajik migrants were employed. The crisis had a significant impact on all aspects of life in the country, giving rise to a new economic situation and public life.

This article reviews and analyzes the conditions for civil society, as well as the history of, and prospects for cooperation between, the state and major civic institutions in Tajikistan over the last 25 years of independence.

## **Civil society in Tajikistan:**

### **Structure and characteristics**

Most definitions of civil society boil down to the fact that it represents the space between the individual citizen and the state.<sup>93</sup> This space comprises various non-governmental and civic organizations, which play the role of mediator in traditionally difficult relations between citizens and the authorities. Civil society is usually divided into three basic levels: the lowest is made up of so-called traditional civic institutions (traditional civic networks), informal civic organizations, and citizens' associations at the community level, such

as initiative groups and neighborhood associations, grassroots associations, and so on.

In Tajikistan, informal citizens' associations, such as village councils, councils of elders, and neighborhood councils, are found in almost every village and town in the republic and are considered *traditional civic institutions*. Historically, similar citizens' associations had a significant impact on public life. And although their influence was limited to a significant extent during the Soviet period, a trend towards their sustainable growth has appeared over the last decade. In addition, Tajik society has historically enjoyed a well-developed network of traditional civic institutions on the local, community level. Tajik communities in both cities and rural regions have traditionally had a system of self-governance in the form of so-called Mahalla councils. Such councils organized various traditional activities within the community such as weddings and funerals, as well as organizing and conducting public works, and so on. On the other hand, these councils provided a place where adult members of the community could discuss local problems and resolve conflicts.

During the soviet period, traditional civic institutions experienced significant erosion. Trying to diminish their influence and replace their functions, the authorities created state-controlled, semi-official organizations and trade unions. After the social and political tensions in the early 1990s began to increase, it turned out that the weakened traditional civic institutions on the local level were not able to effectively fulfill their role as mediators in regulating the conflict and stabilizing the situation. Moreover, during the war, given the conditions with the almost paralyzed official authorities, the existing traditional civic institutions used the various warring political factions as a source to obtain financial and material resources, mobilize recruits, and so on.

The next level of non-governmental organizations, NGOs, as a rule comprise officially registered and active organizations on a more professional level, as well as the independent media. The appearance of officially registered NGOs at the end of perestroika was a new phenomenon for Tajikistan. This system of NGOs initially began to form in early 1990 and quickly gained strength and numbers within the sector: in 1997, the authorities had registered 300, and in March 2000, 625 new NGOs had come into being; approximately 45 women's organizations were included among

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93 See, David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, Urbana/Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1999.

them.<sup>94</sup> This group of NGOs has gradually turned into its own kind of connecting link within the civil society structure in the country, linking the various parts to one another. Indeed, non-governmental organizations, associations, and groups of citizens are the foremost mobile and organized part of nascent Tajik civil society. Their particularity lies in their being one of the most intellectual segments of Tajik society—most leaders and activists of Tajik NGOs are from the scientific and artistic intelligentsia. Given the severe conditions of the economic transition and crisis of fiscal institutions, many Tajik intellectuals have found a niche in NGOs where they can not only fulfill their potential but actually survive. It is no exaggeration to say that the Tajik intelligentsia is indebted to the NGO and third sector for ensuring its position as an active social group.

The third level of civil society is traditionally the parties, political associations, and movements, all of which represent the interests of various social groups among the population. Unfortunately, during the entire post-conflict period in Tajikistan, the political opposition came to lose its former position in society as well as its opportunities to influence the decision-making process, and to help with formulating the government's policy direction.

#### **Structural features and shortcomings of Tajik civil society**

Throughout the course of its history, Tajik civil society has encountered significant difficulties, with objective and subjective challenges. The main subjective factors affecting civil society include the following:

First, an important feature of Tajik NGOs is their complete dependence on external funding primarily from international donor organizations based in Dushanbe. Unfortunately, the economic situation in the republic remains in such a state that local private and state industries, as well as small and medium-sized business are not in a position to finance civic and charitable initiatives. As a result, the majority of local NGOs must adjust their projects and the direction of their activities to fit within the programs of international organizations, which do not always fully meet the needs of the Republic.

On the other hand, the number of international donor organizations based in Dushanbe is quite limited (in any case, based on the number of domestic NGOs). Even fewer of them are willing to fund educational projects in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. As a result, out of more than 2,000 domestic NGOs, a few dozens only are operating more or less continually, and only a dozen or so of them are really able to stand on their

own feet. Despite a significant increase in the numbers of NGOs in the country, only around a dozen of them have a stable position, with an established franchise system and trained staff. The situation for the independent media looks about the same, and the majority of media outlets do not have their own funding sources.

Therefore, on the list of domestic NGOs specializing in conflict resolution contains only a few dozen. However, upon a close examination of their programs, it turns out that only three or four organizations can be considered real experts in this field.

Second, there is still no established mechanism of effective cooperation and interaction between the various elements of civil society. Most importantly, Tajik civil society has not yet developed into a unified and well-oiled machine; the development of its separate elements has taken place very irregularly. If the NGO sector had developed at a quicker pace, then the media would not have lagged behind as much in its development. The modern information-communication space has not yet formed in the republic, which still lags behind the other CIS countries by its number of independent media sources. The development of political parties and movements is occurring at a slow pace; by 2014 only a few could be called genuinely sustainable.

As a result, the social partnership between various sectors of civil society remains at a relatively low level, which often affects the quality of many civic initiatives. Unfortunately, there has still been insufficient development of cooperation between the two main sectors of Tajik civil society: traditional civic institutions and NGOs. In the meantime, cooperation between these sectors of civil society will fully revive the potential of traditional civic institutions. There is no proper cooperation between the mass media and NGOs, or between political parties and public organizations. Even among registered NGOs there are serious problems with communication. Despite repeated attempts to unite and coordinate their actions, Tajik NGOs remain fragmented, and relations between them are more often like relations between competitors than between like-minded thinkers.

Moreover, the impact of civil society depends not so much on the number of such institutions as on the quality of cooperation and networks between them. The higher the level of communication and cooperation between political parties, the media, and NGOs, on the one hand, and informal associations of citizens, on the other, the stronger and more influential domestic civil society is. Accordingly, any substantial gap in the sphere of civil society weakens it and contributes to its inability to fulfill its functions and objectives.

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94 P. Mullojanov, "Civil Society and Peacebuilding," in Kamolitdin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes (eds.), *Accord Issue 10: Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process*, London, Conciliation Sources, 2001, pp. 60-3.

### **Civil society and the authorities in Tajikistan**

Relations between the authorities and civil society in Tajikistan have always been difficult. In general, the post-conflict period can be divided into two main phases: first, the initial 13 years after the signing of the peace accords, a time when state policy on civil society was reasonably liberal. And then, during the last several years, a steady hardening of government policy has occurred in relation to independent civil initiatives and political parties. As a result, in the last several years, two fundamental trends in the development of the society and the country have been observed.

The first is the process of centralization of power, a process that played a significant role in overcoming the consequences of the civil war (1992-1997). The discussion over this general trend in centralizing power concerns a trend that has had its place in the political life of the country for the past two decades. Overall, the centralization of power was somewhat necessary to the country's post-conflict development, and represents the reverse side of the stabilization process. The centralization of power has many positive aspects: during this process, the government has managed to get rid of dominating, willful, and wayward warlords, and strengthened the rule of law in the country, as well as put an end to the most odious manifestations of lawlessness and human rights violations.

However, the process of centralizing power over the last several years has begun to take on an excessive character as a concentration of power in the hands of a rather limited circle of top-tier politicians. As a result, if a few years ago a few centers of influence existed on the political stage, centers that acted as a counterweight to the central government, now their number has sharply declined, and where they exist a significant portion of their influence has been lost.

Second, throughout the whole post-conflict period in the country, the role and influence of civil society has decreased. Parliamentary elections in 2010 and 2015 clearly showed that there is no longer any active and strong opposition in the republic, even though its presence is one of the fundamental conditions for developing a democratic society. The Majlisi Oli (Tajik parliament) today is virtually a one-party legislature in which there is practically one faction—the Tajik “party of power” the PDP (People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan); the closing of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) in 2015 put an end to the presence of opposition parties in parliament.

### **Socio-economic crises from 2014 to 2016 and their possible effects on the state of civil society in Tajikistan**

A feature of the current situation in Tajikistan is defined by the growing conflict between the obsolete socio-economic model and the rapidly changing geo-political and economic realities. The current Tajik socio-economic model has been fully integrated into the overall system of economic relations prevailing in the CIS after the fall of the USSR. However, the Russian economic crisis has had a significant impact on the solvency of the post-Soviet economic system; in these new conditions, the Tajik economic model has become less prosperous and sustainable.

The fact is that the Tajik economic model existed and was prosperous only under favorable political situations—primarily, the booming labor market in Russia and political stability in neighboring countries, especially in Afghanistan. Economists call this model the economy of remittances,<sup>95</sup> as, according to the World Bank, remittances from migrants made up nearly half of GDP in 2015.<sup>96</sup> As soon as these favorable conditions changed and the labor market in Russia began to shrink, as the world prices for cotton and aluminum declined, the Tajik model turned out to be insolvent. Given the new conditions, the Tajik government ought to adapt the economic model to the new conditions as quickly as possible. This would mean carrying out large-scale, structural economic reforms from the top. Above all, it would involve diversifying the economy so that labor migration is not the main engine and source of income for both citizens and the state. Otherwise, this economy is unlikely to succeed and keep us afloat in the long term.

Unfortunately, at the present moment, the Tajik government's response to the new challenges has been essentially purely technical in nature, aimed at addressing the top priorities. First of all, this has translated into a sharp increase in control over the society, which is viewed as the main source of problems and a potential space for societal mobilization, as well as the prohibition against the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) and the organization of new political parties. Human rights organizations have also cited the gradual but steady pressure being exerted on civil society, the mass media, NGOs, and international organizations, including the arrests and persecution of independent civic activists. Thus, to date, the only restructuring taking place is a purge of the political and social superstructure.

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95 S. Olimova, “*Obschestvoved: Zavisimost' Tajikistana ot deneznykh perevodov trudovykh migrantov vedet stranu v tupik*,” Radio Ozodi, <http://rus.ozodi.org/a/25329522.html>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

96 P. Mulloajnov, “*Tajikistan in 2016: Main Trends and Risks for Development*,” Asia-Plus IA Agency, [news.tj/.../tadzhikistan-v-2016-godu-osnovnye-vyzovy-riski-i-tend](http://news.tj/.../tadzhikistan-v-2016-godu-osnovnye-vyzovy-riski-i-tend), (accessed 29 March 2017).



As a result, the decision-making process, which is crucial for the country, has become increasingly opaque in nature. Civil society institutions and the non-government sector now have fewer resources and fewer opportunities at their disposal to influence the development and implementation of projects and community development programs. This has led to the authorities making more decisions without taking public opinion into account, thereby making them less popular and increasing societal tension.

The global financial-economic crisis worked only to exacerbate the gap between civil society and the government. Unfortunately, the societal partnership

in the country remains at a low level. Civil society's contribution to the process of finding solutions to the crisis also remains minimal. One could almost say that civil society's potential in the country is a virtually untapped power.

Unfortunately, this trend will continue to dominate in the next several years. It appears that the Tajik authorities are not planning to carry out any large-scale economic reforms. Additionally, as the socio-economic crisis deepens further, the Tajik government will continue its policy of minimizing and marginalizing civil society, which they perceive as the main mechanism for social and political mobilization of the population.

## “We were a little pregnant...”

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**Umed Babahanov**

*Founder and Chief Editor of Asia-Plus*

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I once said that there are restrictions on freedom of the press in Tajikistan, and several of my Western colleagues (journalists) laughed. “It is impossible to be ‘a little pregnant’. You are either free or not free!” they argued. Of course, I understood their logic but insisted that everything is relative in this world, and even in Central Asian countries there have been various levels of freedom in recent years. I no longer say such things and no one is laughing any more...

To assess the path taken by the Tajik media over the last 25 years, it is necessary to understand that its development, similar to the development of the whole society, was in many ways defined by the civil war in the country. Having started almost immediately after achieving independence, the war delayed the process of development of the national media for a few years. At the same time, most of the independent press, which appeared in the republic before and during the period of perestroika, withered and did not even establish roots. Some of the newspapers were closed down at the start of the war, while others took their operations outside the country and published abroad.

The first Tajik publications began to appear during the period of independence from 1993 to 1995. Their topics were largely determined by the imperatives of the war. The majority of publications preferred to limit themselves to providing entertaining reprints (*Digest Press*) or in the best cases sought to bring social problems to light (*Tajikistan Courier and Evening Dushanbe*).

In the fall of 1995, the Ministry of Justice registered the *Asia-Plus* news agency. The project was made pos-

sible through a grant from the representative office of Mercy Corps International, which gave our agency its first computer, as well as the means to carry out the first months of work. At the time, the national economy was in decline, so that neither the private sector nor the governing institutions, nor the general public, had money. Therefore, the agency initially chose the single, most solvent category of readers at that time as its target audience, namely embassies and the international organizations working in the country. Practice has shown this to be the right choice: *Asia-Plus* became the first and only media outlet in the country to produce news in English, and in two to three months almost all embassies and most international organizations had subscribed. The subscriptions allowed the agency to increase staff numbers and gradually develop services. In addition, this solid audience of subscribers and English-language editions gave the agency the opportunity to freely choose the topics. *Asia-Plus* began to cover the inter-Tajik talks, political and security issues, investments, and legislation. After signing the 1997 peace accords, our agency focused its attention on providing information support to the international press by covering the National Reconciliation Commission's activities, the reintegration of combatants into civilian life, and the return of refugees to their homeland.

Despite the formal end to the war, the level of mutual distrust between the government and opposition remained high, thus preserving the traditional mistrust of the government towards independent media. Therefore, in 1998 *Asia-Plus* decided to implement a new project, namely to open the first FM radio station in Tajikistan *Zavis*, which took four long years to bring to fruition. We received radio equipment from UNESCO, hired personnel, and participated in training in Almaty, and then submitted the documents for the license. But issues unexpectedly arose. The authorities officially

responded to our request, saying that there was already a sufficient number of radio stations in Tajikistan and that “it was unnecessary to create another channel” (even though no single private FM radio station operated at that time). Unofficially, acquaintances within the government openly told us that we did not receive the license because the radio was created with foreign funds. The response was: “You have Western money. You will not protect national interests, but rather the interests of your sponsors!”

None of our appeals to the government or the international community were heeded, but after four years, in September 2002, *Radio Asia-Plus* finally went on the air. By that time, the situation in the region had changed dramatically. In connection with the anti-terrorism operation in Afghanistan, the West had suddenly discovered the small Tajik Republic on the map and decided it would be useful to cooperate with it. On the other hand, the Tajik authorities, who for the previous ten years had oriented themselves only towards Moscow, agreed that it was time diversify the country’s foreign relations. Preparation was made for President Emomali Rahmon to make his first visit to a Western institution—to Prague for the NATO summit, and then to Paris and Washington. Opening the first independent radio station in the country created a positive impression for the upcoming meetings and kept accusations of being an undemocratic regime at bay. This is why, in summer 2002 the phone of *Asia-Plus* suddenly rang: “Be at the president’s administration at 11:00am today. You will be met by the head of state...”

At that meeting, Emomali Rahmon promised that he would order the Television and Radio Commission to review our request for a license and that the issue would be resolved favorably. After this point, as *Asia-Plus* informed its readers about the president’s decision, a wave of positive publications appeared in the local and international press, in which experts spoke about the reforms in Tajik society. And, as a “living example of the free Tajik press,” the president started including me in his delegations and I accompanied him on trips.

All this happened, however, over a four-year period. So, in order not to remain static, we decided to set up own newspaper in 2000, something we initially had not planned on doing. This idea unexpectedly became *Asia-Plus*’ most successful. In one year the newspaper became self-financing, and after a few more we had surpassed all our competitors in terms of the print run and volume of advertising. Some time later, I began to publish the first glossy magazine supplement to our newspaper *VIP Zone*.

So, by mid-2000s, *Asia-Plus* had turned into a major media holding, including a news agency with

the highest ratings, a newspaper with the highest print run, and an FM radio station that broadcast in the country’s three largest cities.

Our example, of course, was not the only successful one on the media market in Tajikistan in those years. During this period, at least two other private media holdings formed in Tajikistan: *Charkhi Gardun* and *Oila*, which between them published five to seven newspapers of various orientation. Many other media outlets successfully entered the market and developed in that period. It is possible that many were far from perfect in the quality of content and effectiveness of their business model. But the facts cannot be denied: this period was the most productive and prosperous one for the Tajik media, which were positively noted in international indexes on freedom of speech. Moreover, in contrast to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Tajik media did not get bought out by financial-industrial groups, meaning it could remain relatively independent from the government, but also from big business. This created the conditions for a broad expression of opinion, but it also had its minuses: the lack of serious investment in the Tajik media did not allow them to grow dynamically and further develop.

After the thaw of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a period of political cooling started advancing after the 2010 parliamentary elections in Tajikistan. A significant percentage of voters voted for the Islamic Renaissance Party (more than 50 percent, according to IRP data and around 8 percent according to official statistics). The government had traditionally allocated “Islamists” only two seats in the new parliament, but it was apparently decided that the IRP had become too threatening as a competitor, and that it had to be contained. A secret government protocol No. 32-20 soon became known to the public. It revealed the tasks of law enforcement and other government agencies to discredit and weaken the IRP. The government announced that the protocol was false, but the authorities’ subsequent actions took the point-by-point turn reflected in the secret document almost to the letter.

The final chord in what journalists referred to as *Operation Anti-Nahzat*, was the banning of the IRP for being a terrorist organization, and the arrest of its leadership in September 2015.

Along with the campaign against political opponents throughout these last years, pressure on the media, human rights defenders, independent experts, and NGOs increased. As a popular way of dealing with objectionable publications, the authorities use defamation lawsuits with especially high fines to bankrupt the media. For example, during that time, the court demanded that our newspaper pay one million dollars to the general Ministry of Internal Affairs, \$300,000 to members of the Supreme Court,

and \$40,000 to the intelligentsia. The last claim was the most famous and scandalous: four artistic unions and the Academy of Sciences were offended by a quote from Lenin on the national intelligentsia published in *Asia-Plus*. The trial was conducted in high-level cabinets and lasted about two years, and, despite its absurdity, it ended in favor of the plaintiffs.

Another popular way of suppressing the media and journalists over the last five years has included blocking information websites and social networks. This mechanism has been actively employed by the authorities since 2012. Currently, Facebook, YouTube, the Tajik Service of Radio Liberty, and *Asia-Plus* all remain blocked, along with other independent media sources. In addition, our Tajik officials have invented a “Tajik know-how” of such blocking: the order to block a particular website is done through the informal oral directives of the Communication Services to mobile operators and Internet Service Providers. As a result, the media do not have the opportunity to challenge these decisions, because officially they do not exist, and the leadership of the Communications Services only shrugs and advises journalists to address it with the service providers.

The authorities’ actions and the events of the last period have naturally led to fewer critical materials appearing in the Tajik media and an increase in self-censorship, which in turn has led to a decrease in readers’ interests and a narrower circulation of materials. The economic crisis in the country aggravated the problem. As a result, the media experienced a 50 to 70 percent decrease in advertising volume. Also, the majority of

Tajik media outlets in 2015 to 2016 declared bankruptcy and had to cut employees’ salaries, as well as reduce the number of staff, and put a hold on new projects. Many journalists left the country.

This is how, over the 25 years of independence, Tajikistan has had almost no opposition. This has occurred hand-in-hand with a noticeable weakening of civil society and the media, and with a president whose title as “Leader of the Nation” gives him the right to rule for life. Obviously, in the next few years, the authoritarian tendencies in Tajikistan will only increase. Only the media that is loyal to the authorities and that provides entertainment will be able to exist in such circumstances. The government’s strategies for the country’s development have possibly sought to create this difficult situation for the national media. However, it is important to keep in mind that even with the obvious advantages this situation gives to the authorities in power, it could also have negative effects for the state and the country as a whole. A holy place is never empty; therefore, in the absence of influential national media, the international media will fill the vacuum, especially the Russian media, which the authorities have no way of influencing. This will increase the country’s vulnerability in the information wars being waged with neighbors, near and far. By closing down the independent media, the safety valve also disappears, producing the flood of social tensions that have emerged over these last years. Building on my colleagues’ metaphor with which I started my article, it can now be said the Tajik media is no longer pregnant with freedom; it has miscarried.

## Social Media in Central Asia

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Both states and nongovernmental stakeholders across the Central Asian region view information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a developmental vehicle. Governments prioritize this sector in their policies, investing millions of dollars to improve the infrastructure of Internet access and make efforts to introduce technologies into the provision of state services. Internet penetration has skyrocketed over the past decade, enabling people to benefit from the information age in this landlocked region. Their representation on social media platforms and the active use of those websites is less welcomed by the authorities, who often see these tools as a threat to “internal stability,” which is to say the safety and longevity of the elites.

Social networking sites top the list of popular web resources in Central Asia. The use of particular networks varies from country to country, but Russia-based platforms—Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki and Mail.Ru—are among the most used. The popularity of Facebook and its photo-sharing application Instagram is also growing quickly and steadily, accounting now for a total of 2.1 million users—and counting—in all five Central Asian countries.

Twitter and other micro-blogging solutions are catching up, but are way behind the dominant players, which are designed to host more diverse multimedia content (Vkontakte, for example, is especially attractive for the tons of pirated movies, TV series, and music). YouTube is listed as the number two site in Kazakhstan on Alexa.com, Amazon.com’s global web monitor, but its use in other countries of the region is stifled by a low bandwidth of Internet connection.

The regimes want to develop technologies on their own terms, and thus to help with diversifying their weak

economies, optimizing governance, and stepping out of the margins of the world's fourth industrial revolution. But they see the potential of uncontrollable crowds going online as a risk. Still, in places where these platforms are not banned entirely, both central and local authorities are making use of them. In Kazakhstan, the government uses sophisticated software to monitor the "information space," and in May 2016 President Nazarbayev urged the new Ministry of Information and Communications to identify the problems that people are voicing, and swiftly solve them. Local administration of Almaty, the country's biggest city, is not only watching the social media, but runs its own accounts in Facebook and Instagram to accept complaints and report about the actions it undertakes. Officials of a small municipality in Tajikistan's Rudaki county are practicing a similar approach through the hukumat's page in Odnoklassniki.ru. The prime-ministers, ministers, and many members of parliaments in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are avid Twitter and Facebook users.

Businesses have become very active in promoting themselves on social media, and many businesses them have actually emerged out of it, such as Uzbekistan's consumer rights community Potrebite.uz, which started as a Facebook group, amassed a huge following, and gave its creators the offbeat business idea to form an online marketing agency. Companies in all countries are taking their social media strategies very seriously. But if commercial entities can only enjoy the branding and selling potential the social media promises, the business of making news has to deal both with the advantages and challenges of social networks.

Independent media sources are rare—and almost extinct—birds in Central Asia, except Kyrgyzstan, but even this latter country, long dubbed as an "island of democracy," is increasingly seen as failing to live up to its title. Many traditional media are having a very hard time adapting to the digital era and new demands for competitiveness. News sites are also permanently forced to fight for their audience, which is less likely to visit homepages and more likely to read news in their feeds on Facebook or Twitter, where they can be easily distracted by mainstream topics, "flame" discussions, trolls—or simply by photos of cats and friends. Public interest journalism is in crisis on a global scale, and even established international publications are still learning how to reach out to their readership on social media. At the same time, in hostile environments, where website blocking, DDoS attacks, and court bans on the operation of news sites are routine occurrences for independent journalists, platforms like Facebook can help with public outreach. Yet they offer neither options of financial reward, nor prospects for the media to survive economically. Sidelined from the mainstream ways of

news distribution, independent journalism still lingers in social networks, perhaps, but it is desperate and has little faith in its own future.

Nevertheless, in all Central Asian states today the social media stands as the last bastion of free speech. Not only do the established media find their last resort there, but—perhaps more importantly—many other critical voices are instrumentalizing Facebook, Twitter, and a plethora of messaging applications to have their say on matters of public interest. Opposition politicians may have their parties banned or split up by the authorities, but they keep on asking uncomfortable questions in social networks. They may be denied registration in elections or humiliated by unfair ballot counting, but instead of votes they often garner thousands of "likes" online. The social media also gives rise to emerging younger leaders, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Marginal voices—far-right, leftist-anarchist, reactionary traditionalist, and others—do not miss a chance to broadcast their views through these ubiquitous virtual tribunes. But a free and level marketplace for expressing all views and ideas, such as that provided by Facebook and the like, is a better reflection of the diversity of these societies than what we see in the official mass media.

The information-sharing and mobilizing potential of the social media, much feared by the authorities after the "colored revolutions" and the "Arab Spring," is difficult to contain. Even in Turkmenistan, which is a police state and closed society, and ruled by its president's personality cult, users share forbidden news in online platforms. In 2011, they discussed a series of massive explosions in the military ammunition warehouses, a news item that the regime tried to conceal. Conversations and photos of the incident were posted in forums, the only sites with user-generated content that are not blocked in Turkmenistan.

Several times in Kazakhstan, Facebook has served as a meeting point for citizens outraged by the government's desire to cut maternity benefits and raise the retirement age (2013), crush the national currency's value (2014), or privatize land (2016). Dissent then migrated offline, with online communities getting self-organized "in real life," and staging sanctioned or unsanctioned rallies to protest those policies. Similar grassroots campaigns have taken place in Almaty (Kazakhstan), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), and Tashkent (Uzbekistan), where denizens have confronted the local administrations' plans to spoil nature reserves, demolish historical buildings, or cut trees. Kyrgyzstan has witnessed all forms of social mobilization and collective action, which is facilitated by social networking websites, and set the standard for charity and emergency response through the online platforms, when in 2010 activists and bloggers organized a humanitarian

campaign to support the victims of the inter-ethnic clashes and contributed to reconciliation.

With all the pros and cons of the new reality of this “many-to-many” type of communication, where governments can no longer rely on top-down mechanisms to control information flows, they are increasingly trying to impose restrictions on topics and activities they do not like. Internet regulation in Central Asia—Kyrgyzstan being the only exception—is designed to establish an atmosphere of self-censorship, and infrequent show trials impose a chilling effect on the online community. In criminal cases where people have been charged with insult, defamation, incitement of hatred, and so on, ICT’s are often appealed to as aggravating evidence.

Blocking is the most pervasive way to counter undesired content in the region. In 2015, Kazakhstan permanently or intermittently blocked dozens of online newspapers, user-generated content platforms, and multimedia sharing sites—from the British *Daily Mail* to the UrbanDictionary, a slang and jargon directory, including Vimeo, DailyMotion, Soundcloud, and Tumblr. In some cases, court decisions banned websites for hosting extremist content, but in many other cases the reason for filtering was never given. Uzbekistan also blocks big swathes of global Internet sites, including YouTube and all messaging apps that provide voice and video calls. Many users are not aware of the opportunities for circumvention, are not motivated enough to continue visiting resources they already saw earlier, and they also do not ask questions if a page that they have not accessed before is inaccessible to them.

The government of Tajikistan also blocks most social networks and critical news sites, but users in this country have set an unprecedented case study in Central Asia. The use of circumvention tools is ubiquitous there, proving the ineffectiveness of content filtering. For many Tajiks, 83 percent of whom use mobile phones to connect to the Internet, sites like Facebook, Vkontakte, and Odnoklassniki serve as the main communications channels with their relatives who work abroad seasonally. As such, people soon learned how to bypass blocks. The situation reached absurd levels when the corporate Facebook pages of the Tajik Internet service providers (ISPs) which block Facebook themselves, did not stop providing news updates to their clients. In another account, when the website of *Asia-Plus*, the major Tajik news agency, was blocked, journalists learned about it from their elderly readers, who themselves never switch off the VPNs on their computers.

In the most notorious cases, in which no court decision or other legal ground is given to substantiate the blocking, the authorities and providers deny all complicity in censorship. In Tajikistan, for example, current legislation makes no provisions for any kind of blocking, so neither telecom companies nor the government are taking responsibility for such facts. In Kazakhstan, critical websites Ratel.kz and Zonakz.net were blocked for several months in 2015 and 2016 by the ISP, which had been also providing them hosting services, and it failed to explain the disruption to services and access.

As governments started to realize that blocking has limited impact, they moved to ban the use of circumvention tools; most recent examples of such policies come from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, but in Uzbekistan anonymizers in cybercafes were outlawed much earlier. The regimes in Central Asia now employ even more sophisticated strategies to prevent the risks posed by ICTs, social media, and the unhindered information flow they facilitate. They preserve old or introduce new solutions to centralize the infrastructure of Internet access, test new ways to deploy massive online surveillance, intercept encrypted traffic, obtain obscure cyber-espionage, and monitoring equipment from controversial firms like *Hacking Team* and others.

Kazakhstan banned the use of social media and smartphones by all public officials and visitors of the government bodies to fight “leaks of sensitive information.” Uzbekistan aims to create its own intranet—with its own search engines, social media and messengers—and to keep users within its virtual borders and effective jurisdiction. With the many ambiguous policies and mixed signals that the authorities are sending to their nations, it gets very difficult to make predictions even about the near future. When we hail the cases in which the social media have contributed to collective actions, it should be recalled that only a tiny part of all active users in Central Asia use these tools to explore matters of public interest. The rest mostly use the Internet to keep in touch with friends and for entertainment. At the same time, when we express concerns about the intentions of governments to expand control over the online space, we should remember that many such policies cannot be effective. They fail to consider the global nature of the Internet. They fail to grasp the serious consequences of the Internet’s fragmentation on the economies and the cybersecurity of the countries making such decisions.

# The Return of Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Evaluating the Past, Looking to the Future

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**Alima Bissenova**

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The Soviet Union's collapse ushered in the new-found independence of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. This process coincided with the so-called global Islamic renaissance in the rest of the Islamic world. After a decade of anti-religious propaganda and the prohibition of religious expression in the public sphere, a period of revived interest in religion, both as an essential part of ethno-cultural identity and as a purely religious spiritual practice, followed. Upon receiving independence, the Central Asian countries were able to reestablish ties with Middle Eastern countries both in terms of religious education, "people's diplomacy," trade, and hajj, and they took advantage of these opportunities. For example, in the 1990s and the early 2000s, Kazakhstan sent students both to Al-Azhar University and the Islamic University of Medina; in Shymkent, the Arab-Kazakh University was opened, along with the Ahmet Yessevi University in Turkistan, where students received basic religious education and studied Arabic. With the cessation of Soviet anti-religious propaganda and legislation, the state had to develop a new regulatory framework for public religious activity, which had been fairly liberal in the 1990s. On the one hand, this liberalization could be celebrated as the spirit of freedom and openness, but, on the other, inter- and intra-confessional tensions appeared as this society was not used to any significant presence of religion in the public sphere or "excessive" religious expression. After the initial openness of Central Asian countries to everything new, including the Islamic current of the 1990s, and openness to preachers from different countries, a period of greater restrictions and cautiousness followed vis-à-vis the revival of Islam and the arrival of new, "non-traditional" religions, on the part of both the government and the society. Understandably, the events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing "war on terror," the Chechen wars, as well as internal events (the explosions in Tashkent in 1999, terrorist activity

in the Batken region in 1999-2000) contributed to this change of heart and of policy.

The period of reaction in relation to the rapid and unexpected Islamization is, however, not only connected to external factors. As many researchers on the region note, a belligerent attitude towards Islamic (and other) religious followings exists in post-Soviet Central Asian societies, which were unprepared for the emergence of a new, non-Soviet secularism, the mass circulation of new ideas and practices, and the spread of so-called fundamentalist Islam. Many researchers of Islam in Central Asia also write about the widening gap between adherents of new and old understandings of how religious practices should and should not be expressed. This impending rupture and conflict was noticed in particular by researchers in Kyrgyzstan: Julie McBrien, Mathijs Pelkmans, and Maria Louw have all written about how new practices in the conducting of collective rituals—weddings and funerals, and also some Muslims' taking a more serious approach to Islam in everyday life—have become a source of stress and worry for other Muslims, who consider themselves a different kind of Muslim—whether Muslim-atheists or moderate Muslims.<sup>97</sup> In the competition and heated debates between different visions of the "correct" Islam, state leaders and government representatives, instead of being neutral in the spirit of secularism, have often offered support to one side of the debate, and by doing so have added fuel to the flames of discord. One example of such "inflammatory" activity concerned the placing of billboards stating, "*Qayran elim, qaida baratabyz?*" ("Poor dear people, what is our world coming to?"), billboards that were supposed to make a contrast between the "local" and "exported" Islamic traditions in women's clothing, and were sanctioned and financed by the office of President Atambaev.<sup>98</sup> Explaining his support for the banners, the president also added that those who practice Islam in a different way "confuse Arab, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi culture with Kyrgyz culture," and impose "foreign culture under the guise of religion."<sup>99</sup> In the heat of conflict around whether or not to allow the hijab in schools in Kazakhstan, President Nazarbaev made a similar state-

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97 See M. Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter When There Is Too Much of it: Islam and the Struggle for Balanced Existence in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 4, 2013, pp. 514–26; J. McBrien, "Listening to the Wedding Speaker: Discussing Religion and Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3, 2006, pp. 341–57; J. McBrien and M. Pelkmans, "Turning Marx on his Head: Missionaries, 'Extremists' and Archaic Secularists in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Critique of Anthropology* 28, no. 1, 2008, pp. 87–103.

98 "Provokatsionnye billboardy: Atambayev poruchil razvesit' bannery po vsemy Kyrgyzstanu," July 14, 2016, <http://kloop.kg/blog/2016/07/14/provokatsionnye-bilbordy-atambaev-poruchil-razvesit-bannery-po-vsemy-kyrgyzstanu>

99 Ibid.

ment upon announcing that Kazakh girls “don’t wear the hijab or nicab.”<sup>100</sup> In spite of the fact that wearing the hijab was not made illegal in Kazakhstan, the words of the president carried a lot of weight and solidified the narrow essentialist view of “traditional Islam.”

The states of Central Asia have reacted in various ways to the processes of Islamization, depending on the socio-political climate in the country. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, scholars note that Islam (including official Islam) is often found in opposition to the state, and Islamic views of fairness and a just society are cemented as an alternative to the unfair and corrupt state system. From this perspective, it is interesting to note that the Islamic High Council of Kyrgyzstan officially spoke out against the “provocative banners” supported by the president, which is difficult to imagine in Kazakhstan, where the process of “etatization of Islam” is in full swing. The first, and in some sense forced, movement toward etatization comes from the government itself. This movement was brought forth by the attempts of various government offices to bridle the powerful wave of Islamization in society, following the fall of the Soviet Union. According to one former employee of the Kazakh Agency for Religious Affairs: “The train of Islamization has already left. The only thing we can do is to try to jump on that train and somehow control its direction.”<sup>101</sup> The second movement towards etatization comes from the side of the Muslim community, which wants to be a part of the national modernization project. In today’s climate of the global “war on terror,” for Muslims it is a question of normalizing their lives, and not of bringing their Islamization into conflict with other societal processes.

Bakhtiar Babadjanov calls the expert evaluation of Islam in the region unfortunate, as it posits a “good/bad” or “correct/incorrect” invariant dichotomy.<sup>102</sup> To that list we can add traditional/non-traditional and moderate/extreme. In this atmosphere of ongoing and inflating conflict between the “correct” and “incorrect” versions of Islam, ordinary Muslims face the challenge of how to fit into the framework of “good, moderate Islam.” How to be religious and not to be accused of “excessive” religiosity? Muslim leaders are facing the challenge of how to create a framework of “good, moderate Islam” and how to define its boundaries. If from the point of view of the government, what is meant by “bad Islam” is more or less

clear, insofar as it is connected to problems of security and terrorism, an understanding of “good Islam” has yet to be defined. Any such definition has to correspond, on the one hand, with the orthodoxy (for the majority of believers will not accept unorthodox Islam), and, on the other, fit in with the local geopolitical and cultural context. In principle, determining such a “good” and, at the same time, orthodox Islam, and finding a balance, is a task that is solvable and practicable—as Clifford Geertz has written, in Islam there has always existed “tension between the high universalism of religion and its localization attributes.”<sup>103</sup>

The leaders of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) are attempting today to define what “good orthodox Islam” is, and, while defining it, to stake out a respectable place for Islam in the unfolding nation- and state-building project. According to the re-registration agreement from June 19, 2012, SAMK is defined as a non-governmental Islamic religious organization, though of course it is not just another NGO. Administratively, it has a centralized structure almost duplicating the government offices, and, territorially, it encompasses all of Kazakhstan. It oversees a huge infrastructure, which has to be managed: it presides over two and a half thousand mosques throughout the country, including megamosques that bring thousands of people together, such as Khazret-Sultan, and NurAstana in Astana, the Central City (*Ortalyq*) mosque in Almaty, and regional mosques in all oblast’ centers, also the many madras schools for children and the Institute for Professional Development for Imams. That is to say, in reality we have a gigantic organization with more or less “free” and “flexible” bureaucracy (as compared with to government offices), which has influence over a huge audience that attends mosques on Fridays and other days. It is physically impossible for any regulatory body to control a machine of such size, whether the former Agency for Religious Affairs or the newly established Ministry for Religious Affairs and Civil Society. So, the relationship between SAMK and the government entails more of inter-dependancy and complementarity, which does not exclude conflict, rather than direct authoritarian control. That is, if SAMK were to use its resources to promote a certain “state policy,” then that is based primarily on the good will of SAMK imams

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100 “Nazarbaev vyskazalsya protiv hijabov,” March 11, 2011, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/nazarbaev-vyiskazalsya-protiv-hidjabai-parandji-180922/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nazarbaev-vyiskazalsya-protiv-hidjabai-parandji-180922/)

101 Interview with the author, 14 February 2016.

102 B. Babajanov. “About good Islam and bad Islam. Personal experience in regional expertise”. *Alatoo Academic Studies*, No. 4, Bishkek, 2015, pp. 34-46.

103 Islam, Modernity, Nationalism: Interview with Clifford Geertz, [islamoved.ru/2016/islam-modern-natsionalizm-intervyu-s-kliffordom-girtsem/](http://islamoved.ru/2016/islam-modern-natsionalizm-intervyu-s-kliffordom-girtsem/)

and their desire to cooperate with the government but also to remain true to their religious creed.

At the same time, I want to note that Hobsbawm's concept of the "invention of tradition" cannot be applied to the situation of the Islamic renaissance, since the imams who are trying to establish so-called traditional Hanafi madhhab nonetheless operate in the bounds of orthodox doctrine and cannot stray beyond its borders without damaging their own authority among the congregants. Thus, the imams of SAMK are faced with the task not so much of "inventing" traditional Islam as learning and interpreting it in such a way that leaves as much room as possible for local political and cultural "nuances."

Unlike SAMK, which is somehow trying to establish relations with society, the state, and global Islam, the state has no coherent policy regarding Islamization and "foreign" trends. This becomes clear in a certain legislative ambivalence (for example, the law "On religious activity and religious coalitions" from October 11, 2011 was criticized both by practicing Muslims, whose rights were curtailed, and by members of other religious

confessions) and in the continual structural reform of regulatory offices—the Agency for Religious Affairs was strengthened in 2011 to enact restrictive laws, but was later reduced to a Committee under the Ministry of Culture and Information, and then, in 2016, a separate Ministry for Religious Affairs and Civil Society was created, and people have already started referring to it as the "Ministry Against Religion," anticipating that it will start introducing even more restrictive anti-religious measures. But, at the same time, it is understood that no restrictions on ideology and on the spread of ideas will work, and that restrictions on practices will be difficult to implement. SAMK imams, who are in the vanguard of religious grass-roots developments, admit this and have experience in integrating so-called salafites. They have allowed these latter to pray as they see fit in mosques, but at the same time administer "educational projects" among the congregation on how to pray "correctly" according to the Hanafi madhhab. Measures passed to restrict the conduct of prayer in public institutions are also barely functional: whoever so desires can continue to pray unofficially, and many law enforcement and military institutions turn a blind eye to this.

## Migration of Central Asians to Russia

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### Migration patterns over the past 25 years

While the issues of security and the change of leadership in Central Asia dominate the agenda of Western policy makers, in the households of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan the issue of labor migration is more prominent. Almost every household in each of these three countries has a family member who works abroad. Families with no migrants have someone immediate, such as close relatives, next-door neighbors, or friends who have left in search of earnings. It is no exaggeration to say that every family in these countries is affected by migration.

Before examining Central Asia's labor migration of the past 25 years, a brief review of the pre-independence years will shed light on present-day migration and the factors that led to it. In the early 1970s, Central Asia started

becoming a labor surplus region. The birthrates in Central Asia, Kazakhstan excepted, were the highest in the Soviet Union, twice the rate of the other republics.<sup>104</sup> Uzbekistan alone underwent a 38.1 percent increase in its rural population due to high birth rates and low migration from rural areas between the two censuses (1959 and 1970).<sup>105</sup> Despite growing population density, employment opportunities were not rising. Regardless, the Kremlin continued to encourage the migration of Slavs into Central Asia and in 1978 Pedro Ramet predicted that the situation in Central Asia would soon become explosive.<sup>106</sup>

Twenty-five years ago, the Central Asian economies, formerly a part of a large Soviet supply and demand wheel, came to grinding to a halt. Economic hardships coupled with labor oversupply, which had been brewing since the early 1970s, finally exploded, as Pedro Ramet had predicted, into labor migration. Natural resource poor Tajikistan, as well as Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which has the largest rural population, were the hardest hit. The situation in Tajikistan was aggravated further

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104 D. M. Heer, "The New Direction of Soviet Population Policy," paper delivered at the 1977 meeting of the Population Association of America, 1977.

105 V. Perevedentsev, "Migratsia naseleniya i ispolzovanie trudovykh resursov," in P. Grandstaff (ed.), "Recent Soviet Experience and Western 'Laws' of Population Migration," *International Migration Review*, vol. 9, no. 4, winter, 1975.

106 P. Ramet, "Migration and Nationality Policy in Soviet Central Asia," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, vol. 6, no. 1, fall/winter, 1978, pp. 79-101.

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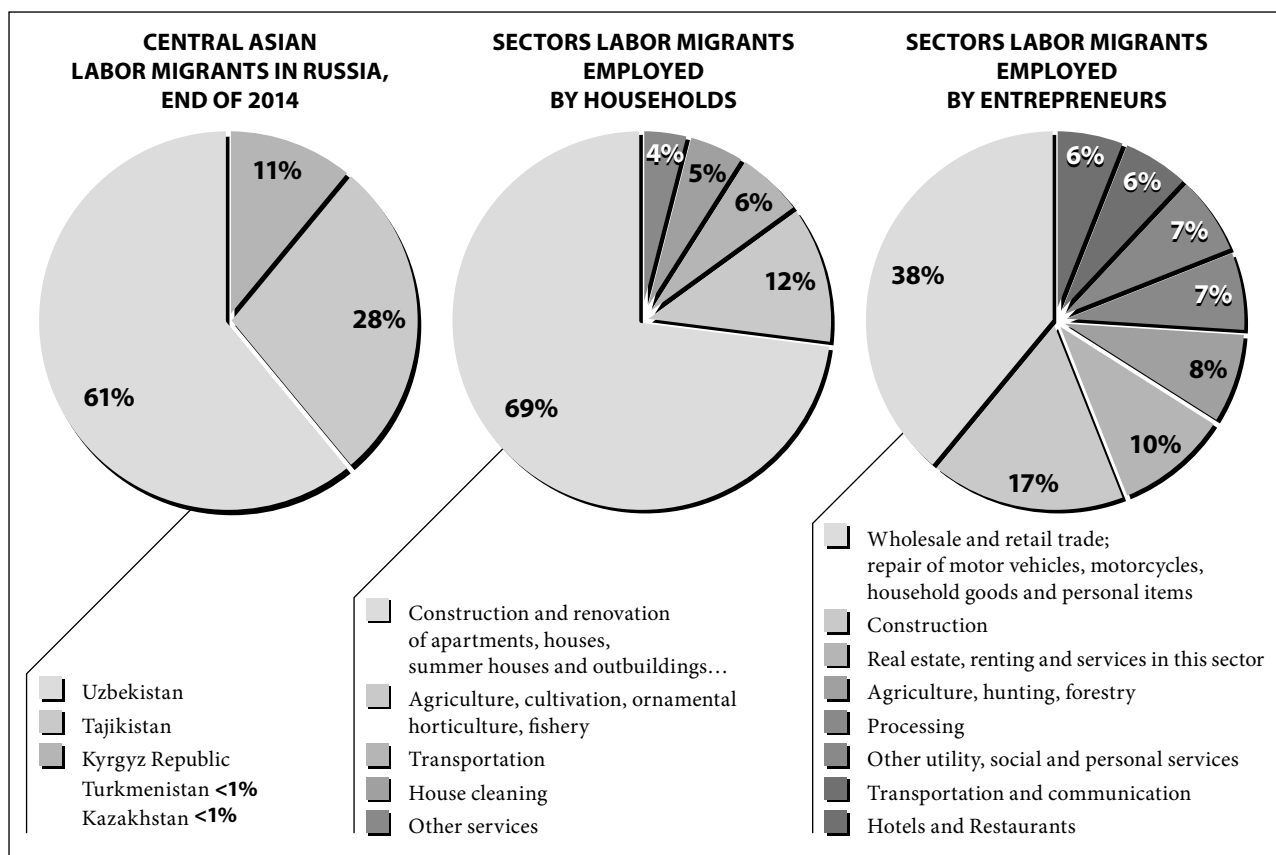
by the civil war from 1992-1997. Still, not until the early 2000s did large-scale labor migration from Central Asia to Russia start. From 2000 to 2010, the share of Central Asian migrants in Russia rose from 6.3 percent to 54.8 percent. By 2011, this migration peaked, reaching 71 percent: 45.0 percent from Uzbekistan, 19.3 from Tajikistan, and 6.6 from the Kyrgyzstan.<sup>107</sup>

Two factors created the conditions for an acceleration of migration: the first was high world oil prices from 2002-2008, which gave Russia's economy one of the biggest boosts in its history. Second, in 2001, for the first time since 1897, Russia entered a phase of the natural decline of its aging population.<sup>108</sup> The latter is ongoing. Indeed, forecasts for 2017-2031 predict that Russia's population will decrease by another 4.2 million.<sup>109</sup> In these times of population decline for Russia, migrants will form the

essential part, if not of the country's economic growth, then of maintaining the country's current levels.

Central Asian labor migrants working legally in Russia—those holding work permits to work for entrepreneurs and individuals—comprised mostly migrants from Uzbekistan in 2014. Uzbekistan was still by far the largest out-migrant country, accounting for 61 percent of all work permits for Central Asians, while Tajik citizens held 28 percent and Kyrgyz citizens 11 percent of them. Work permit holders from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan count for less than 1 percent: a total of 2,000 Kazakhs and 500 Turkmen.<sup>110</sup>

Remittances sent from Russia are social stabilizers for the three countries in the region. In 2015, Tajikistan migrants sent \$3 billion in remittances, Uzbekistan \$2.6 billion, and the Kyrgyz Republic \$1.7 billion.<sup>111</sup> Although



Source: *Trud i zanyatost' v Rossii 2015*. Sections 5.11 and 5.13; Section 5.19; Section 5.21

107 Data from the Russian Federal Migration Service in Vladimir Mukomel, "Labor Mobility of Migrants from CIS Countries in Russia," Central and Eastern European Migration Review, vol. 2, no. 2, December, 2013.

108 Russian Federal Statistical Service (Rosstat), "Demografia: chislennost naseleniya" July 8, 2016. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru), (accessed 29 December 2016).

109 Rosstat, "Demografia: demograficheskiy prognoz do 2030 goda." May 27, 2016. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru), (accessed 29 December 2016).

110 Rosstat, "Trud i zanyatost' v Rossii 2015," Sections 5.11 and 5.13. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru) (accessed 29 December 2016).

111 In 2015, migrants from Tajikistan sent more money than citizens of Uzbekistan even though by the end of 2014 Uzbekistanis were the largest work permit holders. This explains why more Uzbekistanis left Russia during 2015 than Tajikistanis, namely the devaluation of ruble and the slow-down of the Russian economy, and why fewer Uzbekistanis came to Russia in 2015. According to Rosstat, in 2014, 54,658 people arrived from Tajikistan, while in 2015, 47,638 did. The same data for Uzbekistan is 131,275 and 74,242 respectively ("Музыкация: Международная миграция," July 8, 2016. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru)) (accessed 29 December 2016).

these amounts are not as high as world's leading remittance-receiving countries, such as India (\$72.2 billion) or China (\$63.9 billion), in terms of share of GDP, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were the top two countries in the world with 41.7 and 30.3 percent, respectively. Uzbekistan's remittances as a share of GDP stood at 9 percent.<sup>112</sup>

Construction is by far the largest sector of employment for Central Asian migrants. The majority of labor migrants in Russia work in construction and agriculture when hired by households, and in wholesale and retail trade and construction when hired by entrepreneurs.<sup>113</sup> Given that Central Asians dominate the Russian labor market, it is safe to assume that those are the sectors where Central Asians work in the main. It is important to note that the number of migrants hired by households is almost four times higher than those hired by entrepreneurs (3.8 million and 940,000 respectively).<sup>114</sup>

### The voice of migrants in Russia

It is hard to talk about migrant voices in a country where no channels for those voices exist. Zinovy Zinik, a Russia-born novelist, stated recently in an interview that when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, the union countries gained their identity while Russia lost its own.<sup>115</sup> As Russia is still in search of its identity, forging enemies, labor migrants being one of them, is a strategy to unite the nation.

In Russia, non-Slavic labor migrants are portrayed as a threat to the country's integrity, nationhood, and security, even by high-level Russian public officials.<sup>116</sup> Russian politicians skillfully play on the ethnic and religious fears of local populations to gain and maintain power, while migrants are made the scapegoats of modern Russia. Anti-migratory rhetoric unites Russians

and maintains the population's loyalty to the sitting politicians.<sup>117</sup> In Gallup's "Global Barometer on Hope and Despair" survey only 19 percent of those surveyed in Russia expressed neutral or positive attitude toward foreign migrants, while 50 percent said they are unwelcome.<sup>118</sup> Under these conditions, migrants rarely attempt to protect their rights, let alone have their voices heard.

Despite these challenges, a number of organizations do work with and for migrants. Based on field work I conducted in Moscow, in April 2015, I classified these organizations into non-profit, semi-commercial, and for-profit, with some being a mixture.<sup>119</sup> These organizations mainly consult migrants, helping them to arrange work permits, registrations, recruitment, to resolve issues with law enforcement bodies, attempt to retrieve promised salaries from previous employers.<sup>120</sup> The activities of these organizations rarely go beyond solving migrants' bureaucratic issues, not only because migrants have so many of them, but mainly because of the securitized nature of Russian migration policy, which limits the activities of such organizations to assisting, informing, and controlling migrants.<sup>121</sup>

### The future of the Central Asian migration and diaspora in Russia

Two scenarios exist on Central Asian migration to Russia in the coming decade. The first posits that an increasing number of migrants are turning into long-term migrants (staying more than a year), and the latest figures on duration of stay backs this up.<sup>122</sup> However, there is little proof that most of those long-term migrants will become long-term residents. Besides, most migrants are at their peak working capacity now; they are motivated to work hard and save, but as they age,

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112 World Bank, *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016*.

113 Rosstat, "Trud i zanyatost' v Rossii 2015", Sections 5.19 and 5.21. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru)

114 Ibid., Sections 5.18 and 5.20. [www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru)

115 BBC Newshour, "Failed Soviet coup: 25 years on," August 17, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p044dmwm> (accessed 29 March 2017)

116 For example, political programs of opposition and pro-Kremlin candidates to the mayoral elections for Moscow city in the summer of 2013 were full of anti-migratory rhetoric. See S. Abashin, "Горячее лето" 2013: выборы и миграция," in Vladimir Mukomel (ed.) *Migranty, migrantofobii i migratsionnaya politika*, Moscow, Academia, 2014.

117 See, V. Mukomel, "Xenophobia as a Basis of Solidarity," *Russian Social Science Review*, vol. 56, no.4, July-August 2015.

118 M. Malihin, "Gallup: Rossiyanе menee terpimy k trudovym migrantam, chem evropeitsy i amerikantsy," *Vedomosti*, May 30, 2012. <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2012/0513/gazeta04.php>

119 I interviewed 32 organizations in total.

120 The picture would not be complete if I did not mention that numerous organizations and individuals purport to provide services to migrants, but instead deceive them by selling fraudulent documents or after securing initial payment never deliver the promised services.

121 M. Berg-Nordlie and O. Tkach, "You are Responsible for Your People?: The Role of Diaspora Leaders in the Governance of Immigrant Integration in Russia," *Demokratizatsiya*, Spring 2016

122 V. Mukomel, "Labor Mobility of Migrants from CIS Countries in Russia," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, December 2013 Administration on Migration Issues in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Information on foreign citizens in Russia by age and duration of stay", June 2015, [https://zvwm.mvd.pf/about/activity/stats/Statistics/Svedeniya\\_v\\_otnoshenii\\_inostrannih\\_grazhd](https://zvwm.mvd.pf/about/activity/stats/Statistics/Svedeniya_v_otnoshenii_inostrannih_grazhd), (accessed 29 December 2016).

they will eventually return home.<sup>123</sup> Whatever the case, there is no question that migrants from Central Asia's three republics will continue to come to Russia in the near future. The same circumstances that have motivated migrants in the past 25 years will be valid in the future as well: higher salaries, unemployment in the out-migrant countries, differing living standards and conditions, and the reducing workforce in Russia.<sup>124</sup>

It is early to talk about any change in the values of migrants, since only 15 years has passed since the migratory peak from the region. However, there is no question that migrants are exposed to European values while in Russia. But it is hard to judge whether, for example, migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will be willing to challenge those values once they return to their own societies. However, growing anti-migrant sentiments among Central Asian migrants, due to the

hardships and mistreatment that they receive in Russia, is something that might have negative implications for the future.

Overall, migration is a panacea for the region. Finding no work at home, people can leave in order to support their families. But the high share of remittances in the GDP of the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan make those countries highly dependent on fluctuations in Russian economy. Central Asian expatriates will continue to be a part of Russia's political and business lives. Their numbers and even significance might grow in the future. However, given that the Russian authorities limit the activities of diaspora organizations in upholding law and order for the migrants they represent, there is little evidence they will take up migrants' causes on a large scale and be able to change Russia's migration policies in the near future.

## Diasporas of Central Asia in Russia: Historical Perspectives and Modern Development Trends

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### **The development of the Central Asian diaspora in Russia**

The fall of the Soviet Union entailed fundamental socio-economic and political changes in practically all the countries of Central Asia, determining modern trends in the make-up and development of the Central Asian diaspora on Russian territory.

It would be untrue to claim that the phenomenon of national diasporas is an entirely new one for modern Russia. Being a multinational state, Russia has always held and developed political, social, and economic ties with the Central Asian states populated by Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks. These historical connections have very deep roots, which stem from times of the Great Silk Road and the works of Afanasy Nikitin,

and developed until the mid-nineteenth century, during the period of the Emirate of Bukhara, and the Khivinsky and Kokandsky khanates. Even in those years merchants, scholars, poets, and writers often visited Russia, and also took up permanent residence on its territory.<sup>125</sup> Later, during Soviet times, all the peoples of Central Asia became members of a big family inhabiting the Soviet Union for a period lasting 70 years. The unified structure of the state, the education system, science, and arts in the USSR all led to the appearance of a significant stratum of immigrants from Central Asian countries, namely, representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia, including: scholars, doctors, public figures from the arts and culture, who lived permanently on the territory of contemporary Russia. As an example we present data about the ethnic composition of the population of Moscow, both as the capital of the USSR and later of Russia.

According to the nationwide census of the USSR's population for 1989, inhabiting the city of Moscow alone were some 25,146 representatives of the Central Asian republics (0.23 percent of the total population of Moscow), comprising: 9,183 Uzbeks (0.1 percent), 8,225 Kazakhs (0.09 percent), 3,044 Kyrgyz (0.03 percent), 2,893 Tajiks (0.02 percent), and 1,801 Turkmen (0.02 percent).

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123 For more on the willingness of migrants to stay or leave, see the Commissioner for Human Rights for Moscow city and Center for Migration Research, *Zaschita prav moskvichei v usloviyakh massovoi migratii*, Moscow, 2014.

124 Mukomel, "Labor Mobility of Migrants from CIS Countries in Russia."

125 N. A. Khalfin, *Rossiia I khanstva Srednei Azii*. Moscow, Nauka, 1974, pp. 8-14.

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### Comparative data of the ethnic composition of Moscow

(according to the All-Union population census for 1989 and the Russia-wide population censuses for 2002 and 2010)

Nationality	Census data from 1989		Census data from 2002		Census data from 2010	
	Number	% of total number of residents	Number	% of total number of residents	Number	% of total number of residents
<b>All residents</b>	8875579	100%	10382754	100%	11503501	100%
<b>Uzbeks</b>	9183	0,1%	24312	0,23%	35595	0,31%
<b>Tajiks</b>	2893	0,03%	35385	0,34%	27280	0,24%
<b>Kyrgyz</b>	3044	0,03%	4102	0,04%	18736	0,16%
<b>Kazakhs</b>	8225	0,09%	7997	0,08%	9393	0,08%
<b>Turkmen</b>	1801	0,02%	3526	0,03%	2946	0,03%
<b>Total:</b>	25 146	0,23%	71220	0,72%	93950	0,82%

Table 1

From the beginning of the 1990s to the present day a “new wave” of the diaspora has taken place. During this time the number of Central Asian peoples living permanently in Moscow dramatically increased (see Table 1).

As is clear from the above data, the total number of representatives of native populations from Central Asia with permanent residence in Moscow increased from 25,146 people (0.23 percent) in 1989 to 93,950 people (0.82 percent) in 2010, or by 3.7 times (0.59 percent). Moreover, it is worth noting that in conjunction with the general significant rise of the population’s percentage, a less significant relative increase of Kazakhs occurred, passing from 8,225 people in 1989 to 9,393 people in 2010, thus causing its percentage to fall by 0.01 percent. This outcome is most likely connected to the fact that the socio-economic situation in Russia and Kazakhstan was very similar, so that Russia was less important for Kazakhs in terms of residence and the labor market than for other Central Asian countries. The largest increase can be noted among the Uzbek diaspora, the number of which increased from 9,183 people (0.1 percent) to 35,595 people (0.31 percent), or more than threefold. An analogous situation can be seen with the Tajik diaspora, which went from 2,893 (0.03 percent in 1989) to 27,280 people (0.24 percent in 2010), and with the Kyrgyz diaspora, which went from 3,044 (0.03 percent) to 18,736 people (0.16 percent).

Describing such an important and interesting social phenomenon as an “ethnic diaspora,” the major-

ity of researchers, demographers, and sociologists use a fairly wide interpretation of the meaning of the word diaspora. The most common thing in all their characterizations could be considered the definition given by the European commission for these purposes:

*The diaspora of a given country includes not only the citizens of that country living abroad, but also migrants who, while living abroad, obtained citizenship in their country of residence (often losing in the process their original citizenship) and the children of migrants born abroad, independent of citizenship, so long as they maintain some forms of commitment to and/or interest in the country of their origin or that of their parents. In some extreme cases, such as the Chinese diaspora, people may consider themselves to be part of a diaspora even if their families have lived in the other country for several generations.*<sup>126</sup>

Working from this definition, it is possible to note that the formation of Central Asian diasporas and the dynamics of their growth in Russia obeyed these aforementioned criteria. This goes for all citizens of each country living in Russia and the next two generations of immigrants who, likewise having become citizens of Russia, nonetheless in some cases hold onto their original citizenship and in everyday life maintain a loyalty to the traditions, customs, and language of their countries of birth.

In this regard, it should be emphasized that international agreements regulating relations between Russia

126 V. I. Mukomel, “Diaspora – partner po razvitiyu Tajikistana,” *International Organization of Migration*, Dushanbe, 2014, pp. 37-8.

and Central Asian countries have influenced the development of the diaspora. So, for example, factors that had a positive influence on the growth of the diaspora include the dual citizenship agreement between Russia and Tajikistan,<sup>127</sup> the introduction of amendments to the Law of Citizenship of the Russian Federation, according to which citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were able to get citizenship in the Russian Federation through a simplified procedure until 2008.

In addition, it is worth noting that many peculiarities concerning the development of the diaspora in Russia depended both upon established historical factors and legislative tenets operative in Russia. For example, in Russian law there is no procedural or institutional form for aggregating citizens as a “diaspora.” The general definition of this term does not comprise a legal norm. The majority of so-called diasporas actually acquire their legal form by creating civic associations in accordance with the law for civic associations, and are formed on territorial grounds. For example, the Saint Petersburg Society for Friendship of the Russian and Tajik Peoples or “Somonion,” the “Tajik Cultural Communal Center of Ryazan Province ‘Sino,’” the Tajik society “Middle Asia,” the interregional civic organization “Kyrgyz–Birimdigi,” and the regional civic organization “Kyrgyz House in Saint Petersburg,” all reflect more concrete issues and engage in regional activities, rather than issues pertaining to a general ethnic-cultural diaspora.

The most far-reaching civic organizations are from the Tajik and Kyrgyz “diasporas.” Currently the Russian Ministry of Justice has registered around 50 Tajik, and 40 Kyrgyz, NGOs. However, no kind of well-established structure for these organizations exists in Russia. They have no center, no common leadership structure, and no single goals, issues or principles of activity, since each of them is a separate legal entity.

Among representatives of the Tajik diaspora no clear understanding emerges of what the Tajik diaspora in Russia currently is and who comprises it. There is a widespread belief according to which the diaspora: 1) is made up of Tajiks who have permanently moved to Russia or live there as full-time residents; 2) does not include migrant workers; 3) includes citizens from Tajikistan regardless of ethnicity; 4) is the result of first-wave emigration; and 5) comprises mainly the Tajik elite.<sup>128</sup>

Another interesting and, in our view, promising organizational-legal form of work of the diaspora are the ethnic-cultural autonomies (NKA), which were cre-

ated in accordance with Federal Law No. 74-FZ “On ethnic-cultural autonomy” from June 17, 1996. According to this law, ethnic-cultural autonomy in the Russian Federation (further – ethnic-cultural autonomy) is a form of ethnic-cultural self-determination that represents a unified grouping of citizens of the Russian Federation, citizens who assign themselves to a particular ethnic group that comprises an ethnic minority on the territory in which they live. The basis of such groups is voluntary self-organization in order to independently decide questions concerning the maintaining of distinctiveness, of development of language, education, national culture, strengthening the unity of the Russian nation, harmony in interethnic relations, contributions to interfaith dialogue, and similarly the pursuit of activities directed at the social and cultural adaptation of immigrants. An ethnic-cultural autonomy is a type of non-governmental association.<sup>129</sup>

However, in our view this organizational form does not use ethnic communities actively enough. Thus, currently in Russia not more than ten NKAs exist from Central Asia at the regional level, and they have no coordinated offices at the federal level.

### **The voice of immigrants in Russia: their influence on politics and the economy**

The topic of immigration is pressing one in Russia today, and it has a bearing on both politics and the economy. In the Russian Federation, a whole collection of procedural and institutional apparatuses determines its main approaches and regulate its immigration policies. A key document is the Framework for State Immigration Policy of the Russian Federation through to 2025 (signed by the President of Russia on June 13, 2012), a document that outlines the states main approaches to this question.

The document underscores that:

*Immigration processes play a significant role in the socio-economic and demographic development of the Russian Federation. For the past two decades, growth in immigration has to a significant degree compensated for more than half of the natural losses of population. According the the calculations of the Federal Service for State Statistics on the prospective numbers for the population up to the year 2030 (high and middle variants), taking into consideration the results of the Russia-wide census and the dynamics of demographic processes of recent years, the total number of the population of the country at the beginning of 2025 will be from 142.8-145.6 million people.*

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127 Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan on regulating questions of dual citizenship, Moscow, September 7, 1995.

128 Mukomel', “Diaspora – partner po razvitiyu Tajikistana,” p. 39.

129 Federal Law of the Russian Federation “On ethnic-cultural autonomy” from 17.06.1996 No. 74-FZ.

The document further states that:

*Under current conditions, the migration of highly qualified workers remains an important source of human capital for economic growth and prosperity in receiving countries. It is no coincidence that competition to attract such workers occurs at the international scale. A key strategic problem concerns how to create the conditions and mechanisms to attract various in demand qualified and highly-qualified specialists, including entrepreneurs and investors, and above all on a long-term basis.*

And that:

*The creation of conditions for adapting and integrating immigrants is an important element of state immigration policy, so that their rights and freedoms can be protected, and social protections afforded them. Solving these problems is made harder by the unjustifiable difficulty of receiving permanent residency status in the Russian Federation, and also the lack of proper regulation of the legal status of foreign citizens.*

It further states:

*The lack of government programs for adapting and integrating migrants results in the isolation of immigrants from the receiving society and the rise in negative relations toward immigrants. All interested sides must get involved in organizing integration and acclimatization programs (the governments of the countries of origin of the immigrants, the immigrants themselves, business structures, and non-governmental organizations), and fully utilize the potential of the mass media.*

Another important mechanism for the integration of immigrants is the Council for Interethnic Relations under the President of the Russian Federation, an advisory body serving the head of state. The Council was formed on June 5, 2012, upon Putin's order of May 7, 2012, "On the Provision for Interethnic Accord." The Council is made up of representatives of the ethnic-cultural autonomies and other organizations of peoples of the Russian Federation, as well as figures from scholarly and expert communities, Russian government ministers, State Duma deputies, and others. They all take part in the work of the Council on a pro bono basis.<sup>130</sup>

In addition, analogous structures and community boards have been created and function on the regional level.

At the same time, in recent years, especially as immigrants started flowing from the Middle East into Europe, public rhetoric in the Russian press became increasingly negative and intolerant in relation to for-

eign citizens, immigrants in particular. For the Russian political elite, the immigration question in the country is a particularly sensitive one, and is much discussed in the political sphere, the mass media, and society at large. The various anti-immigrant slogans being banded about include: "immigrants are taking our jobs" and "immigrants are driving up crime in Russia."<sup>131</sup>

Immigrants the object of politics in Russia more than the subject. Concerning the many recent policy changes relating to immigrants in the country, it is possible to separate out the introduction of entrance to the country on a foreign passport (earlier it was enough to have a standard citizen passport), the requirement to take Russian language exams, and also tests covering the main points of Russian history and its legal system. In addition, the license system was made more complicated and punishments for breaking immigration laws became harsher.

These measures are not going to impact favorably upon immigrants. Nevertheless, by these actions, the relevant offices of the Russian Federation are attempting to link all these thousands of foreigners into some sort of legal grouping. Problems concerning immigrants, notably the lack of control over the immigration situation, became clear with the protests surrounding the events in the Moscow neighborhood of Biriulevo Zapadnoe in 2013. In essence, after this incident a crackdown of sorts commenced, a tightening of immigration legislation, and the other aforementioned aspects. A key result of this has been the introduction of a visa regime with Central Asian countries that export workforce to Russia.

There appears to be some dissonance between the values being declared, public rhetoric, and everyday reality. Immigrant petitions for assistance with non-compliance with existing legal acts have become more frequent, especially concerning the provision of medical services to immigrants, and xenophobia is on the rise.

The vast majority of migrant workers are, in fact, from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. And many political decisions are made both by Russia and these two countries about the immigrants who go to live in Russia.

A very important factor is the remittances sent by immigrants to their home countries. Remittances make up approximately 40 percent of these countries' GDP. Indeed, around 90 percent of all money that enters these countries from abroad comes from Russia.

These facts perhaps indicate that migrant workers have made the republics dependant on any changes that transpire in Russia. For example, in recent times we

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130 Statute of the council of interethnic relations under the President of the Russian Federation. Official site of the president: <http://www.kremlin.ru/structure/regulation/28> (accessed 29 March 2017).

131 See, V.I. Mukhomel' (ed.), *Migranty, migrantophobii i migratsionnaya politika*, Moscow, Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, Academia, 2014.

have seen Western sanctions contribute to the falling value of the ruble, which has meant that immigrants receive less money in dollar terms. Officials claim that the size of money transfers from Russia has fallen by more than 30 percent.

In a similar vein, the Russian government does not hide the fact that its budget received significant income in connection with the introduction of the license system from early 2015. The head of the Federal Migration Service of Russia, K.O. Romodanovsky, noted that income from immigrants in 2015 amounted to 29 billion rubles (or about 65 million USD), and the mayor of Moscow, S.S. Sobyanin, noted that tax on income from immigrants in Moscow in 2015 was greater than the taxes received from oil.<sup>132</sup>

One positive step in modern immigration trends is the provision of benefits and easing up of residency requirements for certain categories of immigrants thanks to the formation of the EEU. For example, when Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined this intergovernmental organization, migrant workers from these countries found themselves in a more privileged position than those from other countries, having had the requirement to get a license and pass a Russian language and history exam lifted. The most vulnerable categories of migrant workers today comprise the citizens of Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

### **The ten-year outlook for the Central Asian diaspora in Russia**

As aforementioned, migration will continue to be a major socio-economic trend, one that impacts crucially on Russia's economic and political reality. Unfortunately, the situation is such that in Russia, given the current dynamic of birth and death rates, natural growth, though positive between 2009-2013, will only remain such for a limited time and then only at a level very near zero.<sup>133</sup>

The outlook for population numbers in Russia depends on long-term trends that emerged back as far as WWII. All attempts to boost the birth rate and lower the mortality rate are necessary and unavoidable, but the results of these efforts do not come quickly and their effect is limited.<sup>134</sup>

It follows from this that in the coming decade maintaining population numbers in Russia will primarily depend upon increasing immigration. Therefore, the role

of the Central Asian diaspora in Russia can only grow stronger. It may be supposed that the composition of the diaspora will undergo a transformation. In particular, the core will take a stronger shape. This core includes: those from the "first wave" who are permanent residents of Russia, some of whom have citizenship. Then there is the "semi-periphery," that is, officially registered immigrants who have lived in Russia for less than a year, and also those who spend 10-11 months of the year there. The periphery itself is made up of seasonal migrant workers whose residence in Russia is limited to several months per year. These categories are extremely fluid, since members of the diaspora may go from the periphery to the semi-periphery by setting some long-term goals for themselves and attempting to extend their stay in Russia. With time, they may then become more integrated and enter the core of the diaspora.

The evolution of the diaspora can be seen by comparing its existence in Russia in the years after the fall of the USSR to now. Throughout this time, the diaspora has continued to grow in both quantity and quality. Many Central Asians are today climbing higher up the social ladder. They are playing a visible role in public life in Russia, and some have become the deputies of local legislative offices. We should also keep in mind that students from Central Asian countries in Russia number more than 10,000. Upon completing their education, a great number of these students seek to remain in Russia and tie their futures to it. In this way, as the years pass, the diaspora is continuing to grow with educated representatives from Central Asia.

A further point concerns the change in the Russians' reception of immigrants: if once upon a time, an ordinary Tajik man could only take a job as a handyman, a construction worker, a street sweeper, or the like, now increasingly many Tajiks have a good education, a good job, and a certain status in Russian society. Through their own efforts, these people are overturning the engrained idea of the "Tajik" for the better.

Describing the diaspora's profile, it is worth noting that the Tajik community in Russia is one of the largest in the country. Every year tens of thousands of Tajik citizens come to Russia. Over the last decade, but even more so in the 1990s, Russia was completely unfamiliar to migrants, who, when they arrived in the country would not know where to turn for friendly assistance or advice, and were almost completely cut off from their own culture. Today the situation has significantly

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132 "Sobyanin: prodaja patentov migrantam prinosit v budget bol'she dokhodov, chem neftyanye kompanii", TASS Agency, 29 January 2016 <http://tass.ru/moskva/2624123>. (accessed, 29 March 2017).

133 A report on changes in population under various forecasts, Federal Service of Statistics: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/population/demo/progn1.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/progn1.htm) (accessed 29 March 2017).

134 See, Ed. A.G. Vishnevsky (ed.), *The Population of Russia, 2009: Seventeenth annual demographic report*, Moscow, Publishing house of the Higher School of Economics, 2011.

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changed: in some provinces of Russia, active Tajik autonomies exist. In Moscow and the regions, dozens of civic organizations are active, helping migrants, first, by providing legal assistance, and later by supporting access to arts and culture.

It is also worth recalling the growing role being played by the official representatives of Central Asian embassies in Russia. These officials deal with a wide variety of the issues and problems that their citizens have living in Russia, and those of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have excelled in providing assistance. A whole host of civil unions and consultation offices offering help to migrant workers have been set up. Medical clinics have been opened for migrant workers where they can receive quality medical care for a moderate fee. The experience of Tajikistan is interesting: under the auspices of the embassy a Community Council operates in which the representatives of civic organizations and migrant worker unions can discuss vital problems with the Tajik ambassador and ways to solve them. A branch of the Tajik Ministry of Labor and Migration has also been opened in Russia. In this way, upon arriving from Tajikistan a person no longer needs to feel a totally foreign object in Russian society: legal help is available, one can take part in festivities that are celebrated in Tajikistan (for example, Navruz), read newspapers in one's native language, and so on.

As highlighted above, the role of an NKA is strongly undervalued. In our opinion, the development of the

diaspora should work to keep creating and broadening NKAs at both the regional and federal levels.

This path is promising for two reasons. First of all, to provide for the needs of ethnic-cultural autonomy, federal legislative offices and executive powers must set aside provisions in the federal budget, in accordance with statute 19, chapter 5 of the Federal Law "On ethnic-cultural autonomy." Likewise, in the budgets of the constituent territories of the Russian Federation.

Such provisions come in the form of tax benefits, fees, and loans, which provide significant support for the growth and development of the NKA. In the second place, the state views the NKA as the most highly organized level of the diaspora. NKA representatives are included in commissions for ethnic affairs in governments at the regional level, and at the federal level in the Commission for Ethnic Affairs headed by the President of Russia.

For reasons of space, it is difficult in this essay to shed much light on the complex and multifaceted question of the role of the diaspora in the context of migration. At the same time, the current work attempted to present the main trends characterizing the diaspora's modern condition and its prospects for development in Russia.

In conclusion, let us note that, given its geographical position, Russia's geopolitical role will compel it to move further toward developing into a multi-ethnic state and oblige it to consider all the complex questions of multi-ethnicity.

## The Uzbek Diaspora in the US

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The Uzbek diaspora living in the US comprises two main groups: early immigrants from Turkistan who left the country before the Soviet regime established its rule or during its early years; and newcomers who came to America after Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991. The first group of Uzbeks initially came to Turkey via Afghanistan and then ended up in the US 25 years ago. After Uzbekistan and its neighboring countries declared their independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the new republics faced many challenges and opportunities. A trend that began in early 1990s and has ongoing relevance is the large outflows of migrants to various countries.

As the doors of freedom and opportunities opened, many members of minority ethnic communi-

ties rushed to their historic homelands, such as Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Armenia. Among them was a significant number of Jewish people who emigrated to the US and Israel from Bukhara and other parts of the former Soviet Union. The rest of the Uzbek immigrants who emigrated to the US did so a few years later, since the major educational and economic ties with the US were not established yet, and lack of language skills and the long distance separating the countries made it rather difficult and impracticable. The first major group of Uzbek immigrants finally came to the US through Uzbek government sponsorships, as well as other governments' and private foundations' sponsorships, as students.

The green card lottery, or the US diversity program, started in 1986, and it created a new class of immigrants known as "diversity immigrants" from countries with historically low rates of immigration to the US. According to State Department statistics, in 2013, 2014, and 2015, a total of 1,387,420 people from Uzbekistan applied



for the diversity visa program,<sup>135</sup> and out of this number of applicants, 10473 entrants were selected.<sup>136</sup>

Today, a majority of the Uzbek immigrants living in the US have come through the diversity visa program. As the program does not require any language or professional skills, a majority of the program participants come without strong employment connections, and with inadequate language skills. That is why many of them stay in New York city area, as it is the first port of call and a historic hub for Uzbek communities in the US. Uzbek immigrants rely on the environment created by earlier generation of immigrants from post-Soviet countries in Brooklyn to find housing, jobs, and a guide to survival in the US.

Finding a job that requires no English language skills is possible in New York City. For example, the Uzbek immigrants work in restaurants and shops, the bosses of which are Russian speakers. Sometimes the customers are also Russian speakers.

Another area in which immigrants without language skills can get a job is giving care to the elderly. Having basic training and Russian language skills, many Uzbek immigrants qualify for care-giving positions. Some groups organize their own unofficial day care centers, which hire new immigrants, with whom many neighborhood families leave their kids. These babysitters or nannies get paid daily, but the rate is very low. A Uzbek woman, who takes care of 7 to 10 children from the ages of 2 to 12 will work for \$5 a day. This is part of the deal among the parents and caretakers: the caretaker does not offer extensive care; she is there just to be with the kids. Meanwhile, she may go shopping, do some cooking, or cleaning, and put the older kids in charge of the little ones. Such deals, common in Uzbekistan, work for the Uzbek immigrants in New York City as well. In fact, they are crucial for both sides, since the parents of the children cannot afford the high costs of day care and after school care, and relatively older women or women with young children find it hard to compete in the job market. On the other hand, the more language skills the Uzbek immigrants have, and the more educated they are, the more they tend to move to other big cities and states.

According to *Vatandosh*, a non-profit organization of Uzbeks in New York City area, more than 100,000 Uzbek immigrants live in New York city and neighboring towns and states.<sup>137</sup> People even call some parts of Brooklyn Little Samarkand. One can describe

the experience of walking around Coney Island in Brooklyn as like being in Uzbekistan because almost everyone walking on the streets speaks either Uzbek, Tajik, or Russian, all common languages for people from post-Soviet countries. Some Uzbeks joke that there are two groups of Uzbeks living in Brooklyn: Uzbeks and Samarkandis, because the number of immigrants in Brooklyn who come from Samarkand is said to be much greater than immigrants from other parts of Uzbekistan. Another reason for these separate identities is that a majority of people in Samarkand are ethnic Tajiks or Persians who speak Tajik. There is also a reported tension and struggle for influence between Tajiks from Samarkand and Uzbeks from Tashkent in New York City.

The number of lottery winners is much higher among people from Samarkand, as if Samarkand had been given a special status in the US lottery program. Some people say that the head of the diversity program in the US must be from Samarkand. The truth is that people in Samarkand are far more aware of the lottery, so that the participation rate among the region's residents is much higher than in other parts of the country. Many underground and semi-official business entities in Samarkand are exclusively devoted to registering people for the DV lottery and they operate a very sophisticated scheme. They gather people's information from various government offices such as schools, passport issuing offices, and send their personal information to the DV program unbeknownst to the people themselves. When someone wins the lottery, the registrants come to them and demand a certain sum of money as a fee, which is usually very high given that a permanent move to the US is at stake. Application service providers also go from door to door, and persuade people to submit applications. The service providers do not give confirmation numbers to the applicants. When results are announced, they check the results themselves online for the clients.

Another group of Uzbek immigrants who live in the US can be categorized as refugees or asylees. Large groups of Uzbek refugees live in Akron, in the Washington DC area, in St. Louis, in Arizona, in Seattle, and in other states.

The other Uzbek immigrants generally arrive for study, work, travel, and so on. A noticeable number of Uzbek professionals work in the Washington DC area for international organizations, for the private sector, for

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135 See, <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Diversity-Visa/DVStatistics/DVApplicantEntrantsbyCountry%202013-2015.pdf>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

136 See, <https://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/immigrate/diversity-visa/diversity-visa-program-statistics.html>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

137 See, [www.vatandosh.com](http://www.vatandosh.com)

non-profit organizations, and for the government. This group is relatively young and highly educated. Some of them were educated and immigrated through US-government supported programs such as the Fulbright, IREX, ACCELS, and some through now-defunct Uzbek government programs, such as Umid.

The first waves of post-independence immigration to the US sought out older Uzbeks and tried to get closer to them. These latter Uzbeks tend to live in the New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Chicago areas. Uzbeks have always been close to the Central Asian and former Soviet nationalities, since they share a knowledge of Russian and a common history. Such close ties may have helped them to find better jobs, get a better education and develop skills to adjust to the life in the US. Noting that Uzbeks are accustomed to living in closer social ties with relatives, friends, and neighbors in Uzbekistan, such ties may have helped to forge a sense of community and build relationships. Such may have nonetheless been harder to achieve during the first years of immigration.

Early efforts to establish a formal community and an organization to unite and serve the community's needs started in 2000s. Uzbek Initiative was the first organization of its kind and started by young Uzbek professionals. They started organizing events to bring together Uzbeks to celebrate holidays and network with other Uzbeks from distant states. However, the Initiative's activities suddenly stopped for reasons that are not clear. Although short lived, Uzbek Initiative left many people with nice memories of coming together with and getting to know others.

Soon after Uzbek Initiative, the first Uzbek language newspaper *Vatandosh* was founded in New York in 2011. The *Vatandosh* Newspaper wrote about Uzbek immigrant life in the US, providing necessary information about the community and immigrants, about Uzbek culture, values, and history. Published in New York City, it was distributed in areas around the city where Uzbeks gathered, such as Uzbek restaurants and grocery stores. The newspaper also sent mail subscriptions to different cities as well as to Uzbekistan and other foreign countries.

The newspaper was initially published in the Cyrillic alphabet, since it was the alphabet that was used in Uzbekistan when the majority of Uzbek immigrants in the US was living in Uzbekistan. Older Uzbeks, some of whom were helping to sponsor the newspaper, could not read in Cyrillic because either Latin or Arabic script was used when they lived in Turkistan. Because of these issues,

the newspaper tried different options to satisfy the various needs of the readers: publishing half of the newspaper in Cyrillic and half in Latin, or an entire issue in Cyrillic and the next in Latin, then again in Latin before switching again to Cyrillic. The newspaper stopped its paper publication due to financial difficulties in 2015. However, the newspaper's website continues to be one of the major Uzbek media outlets outside Uzbekistan. After *Vatandosh* the Uzbek-American Federation was founded in New York city. This Federation is a self-described Uzbek cultural and community center. The Uzbek-American Community Center serves as a venue for cultural, educational, sports, and religious activities, and promotes an interest in, and appreciation of, Uzbek cultural heritage, including language, customs, music, dance, arts, and sports. For example, the Center offers matrimonial services, free English-language courses, seminars on immigration regulations, tax, business, and so on.

Other Uzbek organizations also exist, such as the Uzbek-American Association of Chicago (UAAC),<sup>138</sup> the *Yurtdosh* Uzbek American Association (YUAA) in Pennsylvania,<sup>139</sup> the Seattle-Tashkent Sister City Association (STSCA), and regular but informal gatherings of Uzbeks in different states and towns.<sup>140</sup> The UAAC is known for its unitedness and for assisting new immigrants with their urgent needs, such as employment, housing, and building relationships. The STSCA was founded in 1973 and was the first Soviet-American Sister City to be established.

While Uzbek community organizations are popping up and increasing in number, they have not succeeded in uniting and organizing a large number of Uzbeks. The events and activities they offer seem often to be one-offs, and a sense of community has yet to be forged.

Although relatively few, some Uzbek immigrants do return to the homeland after living in the US for a while. Most returnees are also lottery winners, but perhaps lacked the skills to assimilate into the US, skills such as language, education, and cultural adaptability. Most of them are satisfied with the economic gain they have made and happy to return.

However, a majority of Uzbek immigrants stay in the US, even those who initially came with the intention of working, making money, and going back. Although many dream of returning to the homeland one day, the economic prospects, quality education, and political and religious freedoms in the US lead them to remain.

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138 <http://www.uzbekchicago.org/english/>

139 <http://yurtdoshusa.com/index.php/home>

140 <http://seattle-tashkent.org/about-us/>

PART IV  
NEW IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS  
THAT WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE

**Political Islam in the Central Asian Context:  
After 25 years of Independence**

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**Introduction**

Islam has been fundamental to the life of Central Asia for more than a millennium. The Central Asian region has, in its turn, played an invaluable role in Islamic history. Many Muslim scholars, spiritual leaders, and dynasties originated from this region and contributed much to the development of Islamic sciences, culture, and civilization.

The last three decades have been marked by the resurgence of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia after the long seventy-year destruction and suppression of religious institutions, educational venues, and Islamic consciousness by the Soviet regime. Inasmuch as this religious resurgence is having a considerable impact on the personal and social lives of Central Asian Muslims, the issue of political Islam has become one of the most debated and controversial in political and academic circles, as well as in the expert community and in the media.

To form a better picture of political Islam in Central Asian countries, it should be emphasized, first, that Central Asian Muslims differ considerably from other Muslim communities around the world by their seventy-year long, transformative Soviet experience. Second, it is a fact that the body of knowledge produced about political Islam in Central Asia, including its radical offshoots, is shaped by the proto-totalitarian, strongly statist, and secularist discourse of the post-Soviet ruling elites.

Although it seems implausible to deny the threat of radical political Islam in Central Asia, we cannot ignore the fact that this threat can be employed and

exacerbated by some power-holding groups to their own advantage. So, it is necessary to analyze political Islam and the Islamic resurgence in Central Asia in general in a more nuanced fashion. It seems often that “insurgent Islamism” or “creeping radicalism” have become catch-all expressions for conventional threats and fears in Central Asia. Security-obsessed assessments turn out to be not only stereotyped, but also misleading, since they prevent us from understanding the region’s real problems.<sup>141</sup>

Confusion about political Islam reigns. In this paper, I thus, first, define the notion of political Islam. Then, I give a brief overview of political Islam in Central Asia, including an analysis of the reasons for the heavy-handed crackdown on “early political Islam,” and the securitization of political Islam in Central Asia in general. Third, I describe the general situation in Central Asia, with a focus on Tajikistan. Finally, I touch upon the future prospects of political Islam in Central Asia and draw some optimistic scenarios.

**Political Islam: an overview of the notion**

Disagreement persists as to whether political Islam is an exclusively modern political phenomenon or is indebted to long-standing Islamic religious commitments.<sup>142</sup> In actual fact, both in theory and in practice, Islam has proven resistant to secularization.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, as Jocelyne Cesari notes, modernization did not lead to the privatization of religion in a Muslim context, but instead has led to the politicization of Islam. However, this is not because Islam does not separate religion and politics, as classic orientalist discourse argues (which, by the way, is historically false), but because Islamic tradition got integrated into modern nation-state building after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>144</sup>

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141 D. Lewis, “Understanding the Authoritarian State: Neopatrimonialism in Central Asia,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 19 (1), 2012, pp. 115-125: 125.

142 A. March, “Political Islam: Theory,” *Ann.Rev.Polit.Sc.* February, 2015.

143 S. Hamid, “What’s Different about Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia,” Aspen Institute, 1 July 2016, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/aspen-journal-of-ideas/whats-different-islam-malaysia-indonesia/>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

144 J. Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. xiii.

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Simply put, political Islam embraces a political approach to Islam. Conventionally, political Islam is defined as “a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives.”<sup>145</sup> On the one hand, a number of analysts emphasize the oppositional character of political Islam, which implies that political Islam is a religiously based political opposition to the state,<sup>146</sup> or else they “attempt to link religion and politics by way of resisting the government.” On the other hand, political Islam is conceptualized more broadly as a “nationalization of Islamic institutions and personnel under state ministries,” or as the “usage of Islamic references in political competition by both state actors and opponents.” It is noteworthy that the goals of political Islam, above all Islamizing domestic legislation, have been co-opted by some political regimes, for example in Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, Malaysia, or Indonesia.<sup>147</sup>

On the whole, political Islam is a complex phenomenon and should not be seen as a single movement or ideology. Islamist trends can range from left-leaning protest movements to ultraconservative ones aiming to have social control over morality. Also, political Islamist groups and trends vary in their attitudes towards existing political regimes, ranging from quietism and obedience to a desire to be a rival participant in politics and, in extreme cases, to engaging in militant violence. While some political Islamist groups are willing to work within “un-Islamic” political systems, some propagate radicalism. To sum up, “political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam an authoritative status in political life.”<sup>148</sup>

### **Overview of the tragic “advent” of political Islam in Central Asia: early political Islam**

An overview of political Islam is needed to indicate the onesided, and pejorative understandings of political Islam being spread in Central Asia. As John Esposito underlines, the West has a wrong and harmful tendency to treat “political Islam as a global threat similar to the way that Communism was perceived.”<sup>149</sup> A similar, and even more essentialist approach, is observable in post-

Soviet countries, particularly in the most authoritarian Central Asian countries, an approach that emerged after the tragic advent of political Islam in Uzbekistan.

In an atmosphere of severe political, economic, and social crises, coupled with an ideological and ideational vacuum caused by the collapse of the official ideology, many Central Asian Muslims began to perceive Islam as the only alternative to communism and other political systems or ideologies. “Early political Islam” emerged in some parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan under these circumstances at the beginning of 1990s. These societies were “culturally Muslim” but had been deprived of a formal Islamic education system and Islamic intellectual life for seventy years. However, political Islam, being either a popular (and not elitist) movement or an ideology, needs to have more or less solid intellectual and societal underpinnings. For example, in Turkey, Milli Gorus and its affiliated groups, and many other conservative Muslim groups; the numerous offshoots of the Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brotherhoods; the Pakistani group Jamaat-i Islami, and many others, have all moulded Muslim public opinion in their countries for decades. On the contrary, post-Soviet Central Asia was post-atheistic. Furthermore, Central Asian Muslims’ very own lifeworlds could be characterized after the seven-decades of Sovietism as “amnesiac.” Lost knowledge, a result of “70-long-Soviet-years,” plays an important role in people’s reflections on Islam—or, more precisely, the “Muslimness” of society.<sup>150</sup> It would thus be more accurate to name the phenomenon of the “advent” of political Islam in Central Asia in the early 1990s as early political Islam.

Early political Islam can be conceptualized as a response to the legitimation crisis of the incumbent regimes. The deteriorating economic situation, corruption, the different speeds of regional development, and the small number of representatives from the Fergana region in the upper echelons of power, could induce some groups of believers to raise their voices against these injustices by appealing to Islamist slogans. However, it appears that many people followed the Islamist appeal out of emotion even without knowing the basic postulates of Islam.<sup>151</sup> In general, early political Islam was driven by the euphoria that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet system. Specifically, Muslim activ-

145 G. Denoëux, “The Forgotten swamp: navigating political Islam,” *Middle East Policy*, June, 2002, p.61.

146 Cesari, p. xiii.

147 March, “Political Islam.”

148 Ibid.

149 J. Esposito, “Islamists and US Foreign Policy,” *ISIM Review*, 2006, pp. 6-7.

150 M.E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, New York, Routledge, 2007, p. 2.

151 Personal communication with the witnesses of the events living abroad.

ists and organizations were heavily influenced by the atmosphere of politicization during the late Soviet years and the first years of independence. Even the Islamic concept of 'daw'a' (mission) "does not necessarily embrace the propaganda of Islam or Islamic values (...) the concept was used to convey an even more political message."<sup>152</sup>

We cannot overlook the impact of the power struggle between competing regional clans (clan politics). Noteworthy is the fact that the Fergana region in Uzbekistan became a stronghold also for the secular oppositional Birlik party.

Although a combination of factors ignited political Islam within the dominant oppositional discourse in the Fergana regions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, we argue that the main reason it emerged was the political crisis, or, at least, the incumbent regime's lack of legitimation, which can be conceptualized as a "weakness of state." But the oppositional political Islam of the 1990s was geographically very limited. So, arguments about a sweeping political Islam or a creeping Islamic revolution, even applied to the local level in the Fergana region, are highly speculative.

### **Securitizing political Islam and "uncontrollable Islams"**

The effects of early political Islam in the 1990s featured a "gross mishandling" and "overreaction" of the incumbent Uzbek administration to the geographically limited outburst of oppositional political Islam. The costs include stalled democratization in Uzbekistan, and even a reversal of the political processes initiated during perestroika. The result is a host of rebranded totalitarian practices (on the other hand, the mistakes of local Muslim leaders, particularly in the most restive Namangan region, exacerbated the fears of the secular elites<sup>153</sup> and ignored the realities of the post-Soviet and post-atheistic societies, and should thus not be overlooked). Overreaction to oppositional political Islam eventually led to an overall "securitization" (the process of threat construction, i.e., of presenting an

issue or phenomenon that does not necessarily belong to a security realm in security terms, and even as an "existential threat"<sup>154</sup>) of political Islam and all "Islams that the state cannot control." Opposition, above all religious, was identified as a "criminal conspiracy," as "imported," and as aiming to destabilize the country and whole region.<sup>155</sup>

In the end a policy against all "non-approved" religious, social, and political doctrines was adopted. Even the state's role in refereeing became one of the most unpredictable and frustrating. For example, the shift from being "government-approved" to "terrorist" can happen shockingly quickly, and often takes a religious scholar or his followers by surprise.<sup>156</sup>

The eruption of oppositional early political Islam in the Fergana region appears to determine all future directions of the development of Islam and state in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Also it has contributed to regional instability and granted added legitimacy to proponents of political de-liberalization in the region's countries.

Due to their weaknesses, all the political regimes in Central Asian countries are inclined toward securitization, essentially the securitization of ethnic and religious-based political groups. Local elites often regard their own security as national. On the whole, securitization is a by-product of the competition for power, and may be invoked by political and social groups or institutions possessing power.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, it is understandable that in authoritarian regimes incumbent politicians can "craft and enforce restrictions on religious groups to diminish political competition—including from ideological challengers—in order to preserve their own political power. Where politicians fear that some groups will either be able to form a credible opposition to their rule or delegitimize it, they can repress those groups."<sup>158</sup>

Nonetheless, it seems implausible to categorize all five Central Asian states in the same manner. Incumbent political regimes in Central Asia represent different degrees of authoritarianism and paternalism. It would be more accurate to describe the political models on a scale going from mildly or mixed authoritarian to

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152 M. B. Olcott, *Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia*, Carnegie Papers, Number 77, 2007, p.28.

153 Personal communications with the anonymous witnesses living abroad.

154 B. Buzan and L. Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

155 A. Ilkhamov, "Uzbek Islamism: Imported Ideology or Grassroots Movement?", *Middle East Report*, 2001 winter, no. 221, pp. 40-6.

156 N. Tucker, "Domestic Shapers of Eurasia's Islamic Futures" in *Thomas W. Simons Jr. (ed.), Islam in Eurasia*, Davis Centre, Harvard University, 2015, pp. 43-76: 54.

157 M. Omelicheva, "Islam in Kazakhstan: a survey of contemporary trends and sources of securitization," *Central Asian Survey*, 30 (2) 2011, pp. 243-56: 250.

158 A. Sarkissian, "Government Regulation of Religion and Authoritarian Durability in Post-Communist Eurasia," *Conference Proceedings, International Symposium Post-Atheism: Religion and Society in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, Melikian Center, Arizona State University, 7-9 February 2013, p.2.

supreme authoritarian or even “police state” (the so-called Mukhabarat state).<sup>159</sup>

We can talk about the obvious path-dependency in the state-religion relationship in Uzbekistan and particularly in Turkmenistan, while relative newness and dynamism can be observed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

### **The myth of (creeping radical) political Islam and repressive politics**

First, the equation of Islamism (which in essence means political Islam) with religious radicalism, let alone with terrorism, is an aberration, since Islamism is a “range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies,”<sup>160</sup> although it is a kind of instrumentalization of Islamic teachings for political goals.

Second, oppositional political Islam in Central Asia has been conditioned by factors such as the crisis of legitimacy and the “weak state,” which is to say the weak governmental capacity of the Central Asian states in policy, technical, and financial terms.<sup>161</sup>

Third, while it is implausible to deny the threat of radical political Islam, the fact that radical Islamism may be generated, employed, and exacerbated by political groupings for their own gain cannot be ignored. In particular we cannot discount the role of clan politics if we want to understand the broader political picture in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In other words, we cannot help but wonder, “Is there a nexus between the emergence of radical political Islam and power struggles (and other political games) in Central Asian countries?”

Fourth, in exploring radical political Islam in Central Asia the existence of a particular nexus between politics and criminal underground should not be overlooked. Particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, we can speculate about the existence of a nexus between some political groupings and an organized criminal underground essentially involved in drug-trafficking.

Fifth, it would be wrong to think that the hearts and minds of a majority of Central Asian Muslims are pre-occupied with political Islam of any variety. The claims about “creeping Islamism” being embraced by a majority of Central Asians are speculative. Establishing a so-called Islamic regime is not on the agenda even of the great majority of religiously motivated Central Asian

Muslims, who try to live their own version of Islam, which, in the main, is entirely dissociated from politics.

Sixth, the Muslimness of the great majority of Central Asian Muslims is cultural and individualized. It manifests itself mainly in personal life and goes hand-in-hand with the secular mindset, which rejects making Islamism the aim of a majority of Central Asian Muslims.

Only a few transnational Islamist organizations, like Hizbu-t Tahrir, promote political aims, Adepts of such organizations can be found in Central Asia (this organization operates like a “socialist international,” since one of its primary concerns is the lack of social justice and solidarity among “exploited and colonized Muslims,” a lack that can be eliminated, they claim, by creating a global “Caliphate”). However, Hizbu-t Tahrir is weakly anchored in the region’s countries, because it has been made into bogeyman.

Not only radical, but also peaceful, Islamist groups are still fringe in Central Asia, and organizations with Islamist agendas are very marginal and strictly localized.

Tajikistan is the only country in the region that has experienced a civil war driven largely by a rivalry between region-based clans, a conflict that has been wrongly presented as one between secularists and Islamists. Although Tajikistan was also the only post-Soviet country where political Islam could legally exist in the form of Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), in recent years the government has taken a heavy-handed approach to ensure its hegemony, removing political rivals and banning this party, beginning with the persecution of its leadership. The IRP is seen as the main opposition to the ruling regime. Moreover, in the years leading to its closure, the party became a platform for different anti-governmental forces: various community leaders, and people of different political convictions (such as socialists and liberals) all joined the party. This de-facto party thus found itself in the position of representing various anti-governmental, opposition-minded groups. However, this diversity became an obstacle to developing its own properly post-Islamist policy, to going beyond mere criticism of the government. Ultimately, shutting down the IRP may be counterproductive for Tajikistan’s stability.<sup>162</sup>

The heavy-handed responses to oppositional political Islam in Uzbekistan (and, in recent years, in Tajikistan), has contributed to forming a vicious circle

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159 The “surveillance state” named after the infamous intelligence services of the oppressive regimes of Asad’s Syria and Hussein’s Iraq.

160 March, “Political Islam.”

161 For more on these concepts see, E. Araral, R. Pelizzo, A. Burkhanov, S. Janenova, and N. Collins, “Capacity and Autonomy: An Exploration of Fukuyama’s Governance Hypothesis,” *Varieties of Governance*, G. Capano et al, (eds), New York, Palgrave, 2015, pp.173-89.

162 Personal communication with a Tajik analyst living in the USA.

of social frustration, grievances, weak state legitimacy, and the popularity of, at best, unofficial, and, at worst, radical anti-governmental groups and ideas. In this context, it can be argued that, where there are no systematic state efforts to solve issues of social and economic injustice, combat poverty, and empower people, including religious Muslims, through participation, then oppositional, and even radical and militant, political Islam is able to emerge as an important alternative discourse because of its appeal to disfranchised groups.<sup>163</sup>

It can be seen that the states most repressive of independent Islam, including political Islam, are also the weakest in terms of governmental capacity. For example, in the Central Asian region both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have relatively good governmental capability, and also have relatively restrained policies towards religious communities, whereas Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, both of which have adopted extremely repressive and restrictive policies, have very limited governmental capabilities.<sup>164</sup>

If the state attempts to control the religious beliefs of its citizens it will eventually stall the democratization process and create a country containing not free citizens but “faceless subjects.” The prioritization of repressive methods not only deepens security problems in the region but inevitably leads to the further solidification of paternalistic regimes, and the institutionalization of authoritarian or, at least, anti-liberal practices. If some countries in the region had not adopted harsh methods, reminiscent of the totalitarian past, for fighting radical political Islam and terrorism, and had not indulged in the overt and systematic violation of basic human rights and the securitizing of “non-approved” social, religious, or opposition political groups, the political and psychological atmosphere in Central Asia would be far more conducive to developing human-oriented, pluralistic political systems.

### **Religious Muslims’ voices and fighting radicalism**

Although political Islam is a complex phenomenon unable to be reduced to a single movement or ideology, it cannot represent the public visibility of religious Muslims, simply because the public sphere is wider than the political sphere. Nonetheless, and quite understandably, in post-atheistic Central Asia, although some differences can be observed among the five states, religion still plays a marginal role in the public sphere (except for some ceremonial events and programs), to say nothing of political Islam. Basically, the post-Soviet Central

Asian elites are the products of their own contexts, and deeply wary about any serious public manifestation of some “uncontrollable” Islam.

In general, the situations of Muslims in Central Asia are diverse and dynamic. Nonetheless we can use the path-dependency approach to bolster our arguments concerning the development of political Islam in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The path-dependency approach makes history (the Soviet experience) extremely important for understandings of the problems to emerge out of the Islamic revival in these countries. However, being open to the outside world, the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (the only country in which political Islam has been legal until recently) may be not “inherently” path-dependent; they are transforming incrementally and this change will continue over time.

On the whole, all Central Asian countries face growing religious demands from their Muslim citizens. This phenomenon may lead to a redefining of the public sphere, social relations, and, perhaps in the long term, the political boundaries in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. By contrast, in an age in which a “post-secular” world is forming, it would be anachronistic of the Central Asian ruling elites not to allow religion into the public sphere.

To have a peaceful/constructive political Islam in Central Asia, it is essential to have strong state institutions, or, failing that, the pluralistic Islamic understandings that are popular with mainstream Muslim communities. For example, while Indonesia may not have strong state institutions, the country has a strong pluralistic conception of Islam, as exemplified by the multi-million strong Muhammadiyah and Nadhat-ul Ulema movements. By developing Islamic activism and encouraging Muslim actors in wider civil society, the Central Asian states can successfully diminish the role of radical groups.

Only political and religious pluralism combined with the rule of law can ultimately curb radical political Islam. In other words, Central Asian countries can only be successful in the long run if they develop strong political and legal institutions, a diversified social fabric, institutionalize the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

### **Future prospects concerning political Islam in Central Asia**

The Central Asian elites, particularly in the most authoritarian states, are extremely wary of political Islam and uncontrollable religious movements in general, even though they are proud of being Mus-

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163 This concerns also the Western regions of Kazakhstan, the most economically advanced Central Asian country.

164 See, for example, E. Araral et al.

lims. It thus seems that, in the short- and mid-term, classic political Islam will not be represented in the political life of the countries. The abortive Tajik experience indicates this wariness of the Central Asian regimes. Nonetheless, if power is handed down peacefully and new cadres come to power in Central Asia, some changes can be expected concerning the systemic visibility of Islam in the public sphere, even of some aspects of political Islam.

Two main scenarios can be envisaged concerning Islam's future in the public sphere in Central Asia.

(1) "Muslim politics" instead of classic Political Islam. A Muslim politics means a "politics conducted by pious Muslims who consciously seek to reflect their Islamic values and principles without pursuing the idea of an Islamic state." The first terms of the Turkish AKP and especially the Nahda Party in Tunisia have demonstrated the possibility of having a Muslim politics that is compatible both with liberalism and integration into Western institutions. (However, the fiasco of the Turkish AKP since 2013 shows the difficulty of transforming Islamism into a conservative democracy, or of converting Islamists into conservative democrats). The notion of Muslim politics does not threaten the secular underpinnings of many Muslim-majority countries, and provides a good alternative to political Islam.<sup>165</sup> After all, the primary Islamic sources neither prioritize the establishing of an Islamic state, nor do they offer a certain type or detailed structure of any particular "Islamic" political system or regime. Basically, the Quran talks about ants, spiders, and embryo formation but makes no mention of an Islamic state.

(2) The Central Asian elites and populations can draw on good examples outside of the Middle East in Malaysia and Indonesia. These latter feature not only democracy, pluralism, and tolerance but significantly more Islamic ordinances than Egypt, Morocco, or Turkey. As Shadi Hamid reminds us, "Islam might have still been exceptional, but the political system is more interested in accommodating this reality than in suppressing it." South-East Asian Muslim societies provide positive examples that suggest that Islamism (political Islam) as such is not necessarily about Islamists, but is about a broader population, one open to Islam,<sup>166</sup> and its being given a central role in the public sphere (a kind of reasonable and pluralistic political Islam in a relatively liberal and pluralist political system). However, this second scenario seems a rather distant one given the post-

atheistic nature of Central Asian societies. Nonetheless, it can be argued that political Islam in particular, and "independent Islams" in general, can find a niche in a legal setting in the future provided that strong state institutions can be built in Central Asia.

### Conclusion

An overstatement of, and preoccupation with, the role of an inherently marginal political Islam in a post-Soviet context is an oversimplification, if not a misperception, of the reasons for the emergence and rise of religious radicalism and political violence in Central Asia. Moreover, security-obsessed and alarmist scenarios, with an apparent emphasis on the threats of radical political Islam, may serve to legitimize the securitization of religious awakening, the diversification of social life, and the adoption of repressive policies in post-Soviet realities. By and large, the Islamic revival in Central Asia seems to have been misleadingly framed as inherently radical and a myth has been generated about post-Soviet Muslim radicalization in Central Asia.<sup>167</sup> Radical political Islam is marginal and geographically limited in the region. However, as little opportunity exists for social, economic, and political transformations in the existing system, then, given the Muslim-majority context, oppositional, not to mention radical and militant, political Islam could come to appear to disenfranchised groups as an alternative to this system.

Critical analysis of the threat of political Islam in Central Asia shows that a key feature is its endeavoring to help find solutions for the real needs of the majority of ordinary people (as such the demands and expectations of Central Asian people are not fundamentally different from those of people living in the West and other countries), and particularly of people living under authoritarian regimes, people who have lost so many freedoms and rights, future hopes and human resources over the last two decades in the name of the fight against radical Islamism.

Central Asian Muslim communities need to get acquainted with progressive and reformist Muslim discourses (such as those developed by El-Fadl, Amina Wadud, A. an-Na'im, and others). Such discourses can alleviate the suspicions of the secular elites and help Muslim activists to focus on their countries' real problems, which are the lack of meritocracy, of access to global knowledge and technology, and a need for the systemic protection of human rights and the environment.

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165 A. Kuru, *Muslim Politics Without an "Islamic" State*, Policy Briefings, Brookings Doha Center, 2013, p.2.

166 Hamid.

167 J. Heathershaw and D. Montgomery, *The Myth of Post Soviet Muslim Radicalization in Central Asia*, November 2014, Chatham House <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/myth-post-soviet-muslim-radicalization-central-asian-republics> (last accessed 26.03.2017).



# Eurasianism in Kyrgyzstan

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## **Eurasian integration and Eurasian ideology and youth**

Any dialogue or analysis of the theme “Eurasianism” confronts the problem of understanding and interpreting the very term. Just like “freedom,” “democracy,” and a host of other concepts actively used in social-propaganda rhetoric, the concept of Eurasianism can be interpreted through a wide spectrum of approaches, sometimes polar opposite in nature.

Among experts, the question of Eurasian integration was introduced in the early 1990s by the president of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbaev. This was an attempt to connect, by means of a convenient ideological concept, that contradictory reality that existed at the beginning of the 1990s in the post-Soviet space: the breakdown of economic ties, the growth of nationalism, nation-building (and in Kazakhstan at that moment almost 50 percent of the country was ethnically “Russian”), the necessity of structuring a whole spectrum of relations with the Russian Federation from economic and trade issues to border security. But that idea (as with its political analogue, the CIS) found no traction among the Russian elites, distracted as they were along with all the other post-Soviet elites with assimilating sovereignty and the off-shoring of the elite.

The Russian elites returned to the idea of Eurasian economic integration after the 2008 crisis, which coincided with a host of factors in the post-Soviet space:

■ For a complex assemblage of reasons, one of the elite Russian clans began to bet on traditional values, patriotic rhetoric, and positioning themselves against the “West.”

■ The growth of resource-based economies (Kazakhstan, Russia) due to the sale of timber, oil, gas, and metals on the global market. This has occurred since the early 2000s, permitting welfare state support in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as the transfer of migrant workers (from the economies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia), and market growth in commodities (Belarus, Uzbekistan). But after the 2008 crisis, and particularly as it began a 25-year cycle of falling prices of extractive resources (c. 2013-14), the question arose of the effectiveness of economies that are marked by high

levels of corruption, low technological advancement, and expensive credit.

The way out of this situation appeared to be the activation of a whole complex of arrangements concerning the common market, the lowering of mutual barriers, the introduction of unified standards, and so on. At this time the term “Eurasian” came into broad use, a term that sooner connoted a set of features pertaining to a given space or geography than a real philosophical-political construct.

Setting aside the Chinese (Silk Road) and Turkish (pan-Turkism) projects, which often use the adjective “Eurasian” in their own cultural, educational, and economic plans on Central Asian territory, then we are left with three Russian-based and one Kazakhstani concept. The essence of Kazakhstani Eurasianism consists in an attempt to show historical commonality with the countries to the south (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) and the north (Russia). This is objectively unavoidable, considering the country’s vastness, coupled with its low population density and its desire to be a transit and trade center. On the other hand, it designates its desire to play the role of regional leader.

Russian “Eurasianism,” which one way or another gets passed onto Central Asia, has dozens of definitions, values bases, and points of view. Bar the most marginal, they all come under three concepts:

1) The neo-Eurasianism of Alexander Dugin. This conception enjoys a certain scandalous infamy in Kazakhstan, but is almost unknown in other countries of Central Asian. Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism is an ideological doctrine, in which he synthesizes the classical Eurasianism of the 1920s, European traditionalism, and elements of the new-right discourse. The main values of Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism are hierarchy, order, social justice, sacredness, communalism, the opposition of civilizations of the land and of the sea, or Eurasianism and Atlantism. The main ideological competitor of this Eurasianism he refers to as liberalism. From the mid-2000s, this teaching gradually became a key trend in post-Soviet Russia’s patriotic self-perception.

2) “Young Eurasia,” a youth social movement created in 2010 and headed by Yuri Konfer. This movement conflicted with that of Dugin, who refused to recognize the movement, considering it empty and meaningless. A small number of students and young specialists in many large cities in the CIS comprised the base of this movement. Ideologically it is extremely poor, it lacks financing, and its whole idea is that in order to further Eurasian economic integration, young leaders are required who can carry on a dialogue with all countries. Clubs of this

organization exist in Central Asian countries, but they meet rarely and mostly only through video conferences.

3) Techno-Eurasianism, an applied, though unarticulated, concept held by post-Soviet technocrats, who follow the dictates of Realpolitik. Its main premises are: Realpolitik, power as the responsibility of political elites for the living standards of its citizens; renewed industrialization for CIS countries on the basis of the 6th technology revolution; that CIS countries do not possess the sovereignty they need for self-determination; that for survival an economic macro-region needs to be created based on the EEU; and that socialism needs to be rethought as an economic base. Some of the more notable representatives include, among economists, S. Glaziev, M. Deliagin, M. Khazin, and, among political scientists, M. Leontiev and S. Uralov. In one way or another some of the technical elites of Central Asian countries listen to these postulates on the strength of their rationality.

None of these tendencies are officially supported by the Russian elites. In one way or another, all these concepts conflict with the oligarchic system of power, and the media's ad hoc determining of the story of the day. For broad sections of Central Asian youths, there is no understanding of the aforementioned concepts, which are represented in the media, as they are used to describe Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan's youth sees "Eurasianism" as something related to Russian politics (which, depending on the context, is seen as both positive and negative).

### **Challenges in promoting Eurasianism**

If we look at Eurasian economic integration, then after achieving tangible results (low base effect) upon the removal of customs barriers between Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Russia, the economy encountered the political reality of post-Soviet countries. Now, a host of national elites are looking at Eurasian economic integration as a chance to remain in power by improving the economic situation (by means of economic value chains, increasing the size of the market, grants and credits from Russia) but without changing anything else. This devalues the very idea of Eurasian ideology and its attractiveness. Effective integration should be based only on new principles and images of the future, ones in which tribalism, corruption, and bureaucratic excesses significantly recede, and freedoms for conducting business, the independence of the courts, progressive tax policies, and social protections for citizens, are significantly improved.

Therefore, the problem of the national elites' interest in Eurasian integration is the weak link in the entire integration process. The elites by definition are able to formulate a public opinion, and even oppose the objec-

tive need and economic prudence of integration, if it impacts their interests or ability to control resources (money flows, legal cover for business, distribution of government budgets, ability to privatize government holdings, and the informal right to partial or complete immunity from legal prosecution).

The main question concerning the national elites and Eurasian integration is thus the question of how to motivate them to formulate a national plan.

Though significant differences emerge in the organization of the elites in various post-Soviet countries, the key aspect here is access to resources (government property, the budget, economic advantages). In many countries we observe political stability where several thousands (or tens of thousands) of representatives of the elite can reach a consensus regarding "fair" access to resources. Take the examples of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

Against the backdrop of a modern world moving headlong toward peace between economic-political macro-regions, the Eurasian space is faced with a choice: either to turn into an arena of conflict between external projects (both "global" and "regional"), or else move towards economic and military-political integration, allowing for a unification of powers for the common defence of their economic, political, and cultural sovereignty. From this point of view, Eurasian integration remains the only way for the post-Soviet states to answer the historic challenge of how to preserve, in a new, extremely complicated international environment, both the prospects for independent development and control of resources to be able to provide the population as a whole and not just the elites with a high standard of living.

### **A future for the EEU**

As with any integration project, the EEU is an outcome of decades of mutual approval of economic interests, of framing standards, and so on. As the European Union shows, the process of delegating economic powers (not to mention political ones) is always an involuntary process, not a democratic one, in the sense that decisions are made contrary to the opinion of the people by club and corporate elites, who for decades have determined daily business dealings, formed a single information field, and cultivated bureaucracy. The EEU has not reached its full potential: it lacks a united market of capital, goods, and services. The labor market is almost completely formed. The next ten years will be decisive for the Union, but without any change to the social-legal relations in the leading economies of the Union no great impact can be expected. Personalized political systems that rely on an offshore oligarchy and corrupt bureaucracy cannot create an economy based on a new technological mode, but without such

an economy the region will not get enough surplus value from added-value chains.

Entering the EEU provides Kyrgyzstan with a socio-economic basis to preserve political stability, since the transfer of migrant workers was a plus for the country's budget. But further economic development connected with industrialization, attracting investment, and technologizing agriculture, directly depends on changes to the political system, including: greater objectivity in the courts, improved law enforcement, more legal awareness among citizens, and improved effectiveness from government offices. Though entering the EEU has some objective advantages for the participating republics, it was initiated and brought to life by the political will of acting president A. Atambaev, who received the necessary financial resources from Russia, thus helping to secure the budget and institute mechanisms in Kyrgyzstan that strengthened Atambaev's power. If Russia ever withdraws its financial support and/or the elites in power in Kyrgyzstan were to change, the question of exiting the EEU might arise. But were that to happen, China would step in to support Kyrgyzstan's participation in the EEU, since for the successful implementation of projects under the

auspices of the Economic Belt of the Silk Road requires a cohesive customs and economic territory (EEU).

It is easier and faster to conduct dialogue at the level of the Eurasian Economic Commission than with each country separately. Considering Kyrgyzstan's increasing dependence on Chinese infrastructure credits (\$1,394 billion ExIm Bank of China in May of 2016), projects (oil refineries, mineral assets, businesses working in the EEU market), and grants, Kyrgyz politicians will take the "wishes" of their Chinese colleagues very seriously.

In years to come, the perception of "Eurasianism" in Kyrgyzstan will largely depend on the economic situation around migrants, and the struggle of the elite clans for power, since they clans will game the map of Kyrgyzstan's "good" and "bad" relationships in search of bonuses from various geopolitical sides. On the whole, the residents of Kyrgyzstan do not subscribe to the concept of "Eurasianism," unless within the context of the cultural, historical, and political relations between Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation. Its ideological dimension for Kyrgyzstan concerns issues of opposing non-native Islamic nationalistic tendencies to do with Tengriism, tribal identities, and the Islam of Hanafi madhab.

## The Ethno-Religious Identity of Kazakh Youth<sup>168</sup>

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In the last decade there has been noticeable growth in the spread of ethno-religious identity among the Kazakh youth. Considering that the level of ethno-confessional pluralism in Kazakhstan is among the highest in the world, the growth of ethno-religious identity among youths could lead to a wide variety of

consequences—either to the mutual acculturation of ethnic groups of young people, or, to the contrary, to the isolation of these groups from one another, and greater conflict between them.

Despite its objective urgency, the problem of ethno-religious identity among the youth in our country has not surpassed the level of theoretical discussion. But there is a real need, at the level of practice, for the preventative regulation of certain social processes that are having an influence on the living environment, consciousness, and behavior of youth, the goal of regulation being to prevent undesirable deviations.

Meanwhile, the situation is seriously complicated by counterproductive tendencies in a globalizing world, in the "cross-fire," of which youth find themselves the main

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168 This article is based on a report titled "How's life for you, young people?" conducted with the financial support and expertise of the Soros Foundation in Kazakhstan. The research includes a large survey of youths as well as semi-structured interviews with informal youth leaders. The data collection was carried out with the help of a standardized inquiry form in Kazakh and Russian, depending on the place of residence (of the youth), and with the help of a form-based interview including both open and closed questions (in both Kazakh and Russian) depending upon place of work (of the interviewed youth leaders). The method of inquiry was face to face. In order to construct a sample, a multi-stage territorial random sample was used. To form a framework for the geographical correlation of the sample, Kazakhstan's provincial divisions (*oblasti*), as stipulated by the Committee for Statistics of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, were used. The statistical discrepancy is less than 1 percent. The total number of people survey is 1404 between the ages of 15-29 (inclusive). Of them 393 people were urban respondents, and 1011 rural respondents. Included in the analytical breakdown were 1398 forms. The survey of informal youth leaders from fourteen of the republic's provinces was conducted using semi-structured interviews recorded on a dictaphone. The extent of the sampling population for youth activists was 15 people.

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object of propaganda. Key here is the influence of such mega-trends as the progressive politicization of Islam and the missionary activities of Christian congregations that take on the character of “humanitarian interventions.”

Given the new security challenges, the question of ethno-religious identity is one of the most sensitive as regards political changes in the country and the world in general. Bearing this in mind, we grasp the need to understand properly the reasons behind the spread of ethno-religious identity among the youth, especially in that segment of its population that tends to be socially marginalized. The important, yet understudied, state of this regional segment of the Kazakh youth, along with the discursive nature of the quantitative and qualitative questions of ethno-religious identity, indicate the urgency of the research, as well as its scholarly and practical significance.

Ethnic and religious identity are closely inter-related. This relationship, however, has changed over various periods of history. We take the underlying type of identity to be ethnic, which we understand to mean blood relations, an equating of oneself with one’s “roots.” This is what comprises the basis of any person’s identity irrespective of the presence of religious, civic, or other affiliation. By religious and civic identity, we understand one’s conscious or unconscious affiliation to a particular confession or national community (the latter being understood as belonging to a political nation or a state).

Research has shown Kazakh’s to be divided into fractions, formed partly by several religious groups, which differ not only in linguistically but also in their belonging to a particular confession: the largest group is Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs who profess one or other versions of Islam; among Russian-speaking Kazakhs we find followers of Islam, Orthodoxy Christians, and

**Reference:**

According to the official statistics for 2015, the percentage of regional youth aged 15-29 is 58.9 percent of the total youth population for the indicated age. Composition: predominantly Kazakhs (estimated 69-70 percent),\* natives of rural areas (72.4 percent), the south and west of the republic (together 65.3 percent).

\* Data of population numbers according to ethnicity is not available on an age group basis, according to the current report of the Committee for Statistics for the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The given data reflect the general number of Kazakhs in the regional population regardless of age specification. Among the Kazakhs polled, 86.8 percent of them speak Kazakh.

other religious minorities (their mental characteristics make them more akin to ethnic Russians).

The spread of ethno-religious identity of youth is happening against the background of growing contradictions between the need to form an ethnic Kazakh identity, on the one hand, and the need to form a national identity around a common citizenship, on the other.

Religious youths of 15-19 and 20-29 years are generally no older than the country itself. Research shows that one general feature characterizes them—a heightened interest in consolidating primary native communalities (both ethnic and confessional).

**Characteristics of the ethno-religious identities of the regional youth**

Research results bring to light conflicts of civic identity. In the personal/group identity division of the regional youth, civic identification dominates (see illustration 1). However, the direct application of this under-

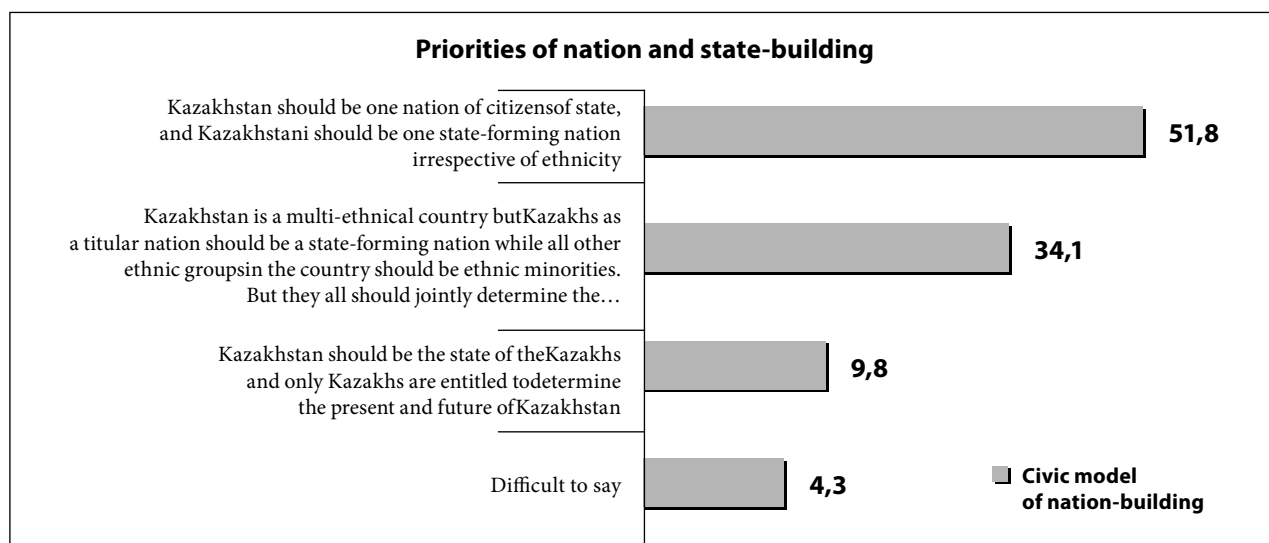
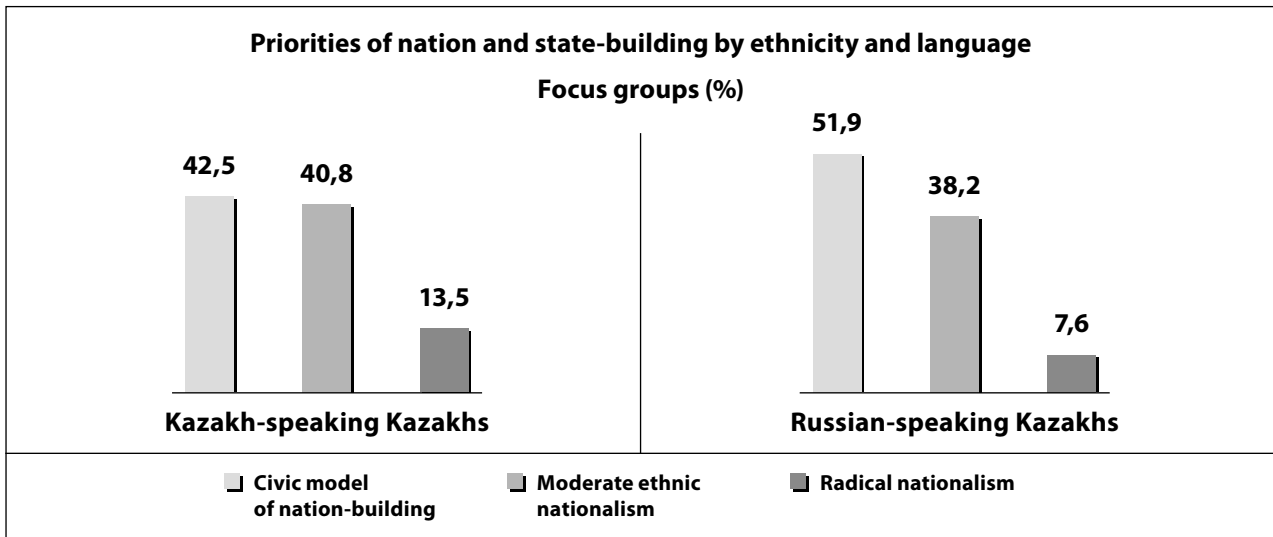


illustration 1



*illustration 2*

standing is complicated by the fact that, based on the methods of grouping and cross-tabling, two contradictory self-identifying civic groups become evident.

The ethno-linguistic factor is a strong marker of the border between them (*see illustration 2*). The first group is made up predominantly of Kazakh-speaking youths, both rural and urban (the latter are represented more than the former). These youths equate their citizenship with an ethnically Kazakh state (and thus merge ethnic and civic identity), and espouse the development of Kazakh as a single state language as well as the idea that only ethnic Kazakhs be able to become high government officials. This group is not uniform and can be divided into two subgroups:

- “moderate ethno-nationalists” (“Kazakhs as the state-forming ethnic group, and all others as ethnic minorities, but all of whom should together determine and be responsible for the country’s future.”)

- “narrowly ethnic nationalists” (“Kazakhstan for Kazakhs.”)

The second group comprises Russian speaking youths (Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs), both rural and urban, who support a civic model of nation-building, the official recognition of two state languages, and they demonstrate high levels of tolerance and openness toward other ethnic groups and the followers of other religions. Here we can likewise divide the group into two subgroups:

- those who equate their citizenship with the country (super-ethnic nature of civic identity)

- So-called internal immigrants who equate their citizenship with a designated territory (“Junior Homeland”). This trend is expressed mostly in the north. In this case, it is possible that some portion of respondents under-

stand “Junior Homeland” as a territory that is in some way ethnically marked. We might suppose that behind this “small town” character of citizenship there lies the loss of feeling of Homeland as related to Kazakhstan.

As far as the ethno-religious identity of the regional youth is concerned, a characteristic lack of firm connection exists between religiosity and faith. On average 71 percent claim to be believers. However, this high figure does not actually express a conscious conversion of the youth to religion. Young people more often identify themselves with a particular religion, but more rarely claim to be believers. In some cases, individuals claim that they have their own faith and that religion itself means nothing to them. The superficial, fluctuating character of youth religiosity confirms the role of religion as a kind of “ethnic marker.” Religion has not become a system-forming mechanism of regulation for young people.

The category of religious identity presumes that individuals engage in more rational-methodical behavior than the “believer” youth do. Their religious behavior is dominated by an external, ritual-ceremonial side. But their performing of religious rituals does not equate with a desire to fulfill the holy texts. The majority of religious youths are simply ignorant: they do not know the primary religious sources (the Koran, the Bible, etc.), or religious literature in general. Most “believers” feel relatively free to shirk any sort of religious law or rule. So membership in a religious community is, for young people, not synonymous with faith. It represents a specific phenomenon that is far removed from its classical standard. Religion has undergone a banalization. As a matter of fact, in the practice of today’s youth, religion is devoid of sacred content and becoming increasingly secularized, turning into daily ritual practice.

For the majority of regional youths, faith was motivated not by an inner spiritual searching but by how their family raised them. An absolute majority of believers come from religious families, in which either both parents or at least one parent (most often the mother) is a believer. Under the influence of family upbringing and a traditionalist way of life, nearly every second believer participates in the life of their religious community.<sup>169</sup> In all likelihood, this participation is driven by a relation to their own ethnic religion. Those most active in their religious communities are aged 20-29, adherents of Islam, or representatives of religious minorities.

The results of an interview with informal leaders unexpectedly brought to light a critically high level of religiosity among representatives of the most civically active regional youth (93.3 percent), of which 86.7 percent are followers of Islam. At the same time, roughly half (46.7 percent) are active (i.e., attend the mosque/church, regularly take part in Friday prayers, give to charity, etc.).

The majority of those polled loyally adhere to the tendency to strengthen ethno-religious identity among youth despite the reasons that are provided to critique and explain this tendency: unemployment, especially in rural areas; the marginalization of rural migrant laborers in cities; low levels of education; a susceptibility to religious propaganda; redundancy of destructive information in the Internet; the social media; uncontrolled Internet use by teenagers; and other factors. At the same time, almost all regional leaders point to the challenges and threats to national security in connection with the growing number of radical believers among the youth. To the list of the most serious security risks we can add changes to the constitutional system (the gradual retreat from a secular towards a clerical/religious state); the contraction of a civic mindset and simultaneous strengthening of a religious mindset; and the spread of daily religious practices.

One “hotbed of tension” is concentrated in the west of the republic—Atyrau, Aktobe, Mangystau, and the provinces of West Kazakhstan (this opinion is held by all polled experts). According to the estimations of those interviewed, the state “blundered” in the situation and failed to use measures to control the risks connected with the transformation of the ethno-religious understanding of the population, especially among the youth of these regions. The established powers delayed taking appropriate action in the areas for about ten-fifteen years. The majority of experts consider ideological efforts to have been a failure.

Evaluations of state policies on religion extend between support and complete rejection. Many assert the need to take a tougher stance on the current direction to provide national security and prevent the spread of radical religious sects in Kazakhstan.

### **The growing ethno-nationalist consciousness of the Kazakh youth: possible political consequences for Kazakhstan**

Research shows that in present-day Kazakhstan a social base exists on which to form a civic nation among Kazakhs. Beyond the ethno-religious “barriers” that separate regional youths, a general understanding is palpable of the need to preserve interethnic/interfaith peace and cooperation in the country. The dominant trends indicate that:

- Ethnic self-identity is the main tendency among Kazakhs, Russians, and other ethnic groups. This is ascertained from survey questions such as “What is homeland to you?”

- A high tolerance exists among young people in relation to dual Kazakh-Russian language use, including in the segment of young Kazakh speakers.

- A high degree of tolerance exists among ethno-confessional groups and groups of other ethnicities or confessions.

- Ethno-religious self-identity is devoid for most youths of any expression of nationalist tendencies. This said, national-patriotic sentiments are not inexistence, especially among Kazakh-speaking youths.

Inter-ethnic/interfaith relations in the sphere of regional youth cannot be called unproblematic or devoid of conflict. However, the fact that the ethno-religious self-identity of its majority is not burdened either with the feeling of its own exceptionalism, or with animosity toward others, serves as a guarantee that its civic identity—“being from Kazakhstan”—is taking root.

Against a generally positive backdrop, the research does exhibit signs that ethnic Kazakh nationalism is strengthening. Some signs correspond directly with displays of radical nationalism (“Kazakhstan is for Kazakhs”). Research reveals a tendency to form a negative ethnic solidarity based on ethnic opposition.

It is worth taking into account that, if the politicization of ethnicity reaches a critical level and prevents a pluralistic political nation from being formed, then Kazakhstan could become a “shooting-ground” for all sorts of ethnic Kazakh self-assertion, including manifestations of ethnic phobias and biases toward “other” ethnic

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169 A religious community is an association of people of a determined location with a religious persuasion that is united by the principles of an ethnic community, by views, ideals, and so on. It is traditional form of social organization.

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groups, including attempts to solidify state sovereignty for Kazakhs exclusively. In the latter case, the political repercussions might include realizing one of two models for building the nation on the basis of ethnicity:

- The evolutionary model, which assumes the preservation of existing ethno-demographic processes.

- The revolutionary model, which assumes a sharp, radical transformation of existing ethno-demographic processes.

However, both models contain a host of limiting factors, including:

- fixed limits on long-term economic growth in the country (a restricted labor market, limited competitiveness on global markets);

- the difficulty of ensuring sovereignty over a vast territory;

- a decreasing population after completing the process of urbanization;

- permanent conflict with ethnic minorities that remain in the country (and correspondingly with neighboring countries);

- an inability to use social technology to include minorities in solving state-wide problems.

In a globalized world, not one traditionalist ethnic idea can be competitive, since such ideas do not help the process of fully integrating into the global community and creating an attractive image for the country. Rather, they threaten the country with short-circuiting and isolation, which is destructive given the growing relations of interdependence in the modern world.

Currently, even ethnic Kazakhs do not form a single united community and are divided along non-ethnic lines (for example, economic ones, which result in an estrangement between rich and poor), and along inter-ethnic lines, which affects signs (i.e., cultural-symbolic ones) that are essential for ethnic determination.

Kazakhstan, like many mono-ethnic states, does not have a future. In a globalizing world, it is an “unpromising historical antique” blocking the way to civilization.

Possible directions in the evolution of the ethno-national identity of Kazakh youth are unclear today. The state’s heightened capability, desirable for it to be able to intervene in the situation in the country, demands the operational involvement (in a systemic regime) of regulatory mechanisms to allow for the alignment of an evolving ethno-national consciousness among the youth with a direction for nation-building able to avoid undesirable deviations.

Kazakhstan is going through a period of historical change. In this period, it is impossible to avoid the identity crisis connected with the difficulties of civic self-determination. The image of the crisis is real and dangerous, especially in the heads of young people. The country’s self-destruction begins with the clamoring of radical of various ethnic backgrounds against otherness. Today, this clamoring is building borders within the youth community. And what do such conditions of segregation make possible tomorrow? The national, or civic, identity of Kazakhstan’s young residents needs to be consistently reaffirmed, not only through the pronouncements and pleas made by the head of state, but primarily by means of state-wide youth policies.

Nationalism has two faces; one is the state, the other, ethnic. State nationalism aims at integration and providing a civic unity. Ethnic nationalism runs headlong toward disintegration, since it revolves around the contrapositions of “us/them” and “our own/other.” Ethno-nationalism should not be equated with chauvinism and xenophobia, but the line between them is very fine. It is difficult to distinguish whether what is happening is the natural expression of national feelings and not rather a nationalistic hysteria.

# Understanding Illiberal Sentiments Among the Kyrgyz Youth

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## **Background**

The backlash against liberal values is a very visible feature of current political processes in Kyrgyzstan. Local political activists are successfully promulgating anti-NGO “foreign agents” and anti-LGBTQ bills. Commentaries on domestic and foreign affairs usually build around anti-liberal conspiracy theory arguments, in which civil society and international assistance is blamed for subverting national security and local moralities. This backlash often comes from an unexpected part of the society—the youth.

Young people’s attention to politics and their broad participation in it often arises from the standpoint of a constructed ethnic “purity,” and a misogyny blended with Salafi-inspired Islam. Curiously, for around two decades now, the country has seen a surge in locally and externally driven programs that aim mainly to shape young people as agents of change for democracy and peace. The paper will study why and how the youth are leading the current tide against liberalism in the Central Asian country that has arguably been the most friendly to promoting a broad and liberal outlook.

## **Civic engagement and participation on Kyrgyz soil**

As in many other transiting countries, a key strategy of the international community’s development assistance has to be teach liberal democracy with an emphasis on the youth. The main premise of this strategy is that young people’s political and value orientations are more malleable and thus more susceptible to acquiring a liberal viewpoint through a civic education. The presumption is that the youth are more cognitively and normatively flexible, more adventurous and broad-minded than their elder compatriots.

A more discrete reason for the increasing attention on the youth exists. Kyrgyzstan, as a landlocked, impoverished, and resourceless country, can only rely on its youthful population to be well-educated and empowered. Another prescient reason for this attention concerns the youth’s reportedly active and frequent participation in political violence, especially that related to the two Kyrgyz revolutions of 2005 and 2010, and the large interethnic conflict in the south of the country in June 2010. A rough estimate of the international aid

given over the last seven years to “youth empowerment” programs is over USD 20 million. Below I provide a list of some civic education and youth empowerment programs that have been implemented with the support of international development agencies. While non-exhaustive, the list provides an overview of what are seen as the main points of concern.

## **An education in civics**

A first course called “Individual and Society” became part of the secondary school curriculum around the time of independence in 1991. Georges Soros’ Open Society Foundation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) are among the most frequently mentioned organizations to have been active in developing and introducing an education in civics. By the early 2000s, almost every school in Kyrgyzstan had been furnished with the requisite textbooks and teacher’s aids, though not every teacher has benefitted from the associated teacher training projects.

The repertoire of formal civics classes and informal extracurricular exercises has been rich both in terms of content and the delivery instruments. It has given school students knowledge and an understanding of human rights, the law, the legal and institutional grounds of the state, economic rights, parties and elections, the media, and public opinion. The programs have included a heavy emphasis on the values of tolerance and diversity, as well as some knowledge of corruption and corruption control, in an attempt to tailor the course to the local context.

Teaching methods also varied; sometimes a sole subject was taught, sometimes other components were included, such as debate clubs, self- and co-governance aspects, and social partnership within the wider community. The programs stressed the teaching of “skills” or ways of acting in, and coping with, various social settings and conditions, and were thus oriented towards practical application rather than theory. The purpose was to encourage students to reflect on and apply the knowledge of civics that they learnt in classes.

Usually organized during the longer summer and winter breaks, youth camps were another important component of this civic education, camps devised as a follow up to in-school formal and informal learning. Outside of their familiar surroundings, young camp participants stay in resorts, often on the shores of Issyk-Kul Lake, or in Bishkek, the capital city, and occasionally in other large towns.



By the second half the 2000s, most support from international donors for civics classes in schools were being phased out. This left greater responsibility on the local education sector to further institutionalize the subject. Reportedly, by 2005, the supply of teachers' books and study aids for civics was stopped. Little evidence has emerged that the civics courses have been genuinely owned and made sustainable without donor support. Most civics classes are given in a conservative, unidirectional, teacher-to-pupil manner, with a lot of rote learning and little room for interactive and innovative methods that could induce real demand among students and make it attractive.

### **An education in civics and empowerment for peacebuilding**

The political crises following the violent overthrow of Bakiyev's regime, and the ethnic conflict that came shortly afterward in the south of the country in 2010—also defined as a compound crisis by the UN at the time—added further impetus to the proponents of civic education in civil society and the international development agencies. The remedy adopted for the interethnic strife was to empower young people to become “agents of peaceful/democratic change” and thus prevent the country from relapsing into authoritarianism.

This approach is another facet of the “positive youth development” concept, widely popularized since the early 2000s. In a nutshell, it is about viewing young people as assets and a resource, as individuals with a say, in particular on issues that concern them, and as essential for the development of their communities. This runs counter to the conservative, pathologizing attitude that consists in treating youths as trouble-makers and as a social group at risk that needs to “be dealt with and managed” by a strategy of “keeping-it-busy.”

The International Youth Foundation's *Jasa.kg* youth empowerment program, funded by USAID; GIZ's “Perspectives for Youth”; UNICEF's Youth Centers project; and UNDP's local youth plan all exemplify patterns of youth empowerment that were embraced by a variety of international development donors after political crises and ethnic violence in 2010.

The youth empowerment response to the 2010 compound crisis and its repercussions largely ignored secondary schooling, particularly for the civic education component, albeit with a few exceptions. Those few are

patchy initiatives to revitalize school self-governance, civics classes, and school exercises aimed to address juvenile delinquency and violence. They were “piloted” in a statistically insignificant number of communities and schools across the country. Most of the activities have aimed to reach a bigger number of youths and inform them about the values of democracy, human rights, and diversity. In a few cases, programs reported a change in attitudes and values among youths, as well as an increase of their efficacy and participation in the community. However, little evidence has emerged that the empowerment program became entrenched in the main state services at the local and national levels.

In fact, civic education is a good example of a youth empowerment initiative that is based on the values of liberal democracy that is fully donor-driven with little incentive to adopt it locally. The enthusiasm of donors for a civics education at school decreased when they saw the limited effect on long-term learning outcomes in changing attitudes and values.<sup>170</sup> Now, a “piloting” approach has been taken to support civics in a limited number of schools and communities. This is not to suggest that civic education initiatives have stopped altogether. Whether due to inertia, local enthusiasm, or the sporadic support of international development donors, these initiatives have continued in some form or other.

### **Institutionalized illiberalism**

The increase in political awareness is characterized by a high level of youth participation in mushrooming voluntary institutions<sup>171</sup> and quasi-political groups and individuals. Levels of youth-led political activism received a boost around the two upheavals that resulted in regime change in 2005 and in 2010. The government resorted to the creation of a ministry specifically dedicated to youth at the national level, as well as various quasi-representative bodies, often called youth councils and committees at the local level. The purpose of these institutions is to contain and harness the political and social energies of young people.

Kyrgyzstan's Youth Ministry is in its early days. It provides a vivid example of an institutionalized far-right populism blended with Islamism. This it does by advocating that young people share the values of religiousness/spirituality, ethnocentric patriotism, masculinity, and anti-elitism, at the same time it polemicizes with people who uphold liberal modernity, and the values of diversity and human rights. The Ministry has, for

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170 No formal assessment or evaluation has been conducted to measure attitudinal or value changes as a result of civic education. But the interview respondents to donor organizations and the Ministry of Education and Science suggest that civics mainly yield a better awareness of legal and institutional aspects of democracy.

171 Using the term “civil” to qualify youth institutions that advocate against liberal democracy creates both semantic and philosophical difficulties that cannot be resolved in this paper. So, for the sake of simplicity I use the term “voluntary.”

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instance, has constantly pushed to maintain the Kyrgyz ethnicity as the backbone of the nation, as that which bears responsibility for other ethnic groups inhabiting the country, a dubious proposition that has nonetheless been turned into the central plank of national youth policies. It has also obstinately kept sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda away from formal and informal education, since, claims the Ministry, such contradicts the “traditional values” of the Kyrgyz nation. Sexuality and reproduction, according to them, need to be dealt through religious and traditional norms, whatever the latter might mean.

### Illiberal youth “civil society”

A voluntary grouping called “Kyrgyz-Choroloru,” which is frequently dubbed “Kyrk-Choroloru” (the Forty Knights), exemplifies the non-state dimension of youth participation occurring under the conservative traditionalist and anti-liberal slogans. “Kyrk-Choro” is part of local historical vernacular that refers back to the Epic of Manas, a major identity-shaping cultural legacy for the Kyrgyz people that is said to date back a millennium. “The Forty Knights” were characterized as Manas’ companions in helping him carry out his deeds.

The “Knights” have acted very noisily and provocatively, at times by transgressing the criminal code with violent raids against foreign businesses, sex-workers, and the LGBT community. The first act that brought the “Knights” into the limelight was their demand that shops in the local Madina market be rid of Uyghurs and worked instead by ethnic Kyrgyz.<sup>172</sup> They also claimed a watchdog role by reporting on the purported illegal migration of Chinese citizens. They reproduce widely stereotyped fears about the creeping Chinese economic influence that are gradually gaining cultural and political traction, penetrating into the social fabric and the political elites.<sup>173</sup>

The “Knights” have gained notoriety among civil society organizations and human rights defenders with their raids against sex workers, or so-called. They break into recreation places associated with foreigners, where they identify women who they alleged are involved in commercial sex. The “Knights” enter in large groups, pushing and shoving the women before lining them up

and filming them. They later put these videos online in a bid to ignite public condemnation. They vilify and tell those women off for “committing indecency and distorting Kyrgyz values.”<sup>174</sup>

The LGBT community has also been subject to increasing attacks by the “Knights” and their like-minded allies. The latter’s homophobia became more than visible after they violently ruined the LGBT community’s private attempt to celebrate the Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia in Bishkek on May 17, 2015. Any attempts to bring up LGBT rights in the media or on any public platform meets with highly aggressive resistance from these groups. This backlash is usually accompanied with blunt intimidation of the LGBT community and calls to take violent actions against it and those who advocate for their rights.<sup>175</sup>

Little credible information exists as to what political allegiances and loyalties the “Knights” and other such groups have. As might be expected, they do not disclose the funding sources of their campaigns. Nor does much information exist that locates these groups sociologically. The acts, messages, and accompanying symbols, enable us to characterize the “Knights” and other such groups as ethno-nationalists. Their campaigns are grotesquely adorned with symbols of Kyrgyz culture such as the felt kalpak (the traditional Kyrgyz hat), and appeals to Kyrgyz history, values, and “mentality.”

In connection with the “Knights,” it is worth mentioning a youth group with Internet presence who are self-proclaimed “Patriots” (paradoxically they use the Russian or Western term of patriot, not its Kyrgyz equivalent, *Mekenchil*). They have made headlines in the country and beyond by posting footage online of their savage assaults against young women of Kyrgyz ethnicity. The violence usually takes place abroad, mainly in Russia, against labor migrants accused of dating men of the “wrong,” i.e., non-Kyrgyz, ethnicity.<sup>176</sup>

Some of these “patriotic” assaults are also reported to have taken place in Kyrgyzstan. They are apparently inspired by the Kyrgyz migrant “patriots” in Russia, and the general discourse around “true Kyrgyz values,” according to which women have no rights, but are simply male property. This discourse is the primary connec-

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172 A. Leilik, “Kyrgyzstan: Nationalist Vice Squad Stirs Controversy,” *Eurasianet.org*, February 10, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71996>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

173 See, among many others, “*Pretsedent*”: *Vo chto mozhet pererasti Kyirk Choro*,” February 3, 2015, *Knews.kg*, <http://knews.kg/2015/02/03/pretsedent-vo-chto-mojet-pererasti-kyirk-choro/>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

174 Leilik, “Kyrgyzstan: Nationalist Vice Squad Stirs Controversy.”

175 A. North, “Kyrgyzstan’s Beacon of Tolerance Under Threat From Manufactured Kremlin Homophobia,” *Eurasianet.org*, May 4, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78631>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

176 “Kyrgyzskie ‘patrioty’ zatavliaiut zhenshchin liubi’t ‘svoikh’ ugrozami poboiami,” *Azattyk*, February 16, 2016, <http://rus.azattyk.org/media/video/27556905.html>, (accessed 29 March 2017).

tion between the “Knights” and the “Patriots,” both of which publicly approve of violence against women who dare to relate with men of different ethnicities.

### Some tentative conclusions

Youth activism of an illiberal character is largely indigenous in nature. However, external factors may also have helped to set this illiberal pushback in its current semantic frames, by introducing categories such as “traditional values” or “national sovereignty” into the rhetoric.

Illiberal feelings in youth activism are closely linked to the rise of supposed primordial traditional identities, in conjunction with religious conservatism. In some recent surveys, one funded by USAID, another by Safer World, young people most often mentioned Islam, family, health, and patriotism when asked about their values. What is worrying are how these values are operationalized by young people by violating the rights of women and other vulnerable social groups. Bride-kidnapping is still presented by some as a “beautiful old Kyrgyz tradition.”<sup>177</sup> It has also become a matter of decency for a Kyrgyz male, who also alleges to be a good Muslim, to keep his wife or bride in submission and in the domestic service of his extensive family, especially the more elderly members. The level of tolerance among women to husbands’ hitting or beating their wives for not complying with certain gender norms is almost 33 percent.<sup>178</sup> Some young activists build their political agendas around denying sex education for adolescents, especially girls, on the grounds of its alleged incompatibility with traditional values and religious norms.

Surveys also show that young people’s attitudes towards those with different communal identities are negative.<sup>179</sup> The notion that the Kyrgyz are the country’s titular nation became increasingly popular to the detriment of the opposite notion “Kyrgyzstan is our common home,” a concept popularized by the Akayev regime in the 1990s. Local languages other than Kyrgyz are less and less tolerated in the public sphere. These trends have inevitably alienated liberal ideas such as granting equal

rights to each and everyone irrespective of his/her ethnic or religious background.

Illiberalism, as justified by traditional values and religious norms, often conceals rational calculations and the considerations behind it. Young people, especially young males of Krygyz ethnicity, see that advancing women or minority rights, an agenda of liberal democracy, is a challenge to their perceived power base. On the other hand, in their quest for meaningful participation and access to resources, young people emulate the patterns of their adult fellows in politics. Young people have learnt well that their constituencies best receive traditionalist messages, as they are inherently more appealing and culturally autochthonous than the liberal values of human rights and diversity. Liberalism has also been discredited in practice, since it is associated with rampant poverty, pervasive corruption, and violent injustices. Liberalism is also taxed with producing “moral decay and degeneration” in the society. An even more profound yet subtle challenge to liberalism is the insincerity both of those who deliver and receive liberal messages. Liberal empowerment has been elite-focused and incentive-driven. Strong genuine political platforms of an indigenous nature that entail commitments to individual rights and freedoms to engage in real decision-making are limited.<sup>180</sup>

Liberalism has mainly worked as a gospel for an isolated upper class that is often referred to as an intelligentsia, the main characteristics of which are that it is urban, Russian-speaking, and has a legacy of connections to the Communist nomenklatura and its welfare benefits. This group has rarely had strong ties to the countryside, in which around three-quarters of the country’s population is located. Liberalism has thus actually deepened the fracture between the shrinking elites from the former Soviet intelligentsia and the post-Soviet, often profoundly traditionalist, rural communities.

### Recommendations

Those involved in youth development activities should not expect that empowerment, especially

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177 According to frequently cited accounts of human rights activists, around 12,000 young girls a year are kidnapped for forced marriage. [www.rferl.org/content/bride-kidnapping-in-kyrgyzstan/25403604.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/bride-kidnapping-in-kyrgyzstan/25403604.html), (accessed 29 March 2017).

178 United Nations, *United Nations Children’s Funds and United Nations Population Fund’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey*, 2014,

179 See Safer World, “*Nobody has ever asked about young people’s opinions.*” *Young people’s perspectives on identity, exclusion and the prospects for a peaceful future in Central Asia*, 2012, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/640-nobody-hasaever-asked-about-young-peoples-opinions>, pp. 4 & 12; USAID, *Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic: Values, Social Mood and Conflict Behavior*, 2014, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/youth-kyrgyz-republic-values-social-moods-and-conflict-behavior-report-research>, 17; UNDP National Human Development Report, *Kyrgyzstan: Successful Youth – Successful Country*, 2009, <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/kyrgyzstan-nhdr-2010-en.pdf>, 2; Sinus Institute, *Youth Kyrgyzstan: Bridging Tradition and Modernity*, 2015, <http://www.sinus-institut.de/en/publications/whats-new/detail-en/news/youth-in-kyrgyzstan-bridging-tradition-and-modernity-2015/news-a/show/news-c/NewsItem/news-from/13/>, 17-18, (accessed 29 March 2017).

180 J. Dawson and S. Hanley, “*What’s wrong with East-Central Europe? The fading mirage of the ‘liberal consensus’*,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, 2016, p. 21.

through so-called civic participation, will make the youth more susceptible to liberal democracy. Civil society and the development community should thus adopt a more careful approach in promoting “institutionalized participation and empowerment,” i.e., in supporting national bodies dedicated specifically to the youth, as complaints about their poor capabilities and their propensity to promote a privileged minority is well evidenced.

Both civil society and development community should be ready to engage in a frank and at times blunt debate with the key “spoilers,” i.e., outspoken and influential opinion leaders and decision-makers of the younger generation that represent the illiberal camp. The primary content and purpose of these debates should be to address and deconstruct attitudes based on conspiracy theories, accusations of double standards, fear of a fifth column, and so on.

Liberal messaging also needs to be adapted to the local languages, cultural values, as well as to historical

legacies—real or constructed. Such will help to establish a “buy-in and ownership” feeling that could, in the medium term, hinder attempts to alienate liberal values. Messaging strategies should also be contextualized, and become better embedded in traditional media and information dissemination channels to ensure better outreach. Promoters of liberalism and other humanitarian and development ends need to be less obsessed with visibility and focus more on knowledge and value-related outcomes.

It is also important to address the structural causes of this growing youth illiberalism. Detecting a few strategic bottlenecks as entry points is the way to go. The education sector has functioned as the catch-all field and it requires assertiveness and patience to reform. More investment is needed to embed life skills such as critical thinking, communication, leadership, collaborative action, and so on, in order to develop the ability to make independent, informed, and responsible decisions about participation, even if they do not end up as liberal ones.

## A Long Transformation: Central Asian Countries on the Threshold of Change

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Despite the fact that the Central Asian republics gained independence and started transitioning to market economies 25 years ago, a serious transformation in their economic models and a review of their positions towards mutual integration is still required in the medium term.

Moreover, the sooner such a transformation begins, the less painful it will be, and the more tangible will be the impetus for the integration process in the region. Central Asian economies are dependent on external economic factors; so, if they do not change their economic models, they will face a lengthy period of stagnation, or even economic collapse; and in addition, most integration initiatives will remain mere declarations of intent, as has been happening in recent years.

### **On hold...**

The fall of the Soviet Union left the Central Asian republics with varying economic potentials. In the new political climate, the decision to stick with the Soviet model of a planned economy was rejected. Free trade, privatization, and price liberalization were matters of survival, and not merely (as may seem the case today)

chosen by the elites for the purpose of monopolizing access to resources.

In the 1990s, these new states, of differing levels of enthusiasm, introduced market mechanisms. While Uzbekistan originally took a course of relative isolation and retained significant state control over the economy, Kazakhstan took the path of major liberalization and even undertook the first pension reform in the region.

By the mid-2000s, however, market-economy reforms waned and were left unfinished in all the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. The immovable elites of these countries were content with the model of merely exporting natural (and/or labor) resources, and thus did not concern themselves with building effective institutions.

Even the 2008 crisis, which led to a sharp decrease in economic indicators, did not act as a wake-up call to force the elites to consider the effectiveness of the existing rent-oriented economies and the associated risks. Having put a “hold” on the reform process and even conducting a series of counter-reforms (such as the nationalization of private pension funds in Kazakhstan, increasing the tax burden in Tajikistan, and others), the leaders in the region preferred short-term benefits to risky reforms.

Beginning in 2014, a new challenge emerged: the fall in world prices of individual commodities and the

Russian economic crisis. Both factors led to a considerable worsening of the economic situation in Central Asia. At the same time, despite the authorities' attempts to present it as a more global situation, no "world crisis" existed. Signs of the crisis in these countries included parasitizing resources without creating a foundation for sustainable development. What kind of response did the Central Asian leadership give in this situation? Even though in general their strategies are far from identical, none of them has envisaged making radical changes. Rather, they stick to the "good old" strategy of simply hoping that the situation will stabilize.

### **Tell me who your friend is...**

Russia's role in Central Asia is not the least factor in preserving the "status quo." Although initially only Kazakhstan was a member of the Customs Union, later the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the other countries in the region—except, perhaps, for Turkmenistan—are also strongly tied to the Russian economy, if not by trade, then by labor migration. Kyrgyzstan's joining the EAEU, and also the prospect of Tajikistan's joining, follows the trend of previous years, when Russia played the role of "big brother" and even moderated various forms of cooperation throughout the region. And if the EAEU project is seen as some ideal version, it is still the only really active integration platform for the Central Asian states. So another question arises: how is it all coming along?

In the past years, Russia has become a less attractive economic partner and a rather ambiguous political partner. Its continued economic crises have deep systemic roots, including its increasing and growing isolation from the world economy, confrontations with neighboring countries and the international community. And thus it promises to not be a short-lived phenomenon. What does the EAEU offer countries in the region? Besides several short-term benefits, such as free movement of labor and preferential treatment for migrants, the answer is: nothing new or especially progressive. In fact, the EAEU model is reminiscent of a "modernized, planned economy" or "Sovok 2.0," a union where the principle of "against whom" is more important than "with whom." Thus, the "elder brother" offers up a portion of its sovereignty without offering any long-term or meaningful social or economic growth for countries in the region, or value in the form of effective institutions.

Without any changes to the economic model, such "territorial" expansion will create a rather negative outlook for Central Asian states, further hindering their modernization and condemning them to lagging chronically behind others. But despite the continual and significant influence of Russia, it cannot be said who the "elder brother" of the Central Asian states really is.

China is the major trade partner of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. About two thirds of all Tajik and Kyrgyz imports are made with supplies from China (according to data from the International Trade Center for 2015 Tajik duty for Chinese imports was 58.7 percent, and 62.7 for Kyrgyzstan). Chinese imports make up almost a fourth of the total volume (26.2 and 22.5 percent, respectively). In addition, some countries have positive balances in relation to exports from the region to China. In 2015, Uzbekistan received export duty from China of 22.4 percent<sup>181</sup>.

The volume and growth of Chinese investments is even more impressive in some countries in the region. Chinese resources absolutely dominate in external loan structuring in Tajikistan (about 48 percent of the external debt in April 2016) and Kyrgyzstan (more than 37 percent of external debt). China is only third on the list of main investors in Kazakhstan (about percent of external debt at the end of 2015), but in absolute numbers this still runs to billions of dollars<sup>182</sup>.

China's economic expansion can also influence prospects for regional integration. Even though the idea of Central Asian integration is not a goal of Chinese interests in the region, the likely consequences of this integration are quite consistent with China's interests. Thus, the implementation of the Silk Road Economic project envisions eliminating trade and investment barriers between all project participants, as well as the creation of major logistical and trade units, such that in practical terms integration is certainly developing in the region.

And even though the issue of combining the EAEU with the Chinese project has been raised, a situation wherein "the wolves are fed and the sheep are safe" is hardly a real possibility. There is a rivalry between Russian and Chinese interests in the region, and Central Asian countries are forced to choose who will be their "best friend," and who, simply be "a friend."

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181 Statistics from International Trade Center: <http://www.trademap.org/>, retrieved April 2016

182 Official website of the Ministry of Finance of Tajikistan, on foreign debt <http://minfin.tj/index.php?do=static&page=gosdolg#vdlg>, Official website of the Ministry of Finance of Kyrgyzstan, on foreign debt <http://www.minfin.kg/ru/novosti/mamlekettik-karyz/tyshky-karyz/struktura-gosudarstvennogo-vneshnego-dolga-kr-po-s3440.html>, «Komu doljen Kazakhstan? Rating stran po vneshnemu dolgu», *Kursiv.kz*, 24 November 2015, [http://www.kursiv.kz/news/top\\_ratings/komu-dolzen-kazahstan-rejting-stran-po-vneshnemu-dolgu/](http://www.kursiv.kz/news/top_ratings/komu-dolzen-kazahstan-rejting-stran-po-vneshnemu-dolgu/)

### **Integration and bottom-up transformation**

Of course not only internal powers influence prospects for regional economic integration. The very nature of the regimes in the region has not only shaped ineffective economic models, but is also a factor that hinders integration. Despite the extremely mutual benefits of integration, the process has stalled because the Central Asian elites cannot establish relations among themselves. They continue to believe in their own notions of having “multi-vector” and “special path” politics, but these ideological constructs may merely lead to the creation of various mutual barriers.

But, as often happens, when the “upper classes cannot but the lower classes do not want,” the integration process in the region still occurs, but without the will of the elites. The driver of this process is not the political leadership, but the entrepreneurs who find a “path” to overcome barriers. Integration is natural for the business community. As soon as the political situation reduces the barriers, the volume of mutual trade between countries in the region will grow in a relatively short time.

Strictly speaking, entrepreneurs, or rather sections of them, with no relations to the “current” situation could well become a viable force, one that not only demanding change, but that might also directly implement it. Indeed, despite their relatively small numbers and inactivity in political processes, the middle class is the most competent stratum of society in countries of the region. In turn, as the bureaucratic elite has evolved over the years, it is most likely incapable of deep transformation.

Moreover, top-down modernization and integration probably involves constructing some major control structures founded on the state’s active participation in the economy and the integration process itself (i.e., the same large-scale international projects).

Naturally the government has to decide many issues, first and foremost those of the free movement of citizens, the transit of goods, technical standards, and the implementation of separate cross-border infrastructure projects. In addition, it probably makes no sense to initiate a discussion on which industries should become the growth engines of the national economies of Central Asian countries, which sectors interaction should be promoted, and so on.

While some support expanding industrial development, others are attracted to the idea of developing a “knowledge economy.” These latter see the future of

modern services as based on telecommunications technologies and thus wager on the region’s transit potential. Ultimately, however, it does not matter so much which industry is to be foregrounded; instead, the key issue will be how to resolve the “complementarity” of the Central Asian economies.

It is impossible to attract investments by a simple demonstration of one’s ambitious strategies. More important is the level of favorability in the business climate. If the region’s governments choose the path of reforms and market transformations, the institutional environment for them will develop, and those economic sectors with competitive advantages will resolve themselves. Moreover, entrepreneurs know more than bureaucrats about the prospects of the various industries. The officials must create the conditions which would not inhibit such development.

The question remains—when and why should major changes take place? Most likely, serious changes cannot be expected to happen within the next few years. The likely transformations will be either cosmetic (as they will most likely be in Uzbekistan) or actually imitative in nature (Tajikistan).

But it is entirely possible that the necessary conditions will already develop in the short-term—in five to seven years. Economic decline will most likely continue in Russia, thus depriving countries in the region of considerable resources and the ability to maintain their inefficient economies. In such a case, an association such as the EAEU will either be unable to prevent Central Asian states from self-determination, or it will cease to exist entirely. The flow of Chinese investments is also not guaranteed in the decades ahead. The situation that took place during the fall of the Soviet Union might then repeat itself—to a certain extent, changes will depend not only on how strictly necessary they are, but on the need to preserve statehood.

At this point it is important that the small segment of the progressive middle class has not been significantly eradicated. Without its participation, the transition processes cannot be successful. A key moment for the elite will come when changing external conditions threaten their welfare, leading them either to avoid changes or worse still to “tighten the screws.” After all, the future situation may open “a window of opportunity” in which Central Asian countries will have the chance to make a serious breakthrough on the path of sustainable development.

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To reflect over a quarter century of independence, we give the floor to local voices exclusively. In this book, Central Asian scholars express what they consider to be the main successes and failures of these 25 years of national sovereignty, as well as the challenges their society will have to face in the near- and long-term future.

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