

Political, Economic, and Societal

Political, Economic, and Societal Challenges and Opportunities

NEW VOICES FROM CENTRAL ASIA

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Challenges and Opportunities

VOLUME 2

Marlene Laruelle
editor

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

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and Opportunities**

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Marlene Laruelle, editor

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The second volume “New Voices from Central Asia: Political, Economic, and Societal Challenges and Opportunities” gives the floor to a young generation of experts and scholars from Central Asia and Azerbaijan. They were fellows at GW’s Central Asia-Azerbaijan Fellowship Program, which aims to foster the next generation of thought leaders and policy experts in Central Asia. The Program provides young professionals (policy experts, scholars, and human rights and democracy activists) with opportunities to develop their research, analytical, and communication skills in order to become effective leaders within their communities. The Program serves as a platform for the exchange of ideas and builds lasting intellectual networks of exchange between and amongst Central Asians and the U.S. policy, scholarly, and activist communities. It increases and helps disseminate knowledge about Central Asian viewpoints in both the United States and Central Asia.

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PART I. POLITICS AND POLICIES: THE STATE-SOCIETY INTERACTIONS

Chapter 1. Contemporary Art as a Public Forum in Kazakhstan

Alexandra Tsay¹ (2017)

Introduction

Jurgen Habermas describes the public sphere as a space that can bring individuals together to generate debates about the exercise of power and the relationship between the governing and the governed.² If freedom of expression is requisite for a public sphere to function, how does the public sphere operate in societies with restricted freedom of speech? In 2016, Kazakhstan was ranked 160th in the Press Freedom Index produced by Reporters without Borders. It is marked by legislative restrictions, censorship, and the absence of strong independent media outlets.³ In closed societies, where governmental control prevents the formation of a space for open public debate, the public sphere manifests itself in more unconventional ways. In this paper, I analyze the role of contemporary art as a public sphere in Kazakhstan. I argue that contemporary art constitutes an arena for alternative narratives and oppositional meanings, and contributes to launching new debates on online platforms and social networks.

The evident failure of Kazakh traditional media to create a public sphere triggers the formation of online and offline countercultural spheres. Due to governmental control and censorship, traditional mass media do not allow for dialogue between society and state. Critical voices therefore have to look for new channels of communication and produce alternative

narratives. In such a situation, contemporary and street art becomes an important arena for free artistic expression. As an alternative and affective form of communication, art transcends the status quo and the established official discursive framework in less than open societies, creating alternative narratives. Contemporary and street art thus plays the role of a public forum. It offers new platforms for dialogue and debates through the cultural production of new discourses, intervening in urban public space and engaging people in discussion around artwork and art actions on online platforms and social networks.

This article, an empirical study on the role of contemporary artistic expression in post-socialist Kazakhstan and its capacity to generate public debates, makes reference to the work of a range of contemporary Kazakh artists, including Said Atabekov and art-group “Kyzyl Tractor,” Almagul Menlibayeva, Saule Suleimenova, Yerbossyn Meldibekov, Yelena and Viktor Vorobyovy, Pasha Cas, and others. My goal here is to analyze the main narratives of contemporary art in Kazakhstan, which include: (1) reimagining nomadism; (2) constructing new identities; (3) social critique; and (4) debates about current political issues. The research deploys several qualitative methods of analysis: literature review, interviews with local artists, critical analysis of artwork, and content analysis of online debates and discussions. In addition, I am myself a part of an art community in Kazakhstan,

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2 Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

3 “2016 World Press Freedom Index,” Reporters without Borders, 2016.

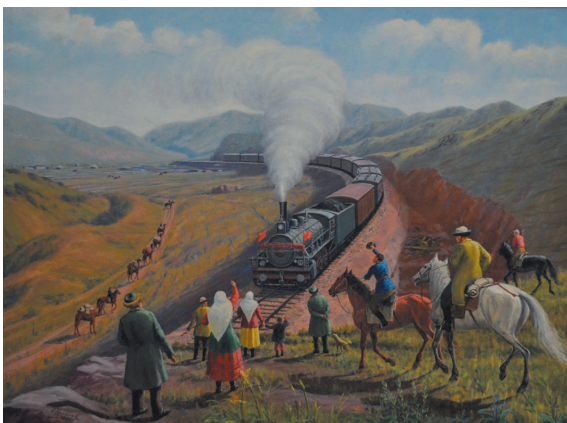
and have curated several contemporary art exhibitions involving more than 20 contemporary artists.

Historical Background: Art in the Context of Authoritarianism

The history of fine art in Kazakhstan started with the Soviet period, when Russians introduced paintings to the region as a new form of cultural product that aimed to educate the masses and support the Soviet ideological worldview.⁴ Indeed, the first Kazakh painters—such as Abylkhan Kasteev (1904–1973) and Kanafiya Telzhanov (1927–2013)—studied in institutes and art academies in Moscow; many works that depicted the region were also created in Moscow.

Kazakh fine art has its origins in socialist realism, a movement created by merging ideology, propaganda, and aesthetics. Boris Groys argues that, “Socialist realism was not supposed to depict life as it was, because life was interpreted as being constantly in flux and in development—specifically in “revolutionary” development, as it was officially formulated.”⁵ Socialist realism was looking toward something that has not yet come into existence, toward a certain dream of the socialist future, toward the ideals of a socialist world. It rejected the idea of autonomy in art, instead considering art as but one element in a wider socialist realm, an instrument that supported the construction of a desired future and the creation of the new socialist individual. It was a creative method that valued art for its social relevance.

Picture 1. Abylkhan Kasteev, “Turksib,” 1969



Source: A. Kasteev State Museum of Arts

The construction of the new man and the new world required the eradication of past heritage, and the destruction of previous cultural identity. Boris Groys writes that in Russia, the October Revolution constituted a radical break with the past, destroying individual and collective heritage.⁶ In Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the destruction of previous cultural identity was even more radical, since the relationship between Moscow and Alma-Ata was a relationship between center and periphery, between dominant and subordinate culture. Art historian Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen describes the relationship between Russia and Central Asia using concepts from postcolonial theory; she argues that through Orientalist images, the Communist Party was able “to pursue several of its goals, namely state unification, imperial expansion and the acceleration of national differences.”⁷ The Soviet state used art as a tool for achieving political goals and establishing its dominance through the complete demolition of pre-existing cultural heritage. The government focused on art’s functional and instrumental value, and was interested in instrumentalizing art as propaganda.

The Soviet center had strong feelings about the scenes, landscapes, and subjects that had to be depicted in paintings. Joseph Stalin famously remarked that art should be national in form and socialist in substance, a phrase that became the manifesto of art production in national republics, including Kazakhstan. Artists depicted scenes of modernization and the construction of a new world: new combine factories against the backdrop of a mountain landscape symbolized the changes that Soviet rule had brought to the region (see Picture 1). Painting was a means to educate, to construct official and mainstream narratives of Soviet power, which (unlike Tsarist Russia) sought to represent itself as anticolonial. The official themes artists could work on were rapid modernization, liberation from archaic traditions, and economic development. The Communist Party did not allow any alternative perspectives on the radical social and cultural changes that were taking place. Though nomads were made sedentary on a massive scale under Soviet rule, a process that caused famine and resulted in the deaths of nearly one-third of the Kazakh population (another third of the population fled to neighboring countries), socialist realism was supposed to

4 Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in Art: From Soviet Orientalism to the New Republics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

5 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 144.

6 *Ibid.*, 157.

7 Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in arts*, 59.

show only the bright side of the road to the desired socialist future.

Art after Independence: Traditional and Contemporary

During the Soviet period, the state heavily subsidized art, considering it a form of propaganda and the only creative outlet that could serve official purposes. At the same time that the Western art world was going through a process of commodification, creating a market for art, Soviet art was part of a political project. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, governmental support for art lives on in official organizations. In Kazakhstan, the post-Soviet government to some extent maintains an instrumental approach toward art, using it as a tool to transmit and promote state ideology. State-supported art continues the realist tradition in painting. An art movement known as “steppe romanticism,”⁸ which depicts colorful landscapes, idealized yurts, and nomads, can be seen as a successor of Socialist realism. It, too, does not show the present, but invents it; it does not reflect on reality, but presents a vision, creates a dream. Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen describes the main themes and preoccupations of traditional artists working in a naturalistic manner as the philosophical, the beautiful, and the nationalistic, with the construction of a heroic national past and heroic nationalism⁹.

Contemporary art as a reaction to traditional art began to develop in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Artists who called themselves contemporary artists experimented with medium and form; they started to break the rules of traditional realist painting, which was associated with official educational institutions and the ideologically-restricted socialist realism. Arystanbek Shalbayev, along with Smail Bayaliyev, Said Atabekov, and Moldakul Narymbetov (who passed away in 2012) organized the art group “Kyzyl Tractor.” Arystanbek Shalbayev, a pioneer of contemporary art in Kazakhstan, said that the radical turn in their perception of art occurred in Shymkent in the late 1980s, in the studio of artist and art teacher Vitaliy Simakov:¹⁰ “I realized that art is not a mimesis, is not a copying of reality, but it is a creation of new

space, of a new concept and a new gaze.” Shalbayev pointed out that he was attending an art academy at that time, but he felt that he did not receive “sufficient knowledge and skills there.” “The story of our group started with a search for newness in art, we experimented with media and performances and we were eager to understand through our practices what art is for,” he said. Through experimentation and practice, Kazakh artists discovered and developed contemporary art in the 1990s. They broke traditional narratives, applied new media and materials to art, raised new questions and problems, and looked beyond the rules of naturalistic oil painting.

There are two major art academies in the country: T.K. Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts in Almaty and Kazakh National Art University in Astana. In addition, there are several fine arts departments in universities and a number of art colleges. Many artists who graduated from art departments in the 1990s insist on the continuation of the naturalistic tradition their teachers taught them.¹¹ Several self-described “contemporary” artists I interviewed mentioned limitations and expressed concerns about education in art academies. As socialist realism was the only creative outlet in Soviet Kazakhstan, art education was restricted by the norms, traditions, and approaches of realist tradition, especially in painting. Though no institution specializes in contemporary art, most of them offer training in naturalistic painting and sculpture. During my interviews, artists listed a lack of critical approaches, the absence of cultural theory classes from curricula, the limited number of workshops on working with new media, including digital media, and a lack of training in critical thinking among the weaknesses of art education.

Art historian Terry Smith theorizes the global phenomenon of contemporary art using various frameworks and approaches. He considers it “a content-driven art, aware of the influence of ideologies and problems of translation, intensely local but also mobile internationally, and concerned above all with issues of nationality, identity, and rights.”¹² It is a set of artistic practices that analyzes and works with the concept of contemporaneity, including current class divisions within societies; inequality; the threat of domination by states, ideologies, or religions; chang-

8 Unofficial term, mentioned by artist Saule Suleimenova during interview with author.

9 Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in art*, 252.

10 Arystanbek Shalbayev, personal interview with the author, October 25, 2016.

11 Ibid.

12 Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 82.

ing modes of communication; and the emergence of an infoscape, or regime of representation, capable of instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere.¹³ Contemporary art is art preoccupied with processes, changes and issues in the modern world, be they political, social, economic, or cultural. Boris Groys writes that the essence of contemporary art is challenging the status quo.¹⁴ The mechanism for launching such a challenge is built on critical thinking and the ability to test boundaries, definitions, and established worldviews.

Contemporary Kazakh art is a process rather than a definitive phenomenon, a constant work in progress with frameworks and norms continuously being developed by artists through their artistic practices. It breaks with traditional realist painting, which is associated with support for state ideology. Artists apply and use new media and materials, and through that process, they look for new messages and stories, new themes and objects outside official narratives. Though they do not engage in politics directly, they increase the number of critical voices and challenge the status quo. It is the essence of art to question the way things are organized in the world, the established understanding of the world, common perceptions and propositions.¹⁵ In a restricted society, art as an arena of alternative meanings and narratives becomes even more important.

Since the 1990s, an art market has slowly begun to develop in Kazakhstan, but in the sphere of art, the transition from a socialist system to a market-based economy has taken a long time.¹⁶ The country lacks the infrastructure of private and public galleries, museums devoted to contemporary art, high-quality educational institutions, journals, and magazines. Contemporary art does not have a wide audience, so much as small circles of connoisseurs, intellectuals, and cultural producers. A number of artists have become successful and established outside Kazakhstan, participating in international biennales, exhibitions, and art fairs. By gaining recognition in the international arena, artists establish themselves on the Kazakh art scene. At the same time, in the absence of an art market, art has yet to become a commodity; ontologically, it still exists in a wider social

realm. There is a tradition of perception of artists as poets, philosophers, social actors, *akyn* (poets of spoken-word poetry in nomadic culture), or “unacknowledged legislator[s] of the world.” The real situation is far from that tradition, but the perception persists among artists. Contemporary art is viewed as an area related to the social sphere, an area of alternatives discourses, intellectual ideas, and free artistic expression. There may be boundaries, structural limitations, and censorship, but I argue that in restricted societies, contemporary art arena can be analyzed as a public forum, a site for social critique and public debate.

Topics and Narratives in Kazakh Contemporary Art

Reimagining Nomadism

One of the main narratives of contemporary art in Kazakhstan is reimagining nomadism, or the revival of symbols, cultural codes, norms, and artifacts of nomadic, pre-Soviet culture. Artists use different media and different approaches to recreate a visual representation of nomadic culture, trace its presence in contemporary life, and locate forgotten artifacts in today’s art scene. Reimagining nomadism is closely connected with another narrative that is constructing new post-Soviet identity. A number of established contemporary artists who are well known outside Kazakhstan work within and develop the theme of nomadism, local culture, and local landscape. Kyzyl Tractor as a group and its members – Yerbossyn Meldibekov, Saule Suleimenova, and Almagul Menlibayeva – as solo artists are among those working within the grand narratives of neo-nomadism and new post-Soviet postmodern identity. The artists discover rituals, games, objects, and visual patterns in search of visual representations of a nomadic culture that was suppressed and eradicated during the Soviet period. Geography becomes an important element of their artwork: the steppe appears both as a physical space and a poetic symbol, as the homeland of nomads and a spiritual space of expelled local culture. Through cultural production, artists raise issues of lost identity and lost heritage during the Soviet period and reimagine the Self and inhabited space.¹⁷

13 Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

14 Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2010), 16.

15 Lena Jonson, *Art and protest in Putin’s Russia* (London: Routledge, 2009), 10.

16 Zhanara Nauruzbayeva, “Refurbishing Soviet status: Visual artists and marketization in Kazakhstan” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2011).

Said Atabekov, a member of “Kyzyl Tractor” who is one of the best-known contemporary artists outside Kazakhstan, develops the nomadic narrative through different series of artwork. His recent series, produced between 2009 and 2016, including “Kokpar” (see Picture 2), “Wolves of the Steppe” (see Picture 3), and “Battle for a Square Meter” depict scenes from the traditional Kazakh game “Kokpar.” In Kokpar, horsemen fight for a dead goat body. The game is still popular, and some tournaments gather several thousand participants. Atabekov regularly attends games that are organized in Shymkent, where he lives. His black and white photographic works portray grandiose battle scenes with contemporary warriors and nomads, capturing the spirit and energy of the game. Atabekov takes pictures from a helicopter, capturing the scale of the scenery and the hundreds of horsemen. His works embody the spirit of the violent game, an almost archaic ritual; he transmits the poetry and intense energy of “Kokpar,” portraying nomadic heritage in the language of contemporary art and locating that heritage in contemporary space.

In the series “Wolves of the Steppe,” he moves closer to participants, capturing their “uniform,” jackets and sweaters with different chevrons and logos, such as famous luxury brand Dolce and Gabbana, Twitter, Coca-Cola, Toyota Panasonic, and others. These symbols are the only colorful elements of the otherwise monochrome images. It is a postmodern gesture both on the part of the horsemen, who are choosing new symbols to identify themselves, and the artist, who is highlighting that element of identity construction, emphasizing the desire of neo-nomads to acquire a new identity, to be part of a globalized world with its luxury brands and international labels.

Yerbossyn Meldibekov is another acclaimed and successful contemporary artist, whose works employ postmodern irony in depicting the nomadic narrative. Meldibekov’s art practices both depict and develop the nomadic narrative and deconstruct and criticize processes that occur within the reimagining of it. His ironic art installation, “Monument to an Unknown Hero,” presents hooves that have apparently been chopped off; the rest of the horse—and the supposed warrior—are invisible, but a viewer can imagine them. The warrior on horseback is a classic

Picture 2. Said Atabekov, “Moscow Kokpar,” 2014



Source: Said Atabekov, courtesy of an artist

Picture 3. Said Atabekov, “Wolves of the Steppe,” 2013



Source: Said Atabekov, courtesy of an artist

subject of Central Asian art, both under socialist realism and in the post-Soviet period. Meldibekov reflects on an iconic art subject, highlighting the tendency to mythologize the past and create monuments to new historical figures and heroes. A piece of art contains several layers: it is a humorous postmodern reflection on the transition of a society and its efforts to construct post-Soviet symbolic capital, while at the same time it portrays a nomadic figure in contemporary art. Meldibekov presents his version of a nomadic warrior, the hero of contemporaneity, where the hero is leaving the stage.¹⁸ As a postmodern work

17 See Diana Kudaibergenova, “My Silk Road to You”: Re-imagining routes, roads, and geography in contemporary art of “Central Asia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1 (2017): 31–43.

18 Viktor Misiano, ed., *Eternal Return: Yerbossyn Meldibekov* (Almaty: Aspan Gallery, 2016), 63.

of art, his installation contains both a depiction of the subject and a deconstruction of it.

The artist has continued to work with the concept of monument, looking at how different public monuments reflect political regime change. His works “Family Album” (2006–2011), “Contest” (2010–2013), “Transformer” (2013), and “Pedestal” (2016) reveal the evolution of public monuments in different post-Soviet cities. For example, for his visual series “Contest,” which consists of archival pictures and project drafts, Meldibekov studied ten monuments replaced one another on the territory of Amir Timur Square in Tashkent over the past century. The ever-changing monuments reflect changes in political structure from tsarist colonialism to the post-Soviet period. As Meldibekov put it, “Central Asia lives in a special time zone, with time rapidly passing but as a wheel turning in the same place.”¹⁹

Almagul Menlibayeva, who lives between Almaty and Berlin, works with the themes of gender, Soviet heritage, and nomadic culture. Steppe is an important element in her fine art photography and video installations. She depicts the character of woman, revealing and rediscovering the Self and culture, or spiritual domain, suppressed by Soviet rule. Through her art, the personal becomes the political. In an artistic statement, Menlibayeva said that archaic atavism, which is a shared cultural-physical experience, is a goal of her artistic practices: “It is as if *he* has been awakened by the post-Soviet experience of the indigenous Kazakh people, who are becoming their own after 80 years of Soviet domination and cultural genocide.”²⁰

Menlibayeva rediscovers and recreates a pre-Soviet cultural space through images of the steppe, the main landscape of her pictures, where a person—usually a woman—is always a central figure. At the same time, she reflects on Kazakhstan’s Soviet heritage. The video work “Kurchatov 22” (2012) is devoted to the Soviet Semipalatinsk nuclear testing polygon, its history, and the lasting damage it caused in terms of health and ecological problems. Her photographic artworks “Aral Beach” (2011) and “Maiden and Wrack” (2011) show a woman, with her face hidden, in front of the dried-up Aral Sea. She continues the theme of ecological catastrophe in the Aral Sea with a video installation, “Transoxiana Dreams” (2011). Menlibayeva speaks about the recent Soviet

past, raising social and ecological issues; looks for and reinvents the authentic, archaic Kazakh culture and spirit; and searches for its place on today’s global art map. In the work “Madonna of the Great Steppe” (see Picture 4), Menlibayeva inscribes the nomadic narrative and nomadic culture on the paradigm of Western art using one of the archetypal figures of the latter tradition: Madonna. It is an artistic construction of nomadic identity and a search for that identity in contemporaneity.

Picture 4. Almagul Menlibayeva, “Madonna of the Great Steppe,” 2009



Source: Almagul Menlibayeva, courtesy of an artist

Constructing Post-Soviet Identity

References to nomadic culture, imagined geography and the reinvention of past heritage constitutes another important theme of contemporary Kazakh art: that is, the construction of a new post-Soviet identity. These narratives are closely related to one another and embrace a number of artists, who are searching, studying, and constructing the form and substance of new post-Soviet identities. Identity appears as a process, not as a definitive construction; in its construction, artists both respond to and oppose Soviet Orientalism and post-Soviet government policies.

Artistic duo Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev analyze the post-Soviet condition through their art. Their conceptual photographic series “Kazakhstan: Blue Period” (2002–2005) explores how blue, the official color of independent post-Soviet Kazakhstan and the color of the Kazakh flag, is occupying physical space, crowding out the red color associated with Soviet rule (see Pictures 5–6). The Vorobyevs photograph urban architecture, small blue

19 Yerbossyn Meldibekov, personal interview with the author, March 15, 2017.

20 “Artist’s statement,” Almagul Menlibayeva’s personal website, <http://www.almagulmenlibayeva.com/artist-statement.html>.

walls and doors, signs, children's uniforms, and ordinary urban and rural scenery.

They study the emergence of a new color palette, and this artistic quest creates a visual representation of changes in social and political structures; one color (or idea) replaces another. At the same time as the artists trace changes in the urban and rural landscape, they observe the durable structures of the post-Soviet condition. Post-colonial conditions produce nationalism: that is, anti-colonial in its discourse, but “derivative” or situated within the epistemological frameworks of the colonial system of knowledge.²¹ In “Blue period,” the Vorobyevs question whether the previous social structure and academic knowledge are reproducing themselves during Kazakhstan’s transition. They examine the process of identity formation in order to deconstruct post-colonial patterns and elements.

Saule Suleimenova works with concepts of memory and identity, treating different art media as different layers of time. With her search for the ordinary beauty of everyday life, she opposes the grand ideological narrative of heroic past and polished bright future. In her series “Kazakh Chronicle” (2008–2014), Suleimenova uses a technique of painting over photography and creates a series of portraits over photos of walls from different Almaty buildings (see Picture 7). The walls she chose are ragged and scratchy, with handmade paper posters and announcements. Suleimenova adopts the concept of *aruakh*, the spirit of ancestors, whom she projects onto the modern buildings and streets. She uses archival pictures of Kazakh people from the beginning of the twentieth century to create her own images of children and adults in traditional clothes. She is looking for the spirit of the people who lived here before these walls were ever built. Her works are poetic and intimate. Suleimenova connects past with the present, but most importantly, she emphasizes everyday beauty and ordinary people, rather than ideologically approved scenes and subjects. Suleimenova has said that it is important to create a local visual language in order to tell local stories. Her art language is poetic, personal and alive compared to traditional naturalistic art with official plots.

Contemporary artists discuss, study and work on major public issues, such as the reimagining of local culture suppressed during Soviet domination

Pictures 5–6. Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev, “Kazakhstan: Blue Period,” 2002–2005



Source: Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev, courtesy of artists

Picture 7. Saule Suleimenova, “Three Brides,” 2014



Source: Saule Suleimenova, courtesy of an artist

21 Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17.

and the construction of new identity. Artistic development highlights the complexity of identity construction and treats it as a process, rather than a solid phenomenon.

Recapturing Urban Public Space

Through its unconventional essence, street art has become an arena for social critique and reflection on socio-economic and ecological issues in Kazakhstan. The most provocative and interesting street artist in Kazakhstan is 22-year-old Pasha Cas. He began to use urban public spaces for artistic interventions, raising social issues and problems through street art and interaction with the city. He uses the concept of an urban public forum, a central place in the city that gives people the opportunity to meet with each other to dialogue or debate. Pasha Cas is already widely known in Kazakhstan, and his works “Pliashem!” (Dancing) (see Picture 8) and “Portrait of Kharms” were nominated for the prestigious Kandinsky award in neighboring Russia.²²

One of Cas’ first works was an installation with a mannequin; it highlighted the high level of suicides among teenagers. The installation, named “Vsem Pokh” (“Nobody Gives a Fuck”) was placed on an advertisement banner in a busy intersection in the center of Almaty in 2013. The artist used filthy language to make a statement and draw attention to the tremendous social problem that seemed to be sidelined in public discussions. “I was shocked by the statistics of teenagers’ suicide, and the numbers are increasing, but nobody cares, neither government nor public. Why don’t we ask what is happening, what pushes people to that decision,” wrote Pasha on his website.²³ He added that he wanted to draw attention to the problem; as such, he chose the busy city center as the site for his work. The artist separates himself both from the government and from the public, criticizing and blaming both parties. The city administration removed his banner and announced that he could be subject to a penalty. Though the work was only visible at its urban location for about a day, the art protest was covered

by local mass media²⁴, and images were widely circulated on social networks.

This use of art in urban space is an attempt to engage both the government and the public in a discussion about an important social problem that needs to be resolved. The artist notes the absence of public discussion, and through his work highlights both the important social issue and the limitations of the existing public sphere; he wants to raise the social profile of an issue, which his art action does. The highly emotional form of the message makes it effective in communicating the problem and raising public attention and interest. At the same time, the nature of the social problem, the unconventional use of public space, the prohibition on his art intervention, and the reaction of the city administration mean that his street art installation becomes a story that is widely covered by local mass media. Mass media coverage and the discussions it triggered on online platforms and social networks constitute the digital public sphere. Despite the fact that the physical urban public space was occupied for a very limited time, street artwork triggers coverage of the issue by mass media and the dissemination of pictures of it online constitute digital public sphere. Street artwork connects physical urban public space with public debates taking place online and on social networks²⁵.

In 2016, Pasha Cas made another important – and in many ways a breakthrough – street work, “Pliashem!” Taking Henri Matisse’s famous painting “Dance” as his point of departure, the artist depicted white-collar individuals dancing around a smokestack in a metallurgical factory. Cas painted his artwork on the wall of an apartment building in Temirtau, a small metallurgical town near Karaganda that is famous for being a mono-industrial city with many socioeconomic difficulties. Cas’ work has both direct and metaphorical significance. He pointed out the ecological problems that metallurgical site brings to town; Cas wrote that his team tested the soil on five children’s playgrounds, and the level of lead was five points higher than allowed. At the same time, he refers to a wider context. He shows the dominant posi-

22 “Raboty skandal’nogo khudozhnika Pashi Cas nominirovany na premiiu Kandinskogo,” *Informburo*, September 9, 2016, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/raboty-skandalnogo-hudozhnika-pashi-kas-nominirovany-na-premiyu-kandinskogo.html>.

23 Pasha Cas, “Matom i poveshennym manekenom privlek vnimanie obshchestva almatinet,” *Pasha Cas blog*, <http://pashacas.ru/2013/10/matom-i-poveshennym-manekenom-privlek-vnimanie-obshchestva-almatinet/>.

24 See, for instance, “Avtor installiatsii khotel privlech’ vnimanie obshchestva k samoubiistvam,” *BNews.kz*, October 4, 2013, http://bnews.kz/ru/old/news/obshchestvo/avtor_installiatsii_v_almati_hotel_privlech_vnimanie_obshchestvennosti_k_samoubiistvam-2013_10_04-1009367.

25 See, for instance, “Zhutkii bilbord v tsentre Almaty ispugal gorozhan,” *Nur.kz*, October 4, 2013, <https://www.nur.kz/284727-zhutkij-bilbord-v-tsentre-almaty-ispugal-gorozhan-foto.html>.

tion that big corporations are gaining in Kazakhstan as it transitions from socialism to capitalism. His work symbolizes the ritualistic dance around new sacred values and symbols in a capitalist society.

Through his artwork, Cas offers a sense of space and time. In one sense, time seems to have passed; the flow of time is represented by the reference to the Matisse painting produced almost a century earlier and by the movement of the dancing people. At the same time, nothing has changed. Despite the ritualistic movements, there are no changes; the situation is static. To him, Kazakh society is undergoing social and political transition, yet there are many constants, from social and ecological problems to the reproduction of the closed political system of the past. The transitional period keeps reproducing the old political regime; movement without change become the repetitive dance of society. The official reaction was straightforward. Police opened a criminal case against the artist, but it was later closed, as they did not find any evidence of criminal activity.²⁶

“Pliashem!” embodies a new form of interaction with urban space. It appears not at a busy intersection, but on an apartment building in a small town that rarely appears in mass media or public discussions on online platforms and social networks. Through his action, Cas is not just bringing a social issue to an established public forum; he is bringing a public forum to a remote area. He is including a small town in his notion of the public. It is an act of inclusion, of giving different publics a sense of belonging to a bigger community that faces the same problems across time and space. The public becomes acquainted with the territory it occupies, receives images of it, images that look both familiar and different from their urban environment. Space is important to this work, as pictures of works disseminated online include the urban landscape of Temirtau and real factory smokestacks in the background. The artist shows the public the space it occupies and gives it a sense of belonging.

After “Pliashem,” Cas released another work, and he is actively using the digital public sphere to disseminate it. “This is silence” echoes Edward Munch’s “The Scream.” The artist created the work on the wall of an abandoned building in Semey, the site of the

Picture 8. Pasha Cas, “Pliashem!,” 2016



Source: Photo by Olya Koto

former Soviet nuclear polygon.²⁷ The medium is a manifesto-type video that showed artwork on the polygon, narrated by the artist. The artist discusses the consequences of nuclear tests on the local environment and human health in nearby areas, pinning the blame on the Soviet and current governments. “This is silence” highlights one of the artist’s main themes: the absence of public discussion on important issues.

This work is located not in an urban area but on an abandoned site that cannot be reached by the general public. It emphasizes the importance of medium to artwork and highlights the power of online dissemination. The initial artwork cannot be presented to people; the artwork is not an object, but a creative process. The difficulties and dangers the creative team faced are incorporated into the final artwork: it is not just street art but a kind of performance recorded on video. It is an art protest where art is not an object, but a radical act. A spectator cannot interact with the artwork in physical space, but the recorded “scream” generates discussion and public reaction online and on social networks. The artist documented the whole process of creating the work, and a member of his team published commentary on the expedition to Semey on online media outlet.²⁸ The strategy of engaging an online audience in a discussion and expanding the vision of digital public space becomes clearer and more organized in this work.²⁹ “This is silence” does not interact with urban public space, as

26 “Avtora samogo bo’shogo graffiti ishchet politsiia Temirtau,” *Tengrinews*, April 20, 2016, https://tengrinews.kz/strange_news/avtora-samogo-bolshogo-graffiti-ischet-politsiya-temirtau-293003/.

27 “This is silence,” YouTube video, posted by Pasha Cas, June 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRHqB_sjhII.

28 See, for instance, “Cas skvoz’ Kz. Chast’ piataia: Poligon,” *Vlast*, <https://vlast.kz/life/18078-cas-skvoz-kz-cast-pataa-poligon.html>.

29 For instance, the initial entry about the “This is silence” manifesto posted on the artist’s Facebook page received 37,000 views and 781 shares, and was reposted by many popular Kazakh bloggers.

it is located on abandoned territory. Yet it provides online discussions with a sense of physical space filled with pain and damage. This pain, sorrow, and damage, both to people and environment, is invisible in the public sphere, but the artist makes it present and material.

Current Political Issues in Art and Online

Cultural production and works of art trigger online debates and create an arena for public discussions: the digital public sphere. Not only do works of art engage the public in discussions, but online debates also trigger the creation of works of art. In August 2016, artist Zoya Falkova, who produced critical works on gender issues for an exhibition earlier in summer 2016, posted a link to a media article about Kazakh feminists on her Facebook page.³⁰ She quoted one of the respondents without attributing the quotation. The quote included a statement about a post-colonial condition and a false “traditionalism” that supports a certain kind of violence, such as domestic violence and bride kidnapping. An immediate – and harsh – response came from another artist, Anvar Musrepov. Musrepov accused Falkova, who is ethnically Russian, in colonial “cynicism.” Musrepov wrote in his Facebook post that prohibition of local traditions could be compared to the repressions carried out by the Bolsheviks, such as the forcible sedentarization of nomads, which resulted in a high number of Kazakh casualties.³¹ Both public entries attracted a lot of attention and prompted heated discussion of the nature of Soviet rule and the position of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan.

A few months later, Falkova created an artwork “The Chronicles of Mars” for an exhibition “Post/Nachalo,” devoted to the post-Soviet and postmodern condition.³² “The Chronicles of Mars” displays the slogans “Tvar’ ya drozhashchaia ili pravo imeiu?” (“Am I a cowering colonizer or exercise my rights?”) and “Kolonizirovali, kolonizirovali, da ne vykolonizirovali” (“Were colonizing, colo-

nizing, but would not have colonized”). The work calls to mind Soviet posters, and both slogans are paraphrased idioms, the first a quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and the second a Russian proverb. Falkova raises the complex issue of the identity of the Russian ethnic group in Kazakhstan and the perception of them as inheritors of the legacy of Soviet domination and colonial abuse of an allegedly superior culture. The case demonstrates overlapping relationships between the digital sphere and the sphere of cultural production, which functions as an arena for debates over important public issues.

Conclusion

Contemporary art and contemporary artists discuss and develop issues such as identity, memory, social structures and power relationships, and engage the public in online debate. Reimagined nomadism, the revival of suppressed culture, and the construction of a new post-Soviet identity are not only narratives of contemporary art, but reflect the cultural transition processes Kazakh society is undergoing. Artistic interventions into urban public and abandoned places and online dissemination of their works constitute an alternative public sphere, one that is open for criticism of the government and can generate public debates and discussions. Art visualizes and vocalizes social and ecological issues, sheds light on themes that have been marginalized in public consciousness, and transforms painful problems into solid aesthetic representations. A polyphony of different artistic voices challenges a closed society, creates areas of free expression and free thinking, and generates public debates and discussions, thus preventing the state from monopolizing the public sphere. In countries like Kazakhstan, where classic forms of freedom of speech may not be respected, contemporary art plays a unique role, offering alternative narratives and practices and contributing to the structuring of an independent public sphere.

30 Zoya Falkova’s Facebook page, <http://bit.ly/2tiQi2M>.

31 Anvar Musrepov’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/anvar.musrepov/posts/745380408938137>.

32 The exhibition “Post/Nachalo” (December 14–24, 2016, Almaty, Kazakhstan) was curated by the author.

Chapter 2.

The Northern Region and the Southern People: Migration Policies and Patterns in Kazakhstan

Serik Jaxylykov¹ (2017)

Introduction

In the light of Crimea's annexation and the Donbas insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the risk of a similar irredentism scenario in the northern oblasts of Kazakhstan—which host the largest population of ethnic Russians outside Russia and Ukraine—has aroused the interest of numerous Western experts.² Some warn that such a scenario is very likely to be repeated in northern Kazakhstan, while other observers are more cautious and see no signs of a domino effect. But no matter how the risk might be assessed, Kazakhstan's government takes the issue seriously. Rebalancing the demographic gap between northern and southern regions has been one of the most persistent goals of Kazakhstan's public policies since independence.

Several initiatives of the 1990s have been characterized³ as efforts to affect the population distribution pattern in the northern oblasts: the capital was moved from Almaty northward to Akmola (now Astana) in 1997; some oblasts were merged in 1997; and mechanisms designed to stimulate immigrants to settle in the North were embedded in the ethnic repatriation

program. In the 2000s, given the favorable demographic trends—higher birth rate of ethnic Kazakhs and massive emigration of ethnic Russians—the government began to hope the demographic misbalance would solve itself with time. Nevertheless, the authorities chose to adopt a more voluntarist stance and initiated several new programs to stimulate South-to-North migration such as “Nurly Kosh” (incentives for ethnic repatriates to relocate in the North) and “Serpín” (state grants for rural youth from the South to study in the North).

With a widening gap between the fast-growing population of the predominantly ethnic Kazakh South and the shrinking population of the ethnically mixed North, the government saw migration as the solution. It has long pursued a policy of stimulating migration to the North; now after two decades, one can trace the actual scale of South-to-North migration. Has the government's policy of stimulating South-to-North migration been effective in changing the current population distribution pattern of northern Kazakhstan? The analysis of internal migration geography presented below provides evidence-based that this policy mostly failed.

1 Serik Jaxylykov is a sociologist and works at a private research company in Almaty, Kazakhstan. He earned his M.A. in Sociology from the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Most of his professional background lies in sociology in different areas including socio-economic, socio-political studies (for the World Bank, UNDP, Oxford Policy Management, and the European Training Foundation) and marketing research for private companies. He was a fellow at the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan Public Policy Initiative in 2015–2016.

2 See for instance Alexander Diener, “Assessing potential Russian irredentism and separatism in Kazakhstan's northern oblasts,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 5 (2015): 469–92, and Marlene Laruelle, “Why no Kazakh Novorossiya? Kazakhstan's Russian minority in a Post-Crimea world,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, October 24, 2016. See also Samantha Brletich, “The Crimea model: Will Russia annex the Northern region of Kazakhstan?” *Modern Diplomacy Special Reports*, November 4, 2014, http://www.modern diplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=420:the-crimeamodel-will-russia-annex-the-northern-region-of-kazakhstan&Itemid=480; Peter Eltsov and Klaus Larres, “Putin's targets: Will eastern Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan be next?” *New Republic*, March 10, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116965/putins-next-targets-eastern-ukraine-and-northern-kazakhstan>; Joshua Kucera, “North Kazakhstan isn't the next Crimea — yet,” *Aljazeera America*, June 19, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/19/north-kazakhstanisntthenextcrimeaayet.html>.

3 Paul Goble, “Astana shifting ethnic Kazakhs to northern Kazakhstan to block any Russian threat,” *The Interpreter*, April 4, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/astana-shifting-ethnic-kazakhs-to-northern-kazakhstan-to-block-any-russian-threat/>.

Here I define as “northern oblasts” those whose share of ethnic Russians is still very important: Akmola (36 percent),⁴ Karagandy (40 percent), Kostanay (43 percent), Pavlodar (39 percent), North Kazakhstan (50 percent), and East Kazakhstan (40 percent). I define the South as four southern oblasts: Almaty, Kyzylorda, South Kazakhstan, and Zhambyl. I define as West four western oblasts: Aktobe, Atyrau, Mangystau, and West Kazakhstan.

The Demographic Gap between Southern and Northern Kazakhstan

The overall pattern of internal migration in Kazakhstan is shaped by two broad trends. The first one is the ongoing migration of the rural population to urban areas; the second one is migration from the provinces to the two capital cities of Almaty and Astana. These two trends have a sequence in their interrelation—the second one is a product of the first.

The first half of the twentieth century was a demographic disaster for the Kazakh population, with repeated famines and massive emigration. That turmoil, combined with significant immigration flows from the European parts of the USSR, including the last one during the giant Virgin Lands Campaign of the 1950s, caused ethnic Kazakhs to become a minority constituting of only 30 percent of the population of their titular republic.⁵ In the 1950s the population of ethnic Kazakhs was smaller than at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶ The decades after the Second World War also featured intensive industrialization of the Kazakh Republic and therefore mass urbanization.

In terms of ethnic composition, that urban expansion was overwhelmingly non-Kazakh, dominated by Russian, Ukrainian, German, and other so-called European populations. In the 1970s, only 17 percent of the republic’s urban population was ethnically

Kazakh. In the northern oblasts of Kostanay and North Kazakhstan, their share was even smaller—6 percent and 8 percent respectively. That population distribution pattern extended across the southern region as well: 15 percent of urban population was ethnically Kazakh in Almaty oblast, 18 percent in Zhambyl oblast, and 26 percent in South Kazakhstan oblast. The only exceptions were the least industrialized cities, like Atyrau and Kyzylorda, the only ones with a Kazakh majority, 56 percent and 51 percent respectively. In 1970, two-thirds of ethnic Kazakhs were still rural, but an exodus toward the cities became an increasingly visible trend in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷

Although both major ethnic groups, Kazakhs and Russians, drifted on that urbanization wave, the trend was more intensive among ethnic Kazakhs: more than a fourfold growth of the ethnic Kazakh urban population took place in less than forty years. Only 1.1 million ethnic Kazakhs lived in urban settlements in 1970; in 2009 the figure was 4.8 million.⁸ That shift could hardly be the result of natural increase; rather, it was a sheer rural-to-urban migration effect. Later it was identified as a turning point for the nation: ethnic Kazakhs had never been an urbanized society before.⁹ It went in parallel with another trend, that of the departure of so-called European population, slowly in the 1970s–1980s and at an accelerated pace in the 1990s. Between the 1989 and 2009 censuses, the population of ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan decreased by 40 percent, Ukrainians by over 60 percent, and Germans by over 80 percent.¹⁰ The rural exodus of ethnic Kazakhs thus also became a replacement strategy for urban population.

In today’s Kazakhstan, differences between the regions’ demography is a tangible fact; populations of the southern and the western oblasts are almost entirely Kazakh, while the northern oblasts have a bipolar composition, with close shares of the two largest ethnic groups. Roughly, what used to be a line between Kazakh rural and Russian urban settlement

4 *Itogi natsional’noi perepisi naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda. Naselenie Respubliki Kazakhstan* (Astana: Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics, 2011), http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/p_perepis?_afLoop=13883079216344535#%40%3F_afLoop%3D13883079216344535%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dqaxmvhipo_62.

5 Aleksandr Alekseenko, “Etnodemograficheskie evoliutsii i problema formirovaniia suverennoogo sotsiokul’turnogo prostranstva Respubliki Kazakhstan,” *Sotsial’nyi portret sovremennoogo kazakhstanskogo obshchestva. Sbornik statei* (Astana-Almaty, 2015), 25–50.

6 Ibid.

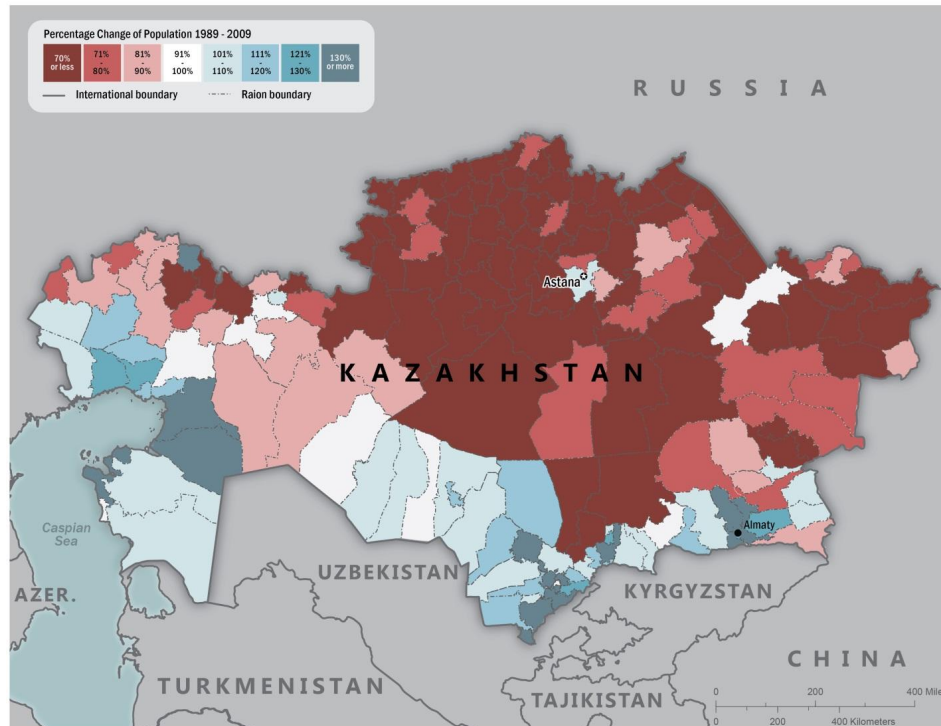
7 *Itogi natsional’noi perepisi naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda.*

8 Ibid.

9 Nursultan Nazarbayev, “V kazhdom serdtse – rodnaia strana: rech’ na 12-i sessii Assamblei naroda Kazakhstan,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, October 25, 2006.

10 *Itogi natsional’noi perepisi naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda.*

Map 1. Population Change 1989–2009



Source: Based on census data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

areas has now become a line between the Kazakh South and the semi-Kazakh North.

Given different reproduction patterns, southern and northern oblasts also display different demographic dynamics: increasing in the South and decreasing in the North (see Map 1). Rural ethnic Kazakhs of the South and the West have a significantly higher birth rate than Russians, urban Kazakhs, or rural Kazakhs of the North. For example, the total fertility rate in Mangystau oblast (where 88 percent of the population are ethnic Kazakhs) is 3.75, whereas in North Kazakhstan oblast (where 33 percent of population are ethnic Kazakhs) it is 2.07; within Mangystau oblast, this index is different in rural and urban areas—4.11 and 3.35 respectively.¹¹ The smaller share of rural population in Karaganda, Pavlodar, and East Kazakhstan oblasts means a lower birth rate. All the lowest values of the birth rate index belong to the northern oblasts; they all occupy the bottom of the ranking. All of the southern oblasts have twofold higher birth rate (between 3.15 and 3.84 in

2014) than the lowest one—Kostanay index (1.76 in 2014).

This high natality makes southern villages the main engine of the country's demographic growth. More than 20 percent of the overall rural population lives in South Kazakhstan oblast alone; about 19 percent live in Almaty oblast. These two southern oblasts constitute almost 40 percent of the whole rural population of Kazakhstan. All four southern oblasts, including Zhambyl and Kyzylorda, make up more than half (about 53 percent) of the country's rural population. Meanwhile, the northern oblasts are facing progressive depopulation. All six northern oblasts together lost 25 percent of their population between the 1989 and 2009 censuses, dropping from 7.7 to 5.7 million, which is less than it was in 1970. Such massive loss is visible: many villages have been abandoned; 298 villages ceased to exist in East Kazakhstan oblast during the 15-year period between the mid-1990s and the late-2000s; there were 168 such cases in North Kazakhstan oblast during the same period.¹²

11 *Koeffitsienty rozhdaemosti po vozrastnym gruppam za 2015 god*, Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics, http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersPopulation?_afzLoop=13886677826592193#%40%3F_afzLoop%3D13886677826592193%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dpw8yhswoh_50.

12 "Ob utverzhenii osnovnykh polozhenii General'noi skhemy organizatsii territorii Respubliki Kazakhstan," Pravitel'stvo Respubliki Kazakhstan, December 30, 2013, no. 1334.

Rural-Urban Patterns: The South and the North

Kazakhstan's statistics give no detailed information on the numbers of people who moved in particular rural-to-urban and reverse directions, so we only can use data on the internal migration balance for the two (urban/rural) types of settlements. But the data collected do allow us to measure migration flows by the type of administrative border that was crossed—that is, regional (within oblast borders) or inter-regional (beyond oblast borders) migration.

The number of people who migrate *within* the country's borders has been growing since late 1990s. The annual turnover of internal migration increased more than 2.5 times between 1999 and 2015. Both regional and inter-regional migrations have been growing at a similar pace. The regional migration balance was positive for urban areas and thereafter negative for rural settlements in all oblasts, with only one exception—the Mangystau one, where regional migration has a negative balance for urban areas since 2007. Dynamics of the rural-urban balance varied significantly over the regions. It was steadily positive with higher magnitude for urban areas in all the northern oblasts, while it was shifting and unstable in most of the southern and western ones. For example, the balance was negative for urban areas in the South Kazakhstan, Kyzylorda, Mangystau, and Atyrau oblasts in some years before the mid-2000s.

The inter-regional migration balance is negative for both urban and rural areas in almost all the regions, except the cities of Almaty and Astana; this means that these two cities are exclusive recipients of inter-regional migration. But the magnitude of inter-regional migration differs; it is smaller in the northern oblasts and larger in the southern ones. Internal migration in the North rarely goes beyond oblast borders: regional rural-urban migration dominates while the significance of inter-regional migration is low. It is somewhat opposite in the southern oblasts, where regional rural-urban migration flows vary (with sometimes a negative balance for urban settlements) and inter-regional migration has a stable negative balance for both rural and urban populations. For instance, the number of people who left Zhambyl oblast for other regions was much larger than the number who left Pavlodar oblast.

It seems therefore that the rural population in the North is steadily flowing toward cities; most move within their oblast; while in the South, not only regional rural-urban flow, but regional rural-rural, inter-regional rural-urban, and inter-regional urban-urban flows are significant. Roughly speaking, the geographical scope of internal migration destinations is much wider for southerners, both rural and urban.

These diverging migration patterns lead to different consequences. In the North, the effective rural-urban flow leaves villages and small towns in desolation, hastening the decline of the population's reproduction base: rural families. In the South, the rural population keeps growing despite regional and inter-regional migration loss. Intensive rural-rural migration in the South means that villagers may move to a better place while at the same time maintaining their traditional reproduction type unchanged. Thus, the reproduction rate stays high despite the negative migration balance. As a result, population size in many rural settlements of the South exceeds that of some small towns in the North. There are at least 21 villages in South Kazakhstan oblast where the population size is larger than that of some towns in North Kazakhstan oblast (see Map 2).

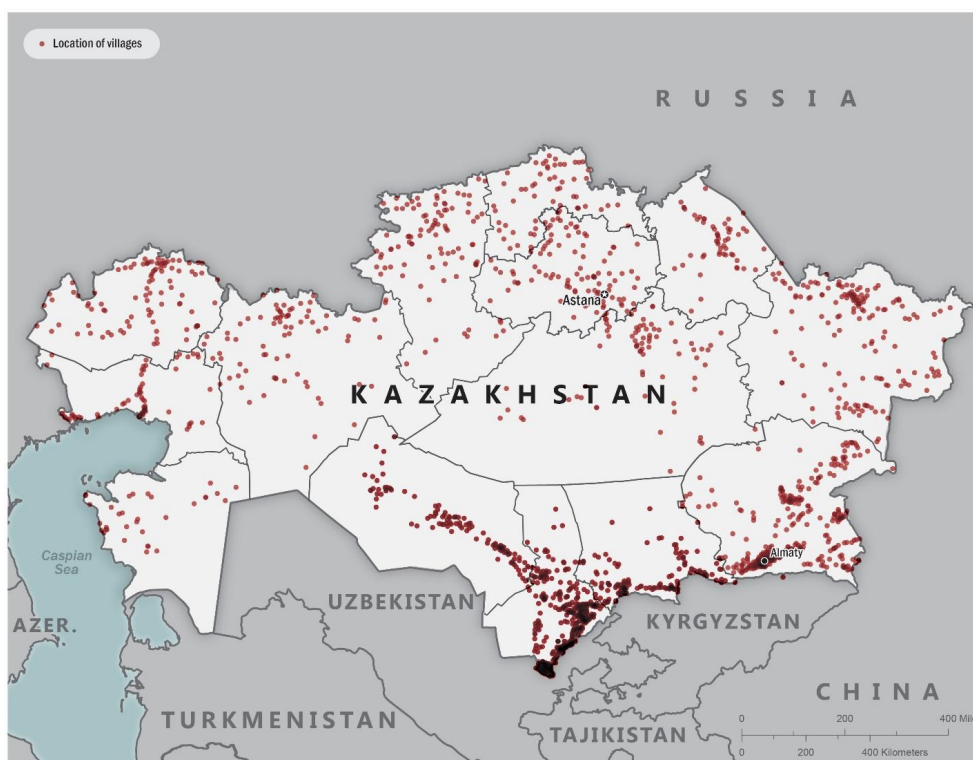
Since the early 2000s, migration from rural settlements directly to the capital cities has been increasing; skipping the intermediate stage of oblast centers was a new feature of the flow. This shift in pattern can explain the sharp increase of the numbers of in-migrants settled in Astana and Almaty. The massive migration to the capital cities is a relatively recent movement compared to the mostly regional rural-urban trend. According to the last census data, inter-regional migration made up 41 percent of all internal movement during the 1999--2009 decade.¹³

Province-Capital Pattern: The South and North

Inter-regional migration has been growing rapidly during the last ten to fifteen years, as clearly reflected in the last two censuses. Over 308,000 people migrated inter-regionally between 1989 and 1999, but then their number soared to 991,000 during the 1999-2009 period (see Figure 1). This threefold growth in ten

¹³ *Itogi natsional'noi perepisi naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda.*

Map 2. Rural Settlements with 1,000 or More Inhabitants



Source: Author's calculation, based on data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

years was heavily driven by some regions. The capital cities attract many more people than any others. The number of inter-regional migrants in Astana increased 66 times; in Almaty their number increased 11 times. Meanwhile, it was decreasing in Mangystau, Kostanay, East Kazakhstan, Pavlodar, Zhambyl, and South Kazakhstan oblasts.

The estimated aggregate share of the two cities—Almaty and Astana—constitutes about 65 percent of overall inter-regional migration. In 2009, 70 percent of the residents of the capital city were migrants (not born in Astana), and 53 percent of its population settled there during the 1999–2009 period.¹⁴ The population of Astana city almost tripled (a 206 percent growth), from 281,000 people in 1989 to 863,000 in 2015.¹⁵ Almaty is the largest urban area in

Kazakhstan; its population grew from 1.07 million in 1989 to 1.67 million in 2015. According to the last census, 51 percent of the city's population was not native (not born in Almaty), and 29 percent of the population migrated to the city during the decade 1999–2009.

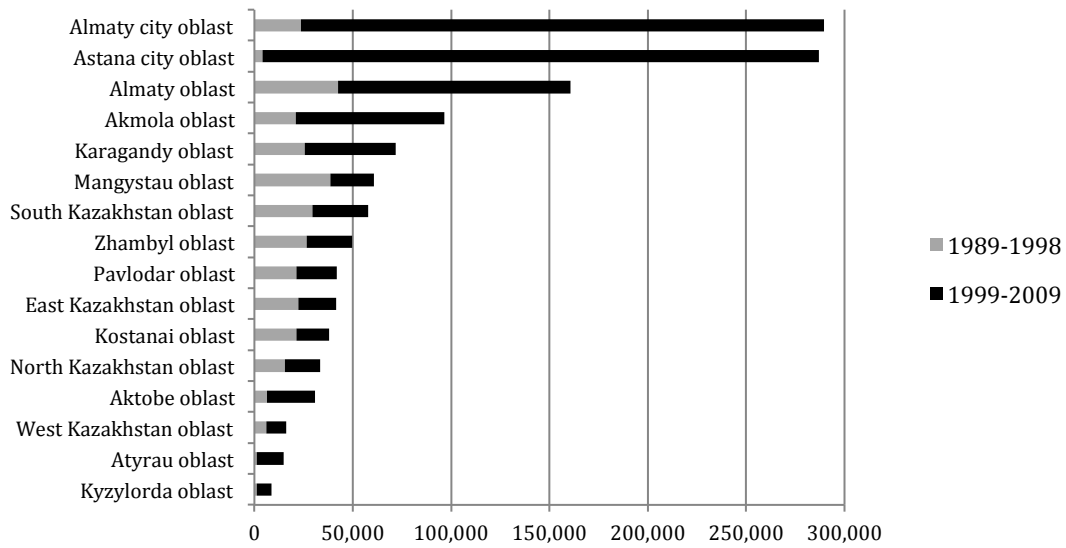
A direct relation between a region's economy and its attractiveness as a migration destination can be seen in the statistics. There are four regions with a consistently positive inter-regional migration balance: Almaty city, Astana city, Atyrau oblast, and Mangystau oblast.¹⁶ The former two are the largest fast-developing cities and the latter two are the regions where the major oilfields are located. All of them are the leading regions in terms of the Gross Regional Product per capita index (see Figure 2).

14 Ibid.

15 *Demograficheskii ezhegodnik Kazakhstana, 2015* (Astana: Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics, 2015), http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/publicationsCompilations?_afLoop=13889162624203738#%40%3F_afLoop%3D13889162624203738%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D12pmag2wra_38.

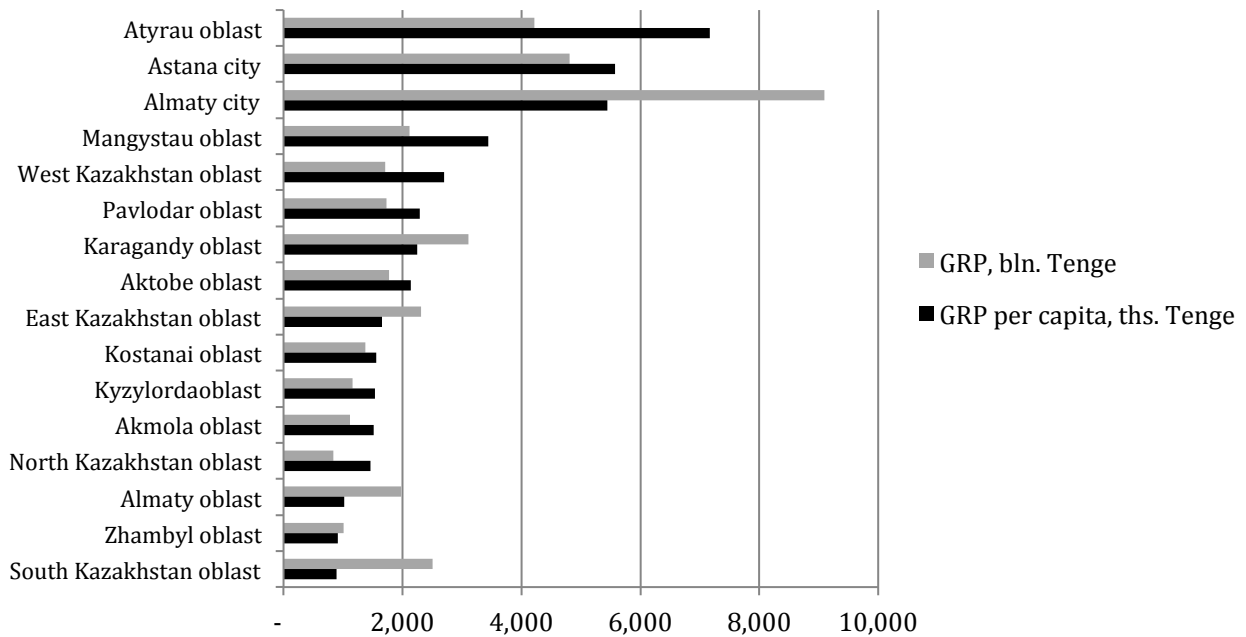
16 *Itogi migratsii naselenia Respubliki Kazakhstan za 2015 god* (Astana: Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Committee on Statistics, 2016). See all bulletins for the 1999–2015 period: http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersPopulation?_afLoop=13889536612055585#%40%3F_afLoop%3D13889536612055585%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D12pmag2wra_140.

Figure 1. Inter-Regional Migration Dynamics (Number of Migrants)



Source: Author's calculation, census data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Figure 2. Gross Regional Product of Kazakhstan's Administrative Regions (2015)



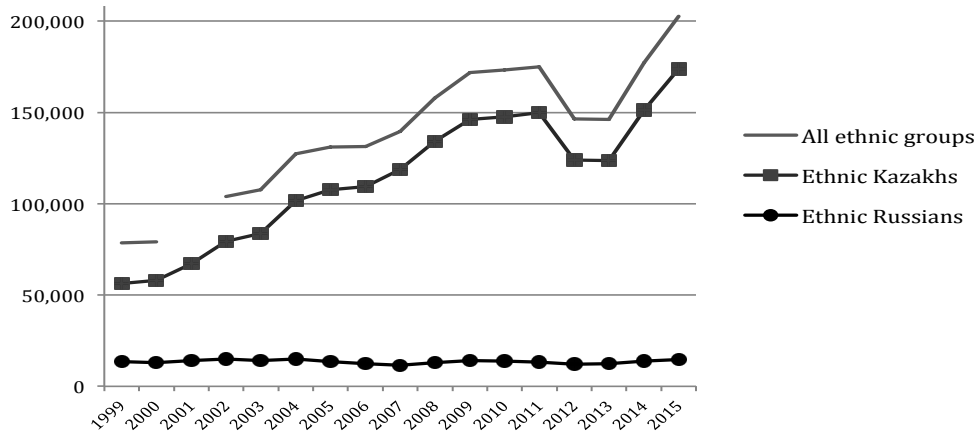
Source: Author's calculation, data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Economic gap and demographics can give a general answer to the question of why the South has so many more internal migrants than the North: the South has lower economic development indexes and the age structure of its population is favorable for migration. But there is also another decisive factor, one of a more cultural nature: ethnic identity. Looking more closely at the structure of internal migration, one can see that it is only Kazakhs that determine its

magnitude and dynamics (see Figure 3). The number of Russians who migrated inter-regionally within Kazakhstan never exceeded 15,000 people per year; there were 13,400 Russians among the 80,000 people of the overall inter-regional migration turnover in 1999 and 14,800 Russians among the 202,800 people who migrated in 2015.¹⁷

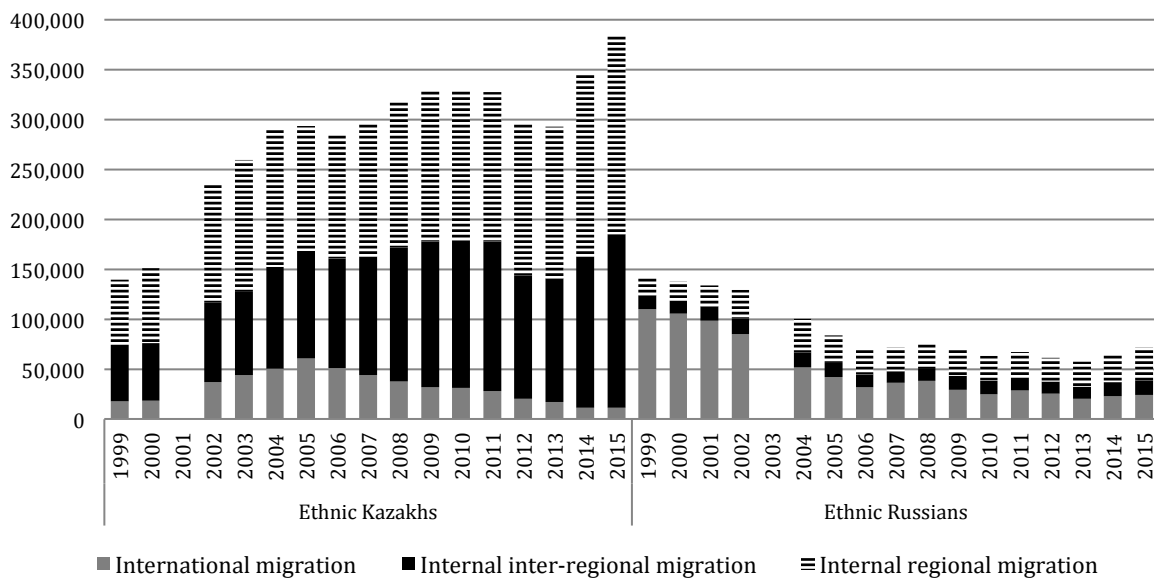
This is not only because fewer ethnic Russians migrate, but also because they realize their migra-

Figure 3. Dynamics of Inter-Regional Migration by Ethnic Groups



Source: Author's calculation, based on census data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Figure 4. Structure of Migration Turnover by Ethnic Groups



■ International migration ■ Internal inter-regional migration ■ Internal regional migration

Source: Author's calculations, based on census data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

tion potential through external migration; those who plan to move outside their oblast prefer to move abroad (see Figure 4). Even in 2015, when emigration seemed exhausted, 34 percent of ethnic Russians who migrated did so across the country's borders, moving to neighboring regions of Russian Siberia.

Given the prevailing reluctance of ethnic Russians to move within Kazakhstan, internal migration is determined by the Kazakh ethnic group alone. Still, the northern region constitutes one-third of all inter-regional migration—33 percent of all inter-regional migrants in 1999-2015. Migrants from the six northern oblasts move mostly within the North: 69 percent migrated to northern settlements—47 per-

cent of them to Astana city and surrounding Akmola oblast. Only about 2 percent moved to the western oblasts, 5 percent to southern ones (excluding Almaty city and Almaty oblast), and 24 percent to Almaty city and Almaty oblast (see Map 3).

About 40 percent of all inter-regional migrants during 1999-2015 came from the southern oblasts: 67 percent of the southerners migrated within the South—56 percent to Almaty city (47 percent) and surrounding Almaty oblast (9 percent), and 11 percent to other southern oblasts; 14 percent of them moved to Astana city and surrounding Akmola oblast, and 10 percent to other northern oblasts; and 8 percent to the West.

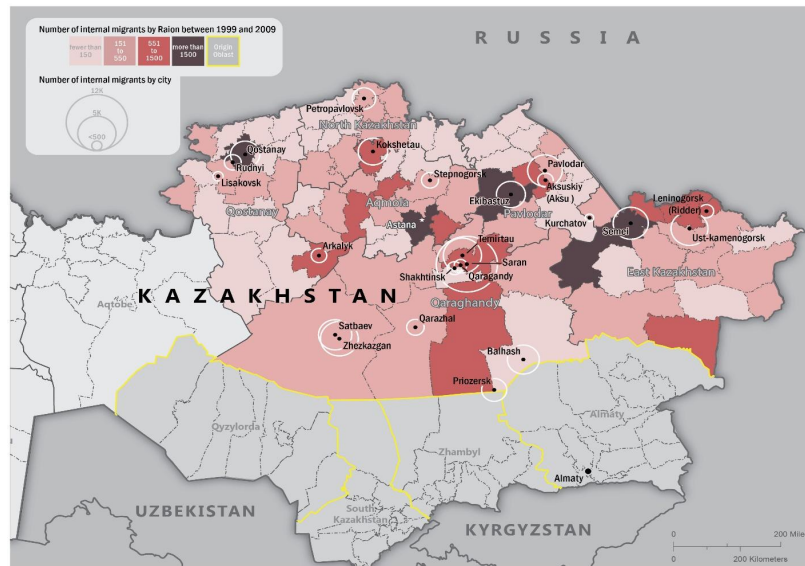
17 Ibid.

Map 3. Migration across Oblast Borders



Source: Author's calculations, based on census data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Map 4. Breakdown of Migrants from the Southern Oblasts between 1999 and 2015



Source: Author's calculations, based on data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

The northern region itself is diverse, and migrants from the South are not evenly distributed among the northern oblasts. The northernmost oblasts—Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, and Pavlodar—are the least attractive, with less than 1 percent migrants from the South. An overwhelming majority (8 percent out of 10 percent) of ethnic Kazakh migrants moved to the nearby Karaganda and East Kazakhstan oblasts. Flows to the farthest oblasts of the North look therefore microscopic (see Map 4). For example, during the whole period be-

tween 1999 and 2015, only about 1,400 out of 278,000 ethnic Kazakh inter-regional migrants from Almaty oblast moved to North Kazakhstan oblast. Only 2,600 out of 244,000 migrants from South Kazakhstan oblast moved to Kostanay during the same period. Flows from less populated Kyzylorda and Zhambyl oblasts are even smaller.

One can identify the three most common flows for the population of the southern oblasts: to rural centers of gravity within oblast borders, to the main cities of the oblasts (oblast centers), and to the capital

cities (Almaty and Astana). Astana, together with the nearby Karaganda and East Kazakhstan oblasts, takes a major share of those who migrate to the North.

Inter-regional (across oblast borders) migration in Kazakhstan is thus heavily affected by the implications of Kazakhstan's geography: large differences in climate, culture, and economic opportunities partly shape migration flows. Migration flows remain localized mostly within the regions—the North, the South, and the West. The best illustration is the two capitals: Astana receives many more internal migrants from the northern oblasts, and Almaty from the southern ones; they both receive few in-migrants from the western region lying equally far from both of them.

The South-to-North Migration Policy Record

The problem of population distribution in the North being a considerable concern for the Kazakh government, several voluntarist state-sponsored measures have been taken since the country's independence, such as setting quotas for the northern territories within the state program for repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs; the “Nurly Kosh” program of resettlement with incentives for repatriates and those citizens dwelling in “unfavorable”¹⁸ territories; and “Serpín” state education grants for rural youth to go to study in the North.

With about 1 million ethnic Kazakhs repatriated from abroad since 1991, the state's repatriation program has become one of the most remarkable initiatives of the government. Over 970,000 ethnic Kazakh repatriates [Oralmans] have entered the country since 1991: 62 percent of them came from Uzbekistan, 12 percent from China, 12 percent from Mongolia, 7 percent from Turkmenistan, 4 percent from Russia, and another 3-4 percent from other countries.¹⁹ The repatriation program aims both at showing Kazakhstan to be the ethnic homeland of all Kazakhs and at rebalancing demographic patterns in favor of Kazakhs in the northern oblasts and com-

pensating for emigration loss. However, the policy of resettling people specifically in the northern oblasts did not work.

Official reports recognize that despite quotas (exaggerated for the northern region) and incentives (offered housing), an overwhelming majority of repatriates still preferred the southern oblasts for settlement.²⁰ Most of the repatriating ethnic Kazakhs came from the countries lying to the south of Kazakhstan (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China, Afghanistan) and a vast majority of them preferred to settle in oblasts with a relatively similar geography and climatic conditions. Even among those who initially settled in the North, many migrated subsequently to the South; that movement is termed “secondary migration” (*vtorichnaia migratsiia*) in official reports.

The reliability of information on the numbers and distribution of Oralmans provided by government bodies has been questioned.²¹ For the purposes of this paper we prefer to use data from the last census, which gives us an understanding of regions that ethnic Kazakh immigrants preferred most. According to the census, 449,000 ethnic repatriates migrated and settled in Kazakhstan during the 1999–2009 period: 49 percent of them settled in the southern oblasts, 25 percent in the western ones, 19 percent in the northern ones, and the remaining 7 percent in Astana and Almaty.

The distribution of ethnic Kazakh repatriates is therefore very similar to that of internal migrants: southerners rarely go to the North. This is partly understandable, as the largest share of ethnic repatriates is coming from Uzbekistan and they prefer to settle in neighboring oblasts. Of all those who repatriated from Uzbekistan between 1999 and 2009, 62 percent settled in the southern oblasts, 21 percent in western ones, and only 13 percent in the northern region. The share of those who settled the southern region is similarly larger among repatriates from China (58 percent), Tajikistan (77 percent), Kyrgyzstan (58 percent), Afghanistan (85 percent), and Iran (44 percent). Geographical proximity thus seems to play a role in the decision to resettle; indeed, 86

18 “Ratsional'noe rasselenie i sodeistvie v obustroistve: etnicheskim emigrantam; byvshim grazhdanam Kazakhstana, pribyvshim dlia osushchestvleniia trudovoi deiatel'nosti na territorii Respubliki Kazakhstan; grazhdanam Kazakhstana, prozhivaiushchim v neblagopoluchnykh raionakh strany” (from the “Nurly Kosh” program's passport).

19 “Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii,” Ministerstvo zdravookhraneniia i sotsial'nogo razvitiia, August 16, 2016, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/338787>.

20 Kuanysha Sultanova and Tastemira Abisheva, eds., *Spetsial'nyi doklad O situatsii s pravami oralmanov, lits bez grazhdanstva i bezhentshev v Respublike Kazakhstan* (Astana: Komissiiia po pravam cheloveka pri Prezidente Respubliki Kazakhstan, 2012).

21 <http://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-interview-with-bodaukhan-on-repatriants/25090530.html>.

percent of immigrants from Turkmenistan settled in western Mangystau oblast, the one closest to them. The northern oblasts are attractive only for those coming from neighboring Russia and Mongolia: 44 percent of the former settled in the North, mostly in Pavlodar (13 percent), Kostanay (11 percent), and North Kazakhstan (10 percent) oblasts. Of the ethnic Kazakh immigrants from Mongolia, 73 percent settled in the northern oblasts.²²

Although on the whole, the ethnic repatriation program is seen to be successful, the directed geographical distribution of Oralmanians in prioritized areas failed.²³ The government has not abandoned this voluntarist policy and continues to try to channel repatriates to the North by a system of quotas and incentives, now complemented with restrictions and limitations.²⁴ For instance, the “Nurly Kosh” program, active from 2009 to 2011, was designed to stimulate the migration of ethnic repatriates and people living in “unfavorable” territories (*neblagopoluchnye raiony*) and to settle them in regions of the state’s economic priorities (*rasseleniia ... v sootvetstviu s potrebnostiami ekonomiki v trudovykh resursakh i dlia realizatsii proryvnykh projektov*).²⁵ It proposed impressive incentives such as preferential loans for housing and assistance with employment. But it was unsuccessful even at the pilot stage and was rapidly stopped.

Another state program, “Serpin,” launched in 2015, pushes rural youth from the southern oblasts to pursue higher and vocational education at universities and schools located in the northern and some western cities and towns. Only youth from five oblasts can apply for the grants. Four of them are in the South (Almaty, Zhambyl, South Kazakhstan, and Kyzylorda oblasts) and the fifth is a western one (Mangystau oblast); all of them are known for their predominantly ethnic Kazakh population, with a large share of rural population and therefore the highest birth rates. Over 11,000 grants were provided in 2014-2016.²⁶ Implementers of the program hope that most of the youth will find jobs after finishing their studies and settle in the North. However, the success of this initiative is questionable since it is not clear what advantages the new graduates will have on the local labor market.

The government’s efforts to shift the population distribution pattern in the northern oblasts do not yet have any examples of success. This may be understandable given that northern Kazakhstan is part of a larger geographical macro-region—Siberia—with a specific climate, culture, and economic features that are rather different from the rest of Kazakhstan. Russia itself faces the impossibility of maintaining its own population in Siberian cities, especially in the most northern or far-eastern ones; the policies of managed migrations that were possible during Soviet times cannot be implemented now in another economic and political context. Despite the Russian government’s efforts to reverse the negative trend, the outflow of population from Siberia in the direction of more welcoming European regions of the country continues to this day.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Mapping of internal migration in Kazakhstan shows that movement beyond oblast borders is heavily shaped by distances and by the existence of strong regional identities. Southerners primarily move within the southern region; likewise, northerners prefer to stay in the northern one. The northernmost areas—Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, and Pavlodar oblasts—do not attract any significant numbers of migrants that could shift the population distribution pattern; this area seems destined to slowly depopulate and remain economically oriented toward Russia’s Siberian cities—Omsk, Chelyabinsk, and Yekaterinburg. Astana is the only northern city that receives large flows of migrants from the South. The promising example of large internal migration to Astana city should not be misunderstood, however: those hundreds of thousands who migrated to the new capital did so without any state stimuli or channeling; it was a natural movement toward one of the most prosperous cities of the country in search of a better life and a symbolic lift on the social ladder. No other northern city can compete with Astana in terms of economic and symbolic attraction.

Massive migration from the South to the territories bordering the Russian Federation remains a

22 *Itogi natsional’noi perepisi naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda.*

23 Sultanova and Abisheva, eds., *Spetsialnyi doklad.*

24 <http://www.rikatv.kz/evrika/region/shlagbaum-dlya-oralmana.html>.

25 <https://www.zakon.kz/130010-nurly-kosh-programma-dejstvuj.html>.

26 http://www.serpin.kz/?page_id=26.

matter of wishful thinking on the part of the state and does not match up with the current internal migration patterns. The migration behavior of ethnic repatriates demonstrates without ambiguity that even solid incentives like housing and social benefits are not enough to make people settle in territories of state priority. Only job markets and a feeling of cultural belonging to a certain region seem to drive migration flows. It would therefore be beneficial for the Kazakhstani government to take into consideration the previous failures in trying to manage migration flows and orient itself toward new policies that would

target improving the job market in every region and reducing economic inequalities between regions. The potential risk of irredentism coming from the Russian-dominated northern oblasts should be addressed by other means than the failed hope of a targeted migration of ethnic Kazakhs. In any case, the demographic evolution of Kazakhstan plays in favor of the Kazakh majority and not in favor of the Russian minority. Yet, the issue of strong regional identities, with Kazakhstan's territory divided into three big regions—North, South, and West—with strong local identities, will have to be addressed in the future.

Chapter 3.

Ethnic Return Migration in Kazakhstan: Shifting State Dynamics, Changing Media Discourses

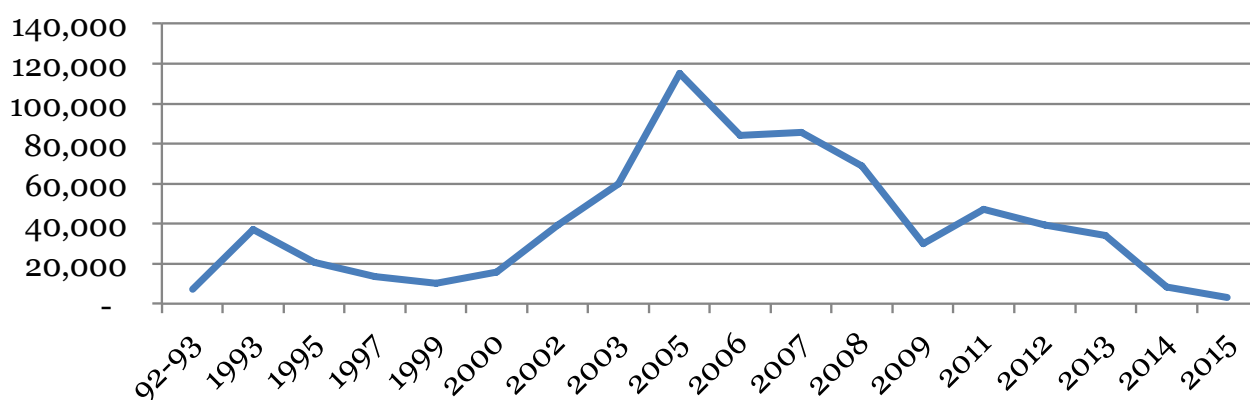
Berikbol Dukeyev¹ (2017)

Introduction

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan launched an ethnic repatriation program for returning ethnic Kazakhs who had left the country during the years of Tsarist colonization and Soviet control. In the 23 years since it was launched, the ethnic repatriation program has brought into the country about 1 million ethnic returnees (in Kazakh: *Oralmandar*),

who now constitute a sizeable 10 percent of the ethnic Kazakh population. The ethnic returnees have come mostly from Uzbekistan (61.6 percent), China (14.2 percent), Mongolia (6.8 percent), Turkmenistan (4.6 percent), and Russia (3.7 percent).² As seen in Figure 1 below, the flow of ethnic returnees was particularly buoyant in the period of Kazakhstan's first post-Soviet economic growth, especially from 1999 to 2004, increasing from 10,000 in 1999 to 115,000 in 2005.³

Figure 1. Ethnic Returnees per Year, 1992–2015



Sources: "Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii," Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/330063>; "Oralmanov v Kazakhstan prebyvaiut vse men'she," Azaattyq.org, <http://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-repatriants-statistics/25146818.html>; "Osnovnye tendentsii migratsionnykh protsessov v Kazakhstane na sovremennom etape," Articlekz.com, <http://articlekz.com/article/7395>

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2 "Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii na 1 oktiabria 2015 goda," Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/332244>.

3 "Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii," Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/330063>.

Research about ethnic repatriation in Kazakhstan can be divided broadly into three main directions. The first scrutinizes the complex levels of ethnic returnees' integration into Kazakhstan,⁴ including adaptation to their new environment.⁵ Research has mainly concluded that difficulties in adaptation have led to the marginalization of ethnic returnees.⁶ A second group of researchers has worked on the topic of ethnic returnees from a transnational identity perspective and studied how ethnic returnees practice their multiple identities.⁷ The third group has researched ethnic return from a nation-building and public discourse perspective; they hypothesize that ethnic return has created a so far irreconcilable public debate between supporters of ethnic nation-building and those who favor a civic approach.⁸

One aspect that has been less studied is how the Kazakhstani state has shifted and changed its policy toward ethnic returnees in response to various events during the course of the past quarter-century. Since the topic of ethnic returnees has always been of high interest to the domestic audience, tracking coverage of the issue in Kazakhstani media allows us to better understand the shifts of public sentiment toward ethnic returnees. In this paper, I argue that the state's approach to the return of ethnic Kazakhs has changed significantly and can be divided into three broad stages of implementation, based on domestic developments. To complement my analysis of the state policy changes, I also examine how media discourses on the ethnic returnees question have evolved by looking at four nationwide state and private newspapers, both in Kazakh and in Russian, from 1992 to October 2016. One of my main findings is that the shifting dynamics of state priorities and changing media discourses have influenced the ethnic returnees' image from positive to negative and then to that of an excluded group.

Zigzagging State Policies toward Ethnic Repatriation

First Stage (1991–1999): From Legitimizing Kazakhness to a Civic Nation-State

The collapse of the Soviet Union prompted the newly independent countries to promote their titular ethnicity in order to consolidate the acquired statehood and dissociate themselves from the Russian and Soviet past. Kazakhstan joined this trend in promoting ethnic Kazakhs as the core of the new nation-building project. In 1991 ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan represented only 40 percent of the population.⁹ In the name of a "restoration of historical justice,"¹⁰ the Kazakh authorities quickly decided to call back ethnic Kazakhs who had emigrated, mostly in the 1930s. The regulations for ethnic repatriation were set by the "Law on Immigration" adopted by Supreme Council (Parliament) on June 26, 1992. According to it, the state would set quotas for repatriation as well as the amount of a financial allowance for adaptation and resettlement of ethnic returnees in the regions of Kazakhstan.

With this move, the government was promoting an image of the young Kazakh state as the ethnic homeland of all the Kazakhs in the world.¹¹ For some ethnic kinsmen abroad, this call back to the ethnic homeland was attractive and many decided to come back.¹² The first wave of returnees who responded to the state repatriation program was cheered by officials who saw in their return a chance for revival of the Kazakh language, culture, and traditions and a break from the Russian and Soviet past. The returnees thus served partly to legitimize the independent country and were instrumentalized by the authorities to win over part of the Kazakh electorate by promoting ethnic identity.¹³

4 Alexander C. Diener, "Problematic Integration of Mongolian-Kazakh Return Migrants in Kazakhstan," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, no. 6 (2005): 465–78.

5 Baurzhan Bokayev, "Language, Ethnic Identity, and Adaptation of Ethnic Migrants in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *European Scientific Journal* 6 (2013).

6 Alexander Diener, "Kazakhstan Kin-State Diaspora: Settlement Planning and the Oralman Dilemma," *Europe Asia Studies* 57, no. 2 (2005): 327–48.

7 Saltanat Akhmetova, "At Home among Strangers: The Integration and Transnational Practices of Chinese-Born Kazakh Returnees in Kazakhstan" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Essex, United Kingdom, 2016), <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1827872520?accountid=11243>.

8 Isik Kuşçu, "Ethnic Return Migration and Public Debate: The Case of Kazakhstan," *International Migration* 52 (2014): 178–97.

9 "15 novykh nezavisimyykh gosudarstv. Chislennost' naseleniia na nachalo goda, 1950–2016, tysiach chelovek," *Demoscope*, http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_pop.php.

10 "Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva ot 16.09.1998 N 900, "O kontseptsii repatriatsii etnicheskikh kazakhov na istoricheskuiu rodinu," *Kazakhstancity.info*, http://kazakhstan.news-city.info/docs/sistemsb/dok_oeqhv.htm.

11 "Rech' Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbaeva na torzhestvennom zasedanii Vsemirnogo kurultaia kazakhov," *Zakon.kz*, http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30006956.

12 Diener, "Kazakhstan Kin-State Diaspora."

13 Kuşçu, "Ethnic Return Migration and Public Debate."

The first wave of ethnic repatriates asserted allegiance to Kazakhstan despite the difficulties of repatriation in terms of socio-economic integration and adaptation into the new society and its then weak economy.¹⁴ Ethnic repatriates readily explained that they were thankful to have come back to Kazakhstan. As one said, “We were happy to come back to our homeland. We would like to thank all supporters for that, first of all ethnic Kazakhs who accepted us in Kazakhstan.”¹⁵

However, in the mid-1990s, the state authorities decided to reduce the ethnic focus of Kazakhstan’s nation-building project and instead promote multiethnic diversity in support of a civic nation-state construction. At this phase, the repatriation program became the subject of an intense public debate between supporters of ethnic and civic nation-building.¹⁶ The supporters of civic nation-building argued for a kind of Soviet-style nationalities policy in order to promote a non-ethnically based Kazakhstani identity, more friendly to Russian-speaking minorities.¹⁷

Supporters of a civic identity believed that ethnic repatriation was an initiative destined to fail. They questioned the government’s financial capacity to provide social benefits to repatriates and the economic sustainability of the program. Ethnic nation-state supporters favored the repatriation program, viewing it as a measure of historical justice in response to the forced emigration of ethnic Kazakhs in the past, and raised alarms about the risks of national erosion and assimilation to the Russian world. They called for the recognition of ethnic Kazakhs as victims of the Soviet Union’s policies of famine and collectivization and the targeted limitations imposed on the use of the Kazakh language.¹⁸

Meanwhile, ethnic returnees were getting over their euphoria about returning to their ethnic homeland and were becoming increasingly outspoken about their difficult socio-economic conditions. Repatriates’ discontent and protests increased.¹⁹ The

shifting narrative in the homeland from the ethnic to the civic approach was one of the reasons for their dissatisfaction: they felt their privileged status was no longer valid while socio-economic issues were making them more vulnerable.²⁰

Second Stage (2000–2011): Repatriates as a Source of Labor to Repatriates as “Otherness”

As nation-building took a basically civic path, the authorities were less inclined to offer special privileges to ethnic returnees. Increasingly, they saw them not as a symbol of a revived Kazakhness but as a cheap and easy source of labor. This shift in state perception coincided with the dynamism of the Kazakhstani economy in the 2000s, based on rising oil and minerals prices and the growing need for a cheap workforce.

A new program for regional and rural development and industrialization of the country, called “Nurly Kosh” (The bright migration), decided at the end of the 2000s, embodied this view of ethnic repatriation as fulfilling the needs of the country’s economic and industrial development.²¹ The program aimed to move ethnic repatriates, along with labor migrants from abroad as well as internal migrants, to labor-scarce territories in the North, East, and West of the country. It envisaged that 2 billion tenge (approximately \$1.3 billion) would be spent over three years, from 2009 to 2011. The program aimed to develop small, integrated hubs of cities with some economic specialization and a common labor market. In order to implement the envisaged 45 innovation projects, 39,000 workers were required; they would receive support from the state, including a housing allowance.²² To provide housing, the government built special compact settlements, funded through budget loans provided from the central budget to local executive bodies. The government planned to provide housing for 3,269 returnee families.²³ These special settlements for the ethnic returnees segregat-

14 Results of author’s fieldwork in Qoyandi, June–August 2016.

15 Isik Kuscu, “Kazakhstan Oralman Project: A Remedy for Ambiguous Identity?” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, USA, 2008), 252, <http://gradworks.umi.com/33/44/3344583.html>.

16 Ibid.

17 Kuscu, “Kazakhstan Oralman Project,” 216.

18 Ibid.

19 See protests at: Shanirak village, Almaty oblast in 2006; Baiterek village, the North Kazakhstan oblast in 2011; micro district Duman 1, Almaty, in 2011; Akyn sara village, Almaty oblast in 2012; Shigis village in 2013, in “Oralmany,” *Esquire*, <http://m.esquire.kz/content/1149-oralmanyi>.

20 Ibid.

21 “Programma ‘Nurly Kosh,’” *Online.zakon.kz*, http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30365313#pos=33;-292.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

ed them from other citizens, limited communication with the local population, and complicated their adaptation and integration.

According to the presidential decree, the quota for ethnic returnees eligible to receive social benefits was 20,000 families per year from 2009 to 2011. In comparison to previous decrees from 2005–2007, the quota had been doubled.²⁴ However, it was not met, and the program reached only 36 percent of its goal. Potential ethnic returnees weighed the opportunity to move to poorer regions of Kazakhstan against better economic conditions in their countries of origin or in some other regions of Kazakhstan where they already had some relatives. Difficulties of integration experienced in the previous years also explain the failure to meet the repatriation quotas. At the end, an inspection by the Accounting Committee revealed the fragmented character of the program's implementation, and it was stopped.²⁵

In late 2011, a protest by oil workers in the small city of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan dramatically impacted the issue of ethnic repatriates. This region was one of the main destinations for Oralman from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The conflict and its repression had multiple causes, but the authorities preferred to look for scapegoats and found them in the ethnic returnees. As the official discourse of stability and effective government began to be scrutinized by civil society, protest groups, and independent media, the government had to make efforts to legitimize its actions in Zhanaozen. It framed the state's behavior as having been compelled by the necessity of providing security rather than as an act of force. The government's narrative thus contributed to accentuating the "otherness" of Oralmans by dissociating them from the national "we" of Kazakhs who support the stability of the country. It presented them as being the source of the riots, in the hope of avoid-

ing addressing the deep socio-economic roots of the conflict.²⁶

Yermuhamed Yertysbayev, then an aide to the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, stated: "What happened in Zhanaozen was not typical for the Kazakh mentality. Kazakhs have never opposed the central government. The main organizers in Zhanaozen are people who recently received Kazakhstani citizenship; they came from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; they have not fully fit into the Kazakh mentality."²⁷ Timur Kulibayev, the president's son-in-law and former chairman of the board of the National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna, declared even more plainly that "the leaders of the protesting oil workers in Zhanaozen are returnees."²⁸ Umirzhak Shukkeyev, former vice prime minister, suggested not accepting any more ethnic returnees in Mangystau oblast, and proposed that returnees who already lived there should be settled in other regions.²⁹ Some state-affiliated experts "confirmed" that the Zhanaozen events were organized by Oralmans from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan who were more prone to social protests than local Kazakhs.³⁰

The state-led discourse of "Other" built on the Zhanaozen incident allowed the government to divert attention from the actual failed results of the "Nurly Kosh" program. After the program was shut down, the government stopped monitoring its implementation and only local administrative bodies were responsible for it.³¹

Third Stage (2014 – currently): The Ukrainian Crisis Catharsis

The Ukrainian crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 caused the Kazakhstani authorities great concern. The claims that some Russian nationalists made on the northern Kazakhstan territories,³² and occasional separatist appeals in the

24 "O kvote immigratsii oralmanov na 2009–2011 gody," *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/prezident_respubliki_kazahstan/konstitutsionnyiy_stroy_i_osnovnyi_gosudarstvennogo_upravleniya/id-U080000690/.

25 "Vystuplenie Predsedatelia Schetnogo komiteta," Accounting Committee for Control of Implementation of the State Budget of Kazakhstan, <http://esep.kz/rus/showin/article/577>.

26 David Lewis "Blogging Zhanaozen: Hegemonic Discourse and Authoritarian Resilience in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 3 (2016): 421–38.

27 "Oralmany," *Esquire*.

28 "Kulibaev: Liderami bastuiushchikh v Zhanaozene neftiannikov iavliaiutsia pereselentsy," *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/kazahstan_news/kulibaev-liderami-bastuyuschih-janaozene-neftyanikov-197979/.

29 "V Kazakhstane vnov' ozabotilis' sud'boi oralmanov," *Titus*, <http://titus.kz/index.php?previd=40880&start=30>.

30 Sultan Akimbekov, "Kazakhstan posle Zhanaozena i vyborov," *TsentrAzii*, <http://www.asiakz.com/node/117>.

31 "Schetnyi komitet otmechaet neeffektivnuiu realizatsiiu Programmy 'Nurly kosh' na 2009–2011 gody," *Nomad.su*, <http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-201205160028>.

32 "Reaktsiia na zaiavleniia Limonova i Zhirinovskogo kak pokazatel' provintsializma MID RK," *Radiotochka*, <https://radiotochka.kz/1814-.html>.

Russian-based social network VKontakte by residents of the northern Kazakhstan oblasts, set off alarms for the authorities.³³ The government tightened up the law against secessionism and its supporters,³⁴ and decided to relaunch a more voluntarist policy for changing the demographic balance in the country's northern oblasts.³⁵

The authorities adopted a new decree on repatriates' resettlement in seven oblasts of Kazakhstan on March 20, 2014, just a few days after the Crimea annexation. According to the text, repatriates should be resettled in six out of the seven oblasts in northern Kazakhstan.³⁶ On June 8, 2014, the government expanded the number of oblasts to 14 – that is, the whole of the country, excluding the two capital cities of Almaty and Astana. But the envisaged social benefits – namely, a housing allowance, travel payment, job opportunities, and bank credits – were guaranteed only for those returnees who settle in the northern oblasts.³⁷

This policy complements an already existing program for resettlement of people from the populous southern oblasts to the less densely populated northern part of Kazakhstan.³⁸ But as Serik Jaxylykov shows in no *CAP Papers* no. 184, “The Northern Region and the Southern People: Migration Policies and Patterns in Kazakhstan,” the majority of ethnic returnees, especially those from Uzbekistan, have settled in the southern oblasts (23.2 percent in South Kazakhstan oblast, 20.2 percent in Almaty oblast, and 7.4 percent in Zhambyl oblast) in the previous stages of implementation of ethnic repatriation program.³⁹

Although the government claimed that the northern oblasts were short of labor supply, in reality most of the ethnic returnees had no professional

education and thus could not replace the departing Russian and Slavic population in their industrial or agricultural jobs. Clearly, the goal was to change the demographic balance in favor of ethnic Kazakhs. Moreover, the government reduced the timeframe for the processing of new Kazakhstan citizenship applications from 5–7 years to 1 year and removed solvency conditions for repatriates.⁴⁰ The acceleration of citizenship processing also meant that the government would be able to cut its expenses for the social benefits that earlier had to be provided during the five years before Oralmanov could attain citizenship status, a discrete way to reduce public spending at a time of limited state budgets.⁴¹ In 2016, state-affiliated experts in the ethnic repatriation program proposed to prioritize young ethnic returnees who would in theory more easily adapt, obtain higher education in Kazakhstan, and become an integral part of the society.⁴² This proposal is likely to be supported by state officials, as it would reduce the financial costs associated with the return of whole families.

Changing Media Discourses on Ethnic Repatriates

After television, newspapers play an important role in shaping public opinion. The print media constitute 90 percent of the total registered media outlets in Kazakhstan.⁴³ For this study, I selected two main state-owned newspapers, the Kazakh-language *Egemen Qazaqstan* (Sovereign Kazakhstan, 170,000-copy circulation) and the Russian-language *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* (Truth of Kazakhstan, 100,000-copy circulation).⁴⁴ Both newspapers reproduce the state ideol-

33 “Kazakhstan: piat’ let tiur’my za separatistskii opros ‘VKontakte,’” *Sputniknews*, <http://sputnikpogrom.com/news/47006/19-november-2015-1/#.V-6hyvDhDFg>.

34 “Nakazanie za separatizm uzhestochat v Kazakhstane,” *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/nakazanie-za-separatizm-ujestochat-v-kazakhstane-253259/.

35 Joanna Lilis, “Kazakhstan: Astana Entices Kazakhs from Abroad Amid Ukraine Crisis,” *Eurasianet*, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69006>.

36 “Ob opredelenii regionov dlia rasseleniia oralmanov i pereselentsev,” *Egov.kz*, <https://egov.kz/cms/ru/law/list/P1600000083>.

37 Ibid.

38 “Ob utverzhdenii Dorozhnoi karty zaniatosti 2020,” *Tengrinews*, https://tengrinews.kz/zakon/pravitelstvo_respubliki_kazahstan_premier_ministr_rk/trud/id-P1300000636/.

39 “Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii.”

40 “V Kazakhstane uprostiti protseduru polucheniia grazhdanstva dlia oralmanov,” *Zona.kz*, <https://zonakz.net/view-v-kazakhstane-uprostiti-proceduru-polucheniia-grazhdanstva-dlja-oralmanov.html>.

41 Ibid.

42 “Etnicheskaiia migratsiia: pora meniat’ podkhody,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <http://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/etnicheskaya-migratsiya-pora-menyat-podhodi/>.

43 “Istoriia stanovleniia informatsionnogo rynka v Kazakhstane,” *Medialaw*, <http://medialaw.asia/node/9139>.

44 “Gazet-tarikhy,” *Egemen Qazaqstan*, <https://egemen.kz/gazet-tarikhy>.

ogy, and their subscribers are mostly people who are funded from the state budget, such as civil servants, teachers, and doctors.⁴⁵ Both newspapers are deemed to be a major source of printed information in the different regions and in rural areas of Kazakhstan because of the limited access to other types of newspapers or the Internet.⁴⁶ I have also selected two privately owned newspapers, *Zhas Alash* (Young Alash) in Kazakh and *Vremia* (Time) in Russian, with circulations of 50,000 and 180,000 copies, respectively. *Zhas Alash* and *Vremia* are semi-independent newspapers and therefore to some degree express a balanced critical view. The readers of *Zhas Alash* are representatives of the ethnic Kazakh intelligentsia, followers and sympathizers of Kazakh nationalism, while *Vremia's* subscribers are mostly from the urban areas and people who tend to seek alternative views on various issues.⁴⁷

Egemen Qazaqstan maintains an online presence in the Latin-derived Turkish script and the Arabic-derived *tote zhazu* script in order to be readable by Kazakhs in Turkey and Xinjiang.⁴⁸ This reflects the desire of the state to influence ethnic Kazakhs residing abroad and promote Kazakhstan as a successfully developed nation in which repatriates have played a key role, especially those from Xinjiang. Contributors to *Zhas Alash* include ethnic returnees who write in a rich Kazakh language and with an independent critical approach. Articles by journalists who are ethnic returnees have become influential because of their bold language and original views, especially when they show no attachment to the Soviet Union. This allows ethnic returnee journalists to discuss the issues of ethnic repatriation using full strength of the Kazakh language. It is noteworthy that the state's nationwide newspapers refused to hire journalists from among the ethnic returnees, who have found an outlet in the semi-independent Kazakh newspapers.⁴⁹

Ethnic returnees have also created web platforms in order to advance their own perspectives and voices. Currently, the most popular websites in

Kazakh are *abai.kz*, created with the participation of ethnic returnees, and *qamshy.kz* (Whip) and *dalanews.kz* (the Steppe News), entirely owned by ethnic returnees.⁵⁰ According to the ratings, *qamshy.kz* took fortieth place, with about 200,000 visitors per month, among Kazakhstan's 7,420 registered websites.⁵¹ Online platforms like these are becoming tools for popularizing the Kazakh nationalist discourse among the Kazakh-speaking population. Each website offers specific viewpoints and focus; for instance, *qamshy.kz* often expresses anti-Chinese sentiments while *abai.kz* focuses on criticizing the Soviet policy toward Kazakhs.

These web platforms are offering high-quality content in Kazakh at a time when online media in Kazakh generally still struggle to find a readership niche. They easily attract readers from among those who crave analytical information in the Kazakh language. As key to their success, these websites raise particular social, political, economic, identity, and foreign policy issues as seen from a Kazakh ethnic perspective and even from the perspective of what they call "Kazakh national consciousness." Undoubtedly, these web platforms promote Kazakh nationalism and respond to the demands of a Kazakh-speaking population. They have an impact on the development of Kazakh nationalist discourse and the growth of conservative ideology among young ethnic Kazakhs.⁵²

Diverging Coverage of Ethnic Repatriation by Kazakh- and Russian-language Newspapers

Articles about ethnic returnees mostly appear in the Kazakh-language newspapers *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Zhas Alash*. The Russian-language *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* and *Vremia* have published few articles on this topic, considered less relevant to the Russian-speaking part of the population; they mostly promote the civic nation-building perspective.

45 Aziz Burkhanov and Yu-Wen Chen, "Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 12 (2016): 2129–48.

46 "Internet v kazakhstanskikh selakh v 30 raz medlennee, chem v gorodakh," *Informburo*, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/internet-v-kazakhstanskikh-syolah-v-30-raz-medlennee-chem-v-gorodakh-.html>.

47 Burkhanov and Chen, "Kazakh Perspective on China."

48 See the website of *Egemen Qazaqstan*: www.egemen.kz.

49 Author's interview with the deputy to the editor-in-chief of a state-owned newspaper, in Astana, May 27, 2016.

50 Berikbol Dukekeyev, Letter, Yesengul Kapkyzy, professor at Suleiman Demirel University, November 4, 2016.

51 "Ratings of the websites," *Zero.kz*, <http://zero.kz/?c=&sr=kz&pd=2592000>.

52 "Content analysis of web sites," The Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the "Strategy" Fund, Almaty, 2013.

In the first stage of the repatriation process, both Kazakh-language and Russian-language newspapers took a similar approach to the issue, presenting ethnic returnees as part of Kazakhstan's nation-building vision as an ethnic homeland. *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Zhas Alash* highlighted the reunification of the ethnic returnees and the Sovietized Kazakh population in one homeland as the symbol of Kazakhstan's new nationhood. In contrast, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* and *Vremia* presented a more complex picture, insisting on the contradictions and unknowns of the new nationhood and the potential contribution of ethnic returnees to the national economy, as well as the issues of resettling and providing for the basic needs of the ethnic returnees. In particular, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* questioned the sustainability of the return:

Saying goodbye, I asked Amantay (an ethnic returnee from Mongolia), can it happen that you will return to Mongolia after the end of contract (all of them have Mongolian passports). Amantay remained silent and then pondered a reply: "No, we will stay." But if he, even passionately loving his homeland, does not find what he looked and aspired for – that is another matter.⁵³

There were major differences emerging between the two information spaces. Kazakh-language newspapers described ethnic return in terms of a primordial notion of "self," using terms such as *qandas* (kinsmen), *bauir* (brother), *again jurt* (relatives).⁵⁴ By contrast, Russian-language media described ethnic returnees, based on a Soviet notion of nationality (*natsional'nost'*), as repatriates, *pereselentsy* (immigrants), and *litsa korennoi natsional'nosti* (people of the indigenous nationality).⁵⁵

Framing Oralman as an "Issue" for Kazakhstan

The term *Oralman*, often used by Kazakh and Russian newspapers to describe the ethnic returnees, acquired additional meanings, but in both languages it was mostly used to describe negative experiences. The state newspapers *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* conveyed the official discourse of resettlement to meet the needs of

Kazakhstan's economic development in labor-scarce regions. In many of its publications, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* particularly stressed the socio-economic opportunities for ethnic returnees:

All Oralman are provided with access to medical services, education, and social care provision; they are targeted as one of the groups in respect of which we use measures to facilitate employment.⁵⁶

However, as an independent newspaper, *Zhas Alash* did not hesitate to criticize the implementation of the "Nurly Kosh" program and especially the limited capacities and responsibilities of local administrative bodies. For example, according to the program's pilot project, a special micro district was built for the needs of ethnic returnees in southern Kazakhstan oblasts. However, local administrative bodies distributed these houses only to ethnic returnees from Uzbekistan who belonged to one particular clan.⁵⁷

Interestingly, after the Zhanaozen riots in December 2011, the state newspapers *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* did not blame ethnic returnees for the riots; in other words, they did not reproduce politicians' mainstream narratives. Instead, the authorities focused on online media to spread a negative image of Oralman and called on popular bloggers to shape online opinion,⁵⁸ but they let the print press opt out of this blame game. Some state newspapers did join high-ranking officials in their labeling of Oralman as the embodiment of the "Other," but they soon focused on questioning the "Nurly Kosh" program's results, and relayed the critical view of the Accounting Committee of Kazakhstan concerning the fragmented implementation of the program. The housing for ethnic repatriates was not well built and was not distributed equally, and the optimistic goal of creating several thousands of new jobs was not met.⁵⁹

The Post-Crimean Image Restoration of Oralman

During the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the relaunching of the ethnic repatriation program, returnees were encouraged to settle in northern areas of Kazakhstan

53 "Is Kazakhstan becoming a motherland for ethnic returnees from Mongolia?" *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, September 26, 1992.

54 See articles in *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Zhas Alash* from 1992 to 1997.

55 See articles in *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* from 1992 to 1997.

56 "Nurly Kosh – programma deistvii," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, December 9, 2009.

57 "Oralman discriminated against based on clan affiliation," *Zhas Alash* August 23, 2011.

58 Lewis, "Blogging Zhanaozen."

59 "Schetnyi komitet otmechaet neeffektivnuiu realizatsiiu Programmy 'Nurly kosh'."

with assurances that they would be provided housing allowances and jobs. This evolution in the government's approach was reflected in state-owned newspapers. They portrayed the repatriation as *Uli kosh* (great migration) or *Kazakh koshi* (Kazakh migration), thus evoking the nomadic past of the country and the creation of the Kazakh khanate, the symbolic precursor of contemporary Kazakhstan, in the fifteenth century.

Egemen Qazaqstan commented positively on the state program's changes, especially the reductions of bureaucratic obstacles for repatriates to gain Kazakhstani citizenship. It promoted the state narrative about repatriates getting houses, land parcels, and bank credits for the development of greenhouses and gardening. It wrote cheerful articles to lure Oralman to northern Kazakhstan.⁶⁰ In particular, an article titled "Kazakhs, Move to the North" advanced the following message:

All Kazakhs are relatives to one another; not only the South but all parts of the country are warm; not only the weather but also the local government should be favorable. The land of the Kazakhs is a wide expanse common for all Kazakhstanis. Land, country, and, more important, interests, are common for all of us. The government is not advertising this project because the budget does not allow for increasing quotas, as the entire world is in a crisis. However, businessmen and the wealthy should be urged to help people who are willing to come to Kazakhstan with housing, jobs, and plots of land. In the end, the government will gain enduring credibility and the respect of the generations.⁶¹

An identical narrative was presented in state-owned *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, which emphasized the returnees' contribution to the country's development:

Oralmans become the pride of our country; they are successfully developing the economy and culture, raising the status of the Kazakh language, and enriching traditions, strengthening our independence.⁶²

Kazakhstanskaia pravda also suddenly depicted ethnic returnees as hard-working persons who have become middle-class businessmen in their villages – successful people who have contributed to the development of the local economy. This excerpt is from an article emphasizing that ethnic returnees have contributed to the development of a village:

Give thanks to Oralman. If it were not for them, the locals still would not have mastered a roadside trade; if it were not them, who would work in livestock, as shepherds, as manufacturers of saddles, harnesses, yurts, bows; if it were not for them, recreation areas would be left without [anyone to prepare] kumis, ayran, boursaks, or home cakes, [and gather] firewood and spring water; if not for them, it is hard to find "social activists" to clean the streets.⁶³

The semi-independent *Vremia* preferred to raise the unresolved issues of ethnic returnees, discussing problems associated with their registration by local administrative bodies, xenophobic attitudes toward them, difficulties for their villages to get access to electricity and the main state-sponsored public services, and so forth.⁶⁴ For example, ethnic returnees from China regularly complained about difficulties registering their surnames with the local administrative bodies in order to obtain state identification cards, as they did not have surnames living in China.⁶⁵

Zhas Alash shared the same, critical perspective, describing the issues of poor quality of houses constructed as part of the "Nurly Kosh" program; the tensions between Kazakh returnees from Iran, who do not speak Russian, and the Mangystau administrative bodies; ethnic returnees' proposal to be represented as a specific group in the Parliament; and their protests in the small village of Qoyandy.⁶⁶ *Zhas Alash* depicted the current perception of ethnic returnees by the population as follows:

The term *Oralman* is imagined to mean persons who are devoid of law, do not understand Russian, and are starv-

60 "Kosh kaita zhandana bastardy," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <https://pdf.egemen.kz/pdfs/2016/10/12102016-web.pdf>.

61 "Kozgal Qazaq Soltustikke," *Egemen Qazaqstan*, <https://egemen.kz/2016/09/08/60693>.

62 "S liubov'iu k rodine," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <http://www.kazpravda.kz/fresh/view/s-liubov-u-k-rodine3/>.

63 "Will go to Akadyr," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, <http://www.kazpravda.kz/fresh/view/budu-ezdit-v-akadir/>.

64 "Svet klirkom soshelsia," *Vremia*, <http://www.time.kz/articles/risk/2015/04/11/svet-klirkom-soshelsja>.

65 "Zvat' tebia nikak," *Vremia*, <http://www.time.kz/news/archive/2012/12/13/i-zvat-tebya-nikak>.

66 "Irnann kelgen Qazaqtar kerı kaituda," *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/kogam/16789.html?lang=kz>; "Oralmanga obal-audeitin pende tabil-mai tur," *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/eleumet/18231.html?lang=kz>; "Bir japirak nan bershi degen syakti goi," *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/sayasat/16500.html?lang=kz>.

ing from hunger. This is not true. Kinsmen who came from abroad include persons with higher education, good knowledge of law, and who think more about giving to Kazakhstan rather than about taking from it.⁶⁷

The media coverage of the relaunching of the repatriation program after the Ukrainian crisis thus combined several of the previous narratives. On one hand, it is celebrated as part of the nation-building process in response to potential risks coming from Russia in the northern regions of the country, and as a positive step to rebalance demographic and ethnic distribution in favor of ethnic Kazakhs. On the other hand, the media continue to cover the main socio-economic aspects of the repatriates' integration process, including their constructive role in building private entrepreneurship and their difficulties in integrating successfully in the Kazakhstani society.

Conclusions

At the beginning, the state approach to ethnic repatriation was founded on a pure kin-state perception, as part of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet nation-building process. With time, it shifted to a more nuanced and less enthusiastic perspective, not only to fit into a broader civic nation-building process, but also to reflect the difficulties of the ethnic repatriates' integration into Kazakhstani society. The implementation of the different repatriation programs proved to be more challenging than expected, as ethnic return-

ees were often segregated in separate villages, faced difficulties in learning Russian (for those coming from outside of the Soviet world), and experienced tensions with local administrative bodies. So far, the primordialist perception of an ethnic, unified "self" between Kazakhstani Kazakhs and Kazakhs from abroad had failed, and ethnic returnees did not "naturally" integrate into Kazakhstani society on the basis of their shared ethnicity. This forced the government to adapt its own narrative and its programs to reflect more complex realities. Since then, Oralman tend to embody both the purity of Kazakhness for that part of Kazakhstani society that is sensitive to Kazakh nationalism, and "Otherness" for the rest of the society, who see in the ethnic returnees a problematic social group.

Even among Kazakhstani youth, which is usually considered to be less Sovietized and more responsive to issues related to "Kazakhness," ethnic returnees are surrounded with negative stereotypes. A survey conducted among 14–28 year-old Kazakhstani youth in 2014, based on the research design of the Shell Youth Study, showed that 14 percent of the respondents did not want to live near ethnic returnees. They appear as the second-least desirable neighbors after homosexuals (27.3 percent of youth are uncomfortable about living near a homosexual couple).⁶⁸ In a longer perspective, with gradual reduction of the Russian and Slavic minorities in Kazakhstan and the emergence a second generation of Oralman, the integration of ethnic returnees into the Kazakhstani social body will become a critical issue for the authorities and their nation-building project.

⁶⁷ "Uiade kaida, Tamara?" *Zhas Alash*, <http://www.zhasalash.kz/eleumet/12483.html?lang=kz>.

⁶⁸ *Molodezh' Tsentral'noi Azii. Kazakhstan, na osnove sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia* (Astana, Fund Strategii, 2016), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B37ubuN9nGEbbHBNNWw5b3BFdVk/view>.

Chapter 4.

Countering Extremism vs. Freedom of Online Expression: The Case of Kazakhstan

Anna Gussarova¹ (2017)

The series of terrorist attacks that took place in 2011, 2012 and 2016 in Atyrau, Aktobe and Almaty reveal Kazakhstan's need to rethink its internal security policies. Strengthening the legitimate use of force to ensure domestic security is necessary, yet the state's current approach also demonstrates a major shift in the balance between citizens' civil liberties and security, to the detriment of the former. Indeed, the Kazakh government's efforts to counter extremism and terrorism have led to a significant level of securitization within the country, in particular challenging freedom of online expression.

Since 2014, over 325 Kazakhstani citizens have been accused of inciting national, racial, religious, and social hatred, receiving prison sentences of between 2 and 7 years. Article 1 of the National Law on Countering Extremism of 2005 interprets incitement of hatred as extremism. Whereas in some cases the charges were the result of obvious opposition activity by activists, who turned out to protest certain political decisions, in other cases, people broke the extremism law unknowingly.

Though the state puts great effort into countering religious extremism, the terminology of the extremism law is vague and confusing. Are extremism and incitement of hatred synonymous? Can violations of territorial integrity and sovereignty be considered extremism, or are these crimes connected to separatism? What indicators for extremism or incitement of hatred should be incorporated into the law?

Not only should the terminology of the law be improved, but public information campaigns regarding it are needed to help citizens better understand what the law prohibits and permits. Otherwise, it is likely that simple ignorance of the content of the law will result in a growing number of people being arrested unnecessarily on charges of inciting national or religious hatred in the years to come.

The paper discusses the need to develop public information campaigns that would educate Kazakhstani citizens about extremism-related laws and practices. I start by analyzing the legal framework and discussing the vague terminology employed. Next, taking real court cases as examples, I show how the law is applied. Finally, I highlight some popular perceptions of extremism in order to demonstrate ordinary people's ignorance that they might be transgressing the law. On the basis of these findings, I argue that educating people about extremism would increase their knowledge on the subject, thereby helping bridge the gap between the law and its application.

Legal Provisions on Extremism in Kazakhstan

The rise of social media has made it easier for individuals to express themselves online—and simultaneously harder for the government to control that expression.² Leaving human rights rhetoric and debates

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2 Collette Davidson, "Navigating Hate Speech and Freedom of Expression," *World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers*, September 28, 2017, <http://www.wan-ifra.org/articles/2017/09/28/navigating-hate-speech-and-freedom-of-expression>.

aside, it is necessary to examine existing legislation and terminology in order to get a sense of what people can be prosecuted for.

The Constitution of Kazakhstan guarantees freedom of expression,³ but this right is qualified by several laws and de facto restricted. Two documents—the Law on Countering Extremism and the Penal Code—address the limitations on freedom of expression in the name of state and societal security. The former introduces terminology and outlines behaviors that are treated as acts of extremism, while the latter addresses prosecution and its justifications.

Law on Countering Extremism

Article 1 of the Law on Countering Extremism describes three types of extremism: political, national and religious. (See Table 1.) Though the document provides definitions, these types remain vague. It is unclear whether the term “incitement” refers to words, actions, or both; the meaning of the word itself is obscure. Nevertheless, the law sends a clear message that calls for violence will be treated as extremism even if physical actions do not necessarily follow.

Table 1. Types of Extremism

Political Extremism	Violent change of the constitutional system; violation of the sovereignty and integrity of the state; undermining the national security and defense capability of the state; forcible seizure of power or forcible retention of power; creation of, leadership of, and participation in illegal paramilitary formations; organization of armed rebellion and participation therein; incitement of social or class hatred.
National Extremism	Incitement of racial, national, or tribal hatred, including actions related to violence or calls for violence.
Religious Extremism	Incitement of religious enmity or hatred, including actions related to violence or calls for violence, as well as any religious practices that threaten the safety, life, health, morals, or rights and freedoms of citizens.

Source: *Law on Countering Extremism, Kazakhstan (2005)*⁴

Threats to the country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty are considered one of the most significant challenges to national security. Yet this and other actions included in the broad category of “political extremism”—including actions against the constitution and violent threats to national security—could also be considered under many other categories of crime, for instance separatism. For all three types of extremism, words are sufficient for an accusation of incitement of hatred, making it easier to charge an individual with one of these crimes.

Penal Code Provisions

The penalty for the crimes described above is discussed in Kazakhstan’s Penal Code, Chapter 4, “Crimes against Peace and Security,” Article 174, “Incitement of Social, National, Racial, Class, or Religious Hatred.” It reads:

Intentional actions, directed to incitement of social, national, racial, class or religious hatred, insult of the national honor and dignity or religious feelings of citizens, as well as propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens on the grounds of their religion, class, national, generic, or racial assignment, if these actions are committed publicly or with the use of mass media or information and communication networks, as well as by production or distribution of literature or other information media, promoting social, national, generic, racial, class, or religious hatred, shall be punished with 2 to 7 years of restrictions on freedom or imprisonment.⁵

The sentence can even be extended to 20 years, depending on who committed the crime, their motivation, and the consequences of the act.

The vagueness of the terminology used in this statement makes enforcing Article 174 difficult. In the case of online freedom of expression, for instance, it is difficult to determine an actor’s intentions and distinguish actions from words. As such, the wording of Article 174 ought to be clarified. Indeed, Kazakhstani lawyers and human rights activists made several attempts to abolish the law’s latest amendment in 2015,

³ The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, August 30, 1995, <http://www.parlam.kz/en/constitution>.

⁴ The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 31 “O protivodeistvii ekstremizmu,” February 18, 2005, https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30004865.

⁵ The Penal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 226-V, July 3, 2014, <http://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/K140000226>.

on the grounds that the wording was too vague, allowing the government to use the law on a case-by-case basis to punish opposition activists.⁶

The Kazakhstani government pays special attention to calls for violation of the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. For instance, Kazakhstani policymakers introduced new norms on separatism to the Penal Code following the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁷ In this regard, Kazakhstan is very much emulating Russia: Russian President Vladimir Putin increased the prison sentence for separatism from 3 to 5 years.⁸

The Rise in the Number of People Arrested on Charges of Extremism

The number of cases of extremism has grown significantly over the past four years, almost reaching the number of those prosecuted for terrorism and terrorism-related activities. In 2016, 151 cases of incitement of national, religious, racial, and social hatred were registered in the country, almost twice the figure recorded in 2015. Of these, 66 were sent to court,⁹ whereas the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law Public Fund reported that 10 and 8 activists were prosecuted under Article 174 in 2015 and 2014, respectively.¹⁰ The figures even increased over the course of 2017: in January, local courts registered 84 cases of incitement of hatred, and 13 people were arrested,¹¹ whereas in September,

the number of criminal cases reached 208.¹² Overall, the Kazakhstani courts opened 1,039 Article 174 cases in 2017,¹³ compared to a combined 131 in the 2008–2012 period.¹⁴

Starting in 2014, people in Kazakhstan were sporadically arrested for posting certain content on social media, in particular on Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki. These individuals were prosecuted for inciting national, racial, religious, class, and social hatred.

Aktobe resident Sanat Dossov was sentenced to 3 years in prison for posting negative statements about Russian President Vladimir Putin and his political course on Facebook.¹⁵ Igor Chuprina from Sokolovka village in northern Kazakhstan received a 5-and-a-half-year prison sentence for insulting ethnic Kazakhs and calling for Kazakhstan's accession to Russia on VKontakte.¹⁶ An Almaty resident, Shukhrat Kibirov, was accused of posting Islamic songs on VKontakte.¹⁷ Sergei Khandogin from the northern city of Petropavl was sentenced to 2 years in prison for "insulting the dignity of Kazakhs by promoting Russian superiority"¹⁸ on Odnoklassniki.

Trends in the Law and Its Application

To show how inconsistent and controversial are the law and its application in the country when it comes to incitement of national, religious, racial, class, and social hatred, I have created a table of court cases that

6 "Pravozashchitniki predlagaiut ubrat' iz UK RK stat'iu o vobuzhdenii rozni," *Informburo*, January 19, 2016, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/pravozashchitniki-predlagayut-ubrat-iz-uk-rk-statyu-o-vozbuzhdenii-rozni.html>.

7 "Stat'iu za separatizm v proekt novogo UK dobavili deputaty Kazakhstana," *Tengrinews*, April 8, 2014, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/statyu-separatizm-proekt-novogo-uk-dobavili-deputaty-253266/.

8 Tatyana Zamakhina, "Putin uzhestochil nakazanie za prizyv k separatizmu," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, July 22, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/07/22/separatizm-site-anons.html>.

9 Marat Shibutov, "God posle terakta v Aktiubinske: itogi bor'by s terrorizmom v Kazakhstane," *Regnum*, May 24, 2017, <https://regnum.ru/news/2279101.html>.

10 Igor Savchenko, "Spisok kazakhstanskikh politzakliuchennykh i lits, stolknuvshikhsia s politicheski motivirovannym presledovaniem so storony Kazakhstana," Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, October 17, 2017, https://bureau.kz/novosti/iz_drugikh_istochnikov/spisok_kazakhstanskikh_politzaklyuchennykh/.

11 Shibutov, "God posle terakta..."

12 Snezhana Tsoy, "Stat'ia 174 UK RK. Mozhno li popast' pod sud za kommentarii v sotssetiakh?" *FactCheck*, November 17, 2017, <https://factcheck.kz/glavnoe/statya-174-uk-rk-mozhno-li-popast-pod-sud-za-komentarij-v-socsetyax/>.

13 Ibid.

14 "Chto takoe sotsial'naia rozni?" *Central Asia Monitor*, May 24, 2013, <https://camonitor.kz/7772-.html>.

15 Ben Kentish, "Kazakh Man 'Given Three-Year Prison Sentence for Insulting Vladimir Putin,'" *Independent*, December 31, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/kazakhstan-man-three-years-prison-russia-president-vladimir-putin-lenin-stalin-a7503306.html>.

16 "Za razzhiganie rozni i prizyv prisoedinit'sia k Rossii osuzhden zhitel' SKO," *Sputnik Kazakhstan*, December 5, 2016, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/incidents/20161205/1150180/za-razzhiganie-rozni-i-prizyv-prisoedinit'sya-k-rf-osuzhden-zhitel-sko.html>.

17 Daniyar Moldabekov, "Delo o nashidakh: zashchita Kibirova zhaluetsia na prostessual'nye narusheniia," *Vlast*, November 3, 2017, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/25574-delo-o-nasidah-zasita-kibirova-zaluetsia-na-processualnye-naruseniia.html>.

18 "Kazakh Man Sentenced to Prison for 'Inciting Ethnic Hatred' on Social Network," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Kazakh Service*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-inciting-ethnic-hatred-social-network/28853648.html>.

have been publicized and are therefore open to public scrutiny. (See Appendix.)

These cases show how vulnerable a person can be while expressing his or her beliefs and ideas online. On the one hand, these cases are not political, and the victims are not known activists or opposition representatives. On the other hand, the table shows that both authors and those who repost materials that incite hatred can be prosecuted.

Evidently, therefore, Kazakhstan's approach to dealing with extremism is controversial. The country is trying to balance protecting freedom of expression with securing public order. However, in most cases of incitement of national, racial, religious, and social hatred, public order has been securitized and politicized. It is also difficult to prove whether such comments, materials and posts intend to incite hatred or not.

When it comes to investigation, the prosecutor requests an evaluation report assessing the comments of those purportedly inciting hatred and identifying intentionality. Dr. Rakhilya Krymsakova, one of the expert authors of Kazakhstan's 2006 methodology on identifying instances of incitement to hatred, believes it should be revised. She explains, "It does not provide the whole algorithm. The mechanism of 'inciting hatred' is unclear and vague, as people can be arrested for posting negative comments against certain groups. It is necessary to indicate a person's followers, readers and listeners, as well as their intention to commit violent actions. However, these elements are not clearly defined."¹⁹

Another issue with the law's application is that language specialists—and not political scientists or psychologists—should be the ones identifying hate speech. More importantly, the country's current methodology on cases of inciting hatred is based on words, not actions, as the key component of evidence and charges. Alma Mussina, a prominent Almaty lawyer, contends that individuals should be prosecuted for incitement to hatred only when actions cause significant damage or result in grave consequences.

In addition, many cases described in Appendix provide no information regarding people's reaction to social media posts that purportedly incite hatred.

For instance, in some cases in northern Kazakhstan, provocative hate speech against the person who incited hatred was promptly deleted, and people who used provocative and offensive language to call for violence were not prosecuted. These examples show that Kazakhstan's approach to dealing with this controversial issue results in a selective justice system, making it more difficult for the government to properly address extremism-related issues and cases.

Finally, the fact that people will no longer be able to comment anonymously on online platforms also makes the law's application problematic. On November 22, 2017, the Mazhilis of the Kazakhstani Parliament adopted amendments to the laws on information and communication, banning anonymous comments without registration and SMS-based identity proof.²⁰ This innovation makes people even more vulnerable, as their identity will be verified and can be provided to government agencies by the website's host. Without appropriate methodology, a clear law, and transparent application thereof, this amendment could cause more damage when it comes to incitement of hatred.

Variations between Regions

The cases also show the complexity of the situation regarding freedom of online expression and countering extremism in the country. People accused of inciting national hatred are of varying ages and different ethnicities.

Whereas western Kazakhstan is considered vulnerable to religious extremism,²¹ people from the central and southern parts of the country, who have diverse ethnic origins, have rarely been arrested for inciting hatred. Kazakhstani news platforms reported on just two court cases, in Kyzyl-Orda and Shymkent, providing no names of the arrested, in contrast to reports on other parts of the country. By contrast, people from northern Kazakhstan have been arrested on charges of inciting national hatred more frequently than those from other parts of the country. Historically, this territory, as well as the Altay region, was part of Russia. Since independence in 1991, the

¹⁹ Tsoy, "Stat'ia 174 UK RK..."

²⁰ "Anonimnye kommentarii v internete zapretiat: Mazhilis odobril popravki," *TengriNews*, November 23, 2017, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/anonimnye-komentarii-internete-zapretyat-majilis-odobril-331676/.

²¹ Farkhad Sharip, "Encroaching Extremism in West Kazakhstan: A Challenge for 'Cyber Shield,'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, no. 112 (September 14, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/encroaching-extremism-in-west-kazakhstan-a-challenge-for-cyber-shield/>.

issue of northern Kazakhstan's possible secession and integration into the Russian Federation has become a very sensitive one for Kazakhstani policymakers, making it highly politicized. Moreover, anti-Russian sentiments and phobias have multiplied in the country since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Kazakhstani citizens convicted of separatism usually receive longer sentences than those imprisoned for extremism and terrorism-related crimes, including Islamist propaganda. The court cases described below emphasize how sensitive and politicized sovereignty and territorial integrity are for the country; posting comments on these issues is therefore more likely to get an individual arrested. For instance, in 2015, Igor Sychev, an online community host on VKontakte, received a 5-year prison sentence for posting a poll in which residents of Ridder (an industrial city in eastern Kazakhstan) could vote for or against joining Russia.²² By comparison, in 2013, Baurzhan Zhanburshin from Aktobe, with a group of 13 like-minded people, promoted religious hatred²³ and received "only" a 3-year sentence. A 25-year-old resident of Kyzyl-Orda was sentenced to 2 years and 10 months' probation for inciting religious hatred on social media, with police officers seizing audio records as evidence.²⁴ A Temirtau resident was sentenced for terrorist propaganda on social media and received 3 years in prison, as well as having his property confiscated.²⁵ In November 2017, Mr. Gaisin was arrested for writing "Kill Kazakhs like dogs" at the bus stop in Astana—he received 3-and-a-half years in prison and treatment for alcoholism.²⁶

The issue of the eastern and northern parts of the country remains very controversial for Kazakhstani people and is politicized for the government. On the one hand, Kazakh policymakers emulate their Russian colleagues, adopting similar laws against extremism, terrorism and separatism. On the other hand, public opinion surveys demonstrate that peo-

ple remain genuinely sensitive to issues of national identity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; Russian actions against Ukraine are regularly held up as evidence that Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity should be securitized lest they be threatened by Russia. The rise of nationalism makes it easier to find oneself enmeshed in legal controversy and accused of extremism.

One of the most interesting survey findings is that identity issues and inter-ethnic relations remain very sensitive, both for ordinary people and for the government. Ten percent of my respondents indicated that a negative attitude toward other ethnic groups could be treated as extremism. A recent hate speech report prepared by the MediaNet International Center for Journalism and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung shows how Kazakhstanis use hate speech on Facebook.²⁷ Based on the report, it is clear that most Facebook posts containing hate speech can be classified as "soft" discrimination against ethnic or religious groups, namely ethnic minorities and the country's neighbors, mostly China and Russia. Interestingly, ethnic Kazakhs are more likely to use "hard" discrimination tools when it comes to hate speech on Facebook, from insulting other ethnic groups to calling for violence.

Another Piece of the Extremism Puzzle: Lack of Education and Awareness

Another important element in understanding efforts to counter extremism and support freedom of online expression is the lack of education about what constitutes extremism. To illuminate the gap between the law, legal practice, and people's knowledge (or not) of extremism, I conducted an online survey. It consists of three main lines of questioning: people's perceptions of freedom of online expression, their understanding of extremism, and education about

22 "V Kazakhstane bloggera prigovorili k turemnomu zakliucheniui za prizvyv k separatizmu," *Lenta*, November 18, 2015, <https://lenta.ru/news/2015/11/18/ridder/>.

23 "Za razzhiganie mezhnatsional'noi rozni zhitel' Aktobe poluchil tri goda kolonii," *Today*, February 19, 2013, <http://today.kz/news/proisshestiya/2013-02-19/233678-news/>.

24 "Za razzhiganie mezhnatsional'noi rozni v sotssetiakh osuzhden zhitel' Kyzylordy," *Today*, April 19, 2017, <http://today.kz/news/proisshestiya/2017-04-19/740563-za-razzhiganie-mezhnatsionalnoj-rozni-v-sotssetyah-osuzhden-zhitel-kyzylordyi/>.

25 "Kazakhstanstu za propagandu terrorizma v sotssetiakh dali tri goda kolonii," *Regnum*, November 2, 2016, <https://regnum.ru/news/society/2200787.html>.

26 "Nakazan muzhchina, ostavivshii oskorbitel'nuiu nadpis' na ostanovke v Astane," *Sputnik Kazakhstan*, November 7, 2017, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/society/20171107/3691889/nakazan-muzhchina-ostavivshij-oskorbitelnuyu-nadpis-na-ostanovke-v-astane.html>.

27 "Monitoring iazyka vrazhdy v sotsial'nykh setiakh v Kazakhstane," *MediaNet*, December 5, 2017, <http://medianet.kz/ru/biblioteka/broshyura-monitoring-yazyka-vrazhdy-v-socialnyh-setyah-v-kazakhstane-489>.

extremism. I reached 100 people aged 18 to 60 from across the country, including the cities of Almaty and Astana, who use more than two social media platforms and applications regularly. The analysis of the survey results is supported by the study of court cases, which shows people of different ages, ethnicities and geographic locations getting arrested for incitement of hatred.

To complement the survey results and strengthen the argument for increasing public awareness, I analyzed almost 300 comments that ordinary people published about the court cases, both on social media—Facebook and VKontakte—and on news platforms (TengriNews, Nur.kz, Karavan, Ratel, and Today). Some of the comments are full of hate speech and provocations. Others were deleted by moderators for being inappropriate.²⁸ However, the overall bent of these comments is toward issues of national identity and inter-ethnic relations, as exemplified by those related to Igor Chuprina’s case.²⁹ That is, people do not know—intellectually or emotionally—where the “red line” that marks incitement of national or religious hatred lies. Moreover, they are unaware that they can be prosecuted for publishing comments deemed hateful online. Responses to cases like Chuprina’s and Sychev’s usually include offensive language: “your head is first on a spit, pig” and “go to Russia, intruder.”³⁰

Here are some of the insights the survey provides for understanding what people think about freedom of online expression, extremism, and education:

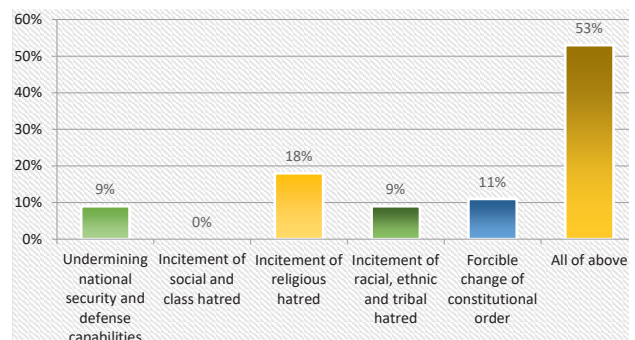
1) Popular perceptions of extremism

To understand people’s perception of extremism, I asked two questions. The first was “What do you think extremism is?”; the second, “Choose one of the options you think could be extremism.” Whereas the first question is about the terminology of extremism as defined by the law, the second is based on documented arrests and real court cases. The diagram for Question 1 indicates people’s perceptions of what extremism means, based on the National Law on Countering Extremism of 2005.

In Figure 1, it remains difficult to interpret what the 53 percent of people who selected the op-

tion “all of the above” meant by it. It could be that they really knew the intricacies of the law; equally, it could just have been a guess. In any case, a significant finding of the survey is that 18 percent of respondents associate extremism with religious hatred. Yet only 9 percent indicate that extremism can be something related to either national security and defense or to incitement of racial, ethnic and tribal hatred. This result might indicate that people are unaware of the fact that policymakers see political extremism—namely the violation of territorial integrity and national sovereignty—as a significant threat to the country’s national security. Most importantly, people are unaware that they can receive a longer sentence for posting online about the above-mentioned issues, despite the fact that the number of such arrests is growing rapidly.

Figure 1. What Do You Think Extremism Is?



Source: Based on the author’s survey

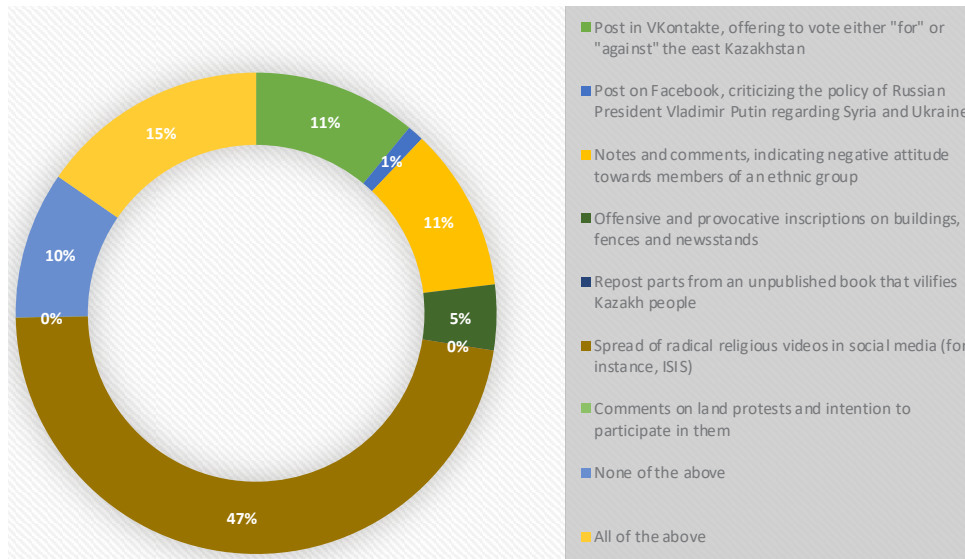
The second diagram helps clarify whether people are familiar with the court cases—whether they follow the news about these cases and can recognize specific cases. The multiple-choice options provided in the question represent real court cases in which people were arrested for inciting hatred. Survey participants were able to choose only one option that they believed could be seen as extremism. When it comes to social media and extremism, people have great difficulty determining which actions or words online might lead to prosecution. Interestingly, the survey shows that, of the various options, people are most likely to associate extremism with religious extremism. It may seem that people are aware of the

28 “Nakazan muzhchina, ostavivshii oskorbitel’nuiu nadpis’ na ostanovke v Astane,” *Ak Zhayk*, November 7, 2017, <http://azh.kz/ru/news/view/48734>.

29 Mikhail Lapshin, “Realnyi srok za virtual’nuiu perezpisu,” *Ratel*, December 5, 2016, http://www.ratel.kz/raw/realnyj_srok_za_virtualnuju_perezpisu?page=3#comments.

30 Viktor Miroshnichenko, “Ot 5 do 10 let za perezpisu v internete,” *Ratel*, September 17, 2016, http://ratel.kz/raw/ot_5_do_10_let_za_perezpisu_v_internete.

Figure 2. Choose One of the Options You Think Could Be Extremism



Source: Based on author's survey

general trends³¹ in fighting extremism and terrorism in the country, however it is not that simple. People think ISIS propaganda is religious extremism, but the law connects it to terrorism—a crime that, under the Law on Combating Terrorism of 1999, carries a much longer prison sentence.

Based on the survey results, I argue that people get confused by the terminology and definitions. They are also unaware of existing laws and programs related to countering extremism. Few know that extremism can be non-religious and “something else”: calls for—or action promoting—violation of sovereignty, territorial integrity, or constitutional order, as well as ethnic hatred.

Additionally, research on publicized information about arrests indicates that the majority of those arrested broke extremism laws unknowingly and denied their guilt, while a minority were convicted for intentionally expressing an opinion forbidden by the law. This is evidenced by the statements of the accused, which were published on online news platforms. Some people voice their innocence in court, one of the best examples being Shukhrat Kibirov's final statement in court, where he denied his guilt.

Only 4 percent of survey participants thought offensive and provocative statements could be considered extremism. This suggests that overall, people believe that extremism is more about words than actions.

Furthermore, almost 10 percent of survey participants indicated that none of the cases could be considered acts of extremism. This might indicate that people are unaware of what extremism means and what actions may be prosecuted as extremist acts. Instead, they categorized these cases as examples of another offense, such as bullying, harassment, or vandalism.

2) People are not safe on social media

One of the most significant findings of the survey is the popular sense of insecurity on social media. The public does not see social media as a tool for expressing ideas and beliefs freely and openly. As seen in Figure 3, 48 percent consider social media unsafe as a platform for communication and self-expression.

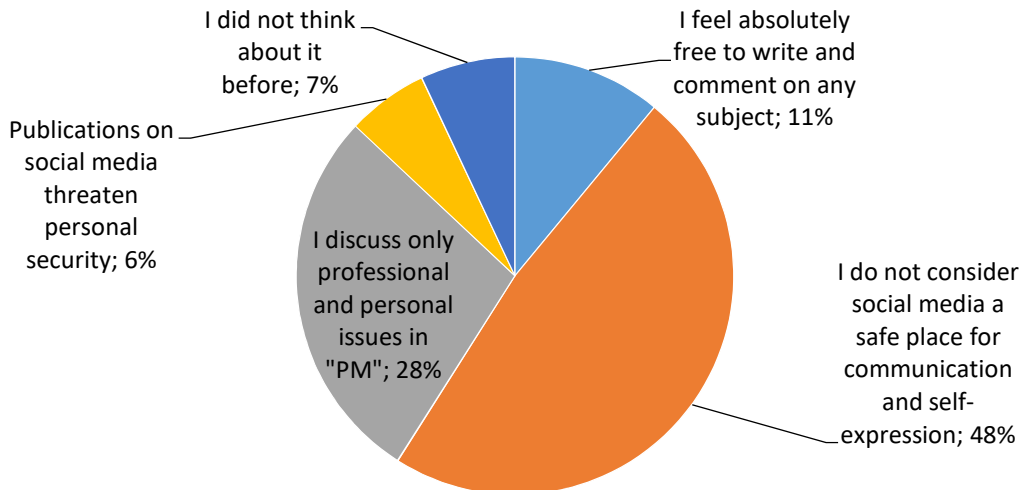
Even though the survey does not reveal why people feel insecure, it shows that they might be afraid to express their ideas and beliefs online. One reason for this could be rooted in Kazakhstan's most recent efforts to control the internet, namely restrictions on connectivity, malware attacks, and arrests of social media users.

Freedom House, in its report “Freedom of the Net 2017,” explains that the country remains “not free,” emphasizing that “Kazakhstani authorities [have] used criminal charges against social media users in an effort to silence dissent and punish online mobilization.”³²

31 A recent program, Countering Religious Extremism and Terrorism 2017–2020, focuses on religion, mainly the Salafi branch of Islam, though other dimensions remain important and even more sensitive for both government and people.

32 “Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy. Kazakhstan Profile,” Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/kazakhstan>.

Figure 3. How Do You Feel and Behave on Social Media?



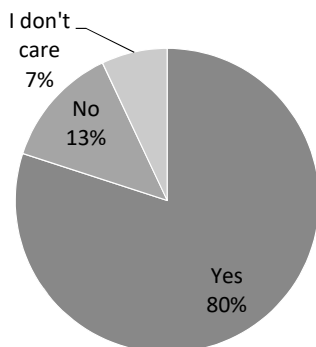
Source: Based on author's survey

Despite the belief of 11 percent of survey participants that they can write and comment freely on social media, the vague extremism law and outdated methodology for its implementation make them vulnerable to existing legal contradictions nevertheless. Nikita Danilin, a journalist at *Karavan*, one of the country's oldest newspapers, believes that people get into controversial legal traps due to their legal illiteracy. He indicates that there are actually many more such cases than are reported.³³

3) People want to know more about extremism

As shown in Figure 4, 80 percent of survey participants were interested in legal literacy and awareness regarding extremism.

Figure 4. Are You Interested in Increasing Your Legal Literacy in Matters of Extremism?



Source: Based on author's research

4) People think that it is the responsibility of the state to educate them about extremism

Sixty-six percent of survey participants indicated that it was the responsibility of the government to educate them about extremism.

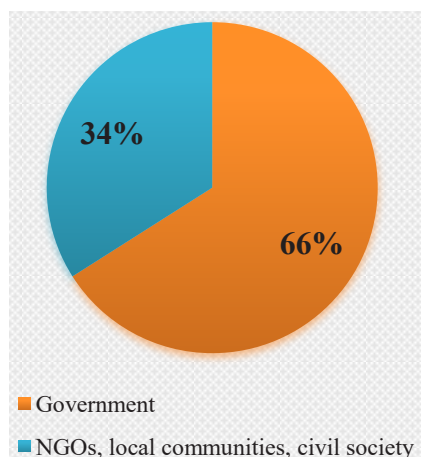
On one hand, this result is not surprising. People are used to thinking about the state as a provider of solutions to existing problems; moreover, the state controls the education system and bears responsibility for educating its citizens.

On the other hand, it would be very problematic for the government to educate people about extremism. Firstly, the topic is highly politicized and securitized, and the state being both judge and party, it is therefore not a neutral actor. Secondly, it is unclear which agency could be tapped to educate people about extremism. The Ministry of Education and Science, an obvious choice, has been going through major reforms: trilingualism, curriculum updates, and revision of the school calendar. It is not clear how it would be able to juggle programs on extremism with the numerous programs already on its plate. Ministry of Justice could be another one, but it is even more both judge and party in this question.

Because the extremism law remains vague and the outdated mode of investigation makes people vulnerable, government is probably not the solution but part of the problem. As such, grassroots education campaigns and initiatives supported by local

33 "Kak vesti sebia v internete, chtoby ne popast' v tiur'mu za laiki i reposty - advokat Utebekov," *Caravan*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.caravan.kz/news/kak-vesti-sebya-v-socsetyakh-chtoby-ne-popast-v-tyurmu-za-lajjki-i-reposty-advokat-utebekov-401890/>.

Figure 5. Who Should Educate People about Extremism?



Source: Based on author's research

communities and NGOs might be the best way for Kazakhstan to bolster its anti-extremism efforts while allowing people to safely navigate social media and enjoy freedom of online expression without prosecution.

A comparative approach may provide some insight into how other governments are tackling this controversial issue. I therefore turn to an analysis of existing legal practices in the world today.

Comparative Cases on Security versus Freedom of Expression

Balancing security and freedom is important in many different contexts. Even though freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and countries' constitutions, it can be restricted by civil or criminal laws for the protection of national security or public order.³⁴

Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement of discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law."³⁵ At the same

time, Article 19 of the ICCPR provides for freedom of expression, including the freedom to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice."

In some countries, only statements that constitute a real and immediate threat of violence against a particular person are considered to be illegal. In others, legislation punishes oral, written or symbolic statements that promote or incite hatred based on discrimination. With social media platforms, it has become much easier to incite hatred that could lead to a fine or a prison sentence.

"No Penalty, No Ban" Approach

Having analyzed the existing practices, I would elucidate three main approaches to dealing with incitement of hatred online. The first is "no penalty, no ban," where the government allows unlimited freedom of online expression with no restrictions or punishment for people, while cooperating with social media companies to curb hate speech online. One of the best examples here is Japan, which is trying to adequately address the issue while respecting freedom of expression.

Japan has been criticized by the Secretary General of the United Nations for turning a blind eye to hate speech in terms of regulation and legislation. Finally, in 2016, the country adopted the Hate Speech Act, which neither bans nor penalizes hate speech; it targets only threats to an individual's person or life.³⁶ Those who were not satisfied with the law protested, demanding that the Tokyo office of Twitter do more to address harassment and hate speech on the platform.³⁷ According to Tokyo No Hate Initiative, 40 million people in Japan currently experience or contribute to hate speech online, particularly on Twitter.³⁸ Japanese society and the Ministry of Justice are currently debating the vague terminology of the law. The wording can be interpreted as labeling hate speech either "unforgivable," in the sense of being morally reprehensible, or "not allowed," which would imply

34 Ibid.

35 "United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights," UNHROHC, December 16, 1966, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>.

36 Tomohiro Osaki, "Diet Passes Japan's First Law to Curb Hate Speech," *The Japan Times*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/05/24/national/social-issues/diet-passes-japans-first-law-curb-hate-speech/#.WjqlmrpFyhc>.

37 "At Twitter's Tokyo Office, Protesters Stomp on Hateful Tweets," *Advoc Global Voices*, September 11, 2017, <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2017/09/11/at-twitters-tokyo-office-protesters-stomp-on-hateful-tweets/>.

38 See the organization's website: Tokyo No Hate, <https://www.no-hate.jp/>.

illegality.³⁹ In addition, the Japanese government is cooperating with the Twitter office in Tokyo to delete content or suspend an account if hate speech is found.

Japan respects freedom of online expression. The existing legal framework does not allow arrests for online hate speech, unless this speech could lead to physical acts that threaten an individual's person or life.

The "Comprehensive" Approach

Another way to deal with incitement of hatred on social media is to take a comprehensive approach that combines legislation with clear terminology, education and awareness, along with targeting social media companies (not individuals) to address incitement of hatred online. This approach has been introduced in many European countries, including the Netherlands and Germany, as well as the United States.

At the EU level, the European Court of Human Rights does not provide an accepted or agreed-upon definition of hate speech. However, it offers guidelines by which prosecutors can decide if the hate speech is entitled to freedom of speech protections,⁴⁰ including whether the speech is anti-Semitic or promotes intolerance toward Muslims. Though ECHR hate speech cases are often related to these groups, the overall number of arrests for hate speech remains comparatively small. In addition, the Council of Europe has launched a "No Hate Speech" campaign to educate people and raise awareness of the issue.

Among the most interesting examples are the Netherlands and Germany. The first has one of the clearest definitions of incitement of hatred, making it relatively easy to deal with these criminal cases. Article 137 of the Dutch Penal Code interprets incitement of hatred as follows:

He who publicly, orally, in writing or graphically intentionally expresses himself insultingly regarding a group

of people because of their race, their religion or their life philosophy, their heterosexual or homosexual orientation or their physical, psychological or mental disability, shall be punished by imprisonment of no more than a year or a monetary penalty of the third category.⁴¹

For its part, Germany is considered one of the most proactive countries when it comes to dealing with incitement of hatred online. The country has a stringent law against online hate speech; its efforts to eliminate incitement of hatred online also target digital platforms such as Facebook, Google, YouTube, and Twitter. These platforms are required to delete hate speech and other extremist messages within 24 hours. Failure to do so results in a USD\$5 million to USD\$59 million fine.⁴² Incitement of hatred (*Volksverhetzung*) is punishable in Germany if committed by German citizens abroad or by non-German nationals on German territory.

Another example is the United States. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government introduced the PATRIOT Act, which has become an instrument to guide responses to terrorism and violent extremism in the country.⁴³ Though the law has been repeatedly criticized for violating human rights, the country's counter-terrorism measures have been essential to preventing terrorist attacks on American soil since 9/11. This is balanced against the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prevents Congress from legislatively limiting freedom of speech, including online.⁴⁴ Individuals therefore enjoy freedom of speech and cannot be prosecuted for posting certain content on social media so long as their words online do not cause physical actions.

The "Authoritarian" Approach

The third approach—authoritarian—is widespread in sub-Saharan African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries. This approach is known for stringent,

39 Casey Baseel, "Japanese Government Gives Examples of What Qualifies as 'Hate Speech' in Anti-Discrimination Law," *Sora News 24*, February 7, 2017, <https://en.rocketnews24.com/2017/02/07/japanese-government-gives-examples-of-what-qualifies-as-hate-speech-in-anti-discrimination-law/>.

40 Alina Dian Sharon, "A Web of Hate: European, U.S. Laws Clash on Defining and Policing Online Anti-Semitism," *The Algemeiner*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.algemeiner.com/2013/02/28/a-web-of-hate-european-u-s-laws-clash-on-defining-and-policing-online-anti-semitism/>.

41 Netherlands Penal Code (in Dutch), http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0001854/2017-09-01#BoekTweede_TiteldeelV_Artikel137c

42 Melissa Eddy and Marc Scott, "Delete Hate Speech or Pay Up, Germany Tells Social Media Companies," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/business/germany-facebook-google-twitter.html>.

43 Geoffrey R. Stone, "Free Speech and National Security," *Indiana Law Journal* 84, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 939-62.

44 "U.S. Constitution, The Bill of Rights. Amendment 1," National Center for Constitutional Studies, <https://nccs.net/online-resources/us-constitution/amendments-to-the-us-constitution/the-bill-of-rights-amendments-1-10/amendment-1-freedom-of-religion-speech-and-the-press>.

vague legislation and a lack of popular education. The governments' efforts to securitize an existing problem have led to people being arrested for inciting hatred online.

In Bangladesh, for instance, anyone can be prosecuted for publishing "false and obscene" material on the internet or in digital form.⁴⁵ A Bangladeshi blogger living in exile in Sweden mentioned that a comment or "like" on Facebook that is perceived to threaten law and order, prejudice the image of the state or a person, or damage religious beliefs could result in a 7–14-year prison sentence and a fine of up to USD\$120,000.⁴⁶ From the government's perspective, these measures are a response to the harassment of religious minorities—namely Hindus—in the country. The Prime Minister's internet and communications technology advisor mentioned in an interview that Bangladesh will not allow terrorists to use the internet to spread falsehoods or multiply the effects of their actions.⁴⁷

Egypt, meanwhile, has made significant progress on educating journalists to identify hate speech and report on it ethically, using a five-point test for hate speech.⁴⁸ In addition to this, Ethical Journalism Network, American University in Cairo, and Egypt Media Development Program joined together to launch the Glossary of Hate Speech.⁴⁹ In so doing, Egypt became the first Arab state to introduce a hate speech initiative. It will be some time before the effectiveness of this instrument can be determined, but raising awareness among young journalists and media specialists of how to deal with online content that incites hatred and terrorist propaganda is certainly necessary.

As the above examples show, it is extremely difficult for governments to deal with incitement of hatred and hate speech online. That being said, a legal framework with clear terminology, the rule of law, and education about the issues can all make a positive difference.

Recommendations

In view of the survey results, case studies, and comparative overview of different approaches to the issue, I propose a series of recommendations that would help the Kazakhstani government counter extremism and adequately address the issue of incitement of hatred while simultaneously respecting freedom of online expression.

Reformulate the Law on Countering Extremism and Article 174 of the Penal Code

The law's vague and overlapping terminology makes it easy to accuse individuals of a crime, but difficult for the government to elucidate which crimes constitute extremism (rather than hate speech or incitement of hatred). People's perceptions of extremism, highlighted in the survey results, show how difficult it is to understand what extremism is and what actions or words online can be treated as acts of extremism.

It is necessary to establish a working group on incitement of hatred that would include many stakeholders: lawyers, members of Parliament, representatives of security agencies, language specialists, and human right activists. The group's goal would be to formulate clear definitions of incitement of hatred, hate speech and extremism.

Introduce the Law on Countering Extremism during civic education classes in secondary schools

According to my survey results, Kazakhstani people want to be educated about extremism. And if the law targets people, rather than social media platforms (as is the case in Germany), people should be educated about controversial issues that may arise when they "like," share, or post certain content on social media. One of the fundamental ways to educate people is to teach them what the law permits and what it prohibits, and how to manage online risks. Young school-

45 Saleem Samad, "Bangladesh New ICT Law Curtails Free Speech Online," *Freedom Network*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.fnpc.org/bangladesh-new-ict-law-curtails-free-speech-online/>.

46 "Facebook Posts Get People Arrested in Bangladesh," *Deutsche Welle*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/facebook-posts-get-people-arrested-in-bangladesh/a-18763933>.

47 "Govt. Won't Allow Use of Internet to Spread Falsehoods: Joy," *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha* (BSS), December 13, 2016, <http://bssnews.net/news-Details.php?cat=0&id=627587&date=2016-12-13>.

48 "Hate Speech: A Five Point Test for Journalists," Ethical Journalism Network, <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/hate-speech>.

49 "Glossary of Hate Speech" (in Arabic), Ethical Journalism Network, <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/لغوي-1-1.pdf>.

boys and schoolgirls use different social media platforms, and they should be aware that irresponsible behavior online could potentially result in a prison sentence. Introducing these issues into the school curriculum would also help increase digital literacy and build digital resilience.⁵⁰

The curriculum-based approach should become a key component of efforts to prevent extremism and increase legal literacy at large. In this regard, Kazakhstan could benefit greatly from UNESCO guidance tools for policymakers and teachers. *A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism* is a concise and practical reference guide for teachers and educators at the upper primary/lower secondary level; it discusses how to manage classroom discussions about controversial issues with a view to preventing violent extremism.⁵¹ The text could be used as a starting point, filling in the gaps until the Kazakhstani government develops its own guide. As an additional benefit, open classroom discussions could significantly reduce the incidence of young people becoming radicalized.

Invest in professional training of state officials

Given the country's outdated methodology and expertise problems when it comes to incitement of hatred crimes, it is necessary to significantly increase the professionalism and expertise of the government agencies that tackle this controversial issue on a daily basis.

In this regard, a pilot project under the Academy of Public Administration of the Republic of Kazakhstan could provide a starting point for advanced training of lawyers, judges, law enforcement officials, and criminal law faculty. Simulation games and exercises on incitement of hatred should become a key component of these trainings. Kazakhstani officials could consult with the Global Freedom of Expression initiative at Columbia University, which has produced training materials, manuals, etc. for judges on the issue.⁵² Judicial training is vital, since the judiciary should play a key role in balancing national security against the protection of human

rights, including freedom of online expression. One of the project's exercises⁵³ touches upon the mechanism of how the courts find out whether incitement has occurred: the courts must find the speaker's intent to incite; the likelihood that violence would result; and a causal link between the speaker's intention and violence. In the long term, professional training on the issue would result in respect for the rule of law and equality before the law, thereby ending selective justice in Kazakhstan.

Launch a comprehensive online hate speech prevention project

Citizens should know their rights and responsibilities, and the government should provide an opportunity for citizens to learn them. In this regard, grassroots literacy campaigns should become a key strategy for preventing people from falling into legal traps. Social media can serve as a platform for increasing users' literacy regarding extremism laws—especially laws that can be used against them if they make certain comments online.

Requiring a glossary of hate speech in the Russian and Kazakh languages would both help people use social media responsibly and make it easier for journalists to do their job professionally. The Egyptian example might provide a good point of departure for such a project. In addition, hate speech codes would help people respect freedom of speech. Furthermore, the survey results suggest that people want more educational videos and trainings on social media to help them learn about extremism. Grassroots initiatives, backed by local communities and NGOs, could support the country's counter-extremism efforts without sacrificing freedom of online expression.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan, like many other post-Soviet states, has been struggling to balance freedom of online expression with public order. Vague laws, including Penal Code provisions, and their controversial application,

50 "United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: A Policy Review on Building Digital Citizenship in Asia and the Pacific through Safe, Effective and Responsible Use of ICT," UNESCO, December 16, 2016, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002468/246813e.pdf>.

51 "United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism," UNESCO, May 4, 2016, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002446/244676e.pdf>.

52 Agnes Callamard, "Freedom of Expression and National Security: Balancing for Protection," Global Freedom of Expression Initiative, Columbia University, 2016, <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/A-Callamard-National-Security-and-FoE-Training.pdf>.

53 Ibid.

on the one hand, and lack of education regarding extremism and hate speech, on the other, make people vulnerable to existing state approaches to maintaining public order and national security. It seems that securitization has become an ad hoc solution for very complex issues like territorial integrity, sovereignty, and religious extremism. Even though the existing legal framework sees actions as the primary indicator of calls for violence or incitement of hatred, people get arrested for words that have been posted online and which have not necessarily been followed by physical actions.

The examples I mentioned above show how difficult it is for governments to balance freedom of

speech and online expression with national security. Some countries have succeeded in doing so, while others have failed. Some countries have vague laws with controversial application; others have adopted laws with clear definitions and invested in raising awareness and educating people. It is obvious that there is no single formula for tackling the issues of incitement of hatred and online expression. That being said, there are certain approaches that have proven to be successful, primarily relating to people, who should be empowered to safely navigate social media and help the government prevent the spread of extremism. Raising citizens' awareness and educating them is the best way to achieve these goals.

Appendix. Table of Incitement of Hatred Court Cases⁵⁴

Case	When	Where	Outcome
Tatyana Shevtsova-Valova committed acts aimed at inciting national enmity and discord and insulting the national honor and dignity of citizens, as well as propaganda on the superiority or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their nationality, using abusive language. According to her, the case was fabricated and the screenshots were forged to slander her.	2015	Almaty	Incitement of national hatred 4-year prison term with a 3-year probation, plus legal costs of 48,500 tenge (USD\$145)
Anti-Heptyl activist Saken Baikenov was arrested for inciting national hatred. He admitted at the trial that he wrote all the posts posted on his behalf on Facebook. He cannot participate in political and public events, leave the city without court permission, or go to nightclubs.	2015	Astana	Incitement of national hatred on Facebook Restriction of freedom for 2 years
Mr. Alkhanashvili published and distributed materials that incite inter-ethnic hatred and enmity, and which offend the national sentiments of representatives of other ethnic groups. He published such materials against both the Russian-speaking population and Muslims.	2015	Petropavl, Northern Kazakhstan	Incitement of national hatred 3-year prison sentence
Sanat Dosov was sentenced for insulting Russian President Vladimir Putin on Facebook. During the investigation, he recognized only a few publications, and assumed that his page had been hacked. Initially, the expert the court called to analyze Dosov's publications did not find anything criminal. Later, however, the expert reversed his point of view. Dosov established Ikhtiyar public association, which works to prevent religious extremism.	2016	Aktobe, Eastern Kazakhstan	Incitement of social hatred 3-year prison sentence
Igor Chuprina from September 1, 2014 to May 20, 2015, under the nickname of Igor Chupa, published various notes and comments that indicate his negative attitude toward the Kazakh ethnicity, as well as calling for accession to Russia on VKontakte.	2016	Sokolovka, Northern Kazakhstan	Incitement of national hatred and propaganda of violation of territorial integrity 5-and-a-half-year prison sentence
Ruslan Ginatullin published materials from Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami on his Facebook page and posted a video that negatively characterized the Russian ethnicity. He was also charged with participation in a criminal organization.	2016	Pavlodar, Northern Kazakhstan	Incitement of national hatred 6-year prison sentence
Sergei Khandogin used negative words insulting ethnic Kazakhs and cited materials that distorted historic facts on Odnoklassniki.	2017	Petropavl, Northern Kazakhstan	Incitement of national hatred 2-year prison sentence
Kuanysh Bashpayev, an MA student from Islamic University of Madinah, was arrested for posting religious audio lectures on VKontakte.	2017	Ekibastuz, Northern Kazakhstan	Incitement of religious hatred on VKontakte 4-and-a-half-year prison sentence
Nariman Seitzhanov, an MA student from Islamic University of Madinah, was arrested for posting religious audio lectures on VKontakte.	2017	Kokshetau, Northern Kazakhstan	Incitement of religious hatred 5-year prison sentence
Shukhrat Kibirov, under the nickname of Alim Akhmetov, published <i>nasheeds</i> (Islamic songs in Arabic) on VKontakte. He denies his guilt.	2017	Almaty	Incitement of religious hatred and terrorism propaganda 6-year and 8-month prison sentence

⁵⁴ Based on published materials available on the internet.

PART II. AT THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION, VALUES, AND MORES

Chapter 5. Multimodal Salafi Engagement with Digital Media in Azerbaijan

Kamal Gasimov¹ (2017)

Social networks bring good and evil, but you should use them for good purposes. With the help of social networks, you have to spread the correct understanding of monotheism and the teachings of Islam with which the prophet came. You must distribute this through the media. This is a rare opportunity for you - use it and do not leave it to the evildoers and preachers of delusion.²

Sheikh Salih Fawzan al-Fawzan

Religious movements are brought together—realized as movements—through the circulation of discursive forms that address religious subjects, calling them into being, uniting them in common actions of reading, listening, seeing. In the contemporary world, electronic media are central to this process. They are the dominant technologies (though by no means the only ones) through which this circulation takes place and the forms of political and religious identities are forged.³

Brian Larkin

Introduction

This paper examines Azerbaijani Salafis' engagement with the new media technologies. Our main research questions are: how do Salafis use digital or Internet media, what are the outcomes of this interaction, and what styles of communication do Salafis employ in their cyber engagements? Salafis⁴ in Azerbaijan are deprived of state support and do not possess institutional power. Salafi leaders have lost their access to mosques, and therefore their channels of communication with society and the scope of their preaching became severely limited. Under such conditions of structural restrictions and exclusion from public space, the Internet offers many invaluable opportunities for Salafism. Since 2008 (with the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque, the main center of Salafi preaching), the Internet has become an important sphere for the transmission of Salafi knowledge, multi-level communication with society and authorities, disputes with rival religious groups, and the construction of religious authority.

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2 "The prominent scholar Al-Fawzan recommends the use of social media in spreading the call to Allah and responding to the advocates of misguidance" (in Arabic), YouTube video, posted by "AshashaS," May 2, 2016 <https://goo.gl/r6iN3p>

3 Brian Larkin, "Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism," *Social Text* 26:3 (2008): 101.

4 Salafism is an Islamic current, which calls for Islam to be understood as it was by "pious ancestors" (*al-salaf al-salih*), the first three generation of Muslims. In fact, almost all Islamic sects appeal for an understanding of Islam along these lines, but Salafis produce a strong discourse of juxtaposition by contrasting their imitation of social and religious practices of the first Muslims with the theology of all other Islamic trends. A major component of Salafi theology is the rigorous propagation of the unity of God (*tawhid*), combat against polytheism (*shirk*), criticism of Sunni speculative Islamic theology (*kalam*), as well as all kinds of Greek influences on Islamic theological discourse, the struggle against reprehensible religious innovations (*bid'a*) and an extremely hostile attitude towards Sufism and Shi'ism, both of which are accused of innovation and polytheism. As this paper does not focus on Salafi theology, a more detailed explanation can be found in: Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 33–57.

Access to digital media has enhanced “the channels through which ideas and information can be circulated and has enlarged the scope of what can be said and to whom.”⁵ This plurality of channels allows Salafis to overcome governmental control. In addition, Internet media facilitate cross-border interaction between Salafis throughout post-Soviet space, making it possible for them to bypass legal limitations and state borders. However, the Internet is not only a field of possibilities, but also a space that alters Salafis’ epistemology and their methods of argumentation. In other words, Salafis’ relationship with digital media should not be understood in purely instrumental terms—as “sequential processes of movement of an essentially unchanged content from source to destination”⁶—but rather as a process of interaction. The new technology shapes new forms of transmission and acquisition of knowledge, as well as the construction of a community’s identity and the authority of its leadership. In turn, Salafis give the computer-mediated environments new and unexpected meanings.

One of the main Salafi leaders in Azerbaijan—Qamet Suleymanov (b. 1970)—deploys a set of discursive and performative media strategies on the Internet in order to achieve his preaching goals and, following the loss of their mosque, preserve Salafis’ sense of belonging to a single community. At the same time, Suleymanov’s media politics aim to promote his main cause (reopening the Abu Bakr mosque) by representing Salafism as an indigenous phenomenon absolutely loyal to the political regime and compatible with the nation-state. In order to propagate and defend their causes, Salafis extend their epistemology and interpretative approach beyond Islamic texts to various secular media sources (news, political speeches, official decrees etc.), employing the language and rhetoric of these sources for their own ideological purposes.

In the following, we will conduct a detailed analysis of the abovementioned forms of Salafi engagement with digital media. It should be noted that the cyber activity of Muslim groups in post-Sovi-

et countries remains poorly studied. Those studies that exist tend to focus on the Internet resources of radical jihadi groups, especially from the Northern Caucasus⁷ and Central Asia,⁸ while the engagement of other Muslim sects has been largely ignored. In particular, there is a lack of research on the Internet engagement of “quietist” or “purist” Salafi groups, despite the fact that these are the largest Salafi communities in Russia, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan. This research seeks to aid in filling that gap, and analyzes previously unstudied Internet sources in Russian and Azerbaijani. However, the Internet does not replace physical reality and Salafis interact in predominantly urban environments where physical and virtual spaces are closely interconnected. As such, before examining their cyber activity, the appearance and diffusion of Salafi *da’wa* in Azerbaijan will be discussed.

Salafism in Azerbaijan: The *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama’a* Community of Abu Bakr Mosque

Back in the late 1980s, the small epicenters of Salafi preaching in Azerbaijan were student dormitories, where Arab students who came to the Soviet Union to study medicine and the oil industry taught the Qur’an, Sunna and Islamic law to ordinary Azerbaijanis. These foreign students and their most diligent local disciples made the first Azerbaijani and Russian translations of Salafi literature. However, the wide diffusion of Salafism in the capital, Baku, and other cities in Azerbaijan occurred through the activities of public and private Islamic organizations. After independence, the Azerbaijani political elite was highly interested in developing relationships with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries in order to gain their political and financial support. During the period of 1994–1999, Azerbaijan received millions of dollars of humanitarian aid under the umbrella of the King Fahd program.⁹ In addition to Saudi Islamic foundations, NGOs based in Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were also carrying out charita-

5 Dale F. Eickelman, “Communication and Control in the Middle East,” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 33.

6 Jeremy Stolow, “Religion and Media,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 124–25.

7 See Alexander Knysh, “Islam and Arabic as the Rhetoric of Insurgency: the case of the Caucasus Emirate,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35 (2012): 315–37; Matteo Vergani and Dennis Zuev, “Neojihadist Visual Politics: Comparing YouTube Videos of North Caucasus and Uyghur Militants,” *Asian Studies Review* 39 (2014): 1–22.

8 See Noah Tucker, “Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging in Central Asia,” *CERIA Briefs* 11–15 (2016), <https://goo.gl/d6Yke6>.

9 Musa Qasimli, *Azərbaycan Respublikasının xarici siyasəti (1991–2003)* (Baku: Mutarjim, 2015), 296–301.

ble activities in the capital and countryside.¹⁰ It goes without saying that almost all Islamic charitable organizations were involved in proselytizing activities: building mosques, distributing religious literature, and helping young Azerbaijanis gain admission to well-known Islamic universities.

By the end of the 1990s, when Heydar Aliyev centralized power in the country, the authorities had begun to develop policies for the prevention or control of transnational religious (notably Islamic) flows. Consequently, the government of Azerbaijan closed down many of these organizations; others were closed by the governments of their own countries, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11.¹¹ However, the curbs on foreign sponsors failed to prevent the diffusion of Salafism. In fact, if Salafism emerged in Azerbaijan as result of external influence, Salafi networks in the country have been structured around young Azerbaijanis who received religious education in Islamic countries, notably Saudi Arabia, and returned home to preach. The largest Salafi community in Azerbaijan was formed inside the Abu Bakr mosque, which was built in Baku in 1997 with the financial assistance of the Kuwaiti charitable organization “Revival of the Islamic heritage.” The mosque’s preachers were young Azerbaijanis who had graduated from the Islamic University of Medina (IUM). Qamet Suleymanov—the most charismatic and experienced IUM graduate—became he leader of the Salafi community and the imam of the mosque. His eloquent sermons drew 7,000-8,000 people; no other mosque could attract such a number of believers.

The Abu Bakr mosque’s Salafi network included a considerable number of urban educated youth, as well as civil servants, businessmen, and professionals from local and foreign companies. The mosque had a transformative impact on the religious sphere in Azerbaijan. Salafis were able to win new followers by introducing a new discourse of “bookish” Islam, which cut against the traditional Azerbaijani religious discourse of the Shi’a and Sunni mullah-sto-

rytellers, who were mostly religiously uneducated, did not know the Arabic language, and intermingled their speeches about Islam with folk tales, anecdotes, and literary themes. Often, empowered by Salafi *da’wa*, young new lay advocates of Salafism entered into disputes with these mullahs and corrected their religious “mistakes,” demanding proof of every story they delivered.¹² Within the walls of the mosque, a new community was formed, many members of which described themselves either as Salafis or as *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama’a*. These self-identifications implied a claim to “orthodoxy” and a differentiation of the religion from all other forms of Islam in Azerbaijan, particularly the dominant Shi’ism.

The Abu Bakr mosque and its surroundings were places of social interaction, identity building, and meaning production, where attendees rediscovered Islamic theology and law, studied Arabic, brought friends and family members, discussed problems, and traded and read books. The exact number of Salafis in Azerbaijan is unknown, though it is generally agreed not to exceed 50,000 (not a large number for a country of almost 10 million people). However, having penetrated a new environment, Salafism was able to influence it, becoming one of the most competitive religious currents in Azerbaijan.¹³

Nevertheless, despite its successful diffusion, the spread of Salafism in Azerbaijan had—and still has—limitations, due to the nature of the socio-political context in which it operated. The appearance and practices of Salafis inspired negative reactions to them among a large number of Azerbaijanis, who perceived this “fundamentalist” and “scripturalist” religious movement as a threat to the secular environment of the country. Meanwhile, the Shi’ites, the largest Islamic group in Azerbaijan, considered Salafism a deviant, hostile phenomenon. Local media narratives, which associated the Abu Bakr mosque and its community with international terrorism, religious fanaticism, and “the lair of Wahhabism”¹⁴ (especially after 9/11), also nurtured these attitudes.¹⁵

10 Rufat Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society in Independent Azerbaijan. Between Historical Legacy and Post-Soviet Reality* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2009): 146–47.

11 Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society*, 132.

12 Kamal Gasimov, “Examining Salafism in Azerbaijan: Transnational Connections and Local Context,” in *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ansgar Jodicke (London: Routledge, 2017), 112 (forthcoming).

13 Gasimov, “Examining Salafism,” 113.

14 Although media and even some scholars refer to “Salafism” as “Wahhabism,” here I do not use this term because “Wahhabism” is just a part of a broader Salafi tradition. In addition, Wahhabism/Wahhabite has a pejorative meaning to the people designated as such.

15 Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society*, 253–54.

Political elites likewise viewed Salafism as a potential danger and an alien phenomenon. Unable to fully control or adapt it, they imposed structural limitations in order to prevent its diffusion. During the presidency of Ilham Aliyev, the state's intervention into the religious sphere has increased. The state not only tried to manage and control religious movements, as it had done before, but also started creating an Azerbaijani version of "traditional Islam" (*ənənəvi islam*), which ignores differences between Shi'ism and Sunnism, does not have connections with external Islamic institutions, and never interferes in politics. Clearly, Salafism does not fit into this "ecumenical paradigm." Thus, Suleymanov has not been appointed as an imam by the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB),¹⁶ and his community has never been registered by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA).¹⁷ On top of that, police and local authorities, in the capital and Sumgait as well as in the regions (especially in Qusar and Zaqatala), have often responded to Salafi activities with persecution and physical violence.¹⁸ In general, the Azerbaijani authorities' stance on Salafism could be defined as alternating between symbolic and physical violence.

Nevertheless, Salafi leaders, especially Suleymanov, recognize the existing government and the president as legitimate from the *sharia* point of view, and call on lay Muslims to ignore the political struggle in the country. As a matter of fact, the sources of inspiration and discursive references for Azerbaijani Salafis are such authoritative creators of contemporary Salafism as 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (d. 1999), Muhammad ibn Salih al-Uthaymin (d. 2001), Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999) and Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan (b. 1933), all of whom taught political obedience to those who hold political power in the country.¹⁹ In addition to these prominent scholars, two Salafi sheikhs—Muhammad Aman al-Jami (d. 1996) and Rabi' ibn

Hadi al-Madkhali (b. 1931)—had a particular influence on Suleymanov, who proudly mentions that "he was always with sheikh Rabi'"²⁰ and "had a personal relations with al-Jami."²¹ The intellectual influence of these two figures was particularly strong at the IUM in the 1990s, when Azerbaijani students were studying there. The major characteristics of this trend in modern Salafism are a strict focus on preaching and struggle against religious innovations, the refutation of political participation, fierce criticism of jihadism and political Islam, loyalty to the Saudi royal family, and all-out support for the official religious institutions and organizations of Saudi Arabia, such as the Council of Senior Ulama and the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and the Issuing of Fatwas. After returning home, IUM graduates have reproduced these same quietist Salafi ideas and practices, especially in terms of focusing on piety and preaching, ostracizing Islamists and jihadis, and legitimizing the existing political regime.²² Therefore, the rivals of this quietist Salafi trend, notably jihadis, frequently stigmatize its followers as *madkhali* or *jamii* (the follower of al-Madkhali and al-Jami) or even, as in the case of the post-Soviet space, as *qametchi* (in Azerbaijani) or *qametovec*, (in Russian)—"the follower of Qamet Suleymanov."

Thus, in contrast to Shi'ite Islamists (of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan or Muslim Union Movement), Salafis do not belong to the formal organizations that directly confront the current political regime. However, social movements can pose a threat to the authorities even without participating in the conventional political process. Although quietist and purist, Salafis actually challenge dominant cultural codes and create new societal identities, producing networks of activists that spread particular interpretations of Islam.²³ The transformative power of "anti-political" Salafism is seen as potentially contentious by the Azerbaijani political regime. Despite strong quietism, Salafis have a very political longing:

16 A semi-official religious organization that supervises the religious arena in Azerbaijan by registering Muslim communities and appointing imams to mosques.

17 A state institution that registers all religious communities and assists the government in shaping public policy on religion.

18 See, for example, "Sumqayıtlı salafı: "Qollarımyza qandal vurdular, ustumuza chyxdyar, bashımyzda oturdular," *BBC*, November 18, 2014, <https://goo.gl/PMM5gE>.

19 Gasimov, "Examining Salafism," 100.

20 "Elman Qasymovun "Biz bir idik. Ozbaklar... Hanzala qardash ..." shubhası," YouTube video, posted by "Azer Islamoglu," January 8, 2017, <https://goo.gl/3VTq2M>.

21 "Official website of the sheikh Qamet Suleymanov in Russian language," *Qamet.com*, <https://goo.gl/U76HJN>.

22 Gasimov, "Examining Salafism," 111.

23 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The Salafi Movement: Violence and the Fragmentation of Community," in *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip Hop*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 211.

they want Azerbaijan to be ruled by the Qur'an and Sunna, but unlike the political opposition, both secular (e.g. the Musavat Party, the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, etc.) and religious (Islamic Party of Azerbaijan and other Shi'ite Islamists), they pose a challenge to the political regime without direct collision. As sociologist Cihan Tugal has pointed out, religious social movements are able to challenge both society and the state by projecting alternative hegemony, which denaturalizes everyday life and constitutes an alternative everyday routine.²⁴ Through their daily interaction on the grassroots level, Salafis have been able to transform the bodily habits, language, dress, moral codes, and everyday practices of thousands of citizens of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Hence, even if the majority of Azerbaijani Salafis follow a quietist trend, being concerned predominantly with theology rather than politics, they exert a transformative societal impact and create a new vision of a pious Muslim society and state, which indirectly challenges the current political system and, more directly, its cultural hegemony.

Despite the limitations imposed by the state, the Salafi *da'wa* continued to diffuse steadily as long as Salafis had access to the Abu Bakr Mosque. But the loss of the mosque considerably weakened the diffusion of Salafism. The reason for this was not only the aforementioned perplexing context in which Salafism operated, but also intra-Salafi conflict between its purist trend, led by Suleymanov and other IUM graduates, and the jihadis. Salafis in Azerbaijan pursued their *da'wa* when the insurgency in the North Caucasus against Russia was still ongoing and NATO was fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. In this context, Suleymanov and other IUM graduates have been involved in harsh debates with jihadis, both in mosques and in cyberspace, about whether there is a global jihad, whether Azerbaijan is a Muslim country, and whether the Azerbaijani authorities are legitimate rulers. This is yet another manifestation of the long-standing debate between two religious transnational actors, quietist and jihadi Salafis, which reached the South Caucasus in the 1990s. The Abu Bakr mosque was a place of permanent contestation between the followers of these two transnational Salafi groups. The confrontation came

to a head in 2008, when a member of the jihadi group that operated along the northern border between Dagestan and Azerbaijan threw a grenade into the Abu Bakr Mosque while people were praying.²⁵ Two people died and eighteen were injured, including Suleymanov. After this episode, authorities decided to close the mosque.

Salafism Online: Creating an Alternative Infrastructure

After the closure of the Abu Bakr Mosque in 2008, Salafism lost its former societal influence and its diffusion slowed. The Friday sermons and daily lessons were interrupted, and various shops surrounding the mosque—where religious clothing, Salafi literature, and audio and video tapes of prominent Salafi preachers were available for sale—were closed. Obviously, Salafis did not disappear overnight. But without access to the Abu Bakr mosque, their resources and capacity to spread their message diminished considerably.

Salafis started gathering and praying at the Ashur Bey (Lezgi) mosque, the “Ilahiyyat” mosque (in the department of theology at Baku State University), the mosque in Garachuhur district and the mosque in Mehdiabad township—all located either in Baku or its suburbs. In some of these mosques, Salafis even managed to become imams and organize small Salafi communities. However, the authorities either closed those mosques (as in the case of Ashur Bey mosque) or the CMB succeeded in excluding Salafis from them and appointing “official” imams.²⁶ Salafi preachers have since been unable to gain the position of imam, whether in the capital, other cities, or the countryside. The loss of a physical place of worship considerably limited the public sphere in which Salafism could operate, eventually leading to its fragmentation.

Nevertheless, the limitations on the scale and scope of their activities, the fear of repression, and the desire to escape state control have simply encouraged Salafis to find other spaces for interaction. Deprived of their mosque, and barred from building a mosque in a physical space, Salafis began to actively

24 Cihan Tugal, “Transforming everyday life: Islamism and social movement theory,” *Theory and Society* 38, no. 5 (2009): 429.

25 Sattarov, *Islam, State, and Society*, 256.

26 In general, many mosques in Azerbaijan are places of permanent contestation between charismatic imams educated abroad and “official” imams appointed by the CMB.

explore virtual space. Today, Islamic presence in cyberspace is rapidly expanding, and the Internet supplements and sometimes even supplants “traditional approaches to Islamic knowledge management and dissemination.”²⁷ The fact that Azerbaijan is an “internet leader in the South Caucasus”²⁸ also makes the relocation of Salafis from the physical space to cyberspace a strategic move. According to recent statistics, nearly 80 percent of the population used the internet in 2016,²⁹ and that number is growing. In addition, the mobile penetration rate is 100 percent, which contributes to the rapid dissemination of audio and video materials.³⁰ Since the closure of the mosque, Salafis have been actively exploring the possibilities of the cybersphere and winning a new following through social media.

In fact, the media has been an integral part of the Salafi *da'wa* since its arrival in Azerbaijan. In places where Azerbaijani Salafi leaders have studied, notably around the mosques of Medina, one can always find many small shops selling (and playing loudly) CDs by prominent Salafi sheikhs. Returning home in the 1990s, Medina graduates recreated the same familiar spatial environment: CDs with Friday sermons and lectures by Suleymanov and other Salafi preachers were sold around the Abu Bakr mosque and widely circulated among its attendees. Obviously, the official websites of such harbingers of global Salafism as Ibn Baz, Ibn-Uthaymin, al-Fawzan, al-Madkhali, and others have also influenced how Azerbaijani Salafis understand electronic media.

In 2003, Azerbaijani Salafis launched the site of the Abu Bakr mosque—[abubakr-mescidi.com](https://www.abubakr-mescidi.com)—which originally functioned primarily as a forum.³¹ The pages of this forum constitute a living historical document on the development of Salafism in

Azerbaijan, a source that makes it possible to trace the spread of Salafi theology and jurisprudence, discover what questions it evoked among Muslims, and understand how the Salafi *da'wa* was interspersed into the life of post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The forum consists of numerous questions about religion, life, and politics posed by visitors, along with Suleymanov's responses to them.

The forum is not only a sphere for communication between a *mufti* (one issuing a religious opinion) and a *mustafti* (one seeking this opinion), but also a place of heated religious polemics. On its pages, Suleymanov refutes other theologies and constructs his own authority, engaging in debates with anonymous users who speak on behalf of Shi'ism and Sufism. However, his most fierce debates occur with jihadis or those who support their ideas. The Salafi leaders view jihadis as their main competitors within the religious field, as they refer to the same corpus of textual tradition and preach nearly the same theology. In addition, Medina graduates see jihadis' radical actions as a direct threat to their local preaching because they give authorities ever-present justification for the complete prohibition of the Salafi *da'wa* in Azerbaijan. This is why a rubric on the site, named “Sects” (*firqələr*), lists *mumay'is* (*mumeyyilər*)³² and *kharijites* (*xəvariclər*)³³ before other Islamic communities, which Salafis consider deviant (such as Sufis, Shi'ites, and Quranists³⁴). Besides this rubric, the site [abubakr-mescidi.com](https://www.abubakr-mescidi.com) features such sections as “Topics” (a thematic guide to the numerous textual, audio and video materials on theology, law, ethics, and marriage), “Writings” (which contains articles and Salafi books translated from Arabic into Azerbaijani language), “Fatwas” (offering a translation of fatwas by the most authoritative scholars of

27 Garry Bunt, *IMuslims: Rewiring the house of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 15.

28 Alexey Sidorenko and Arzu Geybullayeva, “The Internet in Azerbaijan,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 15 (2010): 2–7.

29 International Telecommunication Union, <https://goo.gl/6Eqc9P>.

30 Ibid.

31 Forum of Abu Bakr mosque: <https://goo.gl/aXogDi>.

32 From the Arabic verb *tamayya'* – “to become liquid”. Salafis use this stigma to designate other Salafis whom they think hide their jihadi or Islamist views. Suleymanov often stigmatizes rival Salafi preachers who challenge his authority using this term.

33 Kharijites are adherents to a sect that developed after the assassination of the third caliph Uthman in 656. The title is derived from the Arabic word *khuruj*, meaning “insurrection”. This sect was extremely violent and declared everyone who disagreed with its ideology and policies an infidel. From the very beginning, Suleymanov stigmatized all his rivals within the Salafi movement, mostly (though not exclusively) jihadis, as *Kharijites* (which is a usual practice of quietist Salafi preachers) and popularized this term through his sermons and interviews. Interestingly, in time, local media, along with some officials, policy experts and even scholars, adopted this ideologically loaded term, using it to differentiate between Suleymanov's followers and his rivals (designating the formers as moderates and the latter as radicals). See, for example, “Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State,” International Crisis Group Europe Report, Brussels, 2008; Dobrosława Wiktoria March, “Measuring Muslims: The Problem of Religiosity and Intra-Religious Diversity,” in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion: New Methods in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Luigi Berzano and Ole Preben Riis, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 220.

34 By Quranists (*Quranilər*) Salafis mean all groups who reject prophetic narrations and accept only the authority of Quran.

contemporary Salafism), “Sermons” (the majority of Friday sermons given by Suleymanov from the mid-1990s to the present day are available here), and “Inquiries” (where users can pose questions to Suleymanov or listen to his YouTube-fatwas). For now, the content of these sections is available only in Azerbaijani; the Russian version of the site is currently under construction, however.

The site of the Abu Bakr mosque is gradually being transformed into a multifunctional digital mosque equipped with religious texts, video sermons, and online lessons, which is managed by certain cyber-preachers, “the seekers of knowledge” (*elm tələbələri*), whose written and oral materials make up its content. Their names are listed in the right corner of the site and include Suleymanov, other Medina graduates who accept his authority, and several preachers who did not study abroad but acquired religious knowledge inside the Abu Bakr mosque. The list implies that these preachers are the bearers of the most authentic Islamic knowledge in Azerbaijan, and that all visitors to the site should therefore study Islam from them.

It is immediately evident that, on the site, audio and video resources are more prominent than texts. In fact, Suleymanov and other Azerbaijani Salafi preachers prefer oral performances to written communication as a means of knowledge transmission for strategic reasons. Firstly, digital media expand their audience, especially in urban environments where people spend more time using their computers and smart phones than reading theological treatises. Secondly, the number of questions is growing; since the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque, the internet is almost the only “place” where one can ask Suleymanov for a *fatwa*. Written responses to forum questions are time-consuming, and so have not been given since 2016. Quick audio responses are preferred. In addition, the new “Questions and answers” (*Sual-Cavab*)³⁵ section provides a forum for Suleymanov to give video responses to the most important and frequent questions of his audience on a weekly or monthly basis, using various YouTube channels owned by Salafis. In the absence of a mosque, digital media have become an indis-

pensable tool for Salafis, allowing them to sustain oral communication and visual contact with their following, thereby compensating, to a certain degree, for the loss of physical contact in the context of the mosque, as well as providing Salafis with some publicity. Engagement in performative politics on YouTube allows Suleymanov himself to demonstrate his rhetorical skills, charisma, and other forms of accumulated spiritual capital, with the goal of building up his religious authority and winning new followers.

YouTube has a special influence on the political economy of Salafi knowledge. Salafis increasingly prefer to translate, comment, and read books by famous Salafi figures to their audience in audio format, rather than print editions.³⁶ In addition to “audio books,” Salafis translate the video-fatwas of major Salafi sheikhs from Arabic into Azerbaijani and disseminate them via the YouTube channel of *fatvalar.com*, thus familiarizing local Muslims with historical and recent developments in the field of global Salafism. Publishing religious books requires obtaining permission from the SCWRA, which is not an easy task, especially for Salafis (the Committee itself has a number of anti-Salafi publications). Under such circumstances, the medium of YouTube allows Salafi preachers to transmit religious knowledge while avoiding state-imposed restrictions.

Along similar lines, Salafis have also begun exploring Mixlr.³⁷ Through this streaming platform, Azerbaijani students studying in Medina teach the writings of well-known Salafi scholars to their Azerbaijani audience on a weekly basis. Mixlr, which can also be considered an electronic form of radio, makes it possible to transmit Salafi knowledge—outside state-controlled channels—from the prestigious Islamic University of Medina to various parts of Azerbaijan.

Nor does Salafi strategic and creative engagement with the media end here. Since the loss of the mosque, Salafi leaders have increasingly traveled around the country to meet with Salafi communities from outside the capital. The loss of a fixed home for Salafism appears to have encouraged them to travel in order to keep *da'wa* from fading away. Suleymanov

35 See abubakr-mescidi.com, <https://goo.gl/efQziL>.

36 See, for example, site of the Abu Bakr mosque; Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, “Qamət Suleymanov: “The Book of Monotheism,” <https://goo.gl/1qxwmV>.

37 “Abubakrmescidi,” *Mixlr*, <https://goo.gl/VhxLCm>.

38 “Qamat Suleymanov-Qobustan, qysa sual javab,” YouTube video, posted by “abuisaselefi selefi,” June 15, 2017, <https://goo.gl/SysQit>.

has begun to meet with Salafis more often, traveling to Qobustan,³⁸ Shirvan,³⁹ Ganja,⁴⁰ Quba,⁴¹ and other cities and regions of Azerbaijan to answer people's questions. If in the past people from the countryside and suburbs came to Baku to listen to the sermons of IUM graduates, now those graduates have themselves begun to travel to meet their audience. Significantly, all these "regional meetings" are recorded and distributed on the Internet, creating a sense of cohesion in the fragmented religious community. By providing video and audio recordings of these meetings, Suleymanov demonstrates to his followers that they are a part of a large community present nearly in all the cities of Azerbaijan. These recordings simultaneously reinforce his authority by demonstrating—both to laymen and to his rivals—that he has followers in various parts of the country.

Furthermore, digital media allows Suleymanov to exert his authority even beyond the borders of Azerbaijan. As a well-known Salafi preacher, he pays short visits to Muslims in Ukraine,⁴² Kazakhstan, and Russia (even the far northern city of Tyumen, where a lot of Azerbaijani labor migrants live),⁴³ and responds to their numerous questions. Such meetings are usually held in an informal atmosphere—in a mosque, café, or private apartment—and widely circulated on the various Salafi Internet channels. Communication mainly occurs in Russian: although Suleymanov mostly speaks and writes in Azerbaijani, he never disregards Russian-speaking Muslims, especially the Russian-speaking segment of Azerbaijani society, addressing their questions both in YouTube videos⁴⁴ and in the Abu Bakr forum. It is apparent that his knowledge of Russian is mediocre, but this is not a significant obstacle, since his fatwas are regularly translated into Russian by his followers, as well as certain Kazakh Salafi networks. The Kazakh Salafi portal "Sunna Press" has a separate section where Muslims can ask Suleymanov questions.⁴⁵ It also directs users to "The official website of Sheikh Qamet

Suleymanov in the Russian language," where he addresses the questions of Russian-speaking Muslims from nearly all post-Soviet countries.⁴⁶ Launching a personal website in Russian—the language of "international communication" among countries in post-Soviet space—is a strategic decision that enables Suleymanov to reach a broader audience of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

These local and transnational engagements within computer-mediated environments can be viewed as an extension of the Abu Bakr mosque's infrastructure in a virtual space. This conception meshes with the theory of Brian Larkin, who sees media as a part of wider infrastructure, including physical infrastructure, which connects people and facilitates the transnational circulation of ideas and goods within and between vast urban environments.⁴⁷ When Salafis had the Abu Bakr mosque, digital media served as a virtual extension of the physical infrastructure that connected people and attracted them to the mosque and its surroundings. Then, when Salafis lost their access to the mosque, the Internet became more of an alternative infrastructure that largely substitutes for physical infrastructure. To a certain extent, the Internet compensates Salafis for limited access to mosques, television, and radio, and preserves their sense of being a single community that once gathered in the Abu Bakr mosque.

We can see that Salafis in some ways imitate and recreate their physical infrastructure in the virtual space. The reason for this is, above all, to preserve the authority of the Abu Bakr mosque and the collective memory of its community. Salafi digital media cultivate a sense among the Salafis that the mosque is still "alive," that it functions and has an imam who continues to read Friday sermons and responds to the questions of the faithful. The fact that some of Suleymanov's video sermons are still being recorded inside the Abu Bakr mosque,⁴⁸ and that pictures of the mosque are presented on the cover of many Salafi

39 "Sheikh Qamet: 'Bu hizbi harakat takfirchiliyin yeni va gizli formasydyr.' Shirvan shahari," YouTube video, posted by "Azar Islamoglu," October 12, 2016, <https://goo.gl/ru34Qh>.

40 "Qamet Suleymanov-Gancada qysa sual javab," YouTube video, posted by "abuisaselefi selefi," April 16, 2016, <https://goo.gl/r9Wj5F>.

41 "Qamet Suleymanov-Qubada Sual Javab," YouTube video, posted by "abuisaselefi selefi," June 23, 2016, <https://goo.gl/yoky31>.

42 "Sheikh Qamet otvechaet na voprosy – 1, Ukraina," YouTube video, posted by "Tovhide Devet," February 6, 2015, <https://goo.gl/HvPFZt>.

43 "Vstrecha Sheikha Qameta s brat'iami v gorode Tyumeni," YouTube video, posted by "Salafin Fahmi ila," May 14, 2016, <https://goo.gl/GGPYkm>.

44 See, for example, "Qamet Suleymanov. Otvet na voprosy," YouTube video, posted by "abuisaselefi selefi," May 31, 2016, <https://goo.gl/AdnXVV>.

45 Sunna Press, <https://goo.gl/9bshoc>.

46 Qamet.com, "Official website of the sheikh Qamet Suleymanov in Russian language," <https://goo.gl/Xq7S2V>.

47 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

48 Suleymanov is allowed to perform prayers inside the mosque with a very limited number of his closest companions, but it is still closed to the public.

audio tapes, could also be considered part of this symbolic politics aimed at maintaining adherents' sense of belonging to a single community.

In addition, Internet infrastructure allows Salafis to reach an uninitiated audience even beyond Azerbaijan. It facilitates transnational interaction between Suleymanov and post-Soviet Muslims, expanding his authority and creating an "imagined community" of Salafis across borders.

Salafi Media Politics: Persuasion and Muted Criticism

As was already mentioned, journalists regularly represent Salafism as a foreign export that is alien to Azerbaijani traditions. The Azerbaijani,⁴⁹ Russian,⁵⁰ and Iranian⁵¹ media outlets package Salafism into their "rhetorical foil,"⁵² which does not distinguish between various trends within global Salafism and depicts local Salafis as "Wahhabis," "terrorists," "fundamentalists," and "long-bearded radicals" striving to establish an Islamic state in secular Azerbaijan. Furthermore, journalists' perspectives on Salafism and its relation to religious radicalism are often colored by their choice of interview subjects, typically Shi'ite theologians associated with the CMB or SCWRA experts, both of whom take a hostile stance on Salafism. Criticisms of Salafism are also amplified in the media following local or global events related to jihadism or international terrorism.

Despite the apparent hostility of journalists, Suleymanov and other Salafi preachers have never stopped trying to approach them. The most successful in building relationships with the local media was Salafi preacher Yashar Qurbanov, a Medina graduate and close associate of Suleymanov. Owing to his exceptional eloquence, education, and personal connections, Qurbanov managed to become a

host of several local radio channels, and even on a regional television channel. He focused primarily on Islamic worship and morality, avoiding controversial theological issues and Salafi polemical criticism, an approach which allowed him to temporarily evade unwanted attention.⁵³ However, his main references were still the body of Islamic texts that constitutes the basic sources of Salafism, a fact that eventually led to accusations that Qurbanov's radio appearances were tantamount to a covert diffusion of Wahhabism in Azerbaijan.⁵⁴ These criticisms, particularly in the context of the structural limitations imposed on Salafism in Azerbaijan, led Qurbanov to follow his classmate Suleymanov in relocating his main preaching activities to cyberspace. There, he became famous for creating one of the biggest Islamic electronic libraries in Azerbaijan, *islamevi.az* (House of Islam), whose appealing slogan reads, "The house that unites us."

However, in spite of Salafi efforts, the general attitude of the media toward Salafism has not changed. Since 2014, the local media has often mentioned Suleymanov and like-minded Salafi preachers in connection with a group of Azerbaijanis who joined jihadi formations in Syria (such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nursa). Although ostensibly negative, this occasional attention has some positive aspects for Suleymanov: it allows him to remind the public of his existence and obtain some publicity for himself and his community. In 2014, for example, he even managed to give an interview to Al Jazeera,⁵⁵ where he explained the meaning of Salafism, as well as stating that there is no jihad in Syria and that his community was by no means connected with jihadists. He was also able to give an interview on the same topic to the popular Azerbaijani Internet news agency APA TV⁵⁶ and to the Voice of America⁵⁷.

Suleymanov therefore sees media as a platform through which he can reach a broader audience as

49 See, for example, X. Ismailova and S. Abbasov, "Logovo vakhkhabbitov v Baku," *Echo*, May 2, 2001, <https://goo.gl/xuhhss>; "Vahhabilar na istayir?" Modern, <https://goo.gl/N8zH8P>; Musavat, "Vahhabi tahlukasi unuduldumu..." <https://goo.gl/Q2Fhyx>.

50 For some generic examples, see Sohbet Mamedov, "Khidzhaby dlia azerbaidzhanok sh'iut araby," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, November 1, 2013, <https://goo.gl/FdBFjk>; Anton Evstratov, "Zakavkazskii inkubator Salafitov," March 3, 2016, <https://goo.gl/m191zx>.

51 "Who supports Wahhabi Movements in the Republic of Azerbaijan," *AhlulBayt News Agency*, <https://goo.gl/gchNfv>; Qafqaz, "Barrasi-ye khatar-e vahhaiyyat dar jomhuri-ye Azerbayjan," <https://goo.gl/nY6P5Y>.

52 Alexander Knysh, "A clear and present danger: 'Wahhabism' as a rhetorical foil," *Die Welt des Islams* 44, no. 1 (2004): 3–26.

53 For some of his radio broadcasts, see his personal channel on YouTube: <https://goo.gl/kKLryA>.

54 See, for example, "Vahhabilarin arxasynda bir general var," *Musavat*, <https://goo.gl/Y5Vpxf>.

55 "Azəri sefeli lideri Al Jazeera'ye konushtu," YouTube video, posted by *Al Jazeera Turk*, <https://goo.gl/4xQvJE>.

56 "Suriyada doyushan azerbayjanlylar," YouTube video, posted by *APA TV*, <https://goo.gl/UGzGyd>.

57 Tapdiq Farhadoglu and Parvana Bayramova, "Qamet Suleymanov: Suriyada 100 yox, 50 azarbayjanlyнын oldurulduyunu demak olar," *Amerikanyn Sesi*, January 14, 2014.

well as protect his community from criticism. Lacking access to television or radio, he began approaching numerous websites, which have mushroomed in Azerbaijan at a frenetic pace since the mid-2000s.⁵⁸ These sites provide Suleymanov, who is excluded from the state's discussions with religious figures, with at least some opportunity to enter into a public discussion of jihad, religious radicalism, terrorism, and Wahabbism. Through his online interviews, Suleymanov responds to critics, explains his theological beliefs, and seeks to familiarize society with Salafism in order to achieve its recognition as one of the indigenous religious communities of Azerbaijan. Almost all his interviews contain three main messages to people and authorities: Salafism is not an alien phenomenon in Azerbaijan, Salafis have no connection to terrorists, and only the reopening of the Abu Bakr mosque can prevent the growth of radicalism in the country. Intriguingly, in his attempts to support and publicize his causes, Suleymanov constructs his messages by combining the Islamic concept of persuasive criticism (*nasihah*), the language and rhetoric of the secular Azerbaijani media, and locally recognizable idioms. For example, in one of his interviews he states:

Mosques are the main places where spirituality is preserved. It is mosques that have preserved the morality and spirituality of our community and our nation. It is not expedient for us to disassemble them, especially if we don't open new ones. It seems to me that certain individuals want to evoke negative opinions among people about the president and the state. I call the closure and demolition of mosques a provocation. This is a provocation against the state and the president. The religious community of Narimanov District has always been respectful of Azerbaijani laws and has supported Mr. President Ilham Aliyev. We have never opposed our state and have distinguished ourselves from other mosques with our ideological struggle against radicalism. That is the exact reason why we have been attacked. That is why they [radicals] threw a grenade at us. Those who want to close [mosques] should visit them at least once on Friday. There is no free space in mosques anymore. Therefore, we need to build new mosques, as is being done in other countries. For example, when looking at the news

about Russia, they regularly show that a church has been opened, has been repaired, and so on. But here, on the contrary, mosques are being closed, which is not a good sign. It contradicts our morality.⁵⁹

In this passage, Suleymanov represents Abu Bakr mosque not as a Salafi mosque per se, but as one of the Azerbaijani "traditional" mosques that cultivated morality and struggled against radicalism. Hence, his message implies that the closure of the mosque contradicts public morality. In order to defend his cause, he connects the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque to the issues that are part of public discourse in Azerbaijani society: the preservation of moral values and the fight against radicalism. His rhetorical strategy implies that both issues could be approached positively if authorities would reopen the mosque. In addition, the passage also contains a soft criticism of the authorities' general policy towards mosques in the country. This indirect appeal to the power-holders, combined with muted criticism of them, is part of the Islamic concept of *nasihah*, which is a softly persuasive criticism of (and courteous advice to) the authorities, without any harsh actions or calls for resistance against them.

Another pertinent example: when asked what he thinks about the ban on wearing hijab in schools, Suleymanov answered:

It is unnecessary to play with the feelings of the faithful. This prohibition, in the first place, diminishes the influence of Azerbaijan in the Islamic world. On the other hand, it negatively affects the attitude of Azerbaijani believers toward the state. In such a context, some [third party] forces use the situation in accordance with their own [selfish] interests. In Azerbaijan, the ban on hijab is a crucial issue that provokes unpleasant popular attitudes toward the president. Artificial exaggeration of the problem [wearing hijab in schools] is not in favor of the state.⁶⁰

Unlike Shi'ite Islamists from the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Suleymanov prohibited his followers from joining demonstrations in front of the Ministry of Education,⁶¹ writing in the Abu Bakr forum that,

58 These online news agencies gradually became more numerous, especially after 2005. According to a political analyst whom I interviewed in July 2017 (he preferred to remain anonymous), many of these sites are financed by ministers and high-ranking officials, who use them to achieve their political goals and in the information struggle against political rivals in the country.

59 Parvin Abbasov, "Qamet Suleymanov: 'İlahiyyat' masjidında gadanlaryn choxu bizim qardashlardy," *Lent.az*, <https://goo.gl/pfUWti>.

60 "Qamet Suleymanov hijab qadagasyny pisladi," *Musavat*, <https://goo.gl/znZStN>.

61 After the former Minister of Education Misir Mardanov prohibited female students from wearing hijab in primary schools, a series of "anti-hijab ban" demonstrations erupted in 2010–2012, resulting in violent clashes between protesters and police in Baku.

“the rally in front of the ministry was a misstep, maybe in time the solution to the problem would have been found, but this rally complicated the issue even more.”⁶² If the Shi’ite Islamists perceived the ban as an attack on Islam, Suleymanov presented it as an erroneous decision that played into hands of “some [third party] forces” that seek to spoil the relationship between the president and the people. Interestingly, his responses mimic the language and rhetoric of the official Azerbaijani media, which often associate problems in the country with the “intrigues of foreign enemies.” By deploying such rhetorical strategies, Suleymanov reveals to his followers that he disagrees with the state’s policies. But by blaming “third forces” and offering gently-worded advice, he also implies that he, as a preacher, is on the side of the authorities and that his primary concern is the interests of the state.

In recent years, the Salafis began using Internet media to publicize cases of repression and violence against them. As has already been mentioned, Salafis are at times physically abused, have their beards forcibly shaved off, and are locked in police stations. Usually, these raids are “carried out by local police and local “authorities” that do what they think is demanded of them by the top, even though this is not necessarily the case.”⁶³ For example, in November 2014, the police arrested a group of Salafis who had gathered and to perform religious rituals in a private apartment. In an interview, Suleymanov told a popular online news site that “radicals are being ignored, while normal people are under attack,” adding that “we do not want to blame the Ministry of Internal Affairs. But there are some individuals in this structure who misuse their position. Possibly, they incline to a certain belief and take revenge on our brothers. We are against that.”⁶⁴ After this event, the affected Salafis wrote letters and made a video appeal to the President and the minister of Internal Affairs, complaining about the brutality of Sumgait’s police department.⁶⁵

According to a popular Salafi formulation,⁶⁶ it is forbidden to criticize officials publicly; if they commit a serious breach of conduct, they can be criticized, but only in front of the ruler. As Salafis do not have direct access either to government structures or to the president, they send their message through the medium of the Internet, using a very common “safe” form of public criticism of officials in Azerbaijan whereby the dissatisfied party can blame “outside forces” (such as “malicious individuals” inside the Ministry of Internal Affairs), thus avoiding making any harsh political statements while ensuring that the appeal will go straight to the president. This approach allows Salafis both to attract attention to their problem and to show their loyalty to the state.

This form of protest not only bears the hallmark of Saudi Arabian religious discourse, which opposes direct criticism of state structures, but it could also be seen as a way of adapting to highly illiberal local political conditions. In Azerbaijan, people generally show a very low trust in government structures, associating them with “the most negative phenomena, such as injustices and unresolved problems.”⁶⁷ For example, only 32 percent of people “somewhat trust” police, and around 11 to 22 percent trust courts, whereas nearly 84 percent of the population trust the president.⁶⁸ In other words, people do not trust institutions, which they consider corrupt, and believe that their problems can only be solved by the intervention of the president. They often sign petitions in the name of the president or protest holding his portraits, indicating that they do not represent the opposition nor seek to revolt against the political regime but simply demand a solution to a certain problem (which helps them to avoid possible repression on the part of the government). Similarly, in order to defend their causes in the media, Salafis interweave their method of approaching authorities with locally recognizable idioms and locally embedded practices of protest.

62 Suleymanov’s answer on Seymur, April 28, 2011 (07:53 a.m.), *Forum of the Abu Bakr mosque*, April 11, 2011, <https://goo.gl/kwNXUz>.

63 Sofie Bedford, *Islamic Activism in Azerbaijan* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2009), 147.

64 Murad Ahmad, “DİN-da bazi shakhslar vazifalarından sui-istifadə edir”: Qamet Suleymanov,” *Qafqazinfo*, <https://goo.gl/gcFRey>.

65 “Sumqayıtly salafi: “Qollarymyza qandal vurdular, ustumuza chyxdylyar, bashymyzda oturdular,” *BBC*, <https://goo.gl/PM5gE>; “Sumqayıtly salafilari shahar polisinda ishanjaya maruz qaldyqlaryny bildiriblar,” YouTube video, posted by “Turan agentliyi,” November 17, 2014, <https://goo.gl/ExMTuD>.

66 “Kutla qarshysynda nazirlari tanqid etmek khavarijlarin yoludur – Sheyx Saleh al-Fovzan (video),” YouTube video, posted by “Salafkhabar kanaly,” December 20, 2016, <https://goo.gl/JcCfSr>.

67 Anar Valiyev, “Social Capital in Azerbaijan: Does it help to build democracy?” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 30 (2011): 11.

68 See Caucasusbarometer.org.

“Salaf News” Media Project: Intervention into the Field of Journalism

Interaction with various private internet news agencies led the Salafis to the idea of creating their own media project, through which they could better introduce themselves to society and reach a wider audience. In 2014, Salafis launched a new media platform, Salaf News (*Sələf Xəbər*), which was theologically legitimized by Suleymanov.⁶⁹ He pointed out that journalists often inaccurately convey or completely misrepresent his words, so from now his interviews would be published on Salaf News. One of the main reasons for the creation of this Internet news agency is circumventing the information blockade under which the Salafi community found itself following the closure of the Abu Bakr mosque. The project is conceived as a Salafi voice that communicates with the public directly rather than through any third party, in an effort to represent Salafism as a local phenomenon that is fully compatible with the nation state.

Salaf News introduces itself through a special section, “Who are we, Salafis?”⁷⁰ that sends three main messages to readers. The first message: Salafism does not contradict the values of Azerbaijani society; on the contrary, it cultivates a good attitude toward parents and preserves family ties. The second message is that the Salafis are not against science—they actually support the development of scientific knowledge and technology, but insist that Muslims have made the most scientific progress when they were most committed to the principles of their religion. In this way, Salafis try to refute the two most common media attacks against them: “Salafism is an external hostile phenomenon incompatible with all Azerbaijani traditions” and “Salafism is inherently anti-science.” The final message emphasizes that Salafis are the movement that is most loyal to the existing political regime: “It is not important for us how a ruler came to power, whether he is fair or not, whether he is president or king—none of it is important at all. In all cir-

cumstances, obedience [to the ruler] is the *sine qua non*. Any manifestation of opposition to the Muslim ruler (in our case, Supreme Commander-in-Chief Ilham Aliyev) is forbidden (*haram*) according to the religion of Islam.”

Developing their loyalty narrative, Salafis point out that the major goal of their project is aiding the state in its fight against all “anti-patriotic and radical religious groups,” as well as contributing to “the enlightenment of citizens,” “protection of state security” and “the multi-ethnicity of the society.”⁷¹ Salafis harness these locally recognized discourses, especially the “struggle against radicalism” and “enlightenment of the masses,” which are widely used by state structures in relation to opposing religious radicalism⁷², implying that the Salafi approach of going back to the Qur’an and Sunna is very much in line with the policies and goals of the government.⁷³ The Salafis try to legitimize their *da’wa* by injecting it into the discourses supported by the state and by speaking in a language that is daily reproduced and repeated in the media, widely recognized in society, and does not seem dangerously provocative to the authorities.

The article “The notion of patriotism in Islam”⁷⁴ exemplifies the Salafi media project’s other attempt to represent Salafism as a local phenomenon by using locally recognizable idioms. First, Salaf News explains the meaning of motherland (*vətən*), referring to both the Explanatory Dictionary of Azerbaijani Language, which defines it as “the country where a person is born and grew up and where he is a citizen,” and to the various classical Arabic dictionaries (for example, the famous *Lisan al-Arab* of Ibn Mansur). Deploying Azerbaijani and Arabic languages along with the Qur’anic verses and *hadiths*, Salafis respond to the popular criticism directed against them that Salafi theological beliefs are contrary to the modern understanding of patriotism. Simultaneously, they are trying to convince lay Salafis that attachment to the national state is not alien to Islam and that their ideological opponents – Salafi-jihadis, who reject na-

69 “Hajı Qamet salafıların yeni saytı haqda danyshdy: ‘Qardashlar maslahatlashdılar ki...’ *Lent.az*, <https://goo.gl/K4YAid>.

70 Salaf Khabar, “Biz salafilar kimik?” <https://goo.gl/GT5Rtu>.

71 Salaf Khabar, “Dovlat bashchisi uqun dua ‘Salaf-Khabar’-yn bidatidir?” <https://goo.gl/PgFFNU>.

72 Even a brief survey of the local media will reveal numerous references by various officials to “the religious enlightenment (*maariflåndirmə*)” in the context of the struggle against religious radicalism. For example, only in 2016, the SCWRA held hundreds of “enlightenment/educational” events (*maariflåndirmə tədbirləri*) in the capital and in the regions of Azerbaijan. See the “Events” or “Enlightenment” sections of the SCWRA’s “Society and Religion” newspaper: <https://goo.gl/9VgBxA>

73 In his various interviews with Internet news portals, Suleymanov also often inscribes his main cause (the reopening of the mosque) into the state-constructed discourse of combating religious radicalism through enlightenment. See Fariz Mirzayev, “Hajı Qamet: ‘Qanunlar dina uygun olmaluydyr.’” *Kulis.az*, <https://goo.gl/GfRbAa>.

74 Salaf Khabar, “Islamda vatanparvarlik anlayshy,” <https://goo.gl/fwdbVZ>.

tional borders, concepts, and symbols – have completely erred.

Then, the text defines the notion of patriotism as the unity of citizens, protection of the homeland, and obedience to the ruler. After a thorough explanation of all three forms of patriotism by Qur'an and Sunna, it ends with a wish to “restore territorial integrity, get back to Shusha, and perform a prayer inside in its mosques.” That is a direct reference to the main issue of Azerbaijan's foreign policy—the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to which Azerbaijani Salafis pay particular attention. News about events from the front lines is frequently posted on Salaf News. Suleymanov also emphasizes that the war in Karabakh is a jihad and distinguishes the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from other armed conflicts in the Muslim world. According to him, Muslims there confront infidels (*kafirler*), while in other places Muslims are mostly fighting Muslims.⁷⁵ However, he stipulates that jihad is invalid unless ordered by the legitimate ruler (the president of Azerbaijan), so he prohibits Salafis from taking any arbitrary action regarding this issue, though he regularly affirms—particularly following skirmishes on the front lines—that Salafis will join the war against Armenian occupation as soon as mobilization is announced.⁷⁶

These statements about the motherland, patriotism, and Nagorno-Karabakh once more demonstrate Salafis' attempts to situate themselves within the political context of Azerbaijani society, as well as point out the national dimensions of their movement. Thus, the deterritorialization of the transnational phenomenon of Salafism has certain limits in Azerbaijan.⁷⁷ Local environment and ethno-nationalist discourses clearly hamper the development of some Salafi movements,⁷⁸ but they also help them adapt to the local context and encourage them to demonstrate the “comprehensiveness” (*al-shumuliyya*) of Islam that is supposed to accommodate any cultural and political challenges. In this respect, Azerbaijani Salafis' strategic engagements with Internet media show their ability to creatively adapt and reformulate both local narratives and Salafi concepts.

All previously mentioned approaches to the media are more obviously manifested in Salaf News' method of combining arguments derived from religious texts with information produced by mass media. In fact, the project's strategy of intermingling religious texts with news about politics, society, culture, technology, etc. distinguishes it from other Salafi media initiatives. The project imitates the discourse and rhetoric of professional journalism while supplementing news with religious commentary, thus melding local and global events and Salafi theology into a single narrative. Salafis apply the interpretive methods they use on Islamic texts to political and social phenomena, thus giving potential readers a vision of the world through a Salafi lens.

Salafis' intervention in the journalistic field required cultural capital (“educational credentials, technical expertise, general knowledge, verbal abilities, and artistic sensibilities”)⁷⁹ typically possessed by journalists. Various aspects of Salafi media engagements—from the official name of the project (Azerbaijan Islamic Studies and News Portal) to Suleymanov's attempts to position himself as a public expert commenting on Islam and society—show that Salafis are trying both accumulate and utilize this capital. However, they do not in any way see themselves as part of the field. Salafis see journalists as a group of specialists who often distort the truth⁸⁰ and associate the Salafi community with terrorists. They see political analysts or scholars of Islamic studies as professionals who desecrate texts and pretend to be legitimate and competent interpreters of religion for local media and government structures. The Salafi media project, therefore, encapsulates symbolic struggle against these two groups over the legitimate right to interpret both religion and the world. It strategically imitates and reformulates the rhetoric of journalists and political analysts, with the goal of dispossessing them and replacing their interpretative authority.

Salaf News emphasizes that its main object is not simply to transmit news, but to “explain many contemporary problems and events related to the Islamic

75 Salaf Khabar, “Qamet Suleymanov: Biz Qarabagy azad etmeye getmaliyik,” <https://goo.gl/yDXFJN>.

76 Salaf Khabar, “Jabhada son bash veran hadisalarla bagly Qamet Suleymanovla ekskluziv musahiba,” <https://goo.gl/kJxpjC>.

77 Gasimov, “Examining Salafism,” 122.

78 Roel Meijer, “Introduction,” in *Global Salafism*, 29.

79 Rodney Benson and Eric Neveu, “Introduction: Field theory as a work in progress,” in *Bourdieu and the journalistic field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Eric Neveu (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 4.

80 “Qamet Suleymanov - Mediada yazylanlara inanmayyn!” YouTube video, posted by “Tovhid Tube,” April 23, 2014, <https://goo.gl/CRBDrz>.

world and Muslims.” Therefore, “in order not to get lost in an overabundance of information,” it tries to handpick the most “valuable and useful” news for readers. The site explains that news is provided selectively according to its media politics, which has the following distinctive features: (1) it always shows the source of the information; (2) it does not present news about crimes and other negative happenings without a serious need; (3) it avoids information containing speculation and lies; (4) it approaches all issues in the context of common sense; and (5) it brings good news to readers in Azerbaijan and the Islamic world.⁸¹ (At the same time, however, the site claims that their project follows the same rules of information transfer as any other news agency, presumably in the hope that people will use it as a source of information on a regular basis.)

Salaf News applies the same criteria for distinguishing truth from falsehood to the various social and political events as Salafi scholarly tradition does while defining prophetic narrations. In this way, Salafis not only extend their epistemology and methodology beyond the texts of the Salafi canon, but they also create a hybrid discourse that mimics the rhetoric of the Azerbaijani media (especially television and broadcasting) by presenting predominantly positive news in which Azerbaijan appears as an island of prosperity and stability in the region. The news is selectively drawn from local and global news agencies, with a focus on general wellbeing in Azerbaijan and the success of the president’s domestic and foreign policies. Meanwhile, the “positive” news stories—from the creation of new infrastructure to the growth of economic indicators to the adoption of various laws aimed at facilitating people’s lives—are explained and legitimized through religious texts. For example, Salaf News accompanies the story “Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree approving the ‘Regulations on the Preferential Housing System’” with a *hadith*:

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: Whoever relieves one of the hardships of a believer in this world, Allah will alleviate his hardship on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever relieves the needs of someone in difficulty, Allah will alleviate his needs in this world and in

the Hereafter. Allah helps the servant as long as he helps his brother.⁸²

Similarly, a news story headlined “Ilham Aliyev: The Politics of Islamophobia, Racism and Xenophobia is Pursued in Europe” is readily available on many sites. It describes how the president condemned the EU for Islamophobia and migrantophobia following a resolution in the EU Parliament that fiercely criticized the Azerbaijani government for violating human rights. However, the Salafi media platform accompanies the story with the following commentary:

Unfortunately, support for the principle of “freedom of speech” does not prevent many Western governments from spreading hatred and insults against Islam and Muslims. But just one question arises: why does the West not apply the principle of “freedom of speech” to manifestations of anti-Semitism? It is known that the denial of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust is a criminal offense in many Western countries. Thus, despite the existence of the principle of “freedom of speech,” the laws of these countries protect a religious community of no more than 15 million all over the world, punishing those who insult them and affect their feelings. So why, then, when it comes to insulting the Muslim community of more than half a billion, does the principle of “freedom of speech” immediately disappear? Is that justice?

As for our religion, Islam prohibits anti-Semitism. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Arab has no superiority over non-Arabs. Non-Arab is not superior to Arab. As a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety.” We ask the Almighty to give Muslims patience and punish those who condemn Islam.⁸³

The commentary both reproduces and supports the anti-Western rhetoric of the Azerbaijani government, supplying it with the anti-Jewish Salafi discourse. Deploying such media strategies, the Salafis legitimize the president’s policies (in hopes of protecting the *da’wa* from possible suppression at the hand of state structures), but most importantly, they hope that such an approach would finally convince authorities to reopen the Abu Bakr mosque. At the same time, they turn the president’s news, speeches,

81 Salaf Khabar, “Dovlat bashchysy uchun dua.”

82 Salaf Khabar, “Prezident Ilham Aliyevin (Allah onu qorusun) farmany ila Azarbayjanda “Guzashtli manzil” sistemi yaradylyr,” <https://goo.gl/iEBZkM>.

83 Salaf Khabar, “Ilham Aliyev (Allah onu quvvatlandirsini): “Avropada islamofobiya, irqchilik, ksenofobiya siyasaki aparylyr.” <https://goo.gl/q7pvXw>.

and activities into part of the Salafi *da'wa*, demonstrating that all events and phenomena find confirmation in Islamic texts.

Another recent and relevant example here would be the Salafi interpretation of the devaluation of Azerbaijani currency (*manat*) that occurred in February and December 2015. Suleymanov received numerous questions about how to cope with rising prices and whether believers were allowed to join rallies against government policies. In his video and audio performances, Suleymanov explains the devaluation as a divine punishment for the sins of the people, who shortchange or bribe each other and take loans from banks.⁸⁴ In other words, he has used the crisis to critique the morals of society. Concomitantly, he forbids his followers to join rallies organized by the secular opposition, and calls on Muslims to endure the hardships and ask forgiveness from Allah, implying that it is not the president who is to blame for economic problems but people committing sins. In line with Suleymanov's fatwas, Salaf News supplies the president's words that the exchange rate of manat will soon stabilize and that Azerbaijan will overcome all crises alongside the following Qur'anic verse: "No creature is there crawling on the earth, but its provision rests on God; He knows its lodging-place and its repository. All is in a Manifest Book."⁸⁵

With links to its YouTube videos, Salaf News invokes the imposing corpus of fatwas of the authoritative, predominantly Saudi, Salafi sheikhs (Ibn Baz, Ibn al-Uthaymin, and al-Fawzan al-Madkhalī), claiming that obedience to the ruler is not just politics, but a part of worship. Moreover, the loyalty of the Salafis stands in opposition to the rebellious stance of Shi'ites, whom the Salafi media represent as agents of external (specifically Iranian) influence.⁸⁶ This media strategy creates a persuasive discourse that frames Shi'ism as a potential danger to the Azerbaijani political regime, setting up a contrast with the supposed safety of the ultra-submissive Salafism, which would under no circumstances interfere in the political field.

It should be noted that, in addition to local news, Salaf News always has an eye on global events related to the worldwide Muslim community (*umma*). Particular attention is paid to Azerbaijan's cooperation with the "Sunni countries": Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Pakistan. These Muslim states, especially Saudi Arabia, are represented as friendly countries through reports of economic cooperation, bilateral relations, meetings of the heads of states, provision of humanitarian assistance to Azerbaijan, and so on. Conversely, the narrative on Iran is negative, portraying it as an aggressor, as a country that causes discord between Muslims, and especially as an ally of Armenia—with which Azerbaijan is at war.⁸⁷ This type of narrative depicts Azerbaijan through a Salafi political imaginary in which it appears as an integral part of the Sunni world and as an ally of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, it also supports "official" media narrative that represents Azerbaijan as a country which has excellent relations with the Muslim world and is a model of sustainable development and religious pluralism.

As well as social and political news, the project provides various useful materials about health and technology in the style of "life hack" Internet resources, which is also part of general Salafi media strategies. Deploying religious texts, news, and various forms of useful information in digital media, Salafis try to create an all-encompassing Internet platform aimed at replacing "conventional" news sites for lay Salafis, as well as to attract a wider, uninitiated audience.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how Salafis in Azerbaijan engage with digital media after having been deprived of the Abu Bakr mosque. It argues that digital media became a virtual extension of their mosque that, to a certain extent, compensates for the absence of physical infrastructure. Having rec-

84 "Qiyamatların artmasynyn sabablari," YouTube video, posted by "Abu Bakr Mascidi," January 29, 2016, <https://goo.gl/XWdvAX>.

85 Salaf Khabar, "Ilham Aliyev (Allah onun ali ila musulmanlaryn ishlarini duzaltsin): 'Manatın mazannasi ədalətlidir,'" <https://goo.gl/rTbkxX>; Salaf Khabar, "Ilham Aliyev (Allah onu quvvatlandirsin): '2016-cı il Azarbayjan uchun synaq ilidir,'" <https://goo.gl/9gjsry>.

86 For example, the site disseminated news about the operation of law enforcement agencies against Islamists led by the Shi'ite theologian Taleh Bagirov in Nardaran in November 2015, accompanying it with comments from prominent Salafi sheikhs about the impermissibility of uprisings. Commenting on this issue to one of the local online news agencies, Suleymnov said, "Events in Nardaran indicate that 'pro-Iranian forces' are involved, because yesterday's event was committed by supporters of the Shi'ite sect. I cannot claim it for sure, but the evidence gives grounds for saying this." See: Salaf Khabar, "Sheykh Qamət Suleyman: Nardaran hadisasini pisladi, 'Kənar quvvəların təsiri görünür,'" <https://goo.gl/KwJFN5>.

87 Gasimov, "Examining Salafism," 122.

reated their mosque in cyberspace, Salafis sustain their preaching and sense of belonging to a single community through discursive and performative media politics. The new media also makes it possible for Azerbaijani Salafis to transmit knowledge, to be involved in transnational interaction with post-Soviet Salafis, and to attract the new followers, while evading state control.

Regularly attacked by local and foreign multimedia, Salafis eventually decided to speak for themselves in order to persuade authorities to reopen the Abu Bakr mosque. In their strategic media engagements,

which aim to propagate and defend their main cause, Salafis represent themselves as an indigenous religious community by using locally recognizable idioms and imitating the rhetoric, forms, and parlance of secular journalism. By incorporating news into their system of argumentation and intermingling it with religious texts, Salafis have extended the application of their methods beyond the Islamic textual corpus. Consequently, they have created a discourse united by a single narrative that explains the happenings of the world for lay Salafis as well as the uninitiated through the Salafi *weltanschauung*.

Chapter 6.

A Resacralization of Public Space and the Future of (Political) Islam in Azerbaijan: Quo Vadis?

Murad Ismayilov¹ (2017)

Our country suffers from a number of fundamental problems, without there being thoroughly examined and analyzed, such as the problem of morals, the problem of self-confidence, the problems of sex, individualism and the lack of readiness to offer help and sacrifice for others, cultural imitation, the problem of economic development and its relationship with morality, etc. These problems result from our historical, political and educational circumstances and from the effect of international circumstances on our own situation. It is necessary that we have our own criteria by which our circumstances should be judged. [By this] I mean a special culture and a special analysis of the universe, the human being and life.

-- Rachid al-Ghannouchi, co-founder of the Tunisian Islamic Movement, *al-Ma'rifa* 10 (1973): 11–14 (qtd. in Mohamed Elhachmi Hamdi, *The Politicisation of Islam: A Case Study of Tunisia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 22.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years of independence, the ruling elite in Azerbaijan have benefited from – and sought to reproduce – overall societal animosity, including as expressed in the attitudes of the secular opposition, towards the country's religious groups, particularly those opposed to the incumbent regime, these routinely portrayed as radical, potentially terrorist, and ostensibly evil.

Not only was the effort to reproduce the social, cultural, and ideological rupture between these two segments of society meant to keep the country's secular and religious opposition apart as a component of an ingenious “divide and rule” strategy in the pursuit of total dominance and control (including by thus depriving the religious opposition of an organizational toolkit to mobilize society around their cause), but by working to continuously reinforce the representation of Islam as an imminent danger to the stability and secular nature of Azerbaijani statehood, the government has sought to position itself – both in the eyes of the ‘liberal,’ ‘democratic’ West and the populace at home – as the sole force capable of staving off the Islamic danger thus using the radical Islamist card to justify its increasingly illiberal regime and authoritarian practices, a discursive effort that received a particular boost during the dramatic shift in geopolitical conditions associated with the 9/11 events of 2001 in the United States and the “global war on terror” that quickly followed.

For a long time, the regime's approach progressed almost without hindrance. More recently, however, the rise of the Union for Muslim Unity under the leadership of Taleh Baghirzade, a charismatic young Shia cleric, and the concurrent rapprochement between the country's Islamic movement on one hand and secular civil society and traditional opposition (particularly as embodied in the *National Council* opposition bloc) on the other, has occasioned a dramatic shift. Religious and secular forces, which before were insulated from one another, have now

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opened a multifaceted dialogue, discussing issues as fundamental as the nature of Azerbaijani statehood, national identity, and Islam's role and place in both.

This study offers an account of the conditions underlying the unfolding partnership and convergence of interest across the country's religious-secular political landscape and looks into some future dynamics this transformation is set to unleash. The paper begins by outlining elites' attitudes to Islam, and the strategy of separation between religion and politics in which those attitudes find expression. It then proceeds to show the complicity of civil society and the broader populace in the post-Soviet reproduction of the narrative of Islamic danger and the resultant religious-secular divide. The article goes on to discuss key factors contributing to the ongoing normalization of Islam across the public realm and the gradual bridging of the religious-secular divide amid ongoing state repression. The study concludes by offering a comparative perspective of common features and conditioning factors behind the dynamics underlying the religious-secular nexus in Azerbaijan and across the broader Middle Eastern region. It also offers an insight into some future potentialities exposed by the current dynamics.

Elite Attitudes to Islam and the Quest for a Religious-Secular Divide

The perception of Islam as a threat and a viable political challenge, if left unrestrained, has long permeated elite engagement with Islam in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, a concern that prompted the Baku regime to seek control of conduits of external influences on religiosity (including religious education abroad, external sources of teaching in madrasas, and religious proselytizing) and fight any public and, particularly, collective manifestation of religiosity that held a danger of transforming religion, particularly Islam, from an individual identity marker into a *social* phenomenon and hence potentially a political challenge. With Islam seen as "a dangerous genie to be contained,"² the elite's consistent effort to erase it from – and ren-

der it invisible in – the public space, seeking instead to confine religious practices to the privacy of one's home or state-sanctioned mosques, has been intended as "a means of pre-empting the rise of Islamism as a political challenge."³ "Religion is in our hearts and should not be on our streets"—this is how Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan, summarized the regime's position on the issue in an interview with a *Washington Times* journalist in 2007.⁴

Apart from a range of practical measures aimed at stifling the penetration of Islamic discourse in public space (including a ban on using loudspeakers during the call to prayer, a ban on wearing Islamic headscarves in public schools, closing down mosques with a massive following, etc.), the *symbolic violence*⁵ the Azerbaijani political establishment has directed toward Islam, including as part of its quest for legitimation *vis-à-vis* both the domestic populace and the West, involved at least five intricately linked discursive lines:

1. Upholding a narrative associating any upsurge of religiosity, particularly if the latter finds expression in the rising public activism of religiously inspired groups and individuals (and thus transforms from an individual identity marker into a social phenomenon), with the rise of Islamic "extremism" and thus framing it as a threat to state security and domestic stability;
2. Contrasting the dictate of Islamic fundamentalism in neighboring Iran and the rising tendency of insecurity, destruction, and war across the Middle East with the overall secular nature of Azerbaijani statehood and stability and security at home;
3. Linking any trend of rising religiosity (including as the latter necessarily, as the narrative claims, translates into the rise of "radical" Islam) to – and grounding it in – poverty, illiteracy, and backwardness, thus effectively rendering it a quality of the outcast;
4. Linking expressions of religiously-inspired public activism to the influence or direct sponsorship of foreign agents, including, in

² "Recent Steps Highlight GOAJ's Attempts to Control Islam," WikiLeaks, October 16, 2007, goo.gl/yA3Dnn.

³ "Azerbaijan: Summer 2009 Mosque Closures, Destruction, and Openings," WikiLeaks, September 16, 2009, goo.gl/4Ueu7Y; "Azerbaijan and the Hijab Ban: A New Kemalist Nightmare?" Islamic Human Rights Commission, February 8, 2003, goo.gl/x6w3zH.

⁴ Rob Sobhani, "Post-Soviet Modernity," *The Washington Times*, August 7, 2009, goo.gl/wqgDjT.

⁵ The notion of "symbolic violence" was introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to denote processes whereby "order and social restraint are produced by indirect, cultural mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control" (Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 104).

- particular, Iran, these allegedly using Islam to radicalize domestic politics in Azerbaijan;
5. Promoting secular nationalism (including as upheld in the face of the ongoing conflict with Armenia) and *homogenously* empty *multiculturalism* as an alternative ideological vision around which to mobilize society.⁶

As such, the regime has been pursuing two mutually reinforcing objectives. First, in reproducing the post-9/11 notion of “fundamentalist” Islam as a security threat and thus portraying Islamic activism at home as a product of a foreign conspiracy, the elite have sought to position themselves as the only potent leadership able and willing to contain Islam’s rising political clout in the country and guard the secular nature of Azerbaijani statehood. Meant to justify the need for authoritarian governance to properly address these challenges, the effort has become an increasing feature of the elite’s engagement with Islam the more authoritarian the regime has grown and the more its governance model has begun to elicit criticism from the West.

Second, on a domestic level, the goal also has been to discredit any topic that could potentially mobilize the population, Islam and ethnicity being the most potent of these. As Azerbaijani human rights lawyer and activist Khalid Baghirov aptly described it:

In fact, there is one thing this government wants in Azerbaijan [and that is] to localize people. Because authoritarian regimes localize people, that is, detach people from each other, destroy people’s trust in each other, and rule upon this. The government in this country wants one thing:

to have an atmosphere of mutual distrust established [within and between various] social groups... [such that] there be no trust between people on either religious or ethnic topics, or in other [similar] areas, because mutual trust between people leads to joint action and joint action is [perceived as] a threat.⁷

In view of this, the ruling elite have ordinarily accused their political opponents of cooperating with wider terrorist networks, Iran’s special security services, or both. And while these tactics had initially been applied only in relation to the regime’s religious opponents, such accusations have increasingly been used as a labeling marker against secular groups and individuals as well; this to justify state repression against them in the eyes of the West and secular civil society. The underlying aim here, then, has reached beyond the religious realm alone and involved an effort to “impose state control of society, including any independent civil society activity, and to make all exercise of human rights dependent on state permission.”⁸ That is, “[s]imilar to their Soviet predecessors, Azerbaijani officials [have] tend[ed] to dislike pluralism and tr[ie]d to restrict anything that [might] challenge their authority.”⁹

Guided by a Soviet-style notion whereby any *collective* expression of (Islamic) religiosity has been associated with potential or actual opposition to the regime, the ruling establishment has been particularly wary about any possible association between religious activism and secular political opposition, a concern that has informed their effort to introduce and maintain legal and discursive mechanisms of separation between religion and politics,¹⁰ on one hand, and help sustain insurmountable mental divi-

6 Cf. Felix Corley and John Kinahan, “Azerbaijan: Religious Freedom Survey, April 2012,” *Forum 18 News Service*, April 17, 2012, goo.gl/coHlOc.

7 See a conversation with Khalid Baghirov and Hilal Mammadov at “Your Tribune,” *Channel 13’s*, April 7, 2017, goo.gl/TDYmkv (in Azerbaijani). See also “REAL Board Member Azer Gasimli,” Facebook, December 2, 2015, <https://goo.gl/g5PYse> (in Azerbaijani). Some portions of the post have been reproduced in Mansur, “The Nardaran People Are Not Terrorists and Extremists,” *Cebhe.info*, December 2, 2015, <http://goo.gl/iMX7Qy> (in Azerbaijani).

8 Corley and Kinahan, “Azerbaijan.”

9 *Religious Freedom in Azerbaijan* (Washington, DC: Institute on Religion and Public Policy, 2015), 4.

10 Notably, secularization reforms in Azerbaijan had already begun before the advent of Soviet rule, during the two years of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR, 1918–1920). Among other measures, *shari’a* courts were abolished in all regions save Zaqatala, where they were kept given “the existing realities and the closeness to Daghestan”; *waqf* property was confiscated as a result of the May 1920 land reform; and “all present and former servants of religious cults regardless of their denomination with the exception of the *müdeshirs* [those who washed dead bodies] were deprived of the right to elect and to be elected in the power structures.” With the establishment of Soviet power, these measures were taken further: “Muslim clerics” now also “lost the right to be elected in local Soviets and their assemblies” and the constitution of Soviet Azerbaijan (adopted in May 1921) stipulated in Article 4 the separation of state and education from religion in compliance with the May 1920 decrees by the People’s Commissariat of Education of the USSR “On the ban of religious education and the conducting of religious rituals in schools” and “On the Freedom of Conscience.” Nonetheless, religious schools—*madrasas* and *maktabs*—continued to function semi-illegally in Soviet Azerbaijan and many Azerbaijani citizens could obtain religious education abroad, including in Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, until the late 1930s. See Altay Goyushov and Elchin Asgarov, “Islam and Islamic Education in Soviet and Independent Azerbaijan,” in *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States*, ed. Michael Kemper et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 170–71, 190–99.

sions between the country's broader civil society and religious groups, on the other. The alliance between the two has been among the government's vilest nightmares, a disposition (and a policy line) which helps explain the nature of the regime's response to the three cases where Islam's intrusion into the political realm in Azerbaijan has been at its most explicit: the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan in the mid-1990s and in the early 2010s; Ilgar Ibrahimoglu in 2003–2005; and Taleh Baghirzade since he returned from studies in May 2011.

Founded in Nardaran, a bastion of ultra-conservative Shia Islam northeast of Baku,¹¹ in 1991, shortly after Azerbaijan emerged as an independent state, and officially registered a year later, the country's only Islamic Party (IPA) had its registration revoked by the Supreme Court on the eve of the 1995 parliamentary elections thanks to a new constitutional provision that prohibited faith-based political parties and given the government's alleged suspicion of the party's connection to Iran, a measure followed by the arrest of the party's founding chair, Haji Alikram Aliyev. Ten years later, in 2005, several members of the Islamic Party, including then-chairman Hajiaga Nuri, were disqualified from standing for the 2005 parliamentary elections on the grounds that they represented "religious figures."¹² Finally, in January 2011, another IPA leader, Dr. Movsum Samadov, was imprisoned. Samadov had become increasingly outspoken against the government as a campaign to close mosques across the country gathered momentum since 2009 and, particularly, following the effective ban on the hijab in public schools since December 2010. Besides the issues of purely religious nature, he had gradually begun to criticize the overall authoritarian, "corrupt," and "unjust" nature of the regime, including in his widely

publicized party meeting speech on 2 January 2011, where he drew parallels between incumbent President Ilham Aliyev and various aspects of his policies and Yazid ibn Muawiya, a tyrant leader of the seventh century Arab caliphate (680–683) responsible, among other things, for the Karbala massacre and the associated murder of the Prophet Muhammad's (SAAS) grandson, Hussain ibn Ali.¹³ In that speech, which served as the final trigger for his arrest a few days later, Samadov also compared the tendency of Azerbaijan's ongoing political dynamics to the Stalinist repressions of 1937 and called the nation to "rise up and put an end to the despotic regime," allegedly the first time since 1995 that a political leader in Azerbaijan had made such a call.¹⁴

With a religious education from the International Imam Khomeini University in Iran's Qazvin city and a secular education that included a bachelor's degree from Azerbaijan's Economics University and two years' human rights advocacy training in Poland, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu represented a natural threat to the regime. Not only did his educational background transcend the religious-secular divide, but he was subsequently involved with Azerbaijani civil society both as a religious activist – primarily in his capacity as the first elected imam of the independent Juma mosque community of some 3,000 believers in downtown Baku since 2002¹⁵ – and as a prominent human rights advocate. After returning to the country from studies in 1998, he was a leading figure in the Centre for Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion (DEVAMM)¹⁶ and co-founder and Secretary General of the unregistered Azerbaijani branch of the Washington-based International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). Identifying himself and his community as "religious people with a strong inter-

11 "Azerbaijan: Independent Islam and the State," *Europe Report* No. 191, International Crisis Group, March 25, 2008, 14–15; Vldic Ravich, "Azerbaijan: Islamic Party Trial Brings Fresh Scrutiny to Religious Hamlet," *EurasiaNet*, August 19, 2011, goo.gl/SxMi6B.

12 Jahan Aliyeva, "Religion Emerges as an Issue for Some Parliamentary Candidates in Azerbaijan," *EurasiaNet*, November 2, 2005, goo.gl/OISGfE.

13 See Samadov's January 2011 speech (in Azerbaijani) at <https://goo.gl/fhVVvm>. Also see Shahla Sultanova, "Azerbaijan Tightens Grip on Islamic Literature," *CRS* 678, March 4, 2013, goo.gl/ZNsGFo.

14 "Azerbaijan: Repression of the Islamic Movement," *5Pillars*, July 19, 2014, goo.gl/37CNQp; Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Arrest of Islamic Party Leader Puts Religion in the Political Spotlight," *EurasiaNet*, January 11, 2011, goo.gl/sapF8.

15 During Soviet times, the Juma mosque located in the capital Baku's old section, *Icheri Sheher*, served as a warehouse and later as a carpet museum. It only reopened as a mosque following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The Juma mosque community was founded in 1992 by Haji Azer Ramizoghlu, a self-educated religious figure who has been in exile in Georgia since November 2003. Registered with the country's Ministry of Justice in 1992, the community did not apply for re-registration following the 1996 law to that effect and has remained outside the control of the official clergy ever since. Their problems with the government started in 1998, after they began to get involved in human rights activities, including as part of DEVAMM, while also receiving support from local Western organizations to that effect (see "Azerbaijan," 12–13). The Juma mosque remains open, but congregational prayers are no longer allowed there (Sofie Bedford, "Islamic Opposition in Azerbaijan: Discursive Conflicts and Beyond," in *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Countries*, ed. Greg Simons et al. (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 137).

16 An NGO involved in the protection of rights of Azerbaijani believers and established in the late 1990s, DEVAMM was initially headed by Haji Azer Ramizoghlu until November 2003, when the latter had to leave Azerbaijan for Georgia where he currently resides in exile (see "Azerbaijan," 13).

est in civil society activism,¹⁷ Ibrahimoglu initially found his interests and objectives aligning squarely with the ideals of the secular political opposition and broader civil society – a bond of harmony based in large measure on the shared understanding that, as Ibrahimoglu suggested, “We are a threat [to the incumbent regime] because we actually believe in the rule of law, and insist that the letter of the constitution be applied, whether in the realm of elections or real-estate.”¹⁸ Consequently, Ibrahimoglu actively backed, including during his Friday sermons, secular opposition candidate Isa Gambar in the run-up to the 2003 presidential elections and was directly involved in the post-election opposition protests against the alleged rigging of these elections,¹⁹ a sequence of choices that landed him in jail in early December 2003.²⁰ He spent four months there before being released on a five-year suspended sentence in early April; his release agreement also stipulated that he could not leave Baku without special police approval.²¹

Ibrahimoglu remained active in the country’s political life for a limited period after his release from prison, including actively campaigning on behalf of opposition candidate Rauf Arifoglu in the 2005 parliamentary election²² and joining the Coordination

Council of the Public Chamber (*Ictimai Palata*), a broad-based coalition of opposition forces established in late December 2010 in response to the government’s alleged rigging of the parliamentary elections in November that year. Over time, however, he has gradually softened his political rhetoric and since 2012-2013 has largely withdrawn from political life and dissociated himself from the secular political opposition, as evidenced by the fact that he fell short of joining the National Council (*Milli Şura*) opposition bloc established in May 2013 to replace the (by that time dysfunctional) Public Chamber²³ ahead of presidential elections late that year. Instead, Ibrahimoglu has chosen to confine his activities to “fundamental enlightenment work,” including regular lectures on purely religious themes (including on Islamic philosophy);²⁴ continued research, with a focus on the study of the interaction between Islam and the West as part of the “House of Wisdom” research centre that he chairs; and working, without too much public fuss, as part of DEVAMM on individual cases of religious oppression (including in particular cases related to the hijab ban).²⁵

The regime’s policy of perpetuating an insurmountable wall between religion and politics and

17 “Azerbaijan,” 13.

18 Thomas Goltz, “Closure of Mosque Does Not Augur Well for Azerbaijani Freedoms,” *EurasiaNet*, May 26, 2004, goo.gl/BZAYVw.

19 In his interview with the International Crisis Group in September 2007, Ibrahimoglu suggests that he “was not supporting Isa Gambar personally,” but rather “was against the Monarchy and genetic transmission of power” (“Azerbaijan,” 12).

20 Ibrahimoglu was charged with instigating opposition protests following the presidential elections in October 2013.

21 Leila Amirova, “Young People Increasingly Drawn to Islam,” *CRS* (Institute for War and Peace Reporting), Issue 407, August 30, 2007, goo.gl/bK6xfn; Felix Corley, “Azerbaijan: Baptist and Adventist Support for Imam at Trial,” *Forum 18 News Service*, March 22, 2004, goo.gl/f0Q2Xs; Felix Corley, “Azerbaijan: Juma Mosque Stolen by Police, Community Refused Access for Worship, and New Imam Imposed,” *Forum 18 News Service*, July 2, 2004, goo.gl/Kb9lQ6; Felix Corley, “Azerbaijan: ‘Half-Free’ Imam to Challenge Suspended Jail Sentence,” *Forum 18 News Service*, April 5, 2004, goo.gl/Vmr6Nf; Felix Corley, “Azerbaijan: Police Storm Mosque, Expelling & Beating-up Muslims,” *Forum 18 News Service*, June 30, 2004, goo.gl/NGb3K0; “Mosque Case Puts Spotlight on Religious Freedom in Azerbaijan,” *EurasiaNet*, April 26, 2004, goo.gl/yg3Dxv; Goltz, “Closure of Mosque”; Fariz Ismailzade, “Political Motivation Behind Mosque Closure in Azerbaijan,” *EurasiaNet*, March 1, 2004, goo.gl/yz29Yz; Julie Wilhelmson, “Islamism in Azerbaijan: How Potent?” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009): 730.

22 It was following Ibrahimoglu’s open campaigning “on behalf of opposition party political candidates in Azerbaijan’s 2005 parliamentary elections [shortly after his release from prison] ... [that] the [Azerbaijani government] announced that Parliament would seek to amend the Law on Religious Freedoms to prohibit political activities by religious leaders” (“The Changing Role of Islamic Religiosity in Azerbaijan,” *WikiLeaks*, September 19, 2006, goo.gl/VYvjHx). Thus, the country’s Law on Religious Freedom now explicitly stipulates a separation between religion and politics by prohibiting religious associations from “partak[ing] in the activities of political parties” (Art.5.5) or serving in public office (Art.5.6), and preventing political parties from engaging in religious activity. The July 2011 amendment to Art. 4 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Practice, defines “professional religious activity” as “activity directed to religious education, religious training, satisfying the religious needs of believers, spreading religion, performing religious ceremonies, giving sermons (preaching) and administering religious structures. A religious person engaged in religious activity is a person with higher or secondary specialized religious education” (Art. 4.1). For a critique of this position by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR, see “Joint Opinion on the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief of the Republic of Azerbaijan by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR,” Opinion 681/2012, Venice Commission Strasbourg, Warsaw, October 15, 2012, 13.

23 In an effort to explain his disassociation from politics, Ibrahimoglu suggested that he would henceforth only join a political structure if he would also be among the latter’s founders with the opportunity to define its rules of the game, and only at a time that such a move was a priority for him (and his community). At the same time, he claims to maintain an active (and, on occasions, friendly) relationship with all forces across the country’s “democratic” camp, ranging from the traditional “Musavat” and “Popular Front” parties to the recently founded “REAL” movement. Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, personal interview with the author, July 12, 2016.

24 As of July 2016, several thousand people had participated in Ibrahimoglu’s classes on Islamic theology and Islamic philosophy (Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, personal interview with the author, July 12, 2016).

25 Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, personal interview with the author, July 12, 2016.

continuously reproducing the religion-politics dichotomy has manifested itself most clearly in its attitude to Taleh Baghirzade, a young charismatic scholar of Shia Islam with religious education from Iran's Qom (2005–2010) and Iraq's Najaf (2010–2011), as well as a secular bachelor's degree from Azerbaijan's Economic University in Baku (2002–2007), who has, since he returned from Iraq in May 2011, positioned himself as a staunch antagonist to what he regarded as the incumbent regime's suppressive policies towards Islam and, ultimately, the overall environment of entrenched authoritarianism reigning in the country. Baghirzade has been imprisoned three times ever since: the first between May 2011 and November 2012 for participating in public protests against the government's hijab ban; the second in late March 2013 for two and a half years on what local and international

human rights defenders suggested were trumped-up charges of illegal drug possession;²⁶ and the last time on November 26, 2015, following what the country's human rights defenders insisted was a carefully planned military assault by a special police force on the settlement of Nardaran that he was visiting on the day, an operation that resulted in the death of at least four villagers and two policemen.²⁷ Charged with terrorism, plotting a government coup, illegal firearms possession, and homicide, Taleh Baghirzade was sentenced in late January 2017 to 20 years in prison.²⁸ Not only have Taleh Baghirzade and his associates, along with the country's human rights defenders, firmly denied the government's allegations, for which the court subsequently failed to produce any evidence,²⁹ but they have also claimed unequivocally that the entire "Nardaran affair" was fabricated by government forc-

26 Idrak Abbasov, "Azeri Muslims Protest Theologian's Arrest," CRS 682, April 9, 2013, goo.gl/4zjV6v; Azadliq Radiosu, "Who is Taleh Baghirzade?" *Azadliq Radiosu*, April 3, 2015, goo.gl/g8fdVZ (in Azerbaijani); Eldar Mamedov, "Whither Azerbaijan's Islamists?" *EurasiaNet*, August 12, 2015, goo.gl/2i6Aoc.

27 The Interior Ministry and Prosecutor's Office have claimed these deaths were a result of the residents' opening fire on police and hurling Molotov cocktails, an allegation they could not back with any evidence and one which Nardaran residents have firmly denied, suggesting that "police opened fire on unarmed people." According to residents, "police broke down the door" of the home where Baghirzade was a guest while its inhabitants were joined together in offering one of the five obligatory prayers, and opened fire, beating the occupants and dragging them towards the police car. During the trial that followed, some eyewitnesses further claimed that the two police officers who also died during the Nardaran events on November 26 were shot by their fellow policemen (allegedly to give "the 'green light' to law enforcement officers to carry out tougher measures and mass arrests in Nardaran"). One of the residents died in a police car in front of the other detainees as the result of a beating sustained during the attack. See *Meydan TV's* online news report, August 3, 2016, goo.gl/Gx86ot (in Azerbaijani); *Channel 13's* online news report, August 12, 2016, goo.gl/7IM5tG (in Azerbaijani). See also Aytan, "Horroric Facts Revealed in the 'Nardaran Case,'" *Azadliq*, August 3, 2016, goo.gl/1GEJQG; Aytan, "New Horroric Facts Revealed in the 'Nardaran Case,'" *Azadliq*, August 11, 2016, goo.gl/nxY2EO; Aytan, "Still More Horroric Facts of Torture Revealed in the 'Nardaran Case,'" *Azadliq*, August 18, 2016, goo.gl/ZTUkb1; Azadliq Radiosu, "The Nardaran Case: 'The Police Officer Was Shot by His Fellow Policeman in Front of My Eyes,'" *Azadliq Radiosu*, August 4, 2016, goo.gl/Mw050N; Azadliq Radiosu, "The Nardaran Standoff (Part 3): The Results of a Journalist's Investigation," *Azadliq Radiosu*, August 3, 2016, goo.gl/IPy9yJ; Caucasian Knot, "Nardaran Residents Erect Barricades at the Entrances to the Village," *Caucasian Knot*, November 26, 2015, goo.gl/uEY2cp; "The Nardaran Case: Political Motives, Illegals and Realities," *Contact.az*, February 21, 2017, goo.gl/EdPzmV; Liz Fuller, "Prosecutor in 'Nardaran Trial' Calls for Life Sentence for Azerbaijani Theologian," *Radio Free Liberty/Radio Liberty*, December 27, 2016, goo.gl/b1qvo9; Liz Fuller, "Azerbaijani Theologian Said to Have Been Plotting Coup," *Radio Free Liberty/Radio Liberty*, November 27, 2015, goo.gl/WGXo53; Mustafa Hajibeyli, "Who Killed the Police Officers in Nardaran?" *Europe Without Political Prisoners*, January 5, 2017, goo.gl/rISPb6; Jamil Hasanli, "The Nardaran Calamity," *Azadliq*, December 26, 2016, goo.gl/q3iKM5; Faiq Majid, "Police Took Control of Entrances in Nardaran," *Caucasian Knot*, November 27, 2015, goo.gl/mt514m; "The Police Killed in Nardaran were Religious," *Maydan TV*, February 3, 2017, goo.gl/0IRUxn.

28 Fifteen other members of the Movement for Muslim Unity, as well as Deputy Chairman of the secular opposition Popular Front Party Fuad Gahramanli, were convicted on the day along with Taleh Baghirzade. Their sentences reached up to twenty years; charges included murder, terrorism, inciting religious hatred, organizing mass unrest, illegal possession of weapons, arms trafficking, and plotting to overthrow the government ("Azerbaijan: Abuse Allegations Mar High-Profile Trial," HRW, January 26, 2017, goo.gl/tV3Dak; Mike Runey, "Azerbaijan: Show Trial Ends with Harsh Sentences for Islamic Activists," *EurasiaNet*, January 26, 2017, goo.gl/Ny13Vb). Also see Alchina and Ilham, "Four Months Imprisonment Decision for Taleh Baghirzade," *Cebhe.Info*, December 2, 2015, goo.gl/PID4Ub; "Azerbaijan: Abuse Allegations Mar High-Profile Trial"; "Taleh Baghirzade and 13 People Arrested, Some Died," *IslamAzeri*, November 26, 2015, <http://goo.gl/Kiwe8S>; Faiq Majid, "Defendants in 'Nardaran Case' Received from 10 to 20 Years in Prison," *Caucasian Knot*, January 25, 2017, goo.gl/xFjGrn (in Russian); "Taleh Baghirzade's Prison Term Extended," *Meydan TV*, March 7, 2016, goo.gl/euNmp1; Alakbar Raufoglu, "Nardaran Violence Sparks Fresh Concerns About Authoritarian Rule," *Meydan TV*, December 1, 2015, <https://goo.gl/MCS8Vm>; "Azerbaijan Deepens Crackdown on Shi'ite Stronghold," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 1, 2015, goo.gl/bzTFS4; Runey, "Azerbaijan: Show Trial Ends with Harsh Sentences for Islamic Activists."

29 Notably, the government has never released the video footage of the police assault in Nardaran, allegedly because this would expose a reality opposite to the governmental narrative. As Taleh Baghirzade suggested during one of the trial sessions in December 2016, "There are those who witnessed the video shooting [of events] during the [Nardaran] operation. However, because there is no armed attack by us, nor resistance, as they have presented it, and on the contrary it exposes their own atrocities, they have not released it" (Azadliq Radiosu, "The Nardaran Case: 'Even Ilham Aliyev Couldn't Sit Me Down, Will You?'" *Azadliq Radiosu*, 2016, goo.gl/Tjyzcb; Hajibeyli, "Who Killed the Police Officers"; Faiq Majid, "The Trial on 'Nardaran case' Interrupted After an Act of Protest by the Defendants," *Caucasian Knot*, December 15, 2016, goo.gl/4HfzW6. Also see Fuller, "Azerbaijani Theologian"; Hajibeyli, "Who Killed the Police Officers."

es who had “deliberately [sought] to provoke a confrontation in Nardaran in order to create a pretext for quashing [Taleh Baghirzade and] his movement,” including “in retaliation for the [harsh] criticism voiced by the Movement for Muslim Unity of blatant falsification during the parliamentary elections on November 1.”³⁰ International human rights watchdogs, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have sided with this interpretation.³¹ Consequently, Azerbaijan’s human rights defense community designated all 87 people imprisoned on criminal charges in relation to what has come to be known as the “Nardaran affair,” including Taleh Baghirzade and members of his *Movement for Muslim Unity*, as political prisoners in October 2016.³²

Both Taleh Baghirzade and Ilgar Ibrahimoghlu, as well as Movsum Samadov in the latter stage of his struggle, among others, were pursuing by the time of their arrest a combined religious-political agenda for freedom of expression and broader democratization and human rights. As such, they embodied an organic amalgam of the religious and secular realms of the country’s social-political landscape, an illegal position in Azerbaijan³³ and a reality that has rendered these leaders particularly dangerous in the eyes of the ruling elite. Speaking to *BBC*’s Azerbaijan service about Ilgar Ibrahimoglu back in 2004, Rafiq

Aliyev, then-chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, suggested that, “Ibrahimoghlu had misused his religious position for political purposes, and thus posed a danger to stability in Azerbaijan,”³⁴ adding that “he [Ibrahimoghlu] should not be at the same time a politician and a religious figure.”³⁵ Elsewhere that same year, Rafiq Aliyev stressed that, “interference of religious associations, centres, religion in politics is inadmissible and contradicts current law.”³⁶

Speaking about Taleh Baghirzade and his newly established Movement for Muslim Unity (MMU) some ten years later, in 2015, Allah Shukur Pashazade, head of the government-controlled Muslim Board, contended that Baghirzade needed to make up his mind as to whether he wanted to pursue a political or religious agenda and thus seek state registration for the organization under his leadership accordingly; apparently, he could not do both in the context of Azerbaijan, a reality that has so far also deprived the MMU of state registration.³⁷ Siyavush Heydarov, deputy chairman of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations, concurred, suggesting in November 2015 that MMU Deputy Head Elchin Gasimov, then detained by police on hooliganism charges, was

not an official religious figure and member of a religious community, and they have not appealed to this effect to the Caucasus Muslims Board and the State Committee for

30 Aytan, “Horrific Facts”; Aytan, “New Horrific Facts”; Aytan, “Still More Horrific Facts”; “The Nardaran Case: ‘He Said This is Azerbaijan’s Guantanamo’” *Azadliq Radosu*, August 24, 2016, goo.gl/WrX5xH; “The Police Officer Was Shot”; “The Nardaran Case: ‘They Were Kicking Us from All Sides as if We Were Balls,’” *Azadliq Radosu*, August 11, 2016, goo.gl/k7jXFH; Fuller, “Azerbaijani Theologian”; Liz Fuller, “Suspected Shi’ite Insurgent Group on Trial in Azerbaijan,” *Radio Free Liberty/Radio Liberty*, August 14, 2016, goo.gl/9Mouu1; Jamil Hasanli, “The Nardaran Affair: The Interior Ministry Against the Believers,” *Contact.az*, September 5, 2016, goo.gl/TCir5u; Faiq Majid, “Taleh Bagirzade Accused Authorities of Provocation in Nardaran,” *Caucasian Knot*, August 4, 2016, goo.gl/3BHzTI; Majid, “The Trial on ‘Nardaran case’”; Durna Safarova, “Azerbaijan: Dubbing Critics as ‘Islamic Extremists,’” *EurasiaNet*, September 20, 2016, goo.gl/G5Y8YO. For a detailed account of the Nardaran events, including the preceding dynamics, see “The Nardaran Standoff (Part 1): The Results of a Journalist’s Investigation,” *Azadliq Radosu*, July 19, 2016, goo.gl/pWtHN5; “The Nardaran Standoff (Part 2): The Results of a Journalist’s Investigation,” *Azadliq Radosu*, July 22, 2016, goo.gl/e20Fjk; “The Nardaran Standoff (Part 3): The Results of a Journalist’s Investigation,” *Azadliq Radosu*, August 03, 2016, goo.gl/IPy9yJ. Also see *Meydan TV*’s online news report, August 3, 2016, goo.gl/Gx86ot (in Azerbaijani); *Channel 13*’s online news report, August 12, 2016, goo.gl/7IM5tG (in Azerbaijani).

31 “Azerbaijan: Torture and Travesty of Justice in Nardaran Case,” Amnesty International, February 6, 2017, goo.gl/iNlqc4; “Azerbaijan: Abuse Allegations.”

32 For the full list, see Ogtay Gulaliyev, “Human Rights Defender Released a List of Those Arrested in Relation to the ‘Nardaran Case,’” *Azadliq*, October 13, 2017, goo.gl/7pAQ8d.

33 In view of the constitutional separation of state and religion, a religious agency in Azerbaijan cannot pursue a political agenda, while a political organization cannot speak in the name of religion (including as expressed in running religious sermons—see Timur Ryazev, “The State Committee Commented on the Illegal Action of Believers in Baku,” *INews.az*, November 6, 2015, goo.gl/Sn8AUL. According to Article 5 of Azerbaijan’s Law on Freedom of Religious Belief, “religious organizations shall not partake in the activity of political parties and help them financially” (<https://goo.gl/ARvZk5>). Likewise, Article 85 of the country’s constitution states that “ministers of religion” (or “religious men” in a different translation) cannot be elected deputies to the parliament (*Milli Majlis*) (<http://goo.gl/mm8JAO>).

34 Fariz Ismailzade, “Political Motivation Behind Mosque Closure.”

35 Rafiq Aliyev, quoted in “Azerbaijan: Independent Islam,” 13.

36 Rafiq Aliyev, quoted in Bedford, “Islamic Opposition in Azerbaijan,” 129.

37 FaktXeber, “Allahshukur Pashazade Expressed His Position,” *FaktXeber*, November 9, 2015, goo.gl/6Gw5BO.

Work with Religious Organisations. Elchin Gasimov has no official permission to perform religious ceremonies in places of worship. But he has repeatedly, under the guise of religious ceremonies, tried to disturb public order [and] hiding behind religion voiced calls and performed actions of a political nature.³⁸

Addressing the likes of Taleh Baghirzade, who use religious sermons to raise and discuss various issues of social and political nature, including the reality of authoritarian governance and economic inequality, head of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations Mubariz Gurbanli said in September 2016, as Baghirzade's trial continued:

We have always worked for [the benefit of] our state and our statehood and are fighting those who want to sow discord [in our society]. No one can transform a mosque into a political arena. We shall not allow this. Mosques are there to pray, to worship Allah.³⁹

While the state-sponsored discursive line has been that the political and religious realms should be kept separate, such that no political party can claim to represent and act in the name of religion, and “the religious sphere should be managed by independent and neutral institutions... [that is] religion should be nonpartisan,”⁴⁰ the regime has, in reality, never allowed nor desired the neutrality of religious institutions. Instead, it has sought to monopolize control of the production of religious discourse and suppress all religious activities outside its administrative reach. Religion, just like the broader field of cultural production, has been effectively held hostage to politics – and to official, mainstream politics at that.

The Dynamics of Change: The Bridging of the Religious-Secular Divide and the Normalization of Islamic Discourse across Azerbaijan's Social-Political Space

The Azerbaijani regime's representation of the Islamic resurgence in the country as a potential threat and

its effort to instrumentalize this narrative in pursuit of power and legitimation have fed on and sought to continuously reproduce what many have viewed as “firmly entrenched” secular traditions of Azerbaijani society,⁴¹ traditions that had been steadily building up since Azerbaijan became part of the Russian Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century, including, in particular, over the seventy years of Soviet rule. Consequently, much of the country's secular opposition and broader civil society have largely shared the regime's less than favorable disposition towards Islam and associated Islamic activism; and Azerbaijan's first quarter of independence was effectively marked by an unusual convergence of interest between the ruling regime, the ‘democratic’ opposition, civil society, and the overall populace on the issue of keeping Islam outside the political domain and otherwise sustaining the religious-secular divide across society. (Indeed, apart from their common stance on Azerbaijan's conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent regions, militant secularism has effectively been the sole issue on which the government and the secular opposition have stood united over the past twenty years of rule of the Aliyev family.)

Hence, when Movsum Samadov, chairman of Azerbaijan's Islamic Party, breached the ‘red line’ of non-interference in politics by ramping up criticism of the authoritarian nature of the political establishment – in particular, calling the nation to “rise up and put an end to the despotic regime” – and was subsequently imprisoned in January 2011, the response from the secular ‘democratic’ camp was rather muted, save the fact of his ‘silent’ inclusion in a list of political prisoners after he was eventually convicted in October that year.⁴² This echoed the experience of Ilgar Ibrahimoghlu nearly a decade earlier: when he crossed the religious-secular divide by seeking to partner up with secular opposition forces to resist state authoritarianism and was subsequently also imprisoned in December 2003, he too failed to receive any meaningful support from the country's ‘democratic’ forces, not even from Musavat, whose chairman's candidacy he had been actively supporting in the run-up to presidential elections earlier that year.

38 Ryazev, The State Committee.

39 Mubariz Gurbanli, quoted in “Mubariz Gurbanli: ‘No One Can Transform a Mosque into a Political Arena,’” *Today News*, September 27, 2016, goo.gl/OISTvU.

40 Rached Ghannouchi, “From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 5, no. 95 (2016): 63.

41 Eldar Mamedov, “Azerbaijan: Evaluating Islamists' Strength in Baku,” *EurasiaNet*, August 9, 2011, goo.gl/Dxldt.

42 Faiq Majid, “Leila Yunus: Azerbaijan Has 25 New Potential Political Prisoners,” *Caucasian Knot*, April 27, 2011, goo.gl/yBBJE5; “Azerbaijan: An Updated List of Political Prisoners,” *Civic Solidarity*, October 1, 2013, goo.gl/5ASn1e.

Instead, Ibrahimoglu's major source of backing at the time was Azerbaijan's Baptist Union.⁴³

This dynamic has significantly changed, however, in relation to developments around the Movement for Muslim Unity and its chairman, Taleh Baghirzade, particularly since the latter's second release from prison in July 2015 and his third arrest in November that year, the overwhelming majority of the country's political opposition and secular civil society forces now standing firmly – and vocally – behind him and all those imprisoned over the “Nardaran affair.” Indeed, on a discursive level, Taleh Baghirzade and the National Council, particularly its only remaining member party, the *Popular Front*, began to openly support each other (including through the party's media wing, the *Azadliq* newspaper) as they each found themselves under government pressure shortly prior to and following the police raid on Nardaran in November 2015.⁴⁴ The sense of partnership between the Popular Front and Baghirzade's MMU has grown so strong as to prompt the former to invite the latter to be represented at its annual party congress in September 2015, a move unimaginable even one year prior.⁴⁵

In many ways, the religious and secular opposition groups have gradually evolved to represent a single acting organism, as evidenced by the participation of many religious activists, including members of Taleh Baghirzade's *Movement for Muslim Unity*, in government-sanctioned public rallies organized by the National Council in 2016. In fact, the involvement of the country's religious community in these rallies proved so massive as to prompt some policy analysts and practitioners to claim that it was the participation of members of the religious community, “particularly from Nardaran and those close to Taleh Baghirzade,” that ensured the “mass character” of these rallies.⁴⁶ Representatives of the secular

opposition in turn began to use these public rallies as platforms to voice and otherwise communicate (including via pre-prepared posters) various slogans in support of imprisoned religious activists and their cause.⁴⁷ Popular Front leader Ali Karimli went so far as to extend a public promise to abrogate the government hijab ban should his party come to power.⁴⁸

Other members of the country's secular opposition landscape, too, have grown vocal in support of Islamists and their cause. In 2016, Eldaniz Guliyev, head of the Association of Azerbaijani Intellectuals and a leading member of the National Council's Coordination Board, set up a so-called “defense committee” for religious political prisoners that includes representatives of the religious stratum, intellectuals, and human rights defenders;⁴⁹ an unprecedented act given how apathetic the country's secular opposition groups had traditionally been about the government's harassment of faith-based political activists.

This shift in attitude towards religious groups has quickly affected civil society nationwide, as a widely-circulated Facebook post from 27 March 2016 by Arastun Orujlu, head of the East-West Research Centre and political commentator, highlights:

We might stand on different positions [and] approaches, be sometimes intolerant against each other, but the fact is that a considerable portion of imprisoned believers in this country, too, are faced with trumped-up charges. Particularly the vast majority of those arrested on weapons and drug [possession] charges. In addition, the charge against Elshan Mustafaoghlu whom I know very well and the believers arrested as part of the “Said Dadashbeyli group” bogus criminal case (one of whom died from torture during interrogation at the national security ministry) that they work for Iranian intelligence is nothing more than a false accusation. I am sure of this, because I have personally investigated

43 Corley, “Azerbaijan: Police Storm Mosque.”

44 For Taleh Baghirzade's statement in support of Popular Front Chairman Ali Karimli, see Facebook, November 16, 2015, <https://goo.gl/iliM0h>. For expressions of support for the Popular Front's media wing, *Azadliq* newspaper, extended to Taleh Baghirzade as he and his Movement for Muslim Unity faced increasing government pressure in the second half of 2015, see Samir, “Instead of Impressing the Stamp of ‘Agent’ Upon the Religious Segment,” *Azadliq*, November 12, 2015, goo.gl/KLBGDH; Zumrud Yagmur, “Which Country Am I Agent of?” *Azadliq*, November 9, 2015, goo.gl/pDkGmU.

45 See goo.gl/nfzzy4.

46 Etibar Seyidagha, “The Incumbent Regime Needed the National Council's Rally,” *Elchi Information Portal*, September 15, 2016, goo.gl/HPHbuF.

47 “The Rally Came to an End,” *AzVision.az*, September 11, 2016, goo.gl/4gwAls.

48 Seyidagha, *The Incumbent Regime*.

49 “The Defense Committee for Religious Political Prisoners Convened,” *Azadliq*, October 8, 2016, goo.gl/k4mfJp; Sizin Yol, “Eldaniz Guliyev: ‘Sunni-Shia Discussion Already Started,’” *Sizin Yol*, May 4, 2016, goo.gl/EpsE8O. Also see the committee's latest meeting in February 2017 at goo.gl/WoLLAI.

both cases... If we want to unite our society, restore people's confidence in each other, we should not turn a blind eye to the cases of slander not only against our partners, but also our opponents and rivals. Regardless of their position, political views, all those detained on bogus charges must be released!⁵⁰

Prominent Azerbaijani human rights defender Leyla Yunus wrote a number of open letters to Taleh Baghirzade while she was living in exile in the Netherlands. In these letters, while committing herself to making his case known in the West,⁵¹ Yunus downplayed religious (and ethnic) categorizations as stratifying social identity markers, and thus as boundary conditions for intra-societal alignment, instead envisioning the divisions between groups of people as being between the "good" and the "bad":

I have always believed that people are not divided into Muslim, Christian, Jewish, atheists, [and] nations are not divided into Azerbaijani, Russian, German, Armenian... There are humans and the non-human wicked. If we fail to support each other, non-humans will destroy us. While reading about daily arrests in Baku, one clearly understands that it is the lack of unity among humans that paves the way to evil.⁵²

Two sets of factors explain this attitudinal transformation:

1. Change in the conditions of possibility underlying the evolving attitude across the political opposition and secular civil society towards the country's religious groups; and
2. An ideological shift behind evolving attitudes within the Islamic movement.

Changing Attitudes within the Secular Opposition Camp

Given its large degree of dependence on Western financial support and political backing, the country's secular civil society and political opposition had traditionally been keen to keep any association with Islam and associated Islamic activism to a minimum for fear of alienating the West,⁵³ this including because many religious communities – particularly, in the first two decades of independence, Shia groups – have tended to be very vocal in criticism of Western, as well as Israeli, policies.⁵⁴ (Hence, also, the government's continued efforts to insinuate the secular opposition's association with "Islamic terrorism" at home and internationally.) In this vein, Sakhavat Soltanli, deputy head of the opposition *Musavat* party, contended in October 2016 that the recognition of imprisoned religious activists as *political* prisoners was "a serious strategic mistake." Suggesting instead that imprisoned religious activists should rather be represented as "prisoners of conscience,"⁵⁵ Soltanli argued that the failure to draw this distinction might send the 'democratic' West the wrong message about the involvement of these religious activists in the country's political processes side by side with the secular opposition, thus undermining Western support for the secular groups.⁵⁶

At least three contextual and perceptual shifts have come to undermine this attitudinal blueprint over the past few years, collectively setting a positive dynamic for the rise of a religious-secular alliance across the country's opposition landscape. First, a range of amendments to the Laws on Grants and Non-Governmental Organizations adopted by the Azerbaijani parliament in 2013-14 amounted to a virtual delegitimation of foreign capital in the NGO

50 The content of the post is available from "Arastun Oruclu: 'A Considerable Portion of the Arrested Believers are Faced with Bogus Charges,'" *FaktXeber*, March 28, 2016, goo.gl/7zAJbm (in Azerbaijani).

51 "Leyla Yunus: A Report on the 'Nardaran Affair' to Be Prepared," *Azadiq Radiosu*, February 10, 2017, goo.gl/IFNkoY.

52 "A Letter to Taleh Baghirzade," *Contact.az*, August 23, 2016, goo.gl/Xj128O.

53 "Azerbaijan: Repression of the Islamic Movement."

54 "Azerbaijan: Pro-Iranian Shia Networks Tarring Pro-Western Shias," *WikiLeaks*, July 21, 2008, goo.gl/WQb10a; "Credible Voices' in Muslim Communities in Azerbaijan," *WikiLeaks*, October 02, 2007, goo.gl/LwmoyX.

55 Amnesty International defines prisoners of conscience as "those who have been jailed or had their freedom restricted because of their political or religious beliefs, ethnic origin, gender, race, language, economic status, sexual orientation, or other status," while its use of the term "political prisoner" is broader, describing "any prisoner whose case has a political element – either in the motivation of the prisoner's act, the act itself, or the motivation of the authorities in their response." Amnesty does not actively campaign for the release of political prisoners, but it does unequivocally demands that all prisoners of conscience must be immediately and unconditionally released. See "What Defines a Political Prisoner?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 23, 2013, goo.gl/nMITUD.

56 Sakhavat Soltanli, "The Representation of Religious People as Political Prisoners is a Mistake," *Arqument.az*, October 23, 2016, goo.gl/U5DMTS.

and political parties sector,⁵⁷ a development that effectively closed the doors of Western aid to the secular opposition, creating a situation when there was not much left to lose from cooperation with religious forces — but still a lot to gain.

Second, the country's secular forces, from within both the civil society and the political opposition, have over the past decade grown increasingly disillusioned with the West's ability or willingness to help foster democratic change of government in the country, thus becoming increasingly reliant, indeed dependent, on domestic sources of power and support.⁵⁸ One could observe some early expressions of this shift already following the 2003 presidential elections: the secular opposition had high expectations of victory at the time, given Heydar Aliyev's terminal illness and withdrawal of his candidacy in favor of his son Ilham, but these expectations crumbled, and the West, along with Russia, ultimately endorsed the legitimacy of succession. Then, some secular politicians in the opposition camp began to talk about the importance of applying Islamic principles in politics, and by the 2005 parliamentary elections, all the country's major opposition parties were making televised appeals to Muslim voters.⁵⁹ More recently, in a remarkable departure from the dominant discourse of reliance on the West in the path of democratization, Jamil Hasanli, chairman of the *National Council*

coalition of opposition forces, while addressing in September 2016 the question of "Western reluctance to defend democracy in Azerbaijan," and in particular the referendum on constitutional changes due later that month, insisted that:

It is primarily us, ourselves, who should solve our destiny. Oftentimes they use expressions like, 'the West does this,' 'the East does that,' 'the Northern wind blows in such a way.' Overall, we need to re-cast the sight of our people away from abroad and should decide ourselves our own destiny. If there is a need to make any change in our country, we ourselves must do it. And I can assure you that to a certain extent, the people's expectations on abroad tend to foster a sense of national laziness. I mean, are we lacking in education [or] intellect to determine whether [certain] changes are right or wrong?... Hence, it is our people, rather than the West, the East, or the North, that should show their will.⁶⁰

In a similar vein, while reacting to the aforementioned article by Sakhavat Soltanli, the deputy head of the *Musavat* opposition party, that argued that the representation of imprisoned religious activists as political prisoners was "a serious strategic mistake" given its potential to undermine Western support,⁶¹ N!DA activist Mammad Azizov — himself a former political prisoner who self-identified as an anarchist — exclaimed in his Facebook post of 23 Oct. 2016,

57 According to a set of amendments to the Law on Grants, the Law on Non-Governmental Organizations, and the Code of Administrative Offences that the country's parliament approved on February 15, 2013 (and which entered into force on February 3, 2014), public organizations or political parties now have to present a copy of a signed agreement on any donation or grant coming from anyone other than the government and exceeding the amount of 200 AZN to the Ministry of Justice for registration (this, among other things, effectively banned unregistered NGOs and movements from receiving grants and donations); all cash donations and grants are rendered illegal as donations must be transferred to a bank account, with an additional report to that effect sent to the respective financial institutions; and failure to comply could result in large fines and confiscation of property (Mina Muradova, "Azerbaijan Restricts NGO Funding," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 20, 2013, goo.gl/KNTpjG). According to the new amendments to the Law on Grants and the Law on Nongovernmental Organizations that the Azerbaijani Parliament adopted on October 17, 2014 and the President signed into law on November 17, the same year, local NGOs can receive *donations* from a foreign donor only if the foreign donor has concluded an agreement with the Ministry of Justice; information on donors and on the amount of donations received must be submitted to both the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Finance (by both local NGOs and branches or representations of foreign NGOs); information on any bank operation or any other operation on donations must be communicated to the relevant state bodies; foreign legal entities may provide grants to Azerbaijani NGOs only if they have signed an agreement with the Ministry of Justice, have a registered branch or representation in Azerbaijan, and have obtained the right to transfer such grant in the Republic of Azerbaijan; the government has now the right to suspend the funds of unregistered NGOs by arbitrarily freezing the bank accounts of organizations and their leaders (Hugo Gabbero, Souhayr Belhassen, Tolekan Ismailova, and Peter Zangl, "Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders Intensifies as Baku Games Approach," *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders*, April 2015, 17–20). This change in legislation has been attended by an unprecedented assault against the country's civil society in 2014–2015 aimed "to weaken independent NGOs funded by foreign donors and terminate their relations with international organizations" ("Surviving a Crisis: Q&A with Azerbaijan's Gubad Ibadoglu," *Natural Resource Governance Institute*, 2014, goo.gl/bp6Gs3).

58 Liz Fuller and Babek Bakir, "Azerbaijan: Why Is 'Alternative' Islam Gaining Strength?" *EurasiaNet*, August 14, 2007, goo.gl/qu4X60; Arzu Geybullayeva, "Is Azerbaijan Becoming a Hub of Radical Islam?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2007): 112–13, goo.gl/Nl33Ss.

59 Altay Goyushov, "Islamic Revival in Azerbaijan," in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 7, ed. Hillel Fradkin et al. (Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2008), 78.

60 See Jamil Hasanli's conversation at *Channel 13's* "His Perspective," Program No. 60, September 24, 2016, goo.gl/gxSsCW (in Azerbaijani).

61 Soltanli, "The Representation of Religious People."

“Why doesn’t he [Soltanli] say that there are only religious people and the [Popular] Front that remained on the frontline [of the struggle with the authoritarian regime]?” Directly addressing the article’s author and the likeminded stratum of the secular opposition, he added that, “What affects me the worst is that you continue to wage the struggle for the West and within the framework the West would like to see. This is a betrayal of the nation.”⁶²

The third shift is the dramatic – and continued – deterioration of the authoritarian climate of repression in Azerbaijan since 2013, with the government firmly tightening the grip on both its secular and religious opponents, including as the rising number of political prisoners in the country, which stood at 119 as of November 2016, indicates.⁶³ This has served to create a new contextual reality whereby any partner in pursuit of democratic change became welcome in the ranks of the secular opposition, prompting the latter to look to religious forces as their potential allies in the process.⁶⁴ Consequently, the religious-secular cleavage that had traditionally divided the country’s opposition landscape has become secondary to what is increasingly perceived as a common struggle against the authoritarian entrenchment; secularists and Islamists now find themselves struggling on the same side of the political divide.

The primacy of the democratization agenda over all other cleavages in the face of the lack of basic liberties was expressly stated by many across the country’s secular civil society, including N!DA member Zaur Gurbanli who, writing from prison in 2014, suggested that:

Today, the public opinion in Azerbaijan is – with or without relevance – so seriously opposed to capitalism, liberalism, as if it was the biggest problem at the moment. In fact, were

we to oppose what we indeed are suffering from, this would be more natural, as well as more effective... [W]hat we are suffering from now is the lack of a liberal state. We should now restore our liberal Republic, so that by way of a natural development we could [then] get to the other problems as well.⁶⁵

Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli’s speech at the National Council-organized public rally on 11 September 2016 sought to highlight this same point:

... today it is with great pleasure that I say that the public rally which we see and in which we participate today is giving a start to a new people’s movement. In this square [in front of me], I can see Musavat party members, I can see N!DA members, I can see nationalist youth, I can see the Future Azerbaijan Party [members], I can see members of the Movement for Muslim Unity... I can see ACP [Azerbaijan Communist Party] members, I can see all kinds of groups. You are very comfortable and friendly standing shoulder to shoulder all together in demand of freedom. We all then share the same problem; our common trouble is the trouble of freedom. Let the entire world see this, let the Azerbaijani government see. How hard they have tried to create cleavages among us, separate us, introduce ideological discussions among us. But what can we see today at this square? Today at this square the liberal youth and the nationalist youth stand shoulder to shoulder; today at this square our religious brothers and our atheist brothers stand shoulder to shoulder; today at this square the Turk, the Talysh, the Lazgi, the Kurds, the Tat, all stand shoulder to shoulder. Because there is a goal that unites us all—the goal of Azerbaijan. We have got that three-colour flag. Long live Azerbaijan!⁶⁶

Former Musavat Chairman Isa Gambar’s speech at the public rally organized by his party on 18

62 See Mammad Azizov’s Facebook post of October 23, 2016, goo.gl/u04Mnm.

63 An upgraded list of political prisoners released by the Working Group on Preparation of the Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan in late November 2016 included 119 people whose status as political prisoners has been confirmed and 25 more people who were considered to potentially fall under the category of political prisoners but – given the lack of necessary data about their case – were included in the list of “monitored” prisoners until their status as political prisoners could be fully confirmed or repudiated. The confirmed list of 119 political prisoners included 6 journalists and bloggers, 2 poets and writers, 1 human rights defender, 5 youth activists, 5 politicians, 86 religious activists, 3 serving a life sentence in prison, as well as 11 not falling under any of the above categories. See the full list at goo.gl/EPMC3U (in Azerbaijani).

64 Consistently ranked as “not free” by Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* annual report over the past decade (see goo.gl/LB7zrk), Azerbaijan “now has the democracy rating of a deeply entrenched Central Asian dictatorship, with less freedom of assembly or expression than Tajikistan and more flagrant corruption than Kazakhstan” (Sylvana Habdank-Kolaczowska, “Nations in Transit 2014: Eurasia’s Rupture with Democracy,” Freedom House, 2014, 2). For a detailed account of the dynamics of the government’s onslaught on civil society and the political opposition over the past few years, see “Tightening the Screws: Azerbaijan’s Crackdown on Civil Society and Dissent,” Human Rights Watch, September 2013; “Azerbaijan: Crackdown on Free Expression and Independent Media,” Human Rights House, September 21, 2015, goo.gl/Srcbhv.

65 Zaur Gurbanli, “What is This? (Part 1),” *Meydan.TV*, May 29, 2014, <https://goo.gl/ccgXjy>; Zaur Gurbanli, “What is This? (Part 2),” *Meydan.TV*, June 11, 2014, <https://goo.gl/0nsdxE>.

66 The full speech is available at goo.gl/RXmlDp (in Azerbaijani).

September 2016, a rally that also featured forces from all across the country's social spectrum, followed a similar discursive line.⁶⁷

The Ideological Shift in the Position of Azerbaijan's Islamic Resistance Movement: From a "Caliphate" Ideology to an Ideology of (Common) Resistance

The overwhelming majority of Azerbaijan's Sunni population has remained expressly apolitical and loyal to the government over the past two decades, including followers of Fethullah Gulen after the latter's fallout with Erdogan and the subsequent persecution of some of the members of this network in Azerbaijan. The country's Shia Islamic movement, too, initially tended to abstain from political activism and, as such, fell short of direct criticism of state policies or active engagement with the secular opposition, their occasional public protests instead directed against Western and Israeli policies and often timed to coincide with high-profile visits by Israeli or US officials to Baku.⁶⁸ While Ilgar Ibrahimoglu was, in the early 2000s, effectively the first Islamic cleric in Azerbaijan to venture into politics to the extent of actively siding with the secular opposition, after consistent government pressure, he stepped back to focus solely on lectures of purely religious instruction and work as part of DEVAMM on individual cases of human rights abuse against the country's observant Muslims. His political language has since dramatically softened and he has more or less disappeared from the political scene, as evidenced by his decision not to join the *National Council* opposition bloc ("Milli Şura"), which has evolved into a major coalition of opposition forces in the country (including political parties, intellectuals, religious figures, youth activists, human rights defenders, and NGOs).

The critical change in attitude within the Shia Islamic community came after the government's mosque closure policies assumed a massive scale as

of 2009 and particularly following the introduction in December 2010 of an official ban on wearing *hijab* in public schools,⁶⁹ a change that paved the way to "an unprecedented socio-political activism of the [country's] Islamic movement,"⁷⁰ including as initially marked by the rise of the political agency of the hitherto apolitical chairman of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), Movsum Samadov.⁷¹ Not only was Samadov the first of the country's Islamic clerics to publicly react to these changes by voicing harsh criticism of the incumbent political establishment, but he also simultaneously toned down his hostility towards what he viewed as "pro-Western opposition parties." In his January 2011 interview with *Crescent International*, just prior to his arrest, he cited his Party's "history of cooperation with various other political parties in Azerbaijan,"⁷² including the Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, the *Vahdat* Party, the *Fazilet* Party, and the *Birlik* Party to suggest that, "the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is open to cooperation with all forces and organizations that are willing to improve the situation in Azerbaijan." Alluding to the common ideological underpinning behind this nascent secular-religious alignment, he went on to state that for the IPA, "the essential issues are the civil rights of every citizen."

Though Samadov noted that the IPA had not yet been involved in close cooperation with the country's two major secular opposition parties, Musavat and the Popular Front, he nevertheless claimed that the Party "[had] nothing against" them, notwithstanding the persistence of strategic differences, including the secular opposition's pro-Western agenda and the IPA's hostility to what Samadov referred to as "the US and Israeli economic hegemony over Azerbaijan," as well as Western "cultural imperialism."⁷³ However, the government's move to arrest Samadov shortly after his change of attitude left him with no time to develop his political identity further (his political action was effectively limited to a single dramatic par-

67 See goo.gl/hxKNsS.

68 See, for example, Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Arrest of Islamic Party Leader"; "Azerbaijan: Pro-Iranian Shia Networks."

69 The government's move to ban hijab has been taken by members of Azerbaijan's Islamic community as a direct assault on religion given that hijab is widely considered an obligation on Muslim women inscribed in Quran. See goo.gl/Jf3t0U; goo.gl/0HHvje; goo.gl/uSKsO9.

70 "Hijab Ban Reinigorates Azeri Islamic Movement," *Crescent International*, April 1, 2011, goo.gl/czKJcZ.

71 Apart from prompting the revival of the Islamic movement inside the country, the government's December 2010 decision to ban hijab in public schools caused international forces to mobilize around the issue as well, as the organization of the first ever international conference on the religious situation in Azerbaijan shows. Organized by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) on March 6, 2011 in Istanbul, the conference brought together participants from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, US, Canada, and the UK (see "Hijab Ban Reinigorates").

72 Movsum Samadov, quoted in "Future of Azerbaijan from the Islamic Movement Perspective," *Crescent International*, January 2011, goo.gl/rWZ-rTF.

73 *Ibid.*

ty meeting speech in January 2011) or cultivate any meaningful contact with the secular opposition.

In contrast, Taleh Baghirzade, whose rise on Azerbaijan's political scene characteristically began with his participation in a public protest against the hijab ban in May 2011 (an endeavor that landed him in jail for the first time immediately afterwards), had an extended period to develop both his political identity and contact with the secular opposition, this due to a combination of short prison terms (the government limited his two initial sentences to no longer than two and a half years⁷⁴) and Baghirzade's own extraordinary resilience and unprecedented persistence in the pursuit of a pro-Islamic, anti-authoritarian agenda every time he was released from prison. Indeed, after being released from his first term in prison in early November 2012, Baghirzade grew ever more active in the country's social-political scene. He continued to speak out against the hijab ban, but also came to embrace a broader political agenda, preaching in Baku and the provinces against the incumbent regime and the overall "feudal" mode of governance reigning in the country. Baghirzade openly denounced the notion of state-religion separation.⁷⁵ He also drew parallels between Baku's ruling elite and Egyptian pharaohs of the past or the tyrants of the modern age, including the likes of Saddam Hussein;⁷⁶ an approach that landed him in jail again in late March 2013.⁷⁷ Upon his second release in late July 2015, Baghirzade had a new pejorative term for the present condition of Azerbaijan, calling it a "large

prison." He continued to preach across the country, denouncing the political establishment and calling for peaceful, yet active, resistance against what he regarded as "the tyranny" of the incumbent political system.⁷⁸ This activism prompted a renewed campaign of police harassment against him and resulted in Baghirzade being imprisoned for the third time on 26 November 2015.⁷⁹

Finally, in an open letter to President Ilham Aliyev that he wrote in January 2017 while in prison awaiting a court decision, Baghirzade declared his readiness for the worst:

For the sake of the freedom of this glorious people, for the sake of its future happiness, we are ready not only for life imprisonment, but even for death, to be burnt alive. Let Allah judge between us and you!⁸⁰

Addressing *Meydan TV's* written questions in December 2016, just after the public prosecutor demanded that he be sentenced to life in prison, Baghirzade was no less determined:

The government of Azerbaijan should know that a life sentence will not divert us from our struggle for freedom and democracy... In our life philosophy, a society ruled by oppression is a large dungeon, while a prison is a small dungeon. As long as Azerbaijan remains a large dungeon, it makes no difference for people in struggle what sentence they receive to spend in the small dungeon... the key is to work for our nation's freedom from the large dungeon. On

74 Taleh Baghirzade was imprisoned for the first time on May 6, 2011, for his participation in May 2011 public protests against the government's hijab ban and sentenced on October 7 that year to one year six months on charges of "organization of actions promoting infringement of social order or active participation in such actions." Having served his full sentence, he was released on November 6, 2012. Imprisoned for the second time on March 31, 2013, Taleh Baghirzade was sentenced in November that year to two and a half years on allegedly trumped-up charges of illegal drug possession and was released on July 31, 2015 after completing his full term (Idrak Abbasov, "Azeri Muslims Protest Theologian's Arrest," CRS No. 682, April 9, 2013, goo.gl/4zjV6v; Eldar Mamedov, "Whither Azerbaijan's Islamists?" *EurasiaNet*, August 12, 2015, goo.gl/2i6Aoc).

75 For some of Taleh Baghirzade's views on state-religion separation that he voiced after his second release from prison in July 2015, see for example "There is No Basis nor Prospects for the Establishment of the Islamic State in Azerbaijan," *Islamin Sesi*, August 10, 2015, <http://goo.gl/1grq8g>.

76 For some of the sermons and other speeches Taleh Baghirzade delivered following his release from prison in November 2012 (in Azerbaijani), see for example <https://goo.gl/IZbbNL> (January 2013); <https://goo.gl/9J72Qk> (January 2013); <https://goo.gl/AApv8X> (Jan. 2013); <https://goo.gl/hCZm6Y> (Feb. 2013); <https://goo.gl/7DKr03> (February 2013); <https://goo.gl/thbW1A> (February 2013); <https://goo.gl/Ts0OHu> (Mar. 2013); <https://goo.gl/ETxOKt> (March 2013).

77 See, for example, "Who is Taleh Baghirzade?"

78 For some of Taleh Baghirzade's sermons and speeches delivered following his release from prison in 2015, see for example <https://goo.gl/DpCUhr> (August 2015); <https://goo.gl/D8Ueu3> (October 2015) (in Azerbaijani). See also his interview with *Turan News Agency* at <https://goo.gl/NpMxUj>. Hacı Abgul Suleymanov's statement following Baghirzade's short-term detention in early November 2015 is available at <https://goo.gl/P6JF1X>. For more on his short-term detention in late September 2015, see "Taleh Baghirzade Detained Again and Released," *Meydan TV*, September 25, 2015, goo.gl/JfQWYC, as well as Baghirov's notes to that effect at <http://goo.gl/yoSrEz>. For his notes following his engagement with the national security ministry on September 22, 2015, see <http://goo.gl/Kj4S0f>.

79 "Sheikh Baqirzade Reveals He May Be Arrested Again, By the Aliyev Regime," *Crescent International*, November 2015, goo.gl/QvkhCa.

80 "Taleh Baghirzade Addressed Ilham Aliyev: 'If you have the courage...'" *Azadiq*, January 10, 2017, goo.gl/FrmCm0.

this path, life imprisonment is considered to be the greatest gift to us. But also, I don't think I will stay in jail for life; the period of my imprisonment equals the life duration of this government. Because it is clear to everyone that legally we have not committed any crime.⁸¹

It is this newfound resilience of the Islamic resistance that has led many analysts to claim that the religious segment is “the most dynamic force in Azerbaijan” and “the leading opposition force” to the incumbent regime today, including in light of “the eclipse” of Azerbaijan’s traditional – secular – opposition.⁸² Following the November 2015 Nardaran events, in particular, some analysts went as far as to claim that “[f]rom now on, the Islamic movement and the ruling caste are the only relevant political actors in the country,” such that “every other socio-political force needs the support of the Islamic movement to stay afloat and wear the mask of ‘credibility’ before the people.”⁸³

Taleh Baghirzade has further embraced the notion of *common struggle* against the incumbent political system as the overarching goal of his efforts, just as Movsum Samadov did shortly before his arrest. In an interview that Baghirzade gave shortly after his second release from prison in summer 2015, he explicitly called for an end to the practice of mutual “othering” by the country’s “observant” and “non-observant” Muslims. Instead, he advocated for a union between the two in the name of a common struggle against oppression and in view of their common heritage:

Azerbaijani society is not a forest, and we are not wood. Our approach should be a human approach. If someone is being cut near us and taken away, we must not remain indifferent to this; we are human [and] should extend our helping hand. Islam’s approach to this is particularly critical, [for it] says that should anyone face oppression anywhere in the world... regardless of his religion, race, and ethnic-

ity... a Muslim should not be silent in the face of it, but should defend that person... The religious segment should learn to work together with other layers (of the population). Regardless of whether they are religious or not, whether they observe religious rituals or not, [people] could unite around the notion of Muslimness. That is, we need to put an end to this social stratification [between observant and non-observant Muslims].⁸⁴

In early September 2016, Baghirzade called on the population – in particular his religious followers – to join the secular opposition in protest against the upcoming referendum on constitutional reform, writing:

It has been decades that we have lived crushed under the evil and negligent administration of a corrupt and vindictive regime. This is a power that has no moral values or ethical standards or red lines that could not be crossed. We all—the right, the left, the religious, and atheists—are victims of this anti-humanistic regime whose main objective is to steal more and crush more. People get thrown in jail for practicing free speech, receive long-term punishment for a minor criticism of the political establishment, entrepreneurs who have launched their business with great difficulty and [now] earning their *halal* money are made bankrupt by the state’s racketeering, get a monthly “fee” set for them, [while] those who do not pay get silenced, destroyed through various blackmail and smear mechanisms available in the arsenal. Torture by the police, special services selling out the interests of our state, courts making decisions for money, schools failing to provide education, healthcare centers making wrong diagnoses [and] killing people, a corrupt bureaucratic apparatus are bitter realities of today... Today, [all those who] speak the truth, [be that] a believer, anarchist, rightist, leftist, nationalist, are in jail! Now, it is not time for mutual accusations, bickering, and frustration! Let us [rise in] protest together! Let us demand our rights within the legally allowed limits!⁸⁵

81 “Taleh Baghirzade: The Period of My Imprisonment Equals the Life Duration of This Government,” *Meydan TV*, December 31, 2016, goo.gl/TWssy5.

82 Fuad Aliyev, “Islamic Activism as a Social Movement. Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Azerbaijan,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 72, no. 29 (2015): 3–6, goo.gl/2TodVn; “Azerbaijan: Repression of the Islamic Movement”; Abbasov, “Azerbaijan: Arrest of Islamic Party Leader”; Fuller and Bakir, “Alternative’ Islam”; Eldar Mamedov, “Azerbaijan: Marching in Lockstep with Turkey in Cracking Down on Gulen,” *EurasiaNet*, August 9, 2016, goo.gl/v3q9VJ; Azer Rashidoglu, “Who and What Did Haji Taleh Fall Victim to?” *Musavat*, November 28, 2015, goo.gl/hqAeea; Shahla Sultanova, “Azerbaijan: Does Baku Face Evolving Opposition?” *EurasiaNet*, October 25, 2012, goo.gl/uYQjtj. See also Azerbaijani historian Altay Goyushov’s interview with *Meydan TV*, February 15, 2017, goo.gl/ipoSzK.

83 “Aliyev Pushes Azerbaijan Toward Civil War,” *Crescent International*, January 1, 2016, goo.gl/azJW4B.

84 “Haji Taleh Baghirzade: Moslems Should Not Be Silent in the Face of Oppression,” *Contact.az*, August 13, 2015, goo.gl/kFFe0V.

85 The full content of the statement is available at Taleh Baghirzade’s official blog page at goo.gl/Mkn1nn and was republished by “Leyla Yunus: ‘The Economic Situation Will Worsen, There Will Be Protests, People Will Rise,’” *Azadliq Radosu*, December 26, 2016, goo.gl/Xh3dvs.

Beyond his embrace of the notion of common struggle, there has also been a programmatic shift in the ideological underpinning behind Baghirzade's narrative of sociopolitical change and the latest wave of Islamic resistance, of which he assumed the lead. While the Islamic Party has focused on establishing an Islamic Republic in Azerbaijan, the Movement for Muslim Unity (cofounded by Baghirzade in January 2015) made establishing a democratic state with popularly elected leaders its primary objective.

Given the limits of discursive potentiality in which the nation-state-based modern world system, Azerbaijan included, is embedded, Baghirzade and his associates – not unlike the like-minded Islamist activists across the Middle East – have embraced nationalism as an ideological framework within which Islamic ideals could be established. And with a democratic transition in Azerbaijan set as the primary target of the initial stage of their struggle, MMU has shied away from any move that might potentially jeopardize this mission. In the Azerbaijani context, embracing a strictly Islamic agenda could polarize society by annihilating secular segments and pitting secularists and religious people against each other (as has proved to be the case in Turkey and Egypt). Just like Tunisia's *Nahda*,⁸⁶ then, the chosen alternative for Baghirzade's Movement has been to instantiate their Muslim identity by bringing ethics into politics rather than seeking a full-fledged Islamic state, an agenda that, in view of its stated goals of fighting corruption and the immorality of the incumbent politics in Azerbaijan, aligned squarely with the objectives of the secular opposition.

Consequently, Baghirzade sees his mission as the pursuit of “a peaceful change of power through reforms [and] elections,”⁸⁷ moving away from the incumbent government's reliance on “force” and “fear” and toward a political order based on “humanism and democratic principles,”⁸⁸ a cause behind which

he suggests the Azerbaijani people, whether they are practicing Muslims or not, should unite.⁸⁹ Professing allegiance to the nationalist idea of an independent Azerbaijani state,⁹⁰ and viewing Shia Islam as a key formative factor in, and an embedded ingredient of, Azerbaijani *national* identity (rather than a detached or supra-national religion), Baghirzade claims to espouse Islam (*Islamization*) and nationalism (*nationalization*, including the formation of an *umma* within the national confines) as two integrated principles informing his struggle. While suggesting that, in the short term at least, “there is no basis nor prospect for the establishment of an Islamic state [and sharia law] in Azerbaijan,” he believes that the Movement's duty is “to act in accordance with the present situation.”⁹¹

Indeed, in a context where the rights of both religious people and the broader community are violated, the community around Taleh Baghirzade has evolved to view its struggle for religious freedoms in the wider context of the struggle for democratization more broadly. As Azer Rashidoglu, head of the Association for Social Research “Tolerant,” suggests: “Most believers in the country are on the side of the democrats, and their aim is not to spread their religion, but to defend human rights.”⁹² Elsewhere, Rashidoglu explains that, “Azerbaijan has its own reality,” expressed, in part, in the denial of some basic human rights to all citizens. “The people of faith operating within the same [organizational] structures with the opposition and democratic forces are compelled to [adequately] assess this reality.”⁹³ In response to a question on his official Facebook page (23 Nov. 2015) regarding the nature of the state that he envisions replacing the incumbent political regime, Taleh Baghirzade noted that:

... first of all, we have no intention to come to power. Our position with regards to the political system is not outside the existing legislation. Like every citizen, we too are among

86 Hamdi, *The Politicisation of Islam*; Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

87 “The National Council Held a Rally, Two People Detained,” *Azadliq*, May 30, 2015, goo.gl/RiUT43; “Taleh Baghirzade: ‘Now, I Am in the Large Prison,’” *Azadliq Radiosu*, July 30, 2015, goo.gl/CbRTae.

88 “No Basis nor Prospects”; see also Taleh Baghirzade's interview with *Meydan TV*, August 10, 2015, <https://goo.gl/gmAkwT>; and his interview with *Azad Xabar*, July 31, 2015.

89 See Taleh Baghirzade's interview with *Turan News Agency*, August 13, 2015, <https://goo.gl/NpMxUj>.

90 See, for example, his March 2013 sermon at goo.gl/UdV7zo.

91 “No Basis nor Prospects”; see also Taleh Baghirzade's full video interview with *Meydan TV*, August 10, 2015, <https://goo.gl/gmAkwT>. For political analyst and REAL Board member Azer Gasimli's views regarding the lack of prospect for an Islamic state in Azerbaijan, see “There is No Religious Stratum in Azerbaijan,” *Moderator.az*, November 6, 2015, goo.gl/e5QGow.

92 Azer Rashidoglu, quoted in I. Abbasov, “Azeri Muslims Protest Theologian's Arrest.”

93 Rashidoglu, “Who and What Did Haji Taleh...?”

those who work towards the development of our country, our statehood, our nation. On a personal level, we are very concerned that today Azerbaijan is known in the world as a gas, oil country. But in fact, Azerbaijan should have been known in the world for its personalities, scholars (whether of secular sciences or religious). We believe that all these problems will be solved only through democratic elections. The key is to establish JUSTICE in society.⁹⁴

Consequently, Baghirzade's is effectively a democratic nationalist, and – on a tactical level – secular, agenda aiming at a “just society,” which, in many ways, is shared with the country's secular opposition. Furthermore, MMU's ideology nearly parallels, at least on a tactical level, the philosophy of the founding fathers of Azerbaijan's first Democratic Republic (ADR) of 1918-1920, whose ideals of Azerbaijani statehood – based on a harmonious blend of Turkic nationalism, European modernity,⁹⁵ and Islam – were expressed in the tricolor flag adopted as ADR's national flag in November 1918 and readopted by post-Soviet Azerbaijan in February 1991.⁹⁶

The Normalization of Islamic Discourse and the Future of Islam in Azerbaijan: Quo Vadis?

What does the resacralization of the political space and the associated normalization of Islamic discourse in public space promise for the future of Islam in Azerbaijan, particularly in the context of broader, exogenous shifts underlying the changing dynamics of the country's domestic politics and international engagements?

As the country's oil-generated rents go down, thanks to the concurrent fall in international crude oil prices and domestic oil production, and the elite's capacity to uphold the initial sources of domestic legitimacy, based on secular nationalism and top-down developmentalism, wanes; and since democratization and economic liberalization seem unlikely to supplant the current regime in the near future, the elite's perception of Islam as a rival source of public

legitimation (and thus a threat to the stability of the regime) is only set to grow in the short term, and with it the state's assault upon religion, particularly in light of the rising role of Islam as a political reality globally and at home. However, while this redoubled opposition to religiosity – with the goal of forging a secular society – may be the elite's initial instinct, the specific dynamics facing the country in the third decade of independence, and the changing contours of its international engagements, will likely gradually work to push the regime from confrontation to accommodation in its engagement with Islam, laying the groundwork for the ultimate endogenization of Islamic discourse in Azerbaijan.

First, the Azerbaijani elite's reliance on the narrative of Islamic extremism to elicit legitimacy from both the West and the domestic populace has rested on the increasingly Islamophobic disposition of the former and the continued influence of Soviet style secularism on (and thus the lack of religious awareness amongst and discursive detachment from the country's religious movement of) the latter. However, although the recent opening of the country's political space to Islam is unlikely to bring Islamic parties to power any time soon, given the still relatively limited stratum of religiously observant people in Azerbaijan, the key impact of this development has been its normalizing effect on Islam's place in the hearts and minds of otherwise secular segments of Azerbaijani society, a shift entailing a gradual re-sacralization and re-traditionalization of politics and society and thus establishing a condition of possibility for Islam's transition from opposition ideology into the political mainstream.

In many ways, the process of Islam's normalization across the country's public realm has worked to nurture a new contextual reality in which antagonism toward Islam will now increasingly amount to antagonism toward society at large, rather than serving as a means of domestic social legitimation. That is, as ever greater segments of secular civil society and the population more broadly move to identify with Islamic groups and their struggle in the same way as

94 Emphasis original. See Baghirov's official Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/talebagirzade/>.

95 While falling short of explicitly embracing European modernization as the third item on his – and the MMU's – political agenda, Baghirzade is clear that there are many things that Azerbaijan should take from European modernity, including “punctuality, discipline, development, science... the justice of the court system, the important role of industrial development, their hard work,” while openly denouncing cultural expressions of westernization, including for example shorts-wearing in public spaces or unusual haircut styles. See Taleh Baghirzade's interview with *Turan News Agency* at <https://goo.gl/NpMxUj> (in Azerbaijani).

96 The flag is a horizontal tricolour featuring three equally sized fesses of blue, red, and green, with a white crescent and an eight-pointed star centered on the red stripe. The blue symbolizes Azerbaijan's Turkic heritage, the red stands for progress, and the green represents Islam.

they have thus far identified with the secular opposition, they will find it increasingly difficult to blindly embrace the creeping assault on religion and to accept the narrative of Islam as an overwhelming threat or exclusively a tool in the hands of foreign powers; a reality that will gradually prompt the government to abandon the use of the narrative of Islamic extremism as a tool for domestic legitimation.

Second, while this changing dynamics across the religious-secular divide at home might otherwise introduce tension between the elite's pursuit of Western and broader domestic legitimation, this may not be a particular concern for the Azerbaijani regime, given a combination of its ongoing shift away from Western power structures toward anti-Western, anti-globalist power constellations in the Global South (including in particular the Muslim world, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Council) in pursuit of legitimation and survival,⁹⁷ and Iran's relative (if still ambivalent) normalization of relations with the West;⁹⁸ two developments set to gradually render redundant the need and the expediency to use the language of Islamic extremism in pursuit of Western recognition. Indeed, the Aliyev regime has been increasingly using the narrative of the rise of Islamophobia in Europe to elicit popular support in its standoff against the West,⁹⁹ a position also signalling, according to some analysts, that the West has already lost its "moral authority" in the eyes of Baku.¹⁰⁰ In light of this dramatic shift in domestic and international structures of potentiality, elites are likely to gradually abandon the narrative of Islamic extremism altogether, a development that will loosen up the associated dialectics at work.

Third, the elite's intensified engagement with – and growing dependence on – the Muslim world as a new external base for domestic legitimacy and

economic survival, particularly as the West's significance in this respect concurrently declines, has effectively unleashed an external channel by which growing segments of the population will gradually find themselves socialized into an Islamic discursive milieu, such that, if maintained, it will likely render the sacralization of society inevitable, and ultimately irreversible, thus gradually realigning the external and internal dimensions of the elite's pursuit of legitimation and survival (both now to be anchored in Islamic structures of potentiality).

Although Baku's engagement with the Islamic world has been ongoing since the early days of independence and this contact has effectively been the only item on its foreign policy agenda to induce the regime's positive disposition towards Islam,¹⁰¹ the country has never been particularly dependent on the Muslim South. The 1994 "contract of the century" entailed the westward direction for Azerbaijan's "main oil," and the country's dependence on the West (and Israel) has since gradually grown far more intense than its initial dependence on the Muslim world (the latter dependence evident primarily in UN General Assembly voting).

This has begun to change, however, since the early 2010s, following the concurrent drop in international oil prices and domestic oil production and the associated economic crisis in Azerbaijan. While the West has been turning down requests for credit, the Islamic Development Bank emerged as one of few institutions to continue its engagement with the Azerbaijani regime in the "post-oil era" and supported the country's ongoing effort to boost the non-oil sectors of economy, chiefly in the areas of transportation, trade, agriculture, and energy, as well as industry, private sector development, and banking.¹⁰² Still in its infancy, this cooperation has already translated

97 Murad Ismayilov, "Postcolonial Hybridity, Contingency, and the Mutual Embeddedness of Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Some Initial Thoughts," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 77, no. 14 (2015): 10–11, goo.gl/ui5aps; Murad Ismayilov, "Power, Knowledge, and Pipelines: Understanding the Politics of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy," *Caucasus Survey* 2, nos. 1–2 (2014): 79–129.

98 Gabriela Baczyńska, "EU Says to Stick to Iran Rapprochement Despite Trump's Criticism," *Reuters*, November 14, 2016, goo.gl/QP5SpG; George Friedman, "Strategic Reversal: The United States, Iran, and the Middle East," *Stratfor*, November 24, 2014, goo.gl/NmoK7P.

99 "Ilham Aliyev Joined Nationwide Festivities on the Occasion of Novruz Holiday," *President.az*, March 19, 2015, goo.gl/MP5Vdw.

100 Murad Gassanly, "Azerbaijan in 2021: Confirmation of Sovereignty," *Russian Council for International Affairs*, February 20, 2017, goo.gl/APdzXc.

101 Ismayilov, "Postcolonial Hybridity."

102 Nigar Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, IDB Sign Grant Agreement," *Azernews*, January 18, 2017, goo.gl/cFVSnv; Azad Hasanli, "Azerbaijan Offers IDB to Invest in Car Manufacturing," *Trend News Agency*, January 18, 2017, goo.gl/Q3Em3K; Azad Hasanli, "IDB May Consider Participation in North-South Project," *Trend News Agency*, January 31, 2017, goo.gl/c890JQ; Anvar Mammadov, "Islamic Development Bank to Review Irrigation Project in Azerbaijan," *Trend News Agency*, April 16, 2015, goo.gl/TjZrdu; "Azerbaijan and Islamic Development Bank Ink Grant Agreement," *Report News Agency*, January 18, 2017, goo.gl/AZy2qv; "Islamic Development Bank Mission Arrives in Azerbaijan," *Report News Agency*, November 22, 2016, goo.gl/qK2esC; "Azerbaijani President Meets with President of Islamic Development Bank Group," *Trend News Agency*, April 6, 2015, goo.gl/uRH0iK.

into intensified efforts to introduce Islamic banking in Azerbaijan,¹⁰³ a measure long resisted in the country and one that, if carried through, is certain to serve as a powerful bridge inviting greater segments of the population into the discursive fold of Islam.¹⁰⁴

The Baku regime has also worked to expand bilateral ties with a number of individual Muslim states, including Iran – with whom it has recently taken measures towards joint car production in the Azerbaijani town of Neftchala¹⁰⁵ and joint pharmaceutical production in Azerbaijan's Sumgayit city and Pirallahi settlement¹⁰⁶ – and Pakistan, with whom it has been discussing measures to deepen military cooperation (with the aim of conducting joint military exercises and establishing joint arms production, including of ballistic missiles with a range of 500 km).¹⁰⁷ The growing intensity and increasingly strategic nature of partnership with Turkey over the

past few years has also been particularly important in this context, given Turkey's spatial proximity and its progressive shift towards an Islamic discursive milieu since the AKP government has been in power.¹⁰⁸

Likewise, in efforts to boost its tourism sector¹⁰⁹ and following the failure of its earlier efforts to bring a considerable number of Western tourists to the country, the Azerbaijani regime has started looking east and south. Consequently, and following a targeted marketing strategy, combined with new direct flights and a simplification of the visa regime for the Gulf states from February 2016¹¹⁰ (a process made available to nationals of some other states starting in January 2017¹¹¹), the country has seen an unprecedented influx of tourists from the Arab Middle East,¹¹² as well as Iran; a development that resulted in nearly \$2.7 billion in foreign tourist spending in 2016, a 71 percent increase over the previous year, making

103 Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, IDB Sign Grant Agreement"; "Islamic Development Bank Takes Next Step in Supporting Islamic Finance in Azerbaijan," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 10, 2015, goo.gl/vFdPto; "Azerbaijan and Islamic Development Bank."

104 C.f. Aliyev, "Islamic Activism as a Social Movement."

105 Nigar Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, Iran Eye Implementation of Joint Projects," *Azernews*, September 21, 2016, goo.gl/g1xF84; Nigar Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, Iran to Launch Joint Production of Cars," *Azernews*, August 8, 2016, goo.gl/pi0lyu; "Azerbaijan and Iran Launch Joint Car Production in Neftchala," *Report News Agency*, August 6, 2016, goo.gl/0NDwgZ.

106 Nigar Abbasova, "Foundation Stone Laid for Azerbaijan-Iran Pharmaceutical Plant," *Azernews*, January 16, 2017, goo.gl/rmV5nu; Nigar Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, Iran Eye Implementation"; Aynur Karimova, "Azerbaijan, Iran Finalize Deal on Medicine Production," *Azernews*, April 22, 2016, goo.gl/tBkusn; Aynur Karimova, "Azerbaijan, Iran to Invest Initially 35M Euros in Medicine Plant Construction," *Azernews*, March 14, 2016, goo.gl/q4cj1f.

107 Mamedov, "Marching in Lockstep with Turkey"; Fuad Shahbazov, "Azerbaijan's Growing Military Cooperation with Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2017, goo.gl/VikYKx; "Baku to Cover the Country with the 'Iron Dome,'" *Vesti.az*, November 7, 2016, goo.gl/EXSO4Y.

108 Among the most dramatic and potentially consequential reforms that the AKP government has introduced lately are the lifting of a ban on wearing the Islamic headscarf in public institutions (October 2013), public schools (September 2014) and most recently the military (February 2017); the introduction of compulsory religious education classes in primary schools (grades 1–3); a dramatic increase in the number of religiously oriented schools within the state system (so called Imam Hatip *Lises*) and the lifting in 2012 of a ban on university entrance beyond theology for graduates of these schools (see Sebnem Arsu and Dan Bilefsky, "Turkey Lifts Longtime Ban on Head Scarves in State Offices," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2013, goo.gl/VxvDGB; Roff Smith, "Why Turkey Lifted Its Ban on the Islamic Headscarf," *National Geographic*, October 12, 2013, goo.gl/yxR3aB; Caroline Tee, *The Gulen Movement in Turkey: The Politics of Islam and Modernity* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 59–61; "Turkey Lifts Military Ban on Islamic Headscarf," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2017, goo.gl/9NOOwg).

109 With a view to streamlining the effort of developing the tourism industry in the country, the government also established a Tourism Council under the chairmanship of the culture and tourism minister Abulfaz Garayev whose first meeting was held on December 29, 2016 ("Tourism Council Holds First Meeting," *Azertag*, December 29, 2016, goo.gl/FF9rxk). President Ilham Aliyev also decreed in December 2016 the establishment of the National Tourism Promotion Bureau to promote the country's tourism potential abroad ("National Tourism Promotion Bureau Established," *Marja.az*, December 28, 2016, goo.gl/6ttMw).

110 According to the new simplified visa system, Arab citizens could now obtain entry visa, valid for a 30-day stay, at any international airport in Azerbaijan (Amina Nazarli, "Arabic Low-Cost Airline to Open Flights to Azerbaijan," *Azernews*, October 24, 2016, goo.gl/fjc6ii).

111 As of 10 January 2017, the State Agency on Public Services and Social Innovations under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan has been processing electronic visas through what is known as the "ASAN Visa" system. E-visas are issued within three working days with validity for 30 days and the fee of 20 USD. Nationals of 81 countries are covered by electronic visas, including Albania, Algeria, Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and United Arab Emirates. Explore the official ASAN visa website at <https://evisa.gov.az/en/>.

112 Personal observations and a number of conversations with taxi drivers, February–March 2017, Baku, Azerbaijan; also see goo.gl/RmZmih. For measures the Azerbaijani government has been taking to boost the number of Arab tourists, see Seba Aghayeva, "Azerbaijan, Kuwait Eye to Open Direct Flights," *Trend News Agency*, November 18, 2016, goo.gl/03Puq5; Nazarli, "Arabic Low-Cost Airline"; Amina Nazarli, "Azerbaijan Seeks to Attract Arab Tourists," *Azernews*, April 8, 2016, goo.gl/Fhah2F; E. Rustamova, "National Museums of Azerbaijan are Not Ready to Receive Tourists," *Echo*, January 9, 2017, goo.gl/xvTYX7. For security-related concerns of some Azerbaijani experts about the influx of Arab tourists, see Azadliq Radosu, "Rafiq Aliyev: 'Rather than the Gulenists, I Am More Concerned about the Arabisation of Tourism,'" *Azadliq Radosu*, August 19, 2016, goo.gl/LExGZ3; "Tourism in Azerbaijan: Is an Arab Tourist a Threat to Security?" *Region International Analytical Centre*, November 5, 2016, goo.gl/ZCrLlh. For opinions of Arab visitors about Azerbaijan, see goo.gl/dmKViQ.

Azerbaijan one of the world's four hottest tourist destinations in 2016, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council.¹¹³ This dynamic continued to grow in 2017, as the country recorded a 24.9 percent increase in the number of foreign tourists in the first three months of 2017 compared with the same period of the previous year – and of the 544,000 tourists who visited the country between January and March 2017, 40,000 received their visa through the newly introduced ASAN (“easy”) visa system. Remarkably, only around the Novruz holidays in March 2017, the number of tourists from Iran reached 65,000.¹¹⁴ As Murad Gassanly, Councillor for Churchill Ward at Westminster City Council and independent political analyst, rightly suggests, “There is today a degree of cultural self-denial in Azerbaijan, which sometimes manifests itself outwardly,” including in what he called a “hysterically racist, xenophobic reaction to Arab tourists in Baku” in 2016.¹¹⁵ With some experts now speaking of the “Arabization” of the tourism sector in Azerbaijan,¹¹⁶ this trend is certain to contribute to the popularization and further normalization of Islamic culture across the population as a whole. The Fourth Islamic Solidarity Games, which Baku is set to host in May 2017, will serve to facilitate a similar outcome.

As part of its humanitarian engagement with the states of the Global South (including as a contributor to the Institution and Capacity Building Program of the African Union Commission) and a pro-active public diplomacy scheme it has embraced since the early 2010s, the Azerbaijani government has also been involved in providing policy-related training for government officials from a number of Muslim

states (particularly Afghanistan), an effort that has *inter alia* translated into the so-called Caspian Basin Studies Program—a certificate program run by ADA University since 2011 (before 2014, the university was known as the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy) that “offers a unique opportunity for foreign diplomats and civil servants to explore and study the in-depths of the Caspian Basin region.”¹¹⁷ The government has also generously provided full scholarships for students from the Global South, many of them practicing Muslims, to receive full-fledged bachelor's or Master's education at ADA University since the latter launched its first degree program in 2009. As this effort continues and expands, it will serve to facilitate the opening of more public platforms for Islamic practice, the further normalization of Islamic discourse across the country's public realm, and the ultimate reduction in the elite's perception of Islam as a threat.

Further, in the absence of what Azerbaijan would consider a fair resolution to its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent territories and given the apparent failure of all existing Western platforms to that effect,¹¹⁸ Azerbaijan has been actively working to move discussion of the problem to organizations in the Global South, including the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, where a designated Contact Group on Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan was established during the organization's Ankara summit in April 2016;¹¹⁹ and the Non-Aligned Movement,¹²⁰ which, remarkably, included in the Final Document of its Tehran Summit in August 2012 a call for “a negotiated settlement of the conflict within the territorial integrity,

113 Alanna Petroff, “These are 4 of the World's Hottest Tourist Destinations,” *CNN*, March 22, 2017, goo.gl/m1iJq.

114 Etibar Seyidagha, “Proposals for the Development of Tourism from Former Minister,” *Musavat*, April 13, 2017, goo.gl/X05aA9.

115 See Murad Gassanly's comment on Erkin Gadirli's Facebook post of September 15, 2016, goo.gl/cNRqwu.

116 “Rafiq Aliyev: ‘Rather than the Gulenists.’”

117 goo.gl/pYKL8u; also see Ismayilov, “Power, Knowledge, and Pipelines,” 96–100.

118 Ismayilov, “Power, Knowledge and Pipelines”; Murad Ismayilov and Michael Tkacik, “Nation-Building and State-Building in Azerbaijan: The Challenges of Education Abroad,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Winter (2009/2010): 89–104. For a background on the conflict and the negotiation process, see Elkhan Mehtiyev, “Armenia-Azerbaijan Prague Process: Road Map to Peace or Stalemate for Uncertainty?” *Conflict Studies Research Centre Caucasus Series* No. 5/23, May 2005.

119 The Contact Group, whose first meeting under the chairmanship of OIC Secretary-General Iyad bin Amin Madani convened on the sidelines of the 71st Regular Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2016, includes seven states: Turkey, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Gambia and Djibouti (“OIC Contact Group on Aggression of Armenia Against Azerbaijan Convenes Its First Meeting,” *Azertag*, September 20, 2016, goo.gl/lm9gbs).

120 Azerbaijan became a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement on May 25, 2011. For a background on Azerbaijan's engagement with the organization, see Jason Strakes, “Azerbaijan and the Non-Aligned Movement: Institutionalizing the ‘Balanced Foreign Policy’ Doctrine,” *IAI Working Papers* No. 15/11, May 2015, goo.gl/lxtrWM.

121 Final Document (NAM 2012/Doc.1/Rev.2), XVI Summit of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, August 26–31, 2012, para. 391, p. 104, <http://namiran.org/16th-summit>. See also special mention of this in President Ilham Aliyev's opening speech at the ministerial meeting dedicated to the social-economic results of 2016, January 10, 2017, goo.gl/A6Nkv3.

sovereignty and the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan,”¹²¹ a development that marked the first time “the Karabakh issue became a subject of broad recognition by governments otherwise far removed from the policy concerns of the South Caucasus or post-Soviet Eurasia.”¹²²

With this vast opening to the Muslim world across various platforms, it is of little surprise that the country’s President has chosen to declare 2017 the Year of Islamic Solidarity. As Azerbaijan’s network of dependencies and interdependencies continues to shift from West to East (to the Islamic world in particular), and with Islam rising as a defining element of regime survival at the domestic and international levels, the Aliyev regime will find itself increasingly compelled to embrace Islam both as a defining feature of the country’s discursive landscape (and the nation’s principal identity marker) and as a primary legitimation mechanism for ensuring its continued legitimacy with both its new (and increasingly strategic) partners in the Muslim South and its own increasingly religious population. Some expressions of this dynamic were already in evidence in April 2015 when, accompanied by his family on a much televised state visit to Saudi Arabia where he was seeking investment and intensified economic cooperation (including in the oil-and-gas sector, tourism, and agriculture), President Ilham Aliyev “swapped his usual suit-and-tie look for the white robes of a Muslim pilgrim to Mecca” on a minor pilgrimage – Umrah, a development that marked the first time that President Aliyev “has been known to circumambulate the Haram Mosque’s Kaaba, the high holy point for Islam.”¹²³

Fourth, because Islam was promoted in view of the elite’s need for external recognition and curbed due to the imperatives of domestic legitimation, the kind of Islam “left” for the majority of the population in post-Soviet Azerbaijan to engage has been what state officials proudly refer to as the “Azerbaijani model of Islam” – Islam as a nominal cultural trait to be discarded (and hence with little consequence for personal dynamics), rather than a faith-based lifestyle to be strictly followed, this deformation itself being a remnant of the Soviet past (and therefore not indigenously Azerbaijani after all). In pursuit of a nationalism-based legitimacy among the empire’s

Muslim population, the Soviet elite sought to undermine and subvert true Islamic practices and dispositions in the Muslim-majority territories under their control lest these practices foster *transnational* bonds and loyalties thus threatening Soviet nationality policy and a staunchly secularist ideology the latter entailed. At the same time, the Soviet authorities welcomed (or at least did not actively resist) the spread of “folk” Islam, this perceived as promoting *subnational* identities and attachments (and hence posing a lesser threat) while helping sustain patriarchal social structures (thus facilitating Soviet rule in rural, traditional, areas otherwise left outside the Party’s control).¹²⁴ As the domestic and international bases underlying the elite’s pursuit of legitimation and survival conjoin and align, and as the elite-sponsored Islamic discourse grows in consistency, uniformity, and coherence, conditions of possibility will arise for the population to more genuinely – and consciously – practice the faith.

And fifth, there is a generational change taking place in Azerbaijan across all layers of society, from the political opposition and civil society to the ruling establishment itself. The generation that grew up and was educated in Soviet times is gradually giving way to a youth that never saw the Soviet Union and has thus been socialized in a USSR-free environment, a reality set to render redundant Soviet cultural influence as a factor informing the traditional perception of Islam as a threat. Naturally more susceptible to Islamic socialization and acculturation, this generation will also likely to develop a view of Islam as a natural way of life rather than as a foreign-induced ideology and doctrine.

At least three words of caution are in order with regards to the dynamics of the resacralization of public space in Azerbaijan, however.

First, Azerbaijan’s growing intensity of engagement with Israel in recent years might stand as perhaps the only external hindrance to the upwardly positive dynamics of Baku’s engagement with Islam in the country. Azerbaijan’s third largest trading partner as of February 2016, Israel has been enjoying a truly strategic partnership with Baku over the past decade, with the latter growing increasingly dependent on the former in a number of areas, including in particular the military realm and domestic security.

122 Strakes, “Azerbaijan and the Non-Aligned Movement,” 15.

123 Giorgi Lomsadze, “Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev Goes to Mecca,” *Eurasianet*, April 8, 2015, goo.gl/4XSHNJ.

124 Ismayilov, “Postcolonial Hybridity.”

Israel has also been critical to Azerbaijan's efforts to diversify its oil-dependent economy, helping to boost the country's high-tech capabilities and agricultural production.¹²⁵ Finally, Israel has occupied a key place in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, traditionally lobbying for Baku's relations with Washington.¹²⁶

Should this latter engagement – or any other factor – be powerful enough to prevent the regime from fully identifying with and embracing the Islamic resurgence at home, and instead fuel its continued perception of Islam as a threat, the elite may choose instead to pursue a permissive policy towards Islam that falls short of the resacralization of public space, an approach that would also require finding an alternative legitimating strategy. Given the incommensurability of democratic governance with the incumbent elite's long-term survival, and in a situation where other discursive and material tools – whether anchored in high-end nationalism and cultural elitism or high-end developmentalism and oil-fueled consumerism – have also grown unsustainable given the reigning economic crisis at home, the elite may choose to rely, in the short term, on a combination of domestic repression and the continued conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh to sustain popular nationalism as its principal legitimation mechanism capable of competing with Islam as an effective tool for popular mobilization. In the longer run, however, since such a strategy is socially unsustainable, the elite will need to work towards genuine economic transformation to further groom popular developmentalism as its principal domestic legitimation strategy and a loyalty-buying scheme.

Second, given the inherent heterogeneity of Azerbaijan's religious landscape along the Shia-Sunni cleavage, political Islam in Azerbaijan has so far stood little chance to transform into a viable political project, since the religiously observant support base on which it could rely has been too meager to matter. Indeed, it is predominantly the Shia groups that have been the vanguard of the political struggle against the secular authoritarian regime; the country's Sunni population has been not only unwilling to stand behind the Shia-led resistance (given the inherent antagonism between the two groups) but – in view of the expressly apolitical ideological outlook and disposition they embody – also unprepared to challenge

the incumbent authorities in the first place. Many observant Shias likewise have not supported the politicized Shia struggle. This is now set to change in at least two ways. For one, the developments around Nardaran and the Movement for Muslim Unity might serve to politicize some segments of the initially apolitical Shia and Sunni groups, such that many of those who initially did not support the anti-government cause of Taleh Baghirzade and others could now move to side therewith, including those who would otherwise not support political Islam as the country's future trajectory. And second, the recent move toward an alignment between politically active observant Shias and the secular opposition has now provided religious groups with a secular support base, one set to solidify as the pro-democracy struggle across the religious-secular landscape further grows. Consequently, while the Azerbaijani authorities' November 2015 raid on Nardaran and the full-fledged onslaught on members of Baghirzade's Movement for Muslim Unity that quickly followed were meant to eliminate Shia Islam as a meaningful factor in the country's political dynamics, what the government has effectively achieved is granting a possibility of success to a religious project which would otherwise have been doomed to continued marginalization and failure.

Third, as noted above, the transformation in the attitudinal dynamics across the religious-secular divide and the normalization of Islamic discourse across the opposition political landscape in Azerbaijan has only become possible through the Islamic groups' tactical neglect of the Islamist element on their strategic agenda and their associated assimilation within the secular milieu of the pro-democracy movement. Functional (and hence tactical) as it has been, the religious-secular alignment is unlikely to last beyond the actual democratization of the country's political system. Should the process towards that end last – and thus the religious-secular alliance endure – sufficiently long, it could work to silently socialize an increasing number of the country's otherwise apolitical religious folks into a post-democratization Islamist agenda, thereby laying a demographic foundation for a dramatic polarization across society along the religious-secular cleavage and increasing the likelihood of a civil war

125 Nigar Abbasova, "Azerbaijan, Israel Keen to Expand Cooperation," *Azernews*, November 8, 2016, goo.gl/GdnUOI; "Azerbaijan and Israel Aimed at Increasing Mutual Trade Turnover," *Contact.az*, December 15, 2016, goo.gl/VKImKD.

126 Cnaan Liphshiz, "Netanyahu Scores Diplomatic Home Run in Iran's Backyard," *The Times of Israel*, December 17, 2016, goo.gl/aoDfac.

should the currently allied forces in the “united” opposition camp come to face a real-life question of power and the ideological underpinning of the state they have come together to build.

After all, it is one thing to be unified in opposition to the incumbent political regime and forge a tentative agreement on what should replace it. Sustaining this unity once the country presents itself as an open book to be written anew is quite another. Consequently, while the dominant dividing line today runs between those in support of the incumbent political establishment and those opposing it (thus bringing secularists and Islamists together in a natural alliance against the creeping authoritarianism of the Aliyev regime), it is very likely that, should the opposition succeed, the principal dividing line will come to run between those who support the course of Islamists and those who oppose it. As Shadi Hamid rightly notes, “Matters of religion could be postponed, but they couldn’t be postponed forever. Politics is also about what happens *after* you get what you want, whenever that might be.”¹²⁷

Indeed, Azerbaijan’s prominent religious leader Ilgar Ibrahimoglu considers that, given fundamental differences of opinion between the country’s religious and secular opposition regarding issues of political identity, cooperation between the two is only possible around concrete issues of common interest, including fostering democratization and creating an environment conducive to free and fair elections in the country. “Let us take the most basic example,” Ibrahimoglu suggests, “some of them [from within the secular opposition] consider the legalization of brothels a most normal act. We think this must not happen. Very well, let them announce their intention to legalize this prior to election, and [people] express [their] opinion on it [during] the election. Should they fail to publicize [this intention in the pre-election campaign], they shouldn’t mention it afterwards either... We think that an Azerbaijani voter will not vote for any group which has got problems with

Islam, Islamic identity and which has no respect for morality and spirituality.”

“That is why I think,” Ibrahimoglu adds, “that in the conditions of free elections and [a democratic] environment, many political organizations will automatically become interested in adjusting their position [on Islam].”¹²⁸

Taleh Baghirzade echoed this position. In an interview with Meydan TV in August 2015, he openly denounced the idea that democracy necessarily entails secularism, contending instead that democracy denotes a governance system based on “people’s choice;” therefore, “if people choose today Islam and an Islamic leader, that is democracy; and if people choose secularism, that is still democracy.”¹²⁹ Experiences across the Middle East, including in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey, suggest, however, that electoral victory of an Islamist party in the conditions of a liberalized social and political space does not necessarily, or at all, entail normalization and might only serve to cause a dramatic split in society and polarization along the religious-secular divide. With both religious and secular forces in Azerbaijan focusing on elections as a key mechanism to resolve their grievances, the moment at which they finally acquire access to this mechanism may expose, in dramatic fashion, the short-lived and unsustainable nature of the functional partnership they enjoy today.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: A Shared Landscape of Islamism across the Secularized Middle East

The people and government of Azerbaijan alike have traditionally asserted the uniqueness of their state and tended to differentiate Azerbaijan’s developmental pathway from that of the Middle East. As such, they would readily dismiss any idea of comparison between the two.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, the dynamics

127 Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, 143.

128 Ibrahimoglu, Ilgar, personal interview with the author, July 12, 2016.

129 See the full interview (August 10, 2015) at <https://goo.gl/gmAkWt>. See it transcribed in “No Basis nor Prospects.”

130 A typical expression of a “self-denial” many Azerbaijanis are practicing today with regards to their cultural identity and belonging, a testimony REAL opposition movement’s Board Member Erkin Gadirli was supposed to deliver at the US Congress in September 2016 (but ultimately failed to given some technical reasons) is a case in point. In that testimony that Gadirli shared on his Facebook page, he challenges the West’s (and largely, US) assumption of Azerbaijan’s being a Middle Eastern country, suggesting that, “We have never associated ourselves with that region. Yes, our country is geographically close to the Middle East, but culturally there is a huge gap between us. Given what happens in what is traditionally known as Middle East countries, Azerbaijan looks like a very peaceful, tolerant, free and prosperous country.” See Erkin Gadirli’s Facebook page (September 15, 2016) at goo.gl/cNRqwu.

around Islam in Azerbaijan today bear a striking resemblance to the situation in many of the Middle Eastern states.

In Azerbaijan and Middle Eastern states alike, elites have traditionally relied on predominantly Western, or otherwise external, support, rather than the backing of their own populace, to help assure their survival. Both, therefore, have looked to the West for spiritual, conceptual and practical inspiration and guidance to build their post-independence governance structures in emulation of Western modernity and associated secular nationalism. For both, that process entailed a desacralization of the political landscape and public space; and, effectively forced upon their respective societies, this for both has been a top-down, “elite-owned,”¹³¹ and as such essentially undemocratic process. In the conditions of the elite’s persistent resistance to democratization on one hand and gradual internalization of expressions of secular modernity across the wider segments of the (urban) population on the other, in both Azerbaijan and the Middle East, modernity has grown to be a principal source of legitimation the elite tapped in pursuit of self-preservation (including by hailing themselves as the guardians of modernity).¹³² The elite in both, consequently, have come to see Islam as a principal challenge to their monopoly on power and legitimation and, as such, have stood as principal agents of Western imperialism and Western discursive domination within their respective political (national) confines, a reality that generated similar patterns of elite-driven volatility shifts in the realm of nation-building;¹³³ elicited similar reactions from the religious segments of their respective populations; and prompted similar dynamics of state-society relations in various evolutionary stages of their statehoods. In view of this, Islamic movements like Taleh Baghirzade’s Movement for Muslim Unity (or its Middle Eastern equivalent, Tunisia’s *al-Nahda*),

in particular, have been perceived as a direct threat to the legitimation narrative of these regimes, in that these have sought to fit their articulated Islamic agenda *within* the conceptual boundaries of modern statehood and nationalism rather than position themselves against it, thus effectively robbing the elite of the principal platform on which their modernity-based legitimation claims have traditionally rested.¹³⁴

With Islamic discourse predominantly a product of elite-level dynamics and bottom-up collective discussion of Islam effectively non-existent, the population in both Azerbaijan and the Middle East had until recently stood as a silent consumer of the mainstream Islamic discourse rather than its active agent and producer. Indeed, Islamic discourse in Azerbaijan – and broader discourse on national identity – has been dominated and defined by elite thinking and agency since the rise of nationalism around the second half of the nineteenth century, with intra-societal dialogue on the matter, including in particular across the religious-secular divide, systematically muted and suppressed.

Consequently, although the questions of national identity and of the role religion should play therein is at the core of the Azerbaijani state-building effort, the prerogative of addressing these questions has never been entrusted to the masses and any discussion on the matter that unfolded at any stage of the twentieth century has been informed by a master discourse imposed by the elites. Such was the case when the founding fathers of Azerbaijan’s first independent modern state (ADR), which lasted two years (1918–1920) before being brought into the fold of the Soviet Union, confronted the question and, inspired by European modernity as they were, made the pioneering moves towards a de-sacralization – and secularization – of the social space historically dominated by religious notions and

131 cf. Mohamed Elhachmi Hamdi, *The Politicisation of Islam*, 122.

132 See, for example, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev’s claim in a conversation with Rob Sobhani for the latter’s 2007 *Washington Times* op-ed that, “Our desire to be secular, progressive, modern and forward-looking... is yet another feature that distinguishes Azerbaijan from other Muslim countries,” something that prompted Sobhani to conclude that “Modernity is the driving force behind the dynamism that one finds today in Azerbaijan” and that “[President Aliyev’s] vision and achievements are persuasive reasons for the United States to advance its relationship with Azerbaijan to a higher economic, political and financial level.” Hence, Sobhani’s advice that Washington should “enter into a long-term strategic ‘grand bargain’ with Azerbaijan” (Sobhani, “Post-Soviet Modernity”).

133 Ismayilov, *Postcolonial Hybridity*.

134 Azerbaijani human rights defender Leyla Yunus, currently in self-exile in France, captured this perceptual dynamic underlying elite intentionality in Azerbaijan by suggesting that, “Today, our government is most afraid of Taleh Baghirov. They are not so much afraid of Islamic Party Chairman Movsum Samadov [or] today’s opposition leaders, as of this guy – Taleh Baghirov,” a reason she added behind her move to choose him to address a special letter to from her European exile, rather than her “friends” among political prisoners, Ilgar Mammadov or Seymur Hezi (see “Leyla Yunus: ‘The Economic Situation Will Worsen’”).

understandings.¹³⁵ Such was certainly the case in Azerbaijan under Soviet rule, when the key tenets of Azerbaijani nationhood were forged and molded in central Moscow.¹³⁶ And this has also been the reality of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where the ideological contours of the emerging nation and the multiple shifts in the understanding of the nature of Azerbaijani identity and its proper application have been defined exclusively by changing elite-level dynamics and evolving elite perceptions of what was most expedient given the unfolding developments at home and internationally. Thus, Ayaz Mutallibov, the country's first president (August 30, 1991—March 6, 1992; May 14–18, 1992), attempted to espouse the kind of national identity that would support a pro-Moscow foreign policy. Second President Abulfaz Elchibey (June 6, 1992—September 1, 1993) tilted towards Turkism to support a pro-Western and anti-Russian, anti-Iranian approach. And more recently, both President Heydar Aliyev (June 24, 1993—October 31, 2003) and President Ilham Aliyev (since October 31, 2003) have re-invoked *Azerbaijanism* of the times of ADR as the foundation of a more balanced foreign policy.¹³⁷

Consequently, much like broader discourse on national identity, Islamic discourse in Azerbaijan over the past two decades has not been anchored in intra-societal or elite-society dialogue and deliberation and has not reflected major cultural shifts, as well as changing moods, perceptions, and self-perceptions across the country's social landscape. Rather, it has been formed and evolved as a continuously instantiated, fluid function of exogenous effects of the elite's tactical pursuit of legitimation across domestic and international planes of power (both grounded in their quest for tactical and strategic survival). Three exogenous factors in particular, each anchored in the elite's

quest for survival, have informed the dynamics of Islamic discourse in post-independence Azerbaijan: the country's geography and associated threat of religious radicalization exported from neighbors; the elite's embeddedness in a Soviet political-cultural milieu; and the elite's pursuit of Western (and broader international) recognition. Consequently, the evolution of Islam's place in Azerbaijan's post-independence identity, too, has unfolded as a contingent product of dialectical tension between the various motivational triggers within the hybrid intentionality underlying the elite's pursuit of survival. A continuously instantiated product of dialectics underlying the elite's response to ever-changing security stimuli at home and abroad in view of their tactical needs for survival, Islamic discourse and state policies based thereupon have also been unstable.

Further, the tactical nature of the elite's need to promote rival discourses domestically as a function of the hybridity of their domestic and foreign policy agendas resulted in the production of a negatively neutral – substance-free (nominal) – discursive space underlying the country's ideational field, such that one needs to embody neutral dispositions (formalism) in all of one's social and public engagements to be accepted as a legitimate member within one's social and political milieu. This reality has manifested itself particularly strongly in popular and state attitudes towards Islam: an average – legitimate – self-identified Muslim in an Azerbaijani nominal context embodying a profile of someone who does not pray, does not grow a beard, never attends a mosque, does not know a single ayah from the Quran, and consumes alcohol.¹³⁸

Aggressively nurtured and deeply internalized across all layers of the country's traditional social spectrum, this formalist disposition has repercus-

135 As part of the nation-building strategy, ADR's founding fathers moved away from purely religious categorizations of the past towards what they called *Azerbaijanism*, thus adding an ethnic category of "Turkism" and European modernism to the definition of the people's collective identification (Murad Ismayilov, "Azerbaijani National Identity and Baku's Foreign Policy: The Current Debate," *ADA Biweekly* 1, no. 1, February 1, 2008, 8–11, goo.gl/cZfb7d; Rahman Mustafa-zade, *Two Republics: Azerbaijan-Russia Relations in 1918–1922* (Moscow: "MIK", 2006); Tadeusz Świętochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan. 1905–1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); cf. Touraj Atabaki, "Recasting and Recording Identities in the Caucasus," *Iran & the Caucasus* 6, no. 1/2 (2002): 219–35. As part of secularization reforms in Azerbaijan of that time, *shari'a* courts were abolished in all regions save Zaqatala.

136 With the establishment of Soviet power, "Muslim clerics" now also "lost the right to be elected in local Soviets and their assemblies"; and the constitution of Soviet Azerbaijan (adopted in May 1921) stipulated in its Article 4 the separation of state and education from religion in compliance with the May 1920 decrees by the People's Commissariat of Education of the USSR "On the ban of religious education and the conducting of religious rituals in schools" and "On the Freedom of Conscience." Nonetheless, religious schools – *madradas* and *maktabs* – continued to function, semi-illegally, in Soviet Azerbaijan and many Azerbaijani citizens could obtain religious education abroad, including in Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, until the late 1930s (Goyushov and Asgarov, "Islam and Islamic Education," 170–71, 190–99).

137 Ismayilov, "Postcolonial Hybridity"; Ismayilov, "Azerbaijani National Identity."

138 Ismayilov, "Postcolonial Hybridity," 13.

sions reaching far beyond the religious realm alone, effectively ridding the nation of its creative potential and thus serving as a dramatic hindrance in its way to sustainable development and progress. In the conditions when an agential tilt towards neither Western (liberal) cultural notions of behavior nor towards more conservative religious dispositions is welcome, when any departure from a neutralized and carefully sanitized “social norm” is punishable through the various mechanisms of the state’s juridical, disciplinary, and biopolitical power,¹³⁹ when the doors to any ideological engine capable to inspire individual self-reliance (and self-expression) and instill a sense of purpose are effectively closed and jealously guarded, a totalizing atmosphere of indolence, apathy, and torpor can be the only sustainable outcome, a reality one could have witnessed across the Arab Middle East over the past few centuries and one Azerbaijan is replicating today.

The elite-driven volatility shifts in the realm of nation-building and the resultant patterns of elite-society relations that Azerbaijan shares with the Arab Middle East should not come as a surprise, for in a postcolonial setting national identity and the overall realm of nation-building always find themselves subservient to the elite’s political agenda, including in particular considerations of political survival.¹⁴⁰ As such, the evolving dynamics underlying identity shifts in a postcolonial nation are always contextually embedded and thus exogenously defined. Any move of a nation away from the postcolonial condition towards paradigmatic independence, then, should necessarily entail an endogenization of the process of nation-building, something that – given the elite’s embeddedness in and dependence upon the international structures of discursive and material power – could only come from within the masses as a bottom-up process of national reawakening. While there are a few mechanisms by which such bottom-up reawakening could unfold, Islamic resurgence is one powerful pathway with the potential to provide the intellectual and spiritual resources – a conceptual toolkit – to underpin and fuel national

emancipation and a rise towards discursive self-sufficiency.

From this perspective, the specific dynamics facing Azerbaijan in the third decade of independence and the associated shift towards a resacralization of political space discussed above have served to prompt a gradual endogenization of the dynamics informing societal attitudes towards Islam and the latter’s normalization across the country’s public space. Indeed, if the developments around Nardaran over the past few years are to hold any historical significance beyond the exposure of human rights violations and torture as the incumbent’s way to maintain public order, it is for their role in molding a religious-secular alliance across the opposition landscape. And regardless of whether this effectively functional reconciliation ultimately succeeds in bringing about the intended outcome of a political change, its principal meaning, one with potentially dramatic effects on the nation’s path towards self-awareness (and discursive self-sufficiency), far transcends the original objective, in that it has served to unleash endogenous channels for intra-societal discussion and dialogue across the religious-secular divide of the social spectrum on key issues involving Azerbaijan’s national identity and the role Islam should (and could) play therein, such as to allow for the secularists to explore how much of Islam they are ready to allow in and for the Islamists to see how much of it they are prepared to let go.

Consequently, with Islamist groups emphasizing their commitment to civic rights, justice, and the overall anti-authoritarian struggle and pursuit of democracy, and with the secular opposition not shying away from making references to Islam and Islamic concepts (thus giving salience to the religious segment of their identity in their narrative of common struggle and unified stance in opposition to the incumbent political regime), the two groups, previously on opposing poles of social-political resistance, have now found themselves gradually moving towards a convergence of discourse on religion and politics.¹⁴¹ As this dialogue further unfolds and Islam secures and fortifies its place in public discourse,

139 The concepts are Michel Foucault’s. See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977–1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–1979* (New York: Picador, 2008); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76* (London: Penguin, 2004); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: An Introduction (New York: Vintage, 1980).

140 Ismayilov, “Postcolonial Hybridity,” 12–13.

141 cf. Shadi Hamid, William McCants, and Rashid Dar, *Islamism After the Arab Spring: Between the Islamic State and the Nation-State* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Center for Middle East Policy, 2017), goo.gl/H8Wxao; Elizabeth Young, “Islam and Islamists in the 2014 Tunisian Elections,” Project on Middle East Political Science, George Washington University, March 12, 2015.

Azerbaijani society will gain a historic opportunity to gradually develop, in an internally grown fashion, its own notion of the place religion should hold in the social-political fabric of the state, thereby re-setting the dynamics of Islamic discourse from being an exogenously (contextually) conditioned *dialectical* function of the elite's pursuit of self-preservation (and hence volatile) towards an endogenously conditioned *linear* (and thus more stable) evolution.

Relatively younger in terms of its *independent* experience of Western-style modernity, Azerbaijan could take a lesson from a negative developmental pathway its brethren in the Middle East had trodden (as manifested itself in the context of the Arab Spring, where the ideological division between reli-

gious and secular groups became irrelevant in a common struggle against authoritarian regimes), open up some space for Islamic discourse and find a way to accommodate the political participation of Islamic individual activists and groups, lest the country repeat the Middle East's fate of revolutionary upheaval as it finds itself at a historical crossroads on the path of independent statehood, a scenario particularly likely in the conditions of growing economic dysfunction, when beyond the rising alliance and cross-ideological cooperation between the religious and secular opposition, the population at large (save some middle class minority) is likely to side with and join any wave of revolutionary resistance should events unfold in this direction.

Chapter 7.

“Spirituality and Enlightenment”: Uzbekistan’s State-Backed Ideological Policy

Rafael Sattarov¹ (2017)

Introduction

Russia remains the most studied country in the post-Soviet space in relation to the promotion of so-called “conservative values.” However, this trend stretches across Eurasia and actually began in other republics earlier than it did in Russia. Uzbekistan has been at the forefront of this movement: it began structuring its ideology of national independence around the doctrine of “spirituality and enlightenment” (*Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat*) in the 1990s, and institutionalized this as a quasi-Ministry of Ideology in 2004. The goal of *Ma’naviyat* is to offer a secular ideology that occupies the space left by the disappearance of Marxism-Leninism, and thus to prevent competing ideational projects—chiefly the Islamic project—from taking root in Uzbek society. In this paper, I study the rise of *Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat* as a political tool for controlling society. I then go on to address its probable disappearance: since the death of Islam Karimov in September 2016, the Uzbek leadership seems to have begun to move away from this ideological construct inherited from the late “father of the nation.”

The State, Guardian of the Nation’s Moral Principles and Traditions

In the early 1990s, Uzbekistan wavered in terms of its ideology. It first tried to promote pan-Turkism and

the notion of Turkestan, but this agenda was already being advanced by opposition parties such as Erk and Birlik. Moreover, the Uzbek leadership was concerned about Turkey’s attempts to replace Russia in playing an “older brother” role toward Central Asia, and therefore sought to avoid promoting themes of Turkic unity too openly.

In the second half of the 1990s, the country progressively withdrew in isolationism, rejecting almost all regional cooperation, and consolidated an authoritarian regime. Alisher Ilkhamov states that the Karimov regime could be regarded as “hard” authoritarianism, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are associated with comparatively “softer” variants of neopatrimonialism: “At the beginning of Karimov’s presidency, the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan was comparatively ‘softer’ but it clearly drifted toward a tougher, exclusive, style of governance characterized by the exceptional and unchecked use of power” after the Andijon popular riots and the repression.²

The consolidation of Karimov’s authoritarian rule went hand by hand with the structuring of a new ideology, according to which the state is the primary guardian of the moral principles and traditions of the nation. Andrew F. March defined Islam Karimov’s ideology—or Karimovism—as a “National Ideology of Uzbekistan.” However, I consider *Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat* to be the core of Karimov’s personal ideology, rather than that of his country. Its founding father

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2 Alisher Ilkhamov, “Neopatrimonialism, interest groups and patronage networks: the impasses of the governance system in Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 1 (2007): 65–84.

was Ozod Sharafiddinov (1929–2005), an intellectual, academic and writer³ who served as a Karimov biographer and the unofficial head of the leader's "court writers." During Soviet times, Sharafiddinov served as Secretary on Ideological Issues for the Uzbek Communist Party and led the National University of Uzbekistan branch of the Communist Youth, the Komsomol. His ideological trajectory encapsulates how Uzbek politicians and intellectuals moved from Communism to nationalism.

According to Karimov and his ideologues, Uzbek state and society were at risk of losing their way. "Wherever an ideological vacuum arises it will naturally be filled by another ideology," declared Karimov.⁴ Therefore, it was determined that the regime should fight against external influences and threats. Some were clearly identified: Western values, deemed decadent; Western foreign influences (the US, Great Britain, Europe at large, all those promoting "color revolutions," the George Soros Foundation, and sometimes even the Aga Khan Foundation); and radical Islam, seen as a path that "good Muslims" should avoid. Karimov proclaimed, for instance, that the modern West and mass culture "want to destroy traditions and classic culture, so for this purpose the Uzbek people should develop our own 'ideological and spiritual immunity'."⁵ The path to this, he indicated, was clear:

In order to protect our people from various ideological threats, to inculcate in society an ideological immunity, it is necessary to arm it with an authentically humanist ideology, comprising in itself a powerful impulse toward the spiritual uplifting of the nation.⁶

In response to these risks, *Ma'naviyat*' advances moral principles such as state paternalism and traditional values: national traditions, patriotism, respect for elders, the celebration of labor, and *mahalla* as Uzbek civil society. It insists on gender roles: men should remain the breadwinners, and while women can

work, they should focus on family issues and occupy a secondary role in household decision-making. *Ma'naviyat*' also promotes a conservative dress code – modest for girls (but no hijab), neat and formal for men (no beard or long hair) (as an example, see Picture 1).

The mission of *Ma'naviyat va Ma'rifat* can be divided into four main areas:

- Promoting Uzbekistan's special path;
- Ensuring loyalty to and support for the regime;
- Protecting Uzbek society from Western values; and
- Preventing young people from having access to mass culture.

Censorship and Banning in the Name of *Ma'naviyat*

Every authoritarian regime is based on the ideology of self-protection. To a greater extent even than in Russia or Belarus, special service workers and representatives of spiritual education centers have penetrated all Uzbekistan's state institutions. Since 2004, a wide network of spiritual centers under the umbrella of the Republican Center for Spiritual Propaganda, a kind of Ministry of Ideology, have taken control over the country's cultural life.

The state agency O'zbek Konsert,⁷ for instance, is responsible for controlling the public life of pop stars, including monitoring their speech and enforcing a dress code. In 2014, pop-singer Lola was banned from Uzbek TV and media for wearing a red dress considered too provocative during the concert of Rayhona, another popular singer. According to O'zbek Konsert, her dress "conflicts with the national mentality." The agency went on to comment, "It is a great shame for an Uzbek woman to wear such kind of dress, because they manipulate young people and

3 Andrew F. March, "The Use and Abuse of History: 'National Ideology' as Transcendental Object in Islam Karimov's 'Ideology of National Independence,'" *Central Asian Survey* 21, no. 4 (2002): 371–84.

4 Islam Karimov, "Ideologiya – eto ob'ediniiaiushchii flag natsii, obshchestva, gosudarstva," in *Svoe budushchee my stroim svoimi rukami*, vol. 7 (Tashkent, 1999); Andrew F. March, "From Leninism to Karimovism: Hegemony, Ideology, and Authoritarian Legitimation," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 4 (2003): 307–36.

5 March, "From Leninism to Karimovism"; Islam Karimov, *National Society of Philosophers of Uzbekistan* (2001), 41.

6 March, "From Leninism to Karimovism."

7 The State Institution "Uzbekconcert" (formerly "Uzbeknavo") was created to enhance the creativity of concert organizations and individual artists in order to raise the cultural level of the population; improve the use and variety of theatrical spaces; and combine efforts and resources in cultural, industrial, scientific, economic, and social development. This state agency is in charge of giving licenses to performers. See "The Single Portal of Interactive State Services," <https://my.gov.uz/en/authority/68>.

destroy their spirituality.”⁸ Deputy Prime Minister Elmira Bosithonova continued the attacks:

How can one explain the fact that some of our female singers are dressed in a more than revealing style, completely divorced from the national style, and appear on television channels intended for family viewing, singing songs with messages that aren't subjected to any criticism and in frivolous video clips?⁹

Repressive measures have also targeted the vibrant Uzbek cinema scene. Many TV scenes are censored or cut. One of the leading lights of filmmaking in Uzbekistan, Zulfikar Musakov, responded to state television's blatant censorship of his own film by writing an open letter.¹⁰ To avoid such censorship, many Uzbek musicians, filmmakers, and rock-stars have moved to Istanbul, Moscow and Almaty, making these three cities new informal cultural centers for Uzbek intellectuals. According to the journalist Ali Feruz (whose real name is Khudoberdi Nurmatov), a contributor to the Russian liberal newspaper *Novaya gazeta*, around 1,500 Uzbek journalists and musicians now live and work in Russia because their works are banned in Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek government and security services have created an unofficial government blacklist noting all those who are not allowed to work in government, travel to foreign countries, or move from their city to other regions of Uzbekistan. One person to suffer such repression is the Uzbek photojournalist Umida Akhmedova. A recipient of the 2016 Vaclav Havel International Prize for Creative Dissent, she was accused of “slander[ing]” and “insult[ing]” her own nation—as well as the traditions, spirituality and cultural heritage of Uzbekistan¹¹—for publishing a series of photos about life in rural Uzbekistan. On December 16, 2009, criminal charges were filed against her for her involvement in the aforemen-

tioned project as well as other gender and human rights media projects, including “The Burden of Virginity,” which discusses the difficulties faced by women in Uzbekistan. The criminal charges carry a possible prison sentence of up to six months, or 2–3 years of forced labor, and she was banned from leaving the country. That being said, the situation seems to have changed since Karimov's death: Akhmedova has, for instance, been allowed to organize her media project *Smirnoe nebo* (obedient sky)—a play on words, because a state propagandist has characterized the regime's stability as *Mirnoe nebo* (peaceful sky).¹²

***Ma'naviyat* as a Youth Policy**

Ma'naviyat also plays a pivotal role in structuring Uzbekistan's youth policy. The Communist youth movement, the Komsomol, disappeared with the Marxist-Leninist ideology upon the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the Uzbek government quickly became concerned about the politicization of youth. In 1992, student unrest—organized on Tashkent campuses by students and activists close to the opposition parties Erk and Birlik—was brutally crushed by the regime.¹³

In the aftermath, Karimov's entourage decided to reanimate and rebrand the defunct Komsomol structure. This drive to control the country's youth accelerated in 1995, when the relatively liberal then-Chairman of the National Security Service Gulam Aliyev (seconded by the Deputy Chairman Abdulaziz Kamilov, now Minister of Foreign Affairs) was replaced by the conservative Rustam Inoyatov, who remains in power to this day.¹⁴ In 1996, the authorities launched the youth organization Kamolot, and its counterpart for schoolchildren, Kamalyak, designed to replace the Soviet Pioneers.

8 Bruce Pannier, “Central Asia's Controversial Fashion Statements,” *RFE/RL*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-fashion-islamic-risque-western-national-mentality/26932437.html>.

9 Bruce Pannier, “Uzbekistan Is Not Robinson Crusoe's Island: A Crackdown On Revealing Clothes,” *RFE/RL*, July 09, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-uzbekistan-/27118277.html>.

10 “Uzbekskoe televidenie –master po obrezaniiu fil'mov,” *Eltuz*, <http://eltuz.com/ru/glavnye-temy/969/>.

11 Mark Norman, “A Country's Negative Image,” Portsmouth University Pugwash, January 3, 2010, <http://www.upsuniversity.com/pugwash/2010/02/a-country-s-negative-image/>.

12 “V Tashkente otroetsia personal'naya fotovystavka Umidy Akhmedovoi ‘Smirnoe nebo,’” *Novosti Uzbekistana*, July 2017, <https://nuz.uz/kultura-i-iskusstvo/24761-v-tashkente-otkroetsya-personalnaya-fotovystavka-umidy-ahmedovoy-smirnoe-nebo.html>.

13 Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 372–73.

14 “Kamolot Movement reorganized into Union of the Youth,” *The Tashkent Times*, July 3, 2017, <http://www.tashkenttimes.uz/national/1112-kamolot-reorganized-into-youth-movement>.

Kamolot aims to "unite the youth of the country in order to build a free and prosperous Uzbekistan; assist in rendering a youth that is spiritually mature, with a thoughtful and independent-minded outlook, with good command of the principles of national ideology, and adherent to national values; [and] provide the conditions for growing the image and prestige of the nation."¹⁵

I interviewed two young pro-*Ma'naviyat* activists: Alisher Sadykov, a Kamalot leader from Andijon, and Mirjalol Mirzakhidov, Lead Coordinator at the GONGO Young Leaders' Development Project in Tashkent. According to them, youth is the most vulnerable age group, since young people are susceptible to dangerous ideologies. For Alisher Sadykov, *Ma'naviyat* is the only way to protect the Uzbek people from mass culture and same-sex marriage. "Sometimes our spirituality is more important than economic growth and Western-type modernization," he explained.

Under the umbrella of the Department of Youth Policy of the Presidential Administration of Uzbekistan, the ideology of *Ma'naviyat* took deep root in the educational sphere. It became a mandatory subject for pupils at secondary schools, who have to study the "Ideology of National Independence," while higher education students study "Spirituality and Enlightenment." *Ma'naviyat* is taught in all educational institutions, from secular secondary schools to military academies. For example, the soldiers of the Uzbek army take an exam in *Ma'naviyat asoslari* that counts for 35 percent of their entrance tests.

With the exception of branches of foreign universities located in Uzbekistan, which include Westminster University, Singapore Institute of Management, Turin Polytechnic University, and Moscow State University, each higher education institution has been given a deputy rector in charge of supervising ideology and the ideological loyalty of the students. This deputy rector is in charge of:¹⁶

- Monitoring spiritual-education work at universities;
- Monitoring the implementation of orders and Ministry instructions connected with spiritual-education work;

- Participating in meetings for electing and dismissing assistant deans on spirituality-enlightenment work;
- Instructing deans of faculties and heads of departments concerning spirituality and enlightenment issues;
- Monitoring and assessing the performance of professors and teachers on the topics covered in the program "Work on spirituality and enlightenment";
- Preparing the dean's assistant's report on accomplished work for submission to the chief of the department on spiritual-education (following the release of grades for each semester); and
- Encouraging the faculty employees, departments and chairs who are most active in promoting spiritual-enlightenment work.

Picture 1. A Poster about Dress-Code Rules at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy



Official Islam vs. *Ma'naviyat*

Last but not least, *Ma'naviyat* is displayed as a way both to counter and to coopt Islam. Diara Ziyayeva and Martha Brill Olcott explain that Uzbekistan's rul-

15 Eric McGlinchey, "Regeneration or Degeneration? Youth Mobilization and the Future of Uzbek Politics," The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), June 2006, http://www.nbr.org/Downloads/pdfs/PSA/Uzk_Conf06_McGlinchey.pdf.

16 "Toshken Davlat Sharqshunoslik Institutining Ma'naviy-axloqiy Tarbiya va Ma'rifiy faoliyati," Tashkent, <http://tashgiv.uz/manaviy-marifiy-ishlar/>.

ing elite tried to recast Islam as an ideology for the new government, using the slogan “Our (national) Islam.” Though they used this notion to promote an overarching national identity and create their own official, national Islam (linked to *O‘zbekchilik*), officials seek to control any activities related to Islam, especially in the sphere of education.

Official Islam is totally under the control of state structures, particularly the security services (SNB). Eight madrasahs, the Islamic University, and the Tashkent Islamic Institute educate all the country’s religious officials. Most of them cooperate with the SNB and the Committee for Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan. Between 10 and 15 students can be educated abroad in Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, and then only after recommendations from the Committee and the SNB. *Ma’naviyat asoslari* is a compulsory subject in religious institutions. Each imam undergoes a short course of study of Islam Karimov’s works, the state policy against extremism, and the spiritual legacy of Uzbekistan.

In its own way, official Islam supports and provides legitimacy to the ideology of *Ma’naviyat*. It, too, encourages obedience to the regime, conservative values, and suppression of the opposition. Both official Islam and *Ma’naviyat* state that their main goal is the preservation of the country’s sovereignty, and the two are equally anti-Western. While administrative structures diffuse *Ma’naviyat* through secular schools and universities, imams and muftis do the same through Islamic educational institutes, *madrasah*, and *hujrah*.

Today, however, Islamic conservatism, with its Internet preachers, seems to be rapidly supplanting the agenda of *Ma’naviyat*. Such popular Internet bloggers or preachers as Abror Mukhtor Aliy, Mubashshir Ahmad and Adham Atadionov (Abu Muslim) use their popular pages and sites (Islam.uz, Kuran.uz) to preach a conservative agenda that refers explicitly to traditional schools of Hanafism while avoiding *Ma’naviyat*. Many imams and religious authorities call for the government to create a religious education platform for young people and do not see *Ma’naviyat* as a viable substitute.

Moreover, official Islam and *Ma’naviyat* differ in their perspectives of many critical issues.

First, they dispute their respective roles in the educational sphere. The Muslim clergy calls for studying the foundations of religion in secular schools and reducing the age young people must be

before they can receive religious education (today, it is 21). For example, Shermurod Togay, imam of the Dumbirobod mosque in Tashkent, proposes a two-stage educational process. In his opinion, schoolchildren should receive spiritual education by first studying the basics of Islam, the Koran and some Sufi poets, and only then progress to the secular component. The imam’s supporters think that it is a mistake for religious education to be strictly prohibited in state schools. Secular conservatives strongly disagree with this policy and call for banning religion from the educational sphere, thus preserving Soviet secularism.

The second dispute relates to the issue of polygamy, which is spreading rapidly. Officially, the Muslim clergy fully supports the government’s policy of fighting against polygamy, but *de facto* many claim that polygamy could solve the problem of Uzbek young women going abroad, whether into marriage or prostitution. Secular conservatives strenuously oppose polygamy, again due to perceptions of women rights inherited from the Soviet era.

Third, Islamic authorities favor a discussion between imams and young people who want to marry, in order to confirm their suitability and readiness for family life. Secular conservatives refuse to accept this, as it would give religious figures some authority over family life.

Conclusion

Ma’naviyat’s future seems bleak following the death of Islam Karimov and the rise to power of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The latter has criticized the ideology on several occasions, calling for the de-ideologization of the educational sphere, increased openness to the world, and modernization. He seems to be interested in raising a new generation of civil servants with good technocratic skills, but the issue of ideological obedience to the regime will remain an important one. Moreover, the equilibrium to be found between reformist tendencies and the security services, which want to maintain the country as it was under Karimov, remains uncertain for all actors, and could shape the future of *Ma’naviyat* and youth regimentation.

Yet change is already on the way: wearing a hijab now seems to be accepted, and state television channels have begun to debate whether or not polygamy should be introduced to the country. Public discussions display less anti-Western tones and place

greater stress on internal issues, including the need for the country to improve itself and move forward. Universities and lyceums have progressively suspended their teaching of *Ma’naviyat va Ma’rifat*. Students at the three main universities in Tashkent—the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, the Tashkent University of Economics, and the Tashkent University of Oriental Studies—whom I interviewed noted that while they cited Karimov’s books, their professors stated that, “there is no need to live in the past forever, and always use the words of Karimov everywhere.”

It is therefore possible to envision the transformation of Uzbekistan along the lines of South Korea or Taiwan during the 1980s: that is, balancing authoritarian practices with economic development and the rising prosperity of citizens, and the structuring of an “enlightened,” modernizing national ideology. Yet the disappearance of *Ma’naviyat* means that secular conservatism is on its way to vanishing. It will probably be replaced by Islamic teaching and values, which could create new societal tensions about the level of Islamization supported by different segments of the population.

Chapter 8.

Overcoming a Taboo: Normalizing Sexuality Education in Kazakhstan

Karlygash Kabatova¹ (2017)

Introduction

On October 6, 2017, five days before the International Day of the Girl Child, yet another abandoned baby girl was found on the streets of Kazakhstan's biggest city—Almaty.² In recent years, reports about newborns left on roadsides, in trash bins, and even in public toilets have become commonplace. Typically, these stories involve teenagers or young adults who became parents too early.

A nationwide survey shows that “64.6 percent of 15–19-year-olds first had sex during their school years, and 13.6 percent before they turned 15.”³ Over 10,000 teenage girls give birth in Kazakhstan each year.⁴ In 2016 alone, 4,254 babies were born to fifteen- and sixteen-year-old girls.⁵ These figures include only the registered cases, and do not even take into account unregistered births or abortions.

The problem can no longer be ignored. Kazakhstani youths are in serious need of education about sexuality and reproduction. A lack of literacy in this domain not only results in abandoned children, but also poses threats to the lives and health of teenage mothers, increases the rate of sexually

transmitted infections (STIs) among youth, leads to early marriages, and limits the economic prospects of teenage parents. Even if a young couple keeps the baby and gets married, both parents dramatically curtail their opportunities for a good education and their professional prospects. A teenage mother suffers the most—she is the one who cares for the child and can rarely go back to her studies. Sexuality education could help address these issues. Moreover, it promotes gender equality, thereby contributing to the overall sustainability of society.

The initial idea of this study was to analyze how, in the absence of formal sexuality education, young women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan create informal platforms on social media to support and educate each other about sexual and reproductive health. However, a closer investigation revealed that, unlike their Kyrgyzstani counterparts, Kazakhstani women rarely discuss their intimate problems online. I therefore decided to focus on the alternative sources of sexuality education available to Kazakhstani youth. My hypothesis is that the internet is the primary source of such information. If so, how can formal institutions mimic the youth-friendly features of inter-

1 Karlygash Kabatova is a researcher currently interested in how society development and sexuality education interrelate. Together with a colleague, she is completing a study on the emergence of sexuality education in the Kazakhstani educational system. Karlygash is a member of the Astana-based PaperLab Research Group, and her recent work experience includes organizing open expert discussions at PaperLab, student recruitment for the University of Central Asia, and data analysis for the Norwegian Helsinki Committee's human rights project. Karlygash holds a Master of Arts degree in Politics and Security (Central Asia) from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. She is a graduate of the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan's Public Policy Initiative Fellowship Program for young researchers and the Bolashak Scholarship Program.

2 “V Almaty v kustakh nashli novorozhdennoogo mladentsa,” *Zakon.kz*, October 6, 2017, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.zakon.kz/4881835-almatinka-brosila-novorozhdennoogo.html>.

3 S. Tanirbergenov and G. Abuova, “Situational Analysis: Reproductive Health of the Population in Kazakhstan (2008-2014),” United Nations Fund for Population Activities, p. 54.

4 “10,000 Teen Girls Have Children Every Year in Kazakhstan,” *TengriNews*, July 20, 2012, accessed September 27, 2017, <https://en.tengrinews.kz/health/10000-teen-girls-have-children-every-year-in-Kazakhstan-11443/>.

5 “Assiia Khairullina: Pogovorite s dochkoi po dusham,” *Time.kz*, November 22, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017, <http://www.time.kz/blogs/hocu-skazat/2017/11/22/assija-hajrullina-pogovorite-s-dochkoi-po-dusham>.

net sources in their efforts to advance sexual and reproductive literacy? How can civil society contribute to raising awareness? To verify my hypothesis, I conducted an anonymous survey of Kazakhstani youth. Based on my findings, I developed recommendations for stakeholders to improve youth access to sexuality education.

Most developed countries include sexuality education in their school curricula. In Kazakhstan, sexuality education is not part of formal education, nor has the government taken any meaningful steps toward including it.⁶ Certain cultural, social, and political factors reinforce each other, resulting in policies that are not adequate to meet youths' needs. Multiple state programs on the nation's strategic development touch upon many important issues, but fail to pay proper attention to the sexual and reproductive health of young generations—the human capital of the country.

In the first part of this paper, I look at the background of the issue: the political, legal, and cultural context, and major initiatives undertaken by the state and international organizations relating to youths' access to sexuality education and associated healthcare services. In the second part, I analyze the findings of my anonymous survey and touch upon how other countries in the region deal with youth sexual activity. This is followed by conclusions and policy recommendations.

The Context

Political and Legal Background

A number of state programs and laws in Kazakhstan concern youth health. None of them, however, pays enough attention to sexual and reproductive health, nor stipulates any detailed actions regarding it. Back in 2001, the Concept of Moral and Sexual Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan was adopted, with the goal of implementing an effective policy in the sphere of youth reproductive and sexual health. The document acknowledged the major issues, which still exist today: growing rates of underage pregnancy and STIs, lack of awareness about maintaining sexual health, and, consequently, adults' lack of capacity to educate youth. The Concept called for age-appropriate education involving parents, state authorities,

and non-governmental stakeholders. Yet no specific actions followed.

The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Children's Rights, adopted in 2002, encouraged the development of a sexuality education course, but this was never acted upon. The 2004 Law on Reproductive Rights of Citizens and Guarantees of Their Implementation stipulated youths' reproductive rights, including sexuality education. The Law was scrapped in 2009 with no replacement. National healthcare development programs "Salamatty Kazakhstan 2011–2015" and "Densaulyk 2016–2020" both raised the issues of teenage pregnancies and youths' sexual illiteracy. However, these programs did not go on to offer concrete strategies to address the problems: the former only mentioned STI prevention in the context of the penitentiary system, while the latter introduced a new notion—"development of reproductive culture"—but confined this to adults, simply recommending that youths become more active in sports.

Neither the Concept of the State Youth Policy Up to 2020 (from 2013) nor the Law on the State Youth Policy (from 2015) pays significant attention to the importance of youth sexual and reproductive literacy. The only document that potentially lays the basis for creation of sexuality education and its inclusion in the education system is the Concept of Family and Gender Policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan Up to 2030, adopted in December 2016. The Concept deserves credit for highlighting the importance of sexuality education in establishing gender equality.

Local governments sometimes prove to be more decisive in promoting access to sexuality education for young people. For instance, the local government of the Eastern Kazakhstan oblast supported the United Nations Fund for Population Activities in Kazakhstan (UNFPA) in implementing a pilot sexuality education course called "Valeology" in colleges (i.e. vocational schools), where students are 15–19 years old. Valeology has now successfully been launched in the colleges of two other oblasts. The completed pilot project demonstrated that, despite the concerns of many, when provided with sexuality education rooted in the local cultural context, young people tend to postpone becoming sexually active rather than develop greater interest in sex. The initiative received great support from both students and

⁶ Karlygash Kabatova and Sergey Marinin, "Polovoe prosveshchenie v sisteme shko'lnogo obrazovaniia Respubliki Kazakhstan: Uchit' nelzia, molchat'?" (2017).

their parents, many of whom “had no idea” how to discuss the topic with their teenage children.⁷

As the first project of this kind—and created from scratch—Valeology does have some flaws. Most of the role-playing focuses on teaching girls to navigate around the dangerous behavior of boys and men. While this is a useful skill, such an approach victimizes girls while simultaneously making them responsible for how males treat them. Moreover, it presupposes that boys are never pressured by girls or other boys. Instead, the course book could include scripts to help both girls and boys learn how to act under peer pressure; it has room for improvement.

With rare exceptions, Kazakhstan’s legislative body and executive authorities have been unable and/or unwilling to advance any genuine agenda on youth sexual and reproductive literacy. The reasons for this are numerous, but a major structural factor is a relatively conservative cultural environment.

Cultural Background

Once in a while, the need for sexuality education is raised in the Parliament and other governmental structures. The initiators are promptly silenced by supporters of traditional views who argue that: (1) sexuality education can corrupt the “innocent” minds of teenagers and trigger their interest in sex; and (2) sexuality has never been part of social discourse in Kazakh culture.

When the need for sexuality education is brought up, opponents of the idea argue that it is up to parents to educate their children. The issue, though, is that the “sex talk” is taboo within families, too. Typical Kazakh parents are not comfortable discussing sex with their children. Another valid concern is whether all parents are conversant enough in sexual and reproductive health matters to educate their children about them. According to Asel Shanazarova, an Almaty-based specialist who counsels adults and children on sexual literacy, parents are very fearful of having to discuss sex with their children.⁸ Almost never do parents initiate the “hard talk” because they

think it is time for children to learn about sex; typically, it happens because the child starts asking questions and becomes interested in her or his own body. Parents then seek a specialist to prepare them for the big talk. Those consultations reveal that for most parents, it is extremely hard even to name reproductive organs without using metaphors. This is how embarrassed they are about discussing sex. In other cases, they prefer to have the consultant talk to the child and not deal with the issue themselves thereafter.

On the whole, parents think they need to have the conversation only once, and they consider that such a conversation is appropriate after a child turns 12. However, this might be too late for a first discussion of sex. During a consultation with a group of 10–12-year-olds, Asel Shanazarova noted, “the children laughed when they were told that their parents thought they didn’t know anything about sex.”⁹

This example is from the largest and most advanced city in Kazakhstan and includes only Russian-speaking families, who are more exposed to discussions on sexual health. But the majority of teenage pregnancies happen in southern Kazakhstan—the most densely populated region, inhabited primarily by ethnic Kazakhs¹⁰ and Uzbeks,¹¹ who supposedly keep to traditional family values more than do people in more urban or Russified regions.

While society is in denial of teenage sex, UNFPA’s surveys show that 37 percent of youth in rural areas and 26 percent of youth in urban areas are sexually active at the age of fifteen.¹² Kazakh-speaking youths are at a disadvantage compared to Russian-speakers because no credible, impartial information about ways to maintain sexual and reproductive health is available in Kazakh. Prior to the launch of Valeology in colleges, UNFPA tested college students in two cities in eastern Kazakhstan: Oskemen (the regional administrative center), where the prevailing language is Russian, and Semey, where the Kazakh language is dominant. The initial level of awareness about sexual health issues was higher among Russian-speakers.¹³

7 Raimbek Sissemliyev, personal interview with the author, April 13, 2017 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

8 Asel Shanazarova, personal interview with the author, November 20, 2017 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

9 Ibid.

10 “Kak izmenilas’ etnicheskaya karta Kazahstana za 25 let,” *Vlast.kz*, October 17, 2016, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://vlast.kz/obshestvo/19747-kak-izmenilas-etnicheskaya-karta-kazahstana-za-25-let.html>.

11 Ramziya Yunusova, “Kak zhivetsya uzbekam v Kazahstane?” *Central Asia Monitor*, February 20, 2015, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://camonitor.kz/15295-kak-zhivetsya-uzbekam-v-kazahstane.html>

12 Galina Grebennikova, personal interview with the author, April 15, 2017 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

13 Raimbek Sissemliyev, personal interview with the author, April 13, 2017 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

The situation where predominantly Kazakh-speaking rural youth is highly sexually active¹⁴ but has no access to sexuality education is compounded by the culture of *uyat*. In the Kazakh language, *uyat* means “shame.” It is *uyat* for unmarried women to get pregnant, but it is also *uyat* to talk or ask about sex. The essence of the very complicated and changing notion of *uyat* was grasped by a human rights activist, Saule Mektepbayeva, who said, “In our society, *uyat* is not killing a baby but having a baby while unmarried. This is because our system of *uyat* is still constructed in medieval categories, when life was not an absolute and could be compensated for with a certain amount of cattle.”¹⁵ This combination of language and cultural factors likely results in a higher teenage pregnancy rate in rural areas of southern Kazakhstan.

Gender Beliefs

Shaming discourses directed toward girls and women are quite strong and seem to have a major influence on current policies. In case of a teenage pregnancy, the full weight of responsibility falls on the girl, who is blamed for being promiscuous, not a “proper” Kazakh girl, and badly brought-up by her parents. Examples of typical opinions in the comments section of reports about abandoned newborns include: “Girls and women should be punished so they learn to be responsible”;¹⁶ “If a girl dressed properly... would boys look at her?”;¹⁷ “Girls are to be put under strict control... There is no other way! Moms, don’t sleep... puberty is the most dangerous age!”¹⁸

Aside from demonstrating paternalistic attitudes toward females and considering them solely responsible for rearing children, the commenters overlook the fact that it takes two to make a child. This is the result of what Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll call “hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender.”¹⁹ Men and boys should have equal responsibili-

ty, yet the majority of women actively support those beliefs about gender. As such, “gender inequality is recreated through everyday social relations.”²⁰

Gender stereotypes are not only supported and circulated by ordinary citizens, but sometimes also inform local governments’ initiatives dealing with the spread of STIs and unwanted pregnancies. On October 24, 2017, the *akimat* of Astana City (i.e. the mayor’s office), together with the Office of Youth Policy of Astana, held a lecture at Nazarbayev University entitled “Moral Upbringing of Ladies.” The audience did not take the lecture well, as the speakers tried to convince the attendees that “[t]he main value of a woman of Kazakhstan is to bring her children up morally,” and if men commit sexual or domestic violence, it is the fault of women, who raised violent sons.²¹

Nazarbayev University is arguably the best in the country, with high academic standards inspired by Western experience and students mastering critical thinking. However, this lecture is just one of a series that will be put on there. Moreover, the government-supported lecturers will probably visit many other institutions, where young people might internalize their rather misogynistic ideas. As Rose Grace Grose, Shelly Grabe, and Danielle Kohfeldt emphasize, youths’ sexual identities form in accordance with “the context of gender-role stereotypes and sexual scripts youths receive from individuals and institutions within their culture.”²²

Non-governmental and international organizations try to deal with gender-based discrimination and conduct awareness campaigns for women and girls. However, this one-sided approach is somewhat counter-productive, as it leaves men and boys out of the process of learning. Researchers find a positive correlation between youth access to sexuality education, “more progressive attitudes toward girls and

14 “V Iuzhnom Kazakhstane kazhdyy god beremeniut 900 shkol’nits,” *Nur.kz*, May 18, 2017, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://www.nur.kz/1122500-v-yuzhnom-kazakhstane-kazhdyy-god-beremen.html>.

15 Saule Mektepbayeva, “Uyat—eto pozhat’ ruku cheloveku, iesli znaete, chto on domashnii tiran,” *TengriNews*, November 18, 2016, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://tengrinews.kz/article/413/> (translation from Russian to English by author).

16 “Vybroshivshei mladentsa v musorku studentke iz Almaty grozit do trekh let tyur’mu,” *Nur.kz*, May 18, 2017, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.nur.kz/1436987-vybroshivshey-v-musorku-mladenca-stude.html> (translation from Russian to English by the author).

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll, “Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations,” *Gender & Society* 18, no. 4 (August 1, 2004): 510, doi:10.1177/0891243204265269.

20 *Ibid.*, 512.

21 “Nravstvennoe’ vospitanie devushek/’Moral Upbringing of Ladies,” YouTube video, 52:35, posted by “itsallapretend,” October 24, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5O_fj3yVkw (translation from Russian to English by the author).

22 Rose Grace Grose, Shelly Grabe, and Danielle Kohfeldt, “Sexual Education, Gender Ideology, and Youth Sexual Empowerment,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 51, no. 7 (2013): 742-53. doi:10.1080/00224499.2013.809511.

women,” and “less agreement with hegemonic masculinity ideology.”²³ Therefore, this research posits that providing youths of both sexes with access to comprehensive sexuality education will not only improve their sexual and reproductive health, but also (in the long term) promote gender equality.

Overall, Kazakhstani society gravitates toward abstinence-based discourse, condemning sexual relationships before marriage. According to both experts²⁴ and ordinary citizens,²⁵ this sometimes leads to situations where drugstores refuse to sell contraception to teenagers. It is convenient to consider teenagers too young to have sex, since there is then no need to worry about those who do: they disobey societal norms and therefore deserve all the negative consequences that befall them. However, “the vast majority of rigorous empirical investigations fail to support abstinence-only programs’ ability to reduce unplanned pregnancy and STI contraction or to increase knowledge and accuracy of safer-sex practices.”²⁶

Youth-(Un)Friendly Centers and Clinics

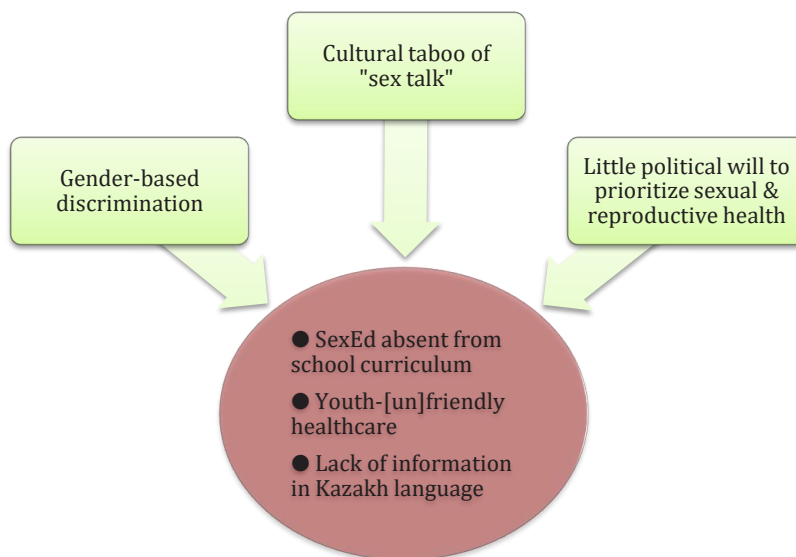
Sexual and reproductive illiteracy is not a temporary state, characteristic of young people only. Sexually

uneducated adolescents tend to turn into sexually uneducated adults. That is why Kazakhstanis are often not aware of STIs they have contracted or other sexual health issues they have. As a result, “around 16 percent of married couples suffer from infertility by the time they are ready to have children.”²⁷ The government sees the problem of deteriorating sexual and reproductive health mainly from the medical point of view—but attempts to address the problem through healthcare alone have not proved to be very successful.

Since 2001, a network of Youth Health Centers has been developing in Kazakhstan. There are currently 17 centers in major cities, as well as dozens of smaller clinics all over the country. The idea behind these so-called youth-friendly institutions is to provide various kinds of healthcare services, including those related to sexual life, to young people, based on principles of accessibility and anonymity. On paper, they function very well: statistically, they have “helped” thousands of young people. However, the original mission of the centers has been sidelined over time, becoming little more than a formality.

According to experts, “the level [of qualification] of specialists at youth-friendly clinics is extremely

Figure 1. Factors Contributing to the Sexual and Reproductive Illiteracy of Kazakhstani Youth



Source: Based on author’s research

23 Ibid., 750.

24 Galina Grebennikova, personal interview with the author, April 15, 2017 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

25 Janna Akhmetova, Facebook post, November 2, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/janna.akhmetova.9/posts/1797511486949239>.

26 Grose, Grabe, and Kohfeldt, “Sexual Education,” 743.

27 Resolution of National Debate “Respublikanskoe soveshanie “Puti vnedreniia nravstvenno-polovogo vospitaniia v Kazakhstane dlia povysheniia osvedomlennosti podrostkov i molodykh liudei 15-19 let po voprosam reproduktivnogo zdoroviia,” Astana, November 20, 2015 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

low,” while “the standards that were developed for youth-friendly clinics are not maintained.”²⁸ Due to limited financial, infrastructural and human resources, the centers and clinics fail to provide quality services. There are no specialists qualified to deal with sensitive teenage issues; the principles of privacy and anonymity are broken; and centers do not have separate entrances as they are supposed to. The result is a loss of trust on the part of teenagers.

Another problem is that, according to Kazakhstani law, a person can receive medical services without being accompanied by a parent only from the age of 18. This is a considerable obstacle for sexually active teenagers in seeking competent medical help. It is astonishing that at 14 a person can be prosecuted, at 16 he or she can get married, but to seek medical help independently a person has to be 18 years old.

What Is the Youths’ Experience?

Survey Analysis

To get a first-hand picture of how youths navigate their sexual and reproductive health, in October–November 2017 I conducted an anonymous survey among young Kazakhstanis. The questionnaire contained 18 questions: 5 demographic questions and 13 multiple-choice questions with the option to leave comments. Fifty-seven respondents aged 15 to 30 participated in the survey. The majority of the respondents were university students or recent graduates from across the country. Twenty-three participants filled out the questionnaire in Kazakh, thirty-four in Russian. Gender-wise, 61 percent of respondents who preferred the Kazakh language were females and 39 percent were males, whereas the group which preferred the Russian language included an equal number of females and males.²⁹ It is worth mentioning that the majority (15 out of 23) of the Kazakh-language respondents grew up in the south of Kazakhstan, while the Russian-language respondents represented all parts of the country, but primarily Almaty and Astana.

The key questions that the survey was designed to answer are:

- At what age do youth gain interest in information about sex and what sources do they use initially?
- What sources do they use now and why?
- What sources would they prefer if they had a choice?
- In what language is the information available?
- Are relevant healthcare services accessible to youth?
- Do youths consider sexual and reproductive literacy equally important for men and women?

The table below demonstrates how different or similar the responses of the Kazakh and Russian groups were. The sample does not claim to be representative of the whole youth population, but it does offer insight into the typical opinions and experiences of Kazakhstani youth.

Both groups of respondents say that it is easy to find information on sexual and reproductive health on the internet, but only if the search is in Russian, or even in English. This is indicative of the inferior position of Kazakh-speakers in terms of access to information in the language they understand the best. In the southern regions of the country, where strict adherence to traditional values dominates society, adolescents are sexually active but do not know how to safeguard their sexual and reproductive health: firstly, because there are no sources in the Kazakh language; and secondly, because they are ashamed to ask for advice. One respondent commented: “There are no materials in the Kazakh language. I don’t know how to protect myself from diseases and this is not taught at school.”³⁰

Youths reported that they would seek sexual and reproductive medical services if the need arose. However, many respondents in both groups would prefer to go to private clinics if they could afford it, as they do not trust the qualifications and professionalism of specialists in state and student clinics. As for the youth-friendly clinics, respondents did not seem to know about them at all. The Kazakh questionnaire also revealed that young women feel embarrassed about using—or even looking for—such services.

28 Raimbek Sissemaliyev, personal interview with the author, April 13, 2017 (translation from Russian to English by the author).

29 In the rest of this chapter, respondents who filled out the questionnaire in Kazakh are referred to as the “Kazakh group;” those who preferred Russian are called the “Russian group.”

30 Anonymous survey designed by the author, completed October 26, 2017.

Table 1. Kazakh- and Russian-Speaking Youths' Experience Accessing Information and Services on Sexual and Reproductive Health

	Kazakh Group	Russian Group
Searched information on sex for the first time at	11 years old	12 years old
Initially received information on sex from	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends • Internet • School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet • School • Friends
Sources used now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet • Private clinics • Friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet • Private clinics • Friends/Family
Why internet?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-embarrassing environment • Quick reply • Anonymity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick reply • Learn peers' experience • Anonymity
Who should educate youth on sexual and reproductive health?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents • School • University and other educational institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents/School • University and other educational institutions • Student clinics
In what language is information more available?	Russian	
Importance of sexual and reproductive literacy for both sexes	83 percent of respondents agreed on importance of awareness for both sexes; 17 percent (3 males, 1 female) disagreed with the statement.	100 percent of respondents agreed that it is important to for both men and women to be literate in sexual and reproductive health issues.

Source: Based on author's research

One of the Kazakh-speaking respondents suggested that when it comes to sexuality education,

“despite our wishes, schools, universities, parents will not give the right result. Children will feel discomfort in front of parents. Schoolteachers cannot respond to requests properly and children may think that their questions are stupid and feel shy about asking them.”³¹

When asked whose role it is to bring awareness to youth, 74 percent of Kazakh-speaking respondents said parents. However, only one of those 23 individuals actually received initial information from a parent. In both groups, parents were rarely the ones who addressed youths' first questions about sex. Later in life, too, youths rarely turn to parents for advice. The fear of embarrassment or *uyat* causes situations where both parents and children avoid discussing the highly sensitive topic of sex. Avoiding embarrassment is also at the root of young Kazakh-speaking women's reluctance to seek professional medical services.

Thus, the internet remains the prime source of information for the vast majority of respondents. For both the Kazakh- and the Russian-speaking groups, the top three reasons to prefer the internet included “quick replies to requests” and “anonymity.” However, a non-embarrassing experience ranked first for the Kazakh group.

Though the internet is the most popular means of getting information, only four people out of 34 in the Russian group questioned the accuracy of information found in web sources. Meanwhile, only one person in the Kazakh group showed concern about this and expressed the need for web sources with verified information in the Kazakh language. This level of trust in online sources is somewhat disturbing, especially considering that half the respondents in both groups encountered some form of pornography while searching for information.

International and Regional Experience

The problem of youth sexual and reproductive illiteracy is not unique to Kazakhstan. Both international (Estonia, Germany, Sweden, etc.) and local³² experience shows that comprehensive sexuality education, incorporated into the school curriculum, empowers teenagers to make informed decisions and encourages them to postpone sexual activity. Owing to this

31 Anonymous survey designed by the author, completed October 28, 2017.

32 The pilot project on sexuality education of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities in Kazakhstan named “Valeology.”

approach, “teenage pregnancies in Germany have dropped by half within the last 10 years, from 15,000 in 2004 to 7,500 in 2013.”³³

In Russia—the largest neighboring country, which has shaped Kazakhstan’s education system and probably had the most substantial cultural influence overall—the problem of sexual illiteracy is also quite acute. Sexuality is not covered by the school curriculum and the approach to youth sexuality is conservative. With a million abortions annually (one of the highest rates in Europe) and a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic, Russia sees widespread myths about sex and contraception.³⁴ Traditionalism and religiosity are on the rise and discussing sex is taboo in one-third of Russian families. Recent political trends contribute to a strong backlash against Western culture and resistance to revision of gender roles. In general, Russian society is opposed to educating youth about sexuality, despite various initiatives and even political and financial support by the government several years ago.³⁵ However, civil society and activists keep pushing the issue. A great example is a project to produce a sexuality education textbook for youth. The author is a popular sex blogger who is crowdfunding the book, which will be reviewed and edited by experts in sexual and reproductive health.³⁶

Turkey is regarded by Kazakhstan as a “big brother” in the Turkic world, and it makes sense for the Kazakhstani authorities to look at Turkey’s experience. Turkey is a Muslim-majority country, where a large segment of the population is inclined toward

conservative attitudes and traditional gender roles. Social discourses on sex mirror those of many other conservative societies: the topic is taboo. Sexuality education is not included in the formal curriculum because “families worry about the risk of premature sexual experience if their children are provided with sex education.”³⁷ The argument for not educating girls about sex is very similar to *uyat*, the Kazakhstani culture of shaming: “female virginity before marriage is, in many cases, tied to the concept of family honor,”³⁸ and if a girl is not going to have sex before marriage, “it [sexuality education] is not relevant to school.”³⁹

Despite—and perhaps because of—these social norms, Turkey seems to face the classic issues of sexual and reproductive illiteracy among its young population: high rates of teenage pregnancy,⁴⁰ damage to girls’ health in the long term, increasing levels of STI infection, etc. Youth from less well-off families and those residing in rural areas are more at risk due to their limited access to internet sources of information on sexual health.⁴¹ On a more positive note, since 2012 sexuality education has gradually been introduced to higher education institutions.⁴²

Looking at Central Asia is somewhat discouraging. Though not at their peaks since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, teenage pregnancy rates remain rather high. In the fall of 2017, female high school students in the Samarkand oblast of Uzbekistan were obliged to go through medical checks to confirm their virginity.⁴³ In this way, the authorities intended “to prevent suicides among young

33 Laura Brockschmidt and Angelika Hessling, “Sexuality Education in Germany: An Effective Intervention to Support the Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) of People Across the Lifespan,” BZGA.de, 2015, accessed November 7, 2017, http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/292203/Sexuality-education-in-Germany.pdf?ua=1.

34 “Seks-blogger Tatyana Nikonova o polovom vospitanii,” *Wonderzine*, February 5, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017, <http://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/sex/224047-sex-ed>.

35 Yuliya Dudkina, “Vmesto polovogo vospitaniia—polovoi razvrat: Pochemu v Rossii net seksual’nogo prosvescheniia v shkolakh. Reportazh ‘Meduzy,’” *Meduza*. September 1, 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/09/01/vmesto-polovogo-vospitaniya-polovoy-razvrat>.

36 Tatyana Nikonova, “Kak sobrat’ million za nedeliu: kratkii uchebnik kraudfandinga,” *Afisha*, August 17, 2017, accessed November 27, 2017, https://daily.afisha.ru/relationship/6502-kak-sobrat-million-za-nedelyu-kratkii-uchebnik-kraudfandinga/?utm_source=fb&utm_medium=socialsharing&utm_campaign=kak-sobrat-million-za-nedelyu-kratkii-uchebnik-kraudfandinga.

37 Alper Çuhadaroglu, “The Effects of Sex Education on Psychological Counselling Students in Turkey,” *Sex Education* 17, no. 2 (March 30, 2016): 209–19. doi:10.1080/14681811.2016.1164132.

38 Justin Vela, “Turkey: Sex Education Remains Taboo Topic,” *EurasiaNet.org*, September 7, 2012, accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65884>.

39 Ibid.

40 Linnea Celik, “Is Turkey Ready for Holistic Sex Education? Possibilities for Design, Application, and Implementation in Contemporary Turkey” (BA thesis, Amsterdam University College, June 11, 2014), accessed November 29, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/15445974/Is_Turkey_Ready_for_Holistic_Sex_Education_Possibilities_for_Design_Application_and_Implementation_in_Contemporary_Turkey.

41 Vela, “Turkey: Sex Education.”

42 Ibid.

43 Daniil Khashkovsky, “Uzbekistan: Devushek proveriaiut na devstvennost’ s tseliu predotvrascheniia suitsida,” *Kloop.kg*, November 22, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2017/11/22/uzbekistan-devushek-proveryayut-na-devstvennost-s-tseliyu-predotvrashheniya-suitsida/>.

girls who, with a loss of virginity or with pregnancy, would decide to commit suicide to avoid shame.”⁴⁴ In Tajikistan, it is standard practice for brides to get gynecological checks before their weddings to prove their virginity.⁴⁵ Otherwise, they might be rejected by the groom’s family. Turkmenistan does not share much information with the outside world. Nonetheless, according to Aynabat Yaylymova, the founder and an administrator of a website that provides advice on healthcare in the Turkmen language (www.saglyk.info), reproductive and sexual illiteracy is quite an issue in a very strict, traditional society, since this means that bringing up sexuality in conversations is not acceptable.⁴⁶

Kyrgyzstan is sadly known for its obsolete but still widespread practice of “bride kidnapping,” essentially kidnapping a young woman or girl, at times as young as fifteen, with the goal of marriage or rape. Often, “the groom will rape his kidnapped bride to prevent her from returning to her family due to shame.”⁴⁷ However, a positive initiative recently took place in the country: in November 2017, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) opened a youth online portal, www.teens.kg. This Russian-language platform hosts various materials for adolescents on sexuality, relationships, health, and other issues that concern them. This resource should play a very important role in raising awareness and promoting youth sexual literacy.

Conclusions

Implementation of youth sexuality education has always been an ambivalent, complex issue, as is the problem that it seeks to tackle. Sexual and reproductive health is the cornerstone of a sustainable society. Like many other developing countries, Kazakhstan is taking time to realize the urgency of tackling the population’s sexual and reproductive illiteracy.

Whether adults admit it or not, youths start having sex in their early teen years. Youth sexual and

reproductive illiteracy leads to many social problems: teenage pregnancies and abortions, abandoned newborns, early marriages, etc. Despite Kazakhstan’s aspirations to enter the top 30 most developed countries of the world, unlike most developed countries, it has not implemented sexuality education as part of the formal school curriculum, nor has it taken consistent steps toward such a measure.

Instead, the society tries to regulate sexuality using abstinence-only discourse and the institution of shaming, which international experience (supported by scholarly works) has proved to be ineffective in addressing the problems mentioned above. Opponents of youth sexuality education hold parents responsible for making their children aware of sexual and reproductive issues. The problem is that discussions about sex between parents and children are not part of social norms, and most parents are not competent to deliver the necessary information. Meanwhile, comprehensive sexuality education that covers a variety of topics—including human development, relationships, decision-making, etc.—is effective at improving youths’ sexual and reproductive health. Moreover, it also advances gender equality.

In the anonymous survey, Kazakhstani youth—even those who were not yet sexually active—expressed an interest in increased sexual and reproductive literacy, which they deem equally important for both males and females. In the absence of formal sexuality education, the internet has become a major source of information for youths. Internet resources are easily accessible and provide replies to specific questions promptly and in non-embarrassing anonymous environments. The downsides are that online platforms do not always provide reliable information, there is a lack of local Kazakhstani sources, and information in the Kazakh language is non-existent.

The situation was summed up by a 17-year-old female survey respondent, who said of the accessibility of information on sexual and reproductive health to youth: “This type of information is not widely and easily accessible, because this topic is taboo. If you do not intentionally search for the information, I

44 Ibid.

45 Anora Sarkorova, “V Tadjikistane vrachi proveriyat zhnschin na devstvennost’—BBC Russkaia sluzhba,” *BBC News*, December 19, 2014, accessed November 29, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2014/12/141218_tajikistan_women_virginity.

46 Aynabat Yaylymova, personal interview with the author, November 21, 2017.

47 Lin Taylor, “One in Five Girls and Women Kidnapped for Marriage in Kyrgyzstan: Study,” *Reuters*, August 1, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-women-bride-kidnapping/one-in-five-girls-and-women-kidnapped-for-marriage-in-kyrgyzstan-study-idUSKBN1AH5GI>.

noticed that no one would explain about health and protection. Adults look down upon it and pretend that it [the problem] doesn't exist."⁴⁸

Recommendations

The bottom-line recommendation of this research is to make comprehensive sexuality education for youth legally required and introduce it into the formal education system in Kazakhstan. Sexuality educators could be trained through the Bolashak scholarship program. Aside from considerable financial investment, the introduction of sexuality education will require consistent collaboration between (and the dedication of) the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Healthcare, international organizations, and civil society. While this is a long, challenging process, smaller steps can be taken to prepare the ground. These steps are outlined in the recommendations below.

- For the state and healthcare authorities:
- Enforce the standards of youth-friendly clinics more strictly
- Train medical personnel on the importance of patient confidentiality

- Reduce the age of informed consent for medical services for youth from 18 to 16
- Open accounts on social media to be more accessible by youths

For social activists and non-governmental organizations:

- Create local online platforms on youth sexual education based on the principles of accessibility, positivity, trust, and a scientific approach. These should be in Russian, Kazakh, and potentially other languages (e.g. Uzbek).
- Conduct awareness campaigns for parents, religious communities and society more broadly about sexual and reproductive literacy
- Make contraceptives more accessible to youth; monitor drugstores and ensure that they not decline to sell contraceptives to people under 18
- Establish a free hotline on sexual and reproductive health issues. Besides educating people, it will help collect demographic data (age, region, gaps in knowledge, social status, etc.) that will inform the policies of educational and healthcare authorities going forward.

48 Anonymous survey designed by the author, completed October 23, 2017. (Translation from Russian to English by the author. Original punctuation is preserved.)

PART III. SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITIES AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

Chapter 9. Income Inequality in Kyrgyzstan: The Redistributive Effect of Social Benefits

Savia Hasanova¹ (2017)

This paper gives an overview of income inequality in Kyrgyzstan. An analysis of the national development strategies suggests that the issue of income inequality has not been popular among policymakers. An analysis of social assistance transfers provides evidence that the current social assistance policy cannot be effective in reducing inequality in income distribution. I argue that a redistribution of social benefits is essential and can become one of the first steps toward alleviating income inequalities in Kyrgyzstan.

Background

Income inequality has become one of the biggest concerns of human and economic development over the past few years. Recent global findings suggest that despite some declining trends in income inequality, levels remain unacceptably high.² Reasonable arguments are offered in favor of a certain level of income inequality, since it creates incentives for economic development.³ However, this does not hold true for poor and developing countries with high poverty

rates, lack of human capital, and weak institutions. In fact, empirical evidence shows that high levels of inequality are more likely to harm growth in developing than in developed countries.⁴

Furthermore, a high share of accumulated income concentrates political and decision-making power in the hands of a few, leads to a suboptimal use of human resources, and causes investment-reducing political and economic instability. Like weak markets, weak governments and poor public policy are likely to exacerbate the effects of inequality (of income, assets, education and so on) on growth.⁵

Income inequality increases the power and importance of social hierarchy. As a result, a long list of problems is more common in societies with larger income differences.⁶ This includes high social tensions, a large, persistent informal sector, widespread regional divides, and gaps in access to education and healthcare.⁷ In societies that are more equal, people are much more likely to trust each other, measures of social capital suggest greater community involvement, and homicide rates are consistently lower.

1 Savia Hasanova is an economic expert at The Investment Round Table, a Public Association in Kyrgyzstan. She has worked on various research projects related to human development, particularly of vulnerable groups. Her recent experience involves drafting a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report on human development and trade in Kyrgyzstan, including issues of sustainable economic development. She holds an MS degree in economics and management science from Humboldt University in Berlin.

2 *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016: Taking on Inequality* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2016).

3 First, inequality affords incentives for individuals to work hard, innovate, and undertake risky but potentially productive investment projects. This results in increased output and productivity, and therefore higher average incomes and growth rates. Inequality thus acts as a prime booster for entrepreneurship development. Second, inequality is essential because it reflects different levels of effort and talent among people. Third, some concentration of income encourages growth through a higher rate of saving and more investment.

4 Nancy Birdsall, "Income Distribution: Effects on Growth and Development," in *International Handbook of Development Economics*, ed. Amitava Krishna Dutt and Jaime Ros, vol. 2 (Cheltenham UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2008); Robert J. Barro, "Inequality and Growth in a Panel of Countries," *Journal of Economic Growth* 5, no. 1 (2000): 5–32. Barro showed that there is some evidence inequality retards growth in poor countries but encourages growth in richer places. Growth tends to fall with greater inequality when per capita GDP is below around US\$2,000 (1985 US\$).

5 Birdsall, "Income Distribution."

6 Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2010).

7 *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011).

Finally, one of the important reasons for caring about inequality, especially in developing countries, is that it leads to inequality of opportunities for future generations.⁸ If families have vastly different economic resources, some children will begin life with an unfair disadvantage. This deepens the poverty gap, so that people stuck in poverty require even greater efforts from public policy to overcome these conditions.

Box 1. Measures of Income Inequality

There are many measures of income inequality. All are based on income distribution within different income groups of the population. Income inequality metrics usually estimate shares of income accumulated by a certain share of population, e.g. 10 percent (decile) or 20 percent (quintile). None of the measures are perfect; each has its pros and cons, so the choice depends on the research purpose.

The Lorenz curve is a graphical representation of the distribution of income or of wealth. It is often used to represent income distribution: it shows a percentage of households and what percentage of the total income they have. The Gini coefficient is defined mathematically based on the Lorenz curve. It takes values from 0 (perfect equality), to 1 (or 100 percent, which expresses maximal inequality in income distribution).

The 10:10 or 20:20 ratios compare how much richer the top 10 percent (or 20 percent) of the population is compared to the bottom 10 percent (or 20 percent). The Palma ratio is defined as the ratio of the richest 10 percent of the population's share of gross national income divided by the poorest 40 percent's share.

The National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (NSC KR) uses the Gini coefficient as a national income inequality measure. It also provides estimates of income shares accumulated by deciles, top and bottom quintiles, and estimates 10:10 ratio.

In this paper, I use data from the Household Budget Survey (HBS), conducted by the NSC on an annual basis. The HBS data is drawn from a representative sample of more than 5000 households. The NSC KR aggregates information from HBS and publishes data on households' income structure divided by deciles. The HBS has some shortcomings. For example, income data for the richest 10 percent are not very reliable, given the fact that many rich people refuse to participate in the survey or withhold true information about their income. However, the HBS data represent an average cut and show the distribution of average income components. This allows us to get an average picture and grasp some real trends in income distribution. Today it is the only data available to assess income inequality in the country.

All of the above expressed concerns are applicable to the situation in Kyrgyzstan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, dramatic economic transformations caused a rise in the inequality of income distribution that lasted until the early 2000s. After that, there was a significant reduction in income inequality, with the Gini coefficient declining nearly 20 percent. Then, starting in 2008, the gap between rich and poor began to steadily widen, with the result that in 2013 Kyrgyzstan reached its peak of income inequality (see Table 1).

Table 1. Kyrgyzstan's Income Inequality Profile

	2000	2008	2013	2014	2015
Gini coefficient, %	45	36	46	43	41
Palma ratio*	2.4	1.4	2.6	2.4	1.6
Share of income of 10% poorest, %	1.7	2.7	1.6	2.1	2.2
Share of income of 10% richest, %	33.1	26.3	34	37	26.5
Ratio of incomes of 10% richest to 10% poorest, %	-	-	21.4	17.2	11.8

* Author's own estimations.

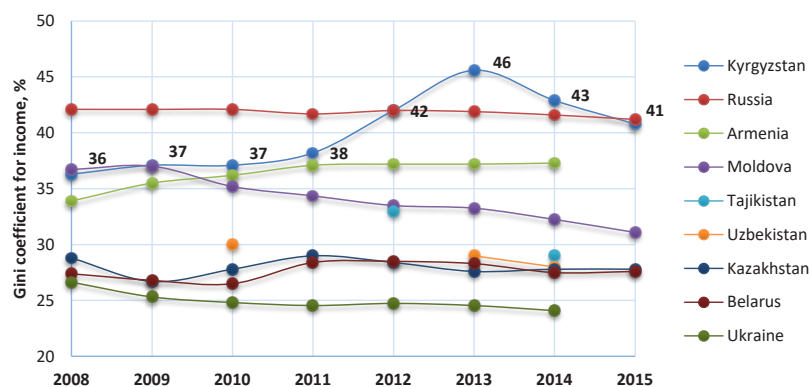
Source: National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

If we look more closely at income inequality in Kyrgyzstan, we can see that the situation is indeed tough. The dynamics is not stable: the Gini coefficient fluctuates around 40 percent and the Palma ratio is around two. Shares of accumulated income of the poorest and the richest population segments differ significantly. Yet, we can see some improvements in the Gini coefficient, with a decline from 45.6 percent in 2013 to 40.8 percent in 2015. However, this reduction is not associated with an increase in income shares of the poor population. The income is redistributed among the richer income groups, resulting in overall decline of Gini. Meanwhile, the share of income accumulated by the poorest 10 percent of population is still around 2 percent.

As a result, today Kyrgyzstan has the highest income inequality among the Eurasian Economic Union countries and nearly the highest among the CIS countries. Figure 1 represents dynamics of the Gini coefficient for selected CIS countries for which data are available. It shows that, while other countries

⁸ Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016.

Figure 1. Dynamics of the Gini Coefficient: Selected CIS Countries



Source: Countries' national statistics offices

had relatively constant or declining trends in the Gini coefficient, Kyrgyzstan's was growing. Despite a decline in Gini over the past two years, income inequality in Kyrgyzstan remains at a considerable level.

The issue of income inequality is rarely discussed in Kyrgyzstan: there is not much literature or research on the effects of income inequality in the country. With that, the problem of income inequality is a crosscutting issue, which affects not only monetary wealth, but also the extent to which people are deprived of the goods, services, and opportunities to live long and healthy lives. For example, the multidimensional poverty index⁹ shows that 13.9 percent of the population lives in multidimensional poverty and has two or more deprivations in health, education, infrastructure access, and monetary assets. It is also important to mention social inequality, along with increasing tensions that lead to greater probabilities of social and political protests and violent actions. Kyrgyzstan has already had two power shifts or "revolutions" in the recent past, accompanied by violent conflicts involving the poorer population in the southern regions.

The negative effects and implications of income inequality would be mitigated if Kyrgyzstan pursued a sustainable policy promoting inclusivity of growth and more equal income distribution. However, as my analysis suggests, the issue of income inequality in Kyrgyzstan has not been popular among policy makers. As a result, two main factors—an absence of national priority on the issues of income inequality, and a lack of inclusive growth—have undermined progress in poverty reduction and sustained income inequality.

Factors Causing Persistent Income Inequality in Kyrgyzstan

National Policy

A number of national development strategies have been implemented in Kyrgyzstan since the early 2000s, which determine the development path of the country for specific periods. They set national goals and priorities and act as the basis for sectoral policies. An analysis of these documents shows, unfortunately, that the issue of income inequality has tended to disappear from national goals and priorities (see Table 2).

Table 2. References to Income Inequality and Poverty in National Strategies

	CDF: NSPR 2003– 2005	CDS 2007– 2010	CDS 2009– 2011	NSSD 2013– 2017
Goal on poverty reduction	✓	✓	✗	✗
Policy priority	✓	✓	✓	✗
Poverty indicators	✓	✓	✗	✓
Goal on income inequality	✓	✗	✗	✗
Policy priority	✓	✗	✗	✗
Inequality indicators	✓	✗	✗	✗

Notes: CDF – Complex Development Framework; NSPR – National Strategy for Poverty Reduction; CDF – Country's Development Strategy; NSPR – National Strategy for Sustainable Development.

Source: Author's own analysis

⁹ This index is calculated by the National Statistics Committee for purposes of the National Human Development Report for publication in 2016.

In 2001, Kyrgyzstan's Parliament approved the Complex Development Framework (CDF), an innovative long-term development program. In 2002, within the CDF, the Government developed the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction for 2003–2005 (NSPR). The NSPR was a powerful document aimed at addressing severe social problems, including extreme poverty and inequality. One of the NSPR's proclaimed goals was taking on inequality in income distribution. It explicitly stated: “understanding that economic growth is necessary but not enough to eradicate poverty, and it should go along with more equal income distribution, the Government will undertake a number of measures to prevent further increase in income inequality.”¹⁰ With that, the NSPR provided a set of national indicators to monitor its progress, including the national Gini coefficient, the level of extreme poverty, and the poverty gap. Although the NSPR revealed several shortcomings, it did lead Kyrgyzstan to achieve some progress in reducing poverty and sharing prosperity.

The CDF was followed by the Country's Development Strategy 2007–2010 (CDS-1). This Strategy was the first national document to include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a base for the country's development. The Strategy therefore tried to address a variety of social and economic issues, including economic prosperity, healthcare and education development, gender equality, environmental problems and others. Unfortunately, the problem of income inequality no longer played a leading role. However, the term “inequality” was mentioned in the Strategy in the context of corruption, healthcare, and education. This was a good thing, since the priorities of the Government would include poverty reduction through equal access to education, healthcare, and social protection.

The next national strategy—The Country's Development Strategy 2009–2011 (CDS-2)—continued on the path of CDS-1. Although some of the social indicators were still there, inequality and poverty were barely noticeable as development priorities.

In 2013, the President signed the first National Strategy for Sustainable Development for 2013–2017 (NSSD). This strategy is the first step to introducing the principles of sustainable development in the coun-

try. It is a complex document accompanied by the Program of Transition to Sustainable Development, a set of action plans and lists of monitoring matrices. The NSSD has two parts. The first part describes a basis for sustainable development via five main pillars, including solving social tasks and problems. The second part sets priorities for economic development, i.e., sustainable economic growth. Unfortunately, neither the section on social problems nor the sections on economic priorities underline the importance of poverty and income inequality reduction. The NSSD itself does not contain any references to the income inequality problem.

One of the big distinctive features of the NSSD is that it has a separate monitoring matrix for human development indicators. This is a big improvement compared to the previous national strategies. Unfortunately, this matrix still lacks a significant number of necessary targets, including income inequality targets and a breakdown of poverty indicators.

A lack of focus on poverty and income inequality is already projected on the results of NSSD implementation. We now have only a year left until the end of the NSSD, and the progress on poverty reduction is minimal. The monitoring matrix sets the poverty level equal to 25 percent at the end of 2017, but given the fact that in 2015 the poverty level increased to 32.7 percent, it is hard to imagine that the country will accomplish the stated indicator.

Lack of Inclusive Growth

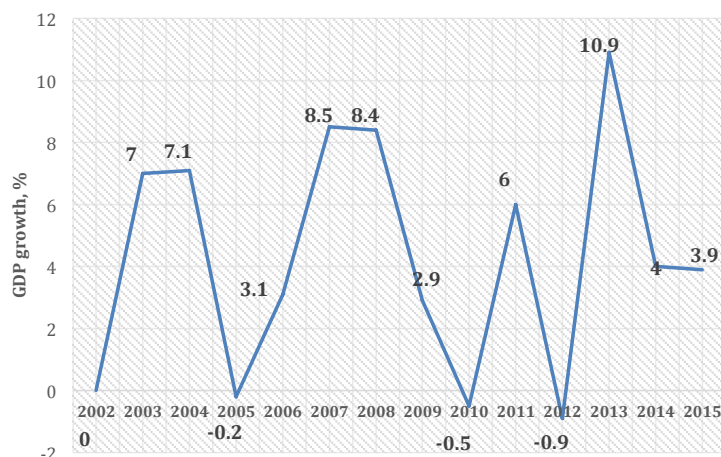
Economic growth and economic development as a whole are necessary, but—as will be discussed further—not sufficient for progress on reducing income inequality. Kyrgyzstan has not been able to achieve sustainable economic growth, having been undermined by various shocks. These shocks included violent power shifts (“revolutions”) and issues with the Kumtor gold mining company. In fact, since 2001 the country has shown zero or negative GDP growth rates (see Figure 2) four times.

Figure 2 clearly shows the reflection of the shocks in economic growth. Since the Kyrgyz economy significantly relies on Kumtor's operations,¹¹ serious technical problems affecting Kumtor in 2002 dropped

¹⁰ “National Strategy for Poverty Reduction for 2003–2005,” adopted in accordance with the Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 269, May 8, 2003.

¹¹ According to Kumtor's 2015 report, its share in GDP amounted to 6.8 percent; in total exports, 39.7 percent, <http://www.kumtor.kg/ru/kumtors-basic-operating-results-in-2015/>.

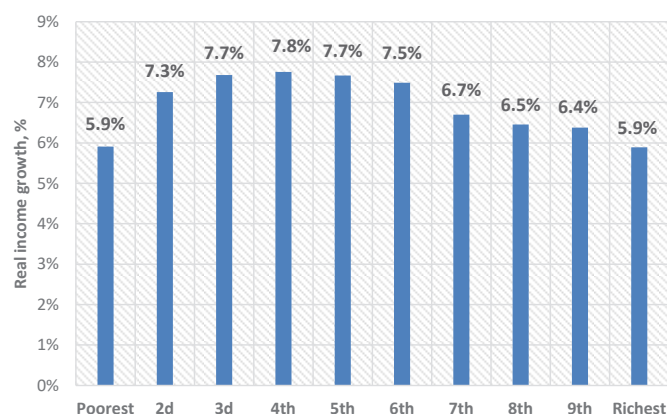
Figure 2. GDP Growth Rates (percentage)



Note: 2015 – preliminary data.

Source: National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic

Figure 3. Average Growth of Real Income by Deciles, 2004–2015



Source: Author's own calculations

the growth to zero. Political events in 2005 and 2010 gravely affected the investment climate and business environment, which led to a halt in many business operations and production activities. Finally, in 2012, again political and technical issues with Kumtor reversed the country's economic growth. On top of that, Kyrgyzstan's economy suffers from a number of substantial problems, including weak economic institutions, an inefficient business environment, and distorted markets.

While economic growth unquestionably plays a vital role in a country's development, it is also critical that special efforts are made to ensure that vulnerable segments of the population are able to participate in economic growth. If income inequality interacts with

poor policy, then whatever growth occurs is going to help the poor less, given the less equal distribution of income. Growth must be inclusive: that means that all economic participants have equitable opportunities and the benefits of economic growth are enjoyed by everyone. If there is a high level of income inequality, then growth must not only be inclusive, but it should benefit society's poorer groups. Income inequality will decline only when the income growth rates of less wealthy individuals are higher than those of wealthier.

In Kyrgyzstan, real GDP growth rates for the population in the bottom part of the income distribution are significantly lower than for the middle part.¹² This is expressed in the fact that the lowest deciles

¹² "Kyrgyzskaia Respublika: Otdel'nye voprosy," Report No. 16/56 (R), International Monetary Fund, February 2016, <https://www.imf.org/external/russian/pubs/ft/scr/2016/cr1656r.pdf>.

on average do not have higher growth of income (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows the annual average growth in real income of different income groups of the population for the past ten years. Not only is the average growth in the poorest decile among the lowest, it is the same as the growth in the three highest decile groups. The real income of the poorest population was increasing by 5.9 percent annually on average during 2004–2015, while in the second to seventh decile groups annual average growth reached nearly 8 percent. At the same time, the average growth of income in the richest income groups (eighth to tenth) was not much less and was equal to the same 5.9 percent. As a result, we see a relatively stable decreasing trend in poverty rates, but not in income inequality: on average, the poverty rate has been decreasing by 4 percent annually, but the Gini coefficient by only 0.2 percent.¹³

When an economy fails to provide substantial and equal gains to each category of the population, the role of social policy becomes salient. Social policy, if well designed, can be much more than a safety net: it can significantly contribute to productive development. Social welfare institutions reduce social tensions and enhance the legitimacy of the political system, thus providing a more stable environment for long-term growth. Redistribution policies via social transfers are a key tool to ensure that the benefits of growth are more broadly distributed and that the results need not be expected to undermine growth. But it is also important to promote equality of opportunity in access to and quality of education. Poor people spend most of their money on consumer products, and very little on human capital, e.g., education and healthcare. Social assistance therefore can bring more improvements to poor people's budgets and reallocate more resources toward savings and human capital investments.¹⁴ Here important questions arise: Can the social assistance system in Kyrgyzstan address the needs of the poor? Is it effectively designed to target the poor? Can the current system become an instrument to reduce income inequalities?

Current Social Policy

The system of social protection in Kyrgyzstan is multidirectional. As proclaimed by the government, the main tasks of social protection are “to support the most vulnerable categories of population, to facilitate economic activity of the working population and assist people in getting out of difficult living situations.”¹⁵ There are two main functions of the social protection system: 1) social security, and 2) social assistance. Social security includes pensions and other social insurance transfers and is excluded from this research. I focus on social assistance, since that is the system that is assumed to implement the tasks described earlier.

Social assistance encompasses a variety of transfers. It includes maternity benefits, state benefits, temporary disability benefits, unemployment benefits, funeral benefits, and so forth. In this context “benefit” means a cash transfer, whose amount and designation are defined in accordance with Kyrgyzstani law, to a population from the social assistance budget.

For example, the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 318 dated December, 29, 2009, “On the State Benefits,” distinguishes between two state benefits: 1) monthly social benefit (MSB), and 2) monthly benefits to poor families with children (MBPF).

The MSBs are paid to certain categories of children, persons with limited abilities, senior citizens, and so forth. The list of persons eligible for receiving MSBs is established in accordance with the Law. MBPFs are paid to families with income below the guaranteed minimum income. The guaranteed minimum income is established by the law and people can apply for the MBPF only if their average income per household member does not exceed it.

According to the data of the Ministry of Finance's “Open budget” portal in 2015, 7,397 billion soms (approximately US\$114.8 million¹⁶) were allocated from republican and local budgets to social assistance. The total budget of social assistance in 2015 constituted 5.5 percent of the budget's expenditures (see Table 3).

13 Author's own calculations based on data of the National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

14 My estimations suggest that on average people from the higher part of the income distribution tend to spend 2.3 times more on healthcare and education than people in the bottom part.

15 “Program of Development of Social Protection System in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2015–2017,” No. 85, approved by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic on February 27, 2015.

16 Average annual exchange rate in 2015 was 64.5 soms/1 US\$.

Table 3. Kyrgyzstan's Social Assistance Budget

	Thousands soms	Social assis- tance, percent	Total budget, percent
Total social assistance	7,397,035	100	5.5
<i>Out of which:</i>			
Monthly social benefits	2,401,479	32	1.8
Cash compensations	1,930,525	26	1.4
Monthly benefits to poor families	1,852,478	25	1.4
Maternity benefits	1,004,281	14	0.7
Other social assistance transfers	208,272	3	0.2

Source: Author's own calculations based on "Open Budget" data, Ministry of Finance

There are four main types of transfers that form the social assistance budget. Two of them—MSB and MBPF—were already mentioned. Maternity benefits are paid in forms of one-time birth benefits, pregnancy, and childcare benefits.

The cash compensations are a little bit tricky. These are the transfers paid to certain categories of citizens, e.g., rearward workers recognized to be invalids, families of perished military men, invalids of the Chernobyl APP accident, etc. The list of eligible categories and sizes of the benefits is established in accordance with Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 795 dated December 22, 2009, "On Payment of Cash Compensations Instead of Benefits." There are 25 categories of population eligible for receiving the compensation payment. A few words must be said about the origin of the term "compensation payments." This system is the inheritance of the USSR social protection system. Before 2010 there were various non-monetary privileges for certain categories of the population, expressed in a form of free train tickets, free medicine, preferential utility payments, etc. In order to raise the effectiveness of the social protection system, since January 1, 2010, the Kyrgyz Republic has monetized benefits. Instead of giving out the types of benefits—e.g., for public transport, for health services, for utility services—compensation payments are made.

Monthly social benefits constitute the largest share of the total assistance budget, amounting to up

to 32 percent. Meanwhile the cash compensations and monthly benefits to poor families take about 25 percent of the budget, and 14 percent of the social assistance budget goes to maternity benefits.

An overview of the system confirms the assumption that social assistance does not take into account a needs-based assessment and is not targeted to the poor. Among the benefits, only the MBPF is based on a certain income level. Aside from maternity benefits, it is unclear what income level the recipients of the other two types must have. The basis for receiving cash compensation is compliance with a list of categories, which are set and unchangeable. The categories are based solely on a person's status. Neither living standards nor income levels are taken into account. The MSBs are granted irrespective of the income level. Meanwhile, the sizes of cash compensations, independent of the region of residence, have been established from 1,000 to 7,000 soms per month. The MSB size is 2,500 soms. The average amount of the MBPF in 2014 was only 554 soms,¹⁷ and the number of recipients was 310,717, while the official number of poor people amounted to 1.8 million.

As a result, not only do rich people receive benefits, but the average amount of benefits received by the richest 10 percent is not much smaller compared to the 10 percent poorest. Figure 4 shows the average per capita benefits in the structure of incomes of the 10 percent richest and 10 percent poorest segments of the population.

Not surprisingly, the nominal amounts of benefits have been increasing. The monetization took place in 2010, and that resulted in a significant increase in average benefits for both the poor and the rich. However, the data show that the effect of monetization was more beneficial for rich people. In 2012 the average benefits of the 10 percent richest were even higher than the average benefits of the poor. In 2015 the average benefit amount received by the richest people was almost two-thirds of the benefit received by the poorest. At the same time, there is a certain portion of rich people receiving monthly benefits designated for poor families. The data show that during 2010–2015, on average, 1 to 6 soms of the total benefits received by the 10 percent richest population were constituted by the MBPF.¹⁸ This indicates a number of problems with the administration of so-

¹⁷ National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

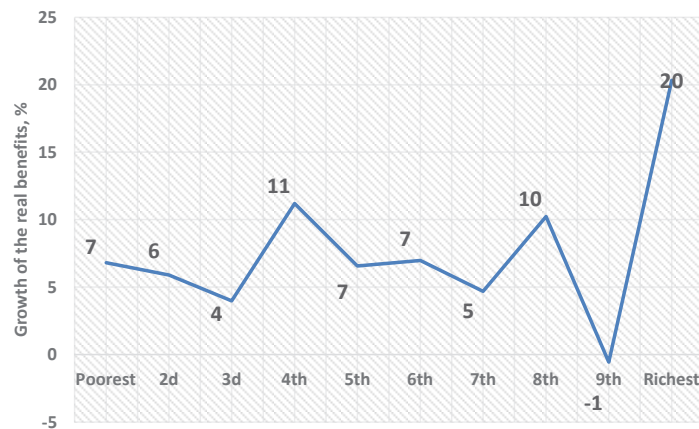
¹⁸ Based on the Household Budget Survey data, provided by the National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Figure 4. Average Amounts of Benefits per Capita Received by 10 Percent Richest and 10 Percent Poorest Income Groups (soms)



Source: National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

Figure 5. Average Growth of the Real Benefits Received by 10 Percent Income Groups, 2004–2015



Source: Author's own calculations

cial benefits, when even targeted assistance cannot be distributed efficiently.

Unfortunately, those are not the only adverse tendencies. The growth in real benefits has also changed, but not to the advantage of the poorest population (see Figure 5). One would think that given the nature of the social assistance, the growth of benefits would be higher at the bottom part of the income distribution. However, as shown in Figure 5 the benefits increase is uncorrelated with the income distribution and the highest decile has the highest growth.

A study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that the effect of cash transfers on income dispersion is greater than that of taxes.¹⁹ The results indicate that cash transfers reduce income inequality, as measured by

the fall in the concentration of market income before and after transfers, by nearly 20 percent. If we look at the specifics of the region, a policy brief from the International Labour Office (ILO) shows that the effect of transfers on reducing the Gini coefficient was the highest for Europe and the Central Asia region.²⁰

Evidence suggests that Kyrgyzstan's social assistance system fails to take the needs assessment into account or focus primarily on the poor. Meanwhile, the experience of many countries shows the positive effect of cash transfers on income inequality reduction. The World Bank report makes the case for "safety net" interventions, which are programs designed to provide regular support to poor and vulnerable people in cash or in-kind. These programs can offer assistance that is conditional or unconditional. Both

19 Isabelle Joumard, Mauro Pisu, and Debbie Bloch, "Tackling Income Inequality: The Role of Taxes and Transfers," *OECD Journal: Economic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012), http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eco_studies-2012-5k95xd6l65lt.

20 Malte Luebker, "The Impact of Taxes and Transfers on Inequality," *Travail Policy Brief* No. 4, International Labour Office, 2011, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_160436.pdf.

types of transfers can be effective, with unconditional often preferred in settings where administrative capacities and the provision of public services are weak.²¹ The World Bank report cites many successful stories of increased cash transfers and reduced income inequality, including the experiences of Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and many others.

The Redistributive Effect of Social Assistance Benefits

In order to understand the possible impact of social assistance transfers on income inequality in Kyrgyzstan, I conducted a simple statistical exercise. The idea of this exercise is to see how income distribution would change if the benefits were redistributed from higher deciles to lower ones. To do so I recalculated the average per capita income in each 10 percent income group by adding and subtracting the amount of benefits to and from the corresponding group. I imposed the assumption that benefits should be re-distributed from fifth and higher deciles to the poorest population.²² This assumption is based on the fact that the median income (50 percent cut-off or fifth decile) is considered a threshold for the middle class, and therefore does not represent poor population. In fact, the poverty rate in Kyrgyzstan is 33 percent and I allow a significant interval to ensure I do not include people close to the poverty line in the redistribution process.

Unfortunately, the available data do not allow me to distinguish between benefits received by higher deciles. However, as shown previously, the majority of social assistance transfers are in fact intended to target the poor and vulnerable population, except for maternity benefits. Therefore, the second assumption I impose is that, on average, 100 percent of state benefits are to be received by poor people only.

Using the data from 2000–2015 I therefore estimated the hypothetical income of each income group—from poorest to richest—to see what the income distribution would be now, if Kyrgyzstan had a social assistance policy that completely targeted the poor population.

Results

The first conclusion I obtain from the estimations is that the average income of the fifth and higher deciles does not change when the benefits are taken away. The average amount of benefits compared to the income level of rich households is very low, and therefore does not play a significant role in their income structure. By contrast, the average income of the poorest households increases notably. Table 4 shows the percentage increase (decrease) in average income after the benefits are redistributed.

Table 4. Percentage Change in Average Income after Redistribution (percent)

	Poor-est	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Rich-est
Change in average income	10.3	-0.7	-0.5	-0.4	-0.3	-0.2	-0.2

Source: Author's own calculations

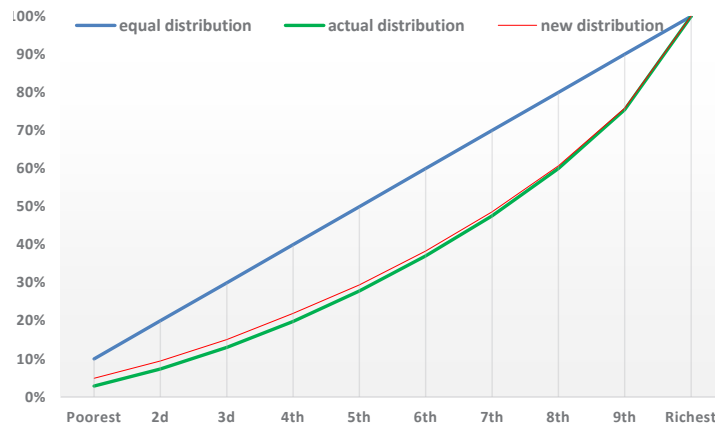
The average decrease in income of the fifth decile and higher does not exceed one percent. In fact, for the richest 20 percent of the population their income on average falls by 0.2 percent only. Meanwhile, the average increase in income of the poorest decile is over 10 percent with the redistribution. In reality, what does not matter for the rich does matter for the poor. New average incomes allow me to estimate the hypothetical shares of income by deciles. I therefore approximate the level of income inequality by showing the shares of income belonging to different income groups. Table 5 represents the actual and new distribution of income shares.

Given the small amounts of average benefits, the redistributive effect is not very high. However, the results indicate that the share of income accumulated by the poorest decile has almost doubled, with associated decreases in shares of higher deciles. The share of accumulated income of the poorest decile increased from 2.86 percent to 4.92 percent. Therefore, the income distribution has become more equal, as shown by the new Lorenz curve in Figure 6. The red line represents the new income distribution, which

²¹ *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2016*.

²² I have tested other assumptions, involving redistribution of benefits from the tenth decile only, from the ninth and tenth, and from eighth to tenth deciles. Unfortunately, the amounts of average benefits are very small, and therefore the effect is hard to see. It only becomes evident when benefits are distributed from the fifth decile and higher.

Figure 6. Redistributive Effect of Social Benefits: New Lorenz Curve



Source: Author's own calculations

now is closer to the perfect equality line, and more important, this effect is gained through the increase in income share accumulated by the poorest population.

Table 5. Accumulated Shares of Income by 10 Percent Income Groups before and after Redistribution (percent)

	1st	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
Actual distribution ²³	2.86	7.99	9.21	10.54	12.44	15.42	24.56
New distribution	4.92	7.56	8.89	10.23	12.15	15.14	24.12

Source: Author's own calculations

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

While poverty reduction has been included on the policy agenda in Kyrgyzstan, the issue of income inequality has received less focus. Not only is income inequality itself harmful to economic and human development of Kyrgyzstan, but it can also significantly limit progress on reducing poverty. Therefore, poverty reduction efforts should be accompanied by directed efforts to alleviate inequality in income distribution. Certainly, reducing income inequality requires a set of complex measures, including promoting inclusivity of economic growth, creating

better-functioning labor markets, and developing appropriate institutions. Yet, one of the possible short-term and feasible solutions for Kyrgyzstan could be reform of the social assistance system. Improvement of the targeting mechanisms of social benefits and focus on people at the bottom of the income distribution increase the accumulated share of income for the poorest and decreases inequality.

To achieve progress in income inequality reduction it is necessary to reintroduce goals and priorities into national development strategies. The current National Strategy for Sustainable Development ends in 2017. The government will have to develop a new strategy, which is a good occasion for assembling targets and goals on income inequality reduction. Once the national goals are introduced, the sectoral policies can be developed, including social assistance policy reforms.

Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan has committed to the achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goals.²⁴ In December 2015 the Coordination Committee on adaptation, realization, and monitoring of Sustainable Development Goals was established (Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 867 dated December 22, 2015). The Coordination Committee is responsible for adapting the global goals formulations and coordinating activities aimed at introducing global goals into strategic documents. One of the Sustainable Development Goals is to reduce inequalities within and among countries (SDG 10). The SDG 10 agenda includes

23 Estimated based on actual distribution of average income levels by 10 percent income groups.

24 See UNDP, <http://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/en/home/post-2015.html>.

achievement and sustainability of income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population and promotion of social and economic inclusion of all.²⁵

Within the framework of the Coordination Committee, it is necessary to establish a working

group of government officials and experts in the field to discuss the possibility of the social assistance system's reform as one of the instruments to achieve progress on SDG 10 and to reduce income inequality in Kyrgyzstan.

Annex 1. Economic and Income Inequality Indicators

Annex 1. Economic and Income Inequality Indicators	Shares of income, percent	10%	1.7	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.0	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.7	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.0	1.6	2.1	2.2	
		20%	2.9	3.1	3.3	3.4	3.4	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.2	4.1	3.9	3.9	3.7	3.3	2.8	3.1	3.6
		30%	4.0	4.2	4.3	4.5	4.4	4.2	4.4	4.3	5.2	5.0	5.0	4.8	4.3	3.8	4.8	4.7	
		40%	5.0	5.2	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.3	5.6	5.4	6.3	6.1	6.1	5.9	5.4	4.9	5.4	5.8	
		50%	6.3	6.4	6.7	6.8	6.9	6.5	7.0	6.6	7.5	7.3	7.3	7.1	6.8	6.2	6.3	6.5	
		60%	7.8	7.8	8.1	8.3	8.4	8.0	8.5	8.1	8.8	8.6	8.6	8.7	8.1	7.7	7.6	8.0	
		70%	9.7	9.6	10.0	10.1	10.4	9.9	10.6	10.0	10.5	10.5	10.5	10.2	9.9	9.6	9.1	10.9	
		80%	12.4	12.0	12.5	12.6	12.8	12.5	13.5	12.6	12.7	12.5	12.5	12.6	12.7	12.4	10.9	13.8	
		90%	17.0	16.1	16.7	16.6	16.8	16.9	18.8	16.7	15.9	16.2	16.2	16.4	16.6	17.1	13.7	18.0	
		100%	33.1	33.6	30.9	30.0	29.4	31.9	26.6	31.1	26.3	27.4	27.5	28.2	30.9	33.9	37.0	26.5	
	Palma ratio	2.4	2.3	2.1	1.9	1.9	2.2	1.8	2.1	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.7	2.1	2.6	2.4	1.6		
	10:10, times	19.5	17.8	15.8	14.4	14.8	17.5	14.4	16.1	9.7	11.0	11.1	12.0	15.8	21.4	17.2	11.8		
	Gini, percent	-	-	41.9	40.7	42.2	43.3	44.6	42.2	36.3	37.1	37.1	38.2	42.0	45.6	42.9	40.8		
	Poverty rate, percent	62.6	56.4	54.8	49.9	45.9	43.1	39.9	35.0	31.7	31.7	33.7	36.8	38.0	37.0	30.6	32.7		
	GDP growth, percent	5.4	5.3	0	7	7.1	-0.2	3.1	8.5	8.4	2.9	-0.5	6	-0.9	10.9	3.6	3.4		
		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015		

Source: National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

Annex 2. Average Total Income and Average Benefits by Deciles (soms)

		Poorest	2d	3d	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Richest
2000	income	120	173	217	264	312	376	450	553	731	1,279
	benefits	4	4	3	3	2	3	2	1	2	1
2001	income	163	271	359	452	557	675	830	1,041	1,392	2,903
	benefits	6	7	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	6
2002	income	187	314	417	523	640	781	957	1,202	1,606	2,966
	benefits	12	15	10	12	9	8	6	5	6	6
2003	income	220	298	358	427	505	594	743	901	1,127	1,896
	benefits	13	7	7	3	5	3	4	2	3	2
2004	income	207	343	428	516	597	694	826	1,006	1,322	2,333
	benefits	13	10	11	9	7	6	4	2	3	3
2005	income	260	402	526	633	755	895	1,058	1,276	1,672	3,225
	benefits	17	7	16	12	6	5	9	10	6	4
2006	income	280	440	562	671	787	917	1,090	1,344	1,774	3,267
	benefits	15	21	9	8	5	5	5	4	4	7
2007	income	420	612	756	887	1,027	1,193	1,409	1,718	2,157	3,987
	benefits	12	12	4	17	4	3	7	3	2	2

25 United Nations General Assembly, Seventieth Session: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on September 25, 2015, A/RES/70/1, distr. General October 21, 2015.

		Poorest	2d	3d	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Richest
2008	income	582	935	1,172	1,396	1,632	1,908	2,246	2,719	3,503	6,176
	benefits	12	7	5	6	5	3	4	4	3	3
2009	income	704	1,122	1,401	1,670	1,979	2,288	2,631	3,140	3,998	6,411
	benefits	21	12	10	10	7	4	8	2	4	3
2010	income	768	1,146	1,387	1,652	1,914	2,192	2,577	3,015	3,811	6,487
	benefits	38	23	17	12	11	11	8	15	11	19
2011	income	889	1,417	1,760	2,070	2,354	2,649	3,029	3,562	4,421	7,212
	benefits	36	18	26	21	16	8	6	11	22	14
2012	income	971	1,552	1,903	2,265	2,565	2,886	3,362	3,964	4,930	7,755
	benefits	28	17	24	36	4	9	8	16	14	33
2013	income	867	1,487	1,847	2,190	2,540	2,976	3,514	4,201	5,284	8,452
	benefits	44	31	24	22	30	24	14	13	11	8
2014	income	1,127	1,823	2,280	2,682	3,156	3,636	4,203	4,969	6,082	9,611
	benefits	33	50	38	28	28	20	21	12	12	16
2015	income	1,165	1,833	2,309	2,779	3,255	3,754	4,295	5,068	6,283	10,006
	benefits	74	39	30	32	29	18	17	15	8	46

Source: National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

Annex 3. Change in Average Income after Redistribution of Benefits by Deciles (percentage)

	10th	9th	8th	7th	6th	5th	1st
2000	-0.1	-0.3	-0.2	-0.5	-0.7	-0.5	9
2001	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3	-0.4	-0.5	-0.8	14
2002	-0.2	-0.4	-0.4	-0.6	-1.0	-1.4	21
2003	-0.1	-0.3	-0.2	-0.5	-0.5	-1.0	9
2004	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-0.5	-0.8	-1.2	12
2005	-0.1	-0.3	-0.8	-0.9	-0.6	-0.8	16
2006	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3	-0.5	-0.6	-0.7	11
2007	-0.1	-0.1	-0.2	-0.5	-0.3	-0.4	5
2008	-0.1	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3	4
2009	-0.1	-0.1	-0.1	-0.3	-0.2	-0.3	4
2010	-0.3	-0.3	-0.5	-0.3	-0.5	-0.6	10
2011	-0.2	-0.5	-0.3	-0.2	-0.3	-0.7	9
2012	-0.4	-0.3	-0.4	-0.2	-0.3	-0.2	9
2013	-0.1	-0.2	-0.3	-0.4	-0.8	-1.2	12
2014	-0.2	-0.2	-0.2	-0.5	-0.5	-0.9	10
2015	-0.5	-0.1	-0.3	-0.4	-0.5	-0.9	11

Source: Author's own calculations

Chapter 10.

Inequality in Secondary Education and Kazakhstan's Risk of Becoming a Fragmented Society

Daniyar Kussainov¹ (2017)

Introduction

Inequality in a seemingly prosperous Kazakhstan suddenly came into focus during the Zhanaozen riots in December 2011, which demonstrated that a gap between various social groups might mobilize the most disadvantaged stratum to engage in social protests. Indeed, Kazakhstan's imbalanced economy, which is dependent on oil and gas revenues, is facing many socio-economic, regional, and social disparities. Chief among these troubling social inequalities is education, since the population considers it the key to upward mobility. In 2015, the OECD educational report highlighted existing inequality in access to secondary education in Kazakhstan, as well as the growing gap between high achievers and underperforming students.²

Although many recent papers point to the growing importance of early education, in my paper I focus on secondary education, because it is at this stage that the knowledge accumulated in class becomes relevant to a student's future career. I am particularly interested in the "elitization" of secondary education, by which I mean the creation, in 2008, of a network of high-class secondary schools known as the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS). These schools were purportedly created as an experiment

to test the best practices before scaling them up by spreading them to ordinary schools. In my paper, however, I argue that these elite schools were in fact designed to reproduce social inequality rather than disperse best practices, and contributed to the institutionalization of the elitization of secondary education.

The first section of the paper provides an overview of the current situation, looking at state educational policy, NIS, and the tendency toward elitization in secondary education as a nationwide inequality issue. The next section is dedicated to the potential implications of the status quo. The third part is a case study centered around three representative cases, in order to elucidate the connection between the school a student attends and his or her further academic and career development. The cases are based on nine in-depth interviews with graduates of three different types of school: rural, urban, or "elite." To analyze the (unequal) distribution of financial and human resources between NIS and the rest of the country's schools, I also drew on interviews with nine secondary education experts, as well as official reports, state program documents, and available secondary sources. The paper concludes by recommending policy changes that would alleviate the current inequality in secondary education.

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² *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Kazakhstan 2015* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015).

Secondary Education Challenges in Kazakhstan

Education inequality is widely studied from a sociological perspective. There are several theories that can explain inequality in secondary education in Kazakhstan. However, in my opinion, the social reproduction theory is in the best position to comprehensively address these issues.³ Social reproduction theorists believe that schools are not institutions of equal opportunity, but mechanisms for preserving social inequalities. Children from the highest stratum of society get the best quality education, as well as better jobs than their counterparts from disadvantaged classes.⁴

In almost every country—not just Kazakhstan—there are special schools for gifted children. The purpose of creating such elite schools is, supposedly, to provide specific groups of children with a high-quality education. This becomes problematic when state education policy and the vast majority of state resources for education are concentrated in these schools, catering to the needs of a very limited number of pupils at the expense of the rest, as is the case in Kazakhstan.

Education is one of Kazakhstan's main public policy priorities. In all, the national and local budgets for education amounted to approximately USD\$5 billion in 2016,⁵ with secondary education the largest budget item. Between 2011 and 2015, state spending on education was equivalent to between 3.5 and 4 percent of GDP (2011–2015),⁶ a good figure for a post-Soviet country.

Several state programs emphasize the importance of education for the future of the country. In “Strategy-2050,” one of the country's leading strategic documents, which aims to put Kazakhstan on the list of the 30 most developed countries, the word “education” appears 38 times. By contrast, the word “healthcare” is used only 8 times. The State Program on Educational Development 2016–2019 (hereafter “Program”) focuses on improving the status of

schoolteachers, the transition to trilingual education (Kazakh, Russian, and English), and the dissemination of upgraded curricula. The Program mentions 18 issues to be resolved in secondary education, chief among them the gap between “the best” and “the worst” schools. Indeed, according to the results of the Unified National Testing, there is a 60 percent gap between the top-performing and underperforming schools.⁷ The National Plan “100 Concrete Steps,” a plan to implement five institutional reforms proposed by Nursultan Nazarbayev during his election campaign in 2015, also emphasized the importance of complying with the OECD standards in education. It proposes a gradual transition to a school system with 12 grades/years, along with English-language instruction for all subjects taught in high school and university. The transition to a 12-year schooling system was planned two years ago, but postponed due to financial constraints and the need for changes to curricula.⁸

Despite these efforts, results have not been forthcoming. Kazakhstan's state secondary schools fail to meet demand (especially in the more densely-populated South) and remain poorly equipped. There are 7,160 secondary schools operating in the country, with more than 2.9 million students. 44 percent of schools do not have grades/years. There are more than three times more schools in rural areas than in urban areas. However, the total number of students in urban areas exceeds that in rural areas. The quality of state schools varies. There are few good schools in big cities, but their classes are oversized (up to 40 students). Only 30.7 percent of schools have facilities for children with disabilities.

Moreover, Kazakhstan's booming economy has created demand for expensive secondary education. Private schools charge up to US\$30,000 per year in tuition. The Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, which were opened in 2008 as part of an initiative spearheaded by President Nazarbayev, sought to provide the same access to high-quality secondary education

3 Pierre Bourdieu, “The forms of capital,” in *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1986).

4 Paul E. Willis, *Learning to labour: how working class kids get working class jobs* (Farnborough, UK: Saxon House, 1977).

5 “Raskhody gosudarstvennogo biudzheta na obrazovanie,” ranking.kz, <http://ranking.kz/ru/a/reviews/rashody-gosudarstvennogo-byudzheta-na-obrazovanie-2016-god>.

6 http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nd-2016_po_itogam_2015_goda_kratkaya_versiya_rus.yaz._iac_zashchita.pdf.

7 “Kazakhstanskaia shkola na puti k standartam OESR,” Informatsionno-analiticheskii tsentr, <http://iac.kz/ru/events/kazakhstanskaya-shkola-na-puti-k-standartam-oesr>.

8 “Perekhod na 12-letnee obrazovanie v Kazakhstane otlozhen – Carinzhypov,” *Tengrinews.kz*, January 22, 2015, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/perekhod-12-letnee-obrazovanie-kazakhstane-otlojen-sarinjipov-268768/.

offered by the private schools to those who lacked financial resources. The NIS targeted the country as a whole—not only Almaty and Astana, where private schools are concentrated. There is at least one NIS in every regional capital in Kazakhstan. Most of the NIS accept students starting with 7th grade, with some of them accepting pupils from 1st grade onward.

The NIS as Drivers of Elitization

I argue that the creation of the NIS institutionalized the elitization of secondary education. My preliminary assessment, based on the fieldwork I conducted, allows for the identification of the following elitization features: 1) materials, technical equipment, and school finances; 2) the location of schools; 3) admission requirements; and 4) the exemption of NIS high school graduates from the requirement to sit the UNT exam (compulsory in all other schools).

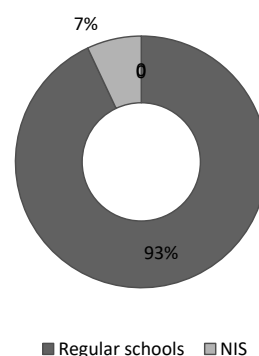
NIS do not position themselves as elite, or for a designated category of students. According to the school administration, the NIS are an experimental platform, designed to elucidate education best practices that can be scaled and implemented in ordinary schools.⁹ Yet the NIS are exacerbating, rather than addressing, the issue of inequality in secondary education.

For instance, in order to enroll in an NIS, students have to pass exams, which include math, Kazakh, Russian, English language, and an “ability test.” The level of English teaching in ordinary schools leaves much to be desired, especially in rural areas. In practice, therefore, this requirement excludes children from low-income households, as most of them cannot afford expensive textbooks and English instructors. Indeed, gaining good English language skills requires sufficient financial resources to allow for complementary education.

Children with more financial means have more opportunities to be better fitted for NIS than children from low-income families. This financial aspect has now been made public, as starting from 2016, several NIS are accepting students on a paid basis: US\$5,800 without accommodation, or US\$8,800 with it for Kazakhstan residents, and US\$6,900 or US\$10,600 respectively for non-residents.

Moreover, huge state resources were allocated to what was claimed to be scaling NIS' high education standards to regular schools. NIS accounted for almost 7 percent of the Ministry of Education and Science's budget in 2017. However, less than 14,000 students attend the 20 NIS across the country: that is, just 0.47 percent of the total number of pupils in Kazakhstan.

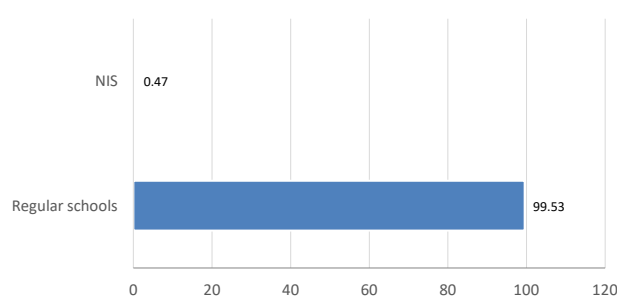
Figure 1. NIS Share of State Budget Expenditures (2017)



■ Regular schools ■ NIS

Source: *online.zakon.kz*

Figure 2. Number of Students Enrolled in NIS Compared to the Total Number of Secondary School Students in Kazakhstan (2016)



Source: *NIS annual report 2016, Committee on Statistics (Ministry of National Economy)*

Not only does NIS monopolize a significant share of the state budget for a very small number of pupils, but there is also a visible imbalance in terms of the origins of students. Very few of them come from rural areas and small towns: 2,667 (out of 13,824), i.e. less than 20 percent of all students. The low number of students from low-income families at NIS is caused by the rigid entrance requirements, in particular those relating to English language proficiency. This proves the hypothesis that the foreign language proficiency requirement automatically excludes these students.

⁹ Berikbol Dukejev and Daniyar Kussainov. Interview by Olga Mozhayeva. Astana, March 10, 2016.

Table 1. Categories of Students in NIS¹⁰

Indicator	Number of students
Children from single-parent families	2,907
Children from multiple-children families	1,612
Parents who are pensioners	383
Parents with disabilities	280
Children under guardianship	28
Children with disabilities	30
Children from rural areas and small towns	2,667

Source: NIS annual report 2016

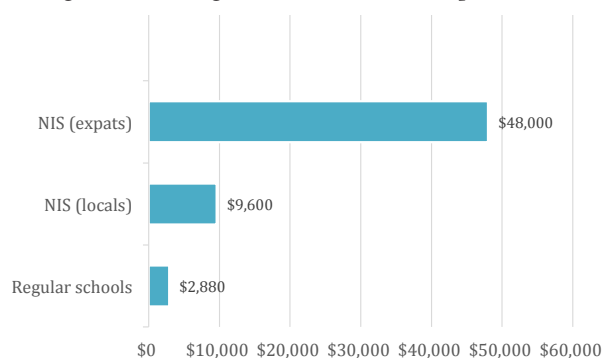
NIS students are also exempt from the UNT. Exemption from the UNT can be viewed from two perspectives: as discrimination in comparison with the graduates of ordinary schools and as confirmation of the inchoateness of the UNT as an assessment tool.

From the state’s perspective, all the abovementioned shortcomings of NIS (in terms of discrimination) are justified by the need for experimental schools in order to improve the overall level of secondary education nationwide. Yet even leaving discrimination to one side, there is still a question of socio-economic feasibility. Some experts have significant doubts about the feasibility of implementing the best NIS practices in urban schools, especially in rural areas:

It is not realistic to fully implement the NIS experience and best practices, especially now during the crisis in Kazakhstan. You have to invest comparable amounts of resources in all schools throughout Kazakhstan.¹¹

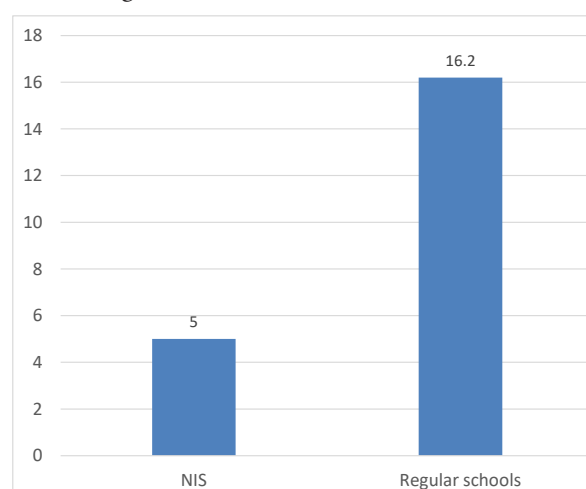
Successful transfer of the NIS curricula to ordinary schools would require not only financial resources, but also qualified teachers who are capable of realizing the best practices. NIS’ method of finding these teachers, however, is to cream off the best teachers and staff from other schools by offering them higher salaries and more opportunities for professional development. Instead of improving the quality of education in a replicable way, then, the NIS contribute to emptying ordinary schools of their best teachers.

Figure 3. Starting Teacher Salaries, US\$ p.a. (2013)



Source: World Bank; OECD; NIS Annual Report 2016

Figure 4. Student-Teacher Ratio (2015)



Source: World Bank; OECD; NIS Annual Report 2016

Another issue is hidden discrimination against ethnic minorities due to the requirement that students be proficient in three languages (Kazakh, Russian, and English). Indeed, the vast majority of the students in the NIS belong to a single ethnic group: Kazakhs. Kazakhs, being to some degree bilingual (in Kazakh and Russian), have an indirect advantage, as they need to learn only English. Representatives of other ethnic groups (mostly Russians) need to learn two new languages (Kazakh and English). This is a push factor for ethnic minorities to apply to universities in Russia. Principals and deputy principals of regular schools report that a growing number of students are enrolled in Russian universities even before graduating from school. They seek to receive a quality education in their mother tongue without being required to know other languages.

10 Annual report of the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools Autonomous Educational Organization, Part I, 2016, Astana.

11 Dr. Smagulova, KIMEP University professor.

Three Case Studies

Rural School Graduates

Rural school graduates typically live close to their school. They usually go to the regional capital, or any city with a larger population than their home village, to study. Graduates speak one language – either Kazakh or Russian, depending on the ethnic composition of their home village. After graduation from a rural school, they tend to start working immediately or attend vocational school, where they gain the technical skills needed for blue-collar jobs. Some of them start their own small businesses targeting their home village. Reasons why they did not study in university include lack of money and the need to provide financial support to their families. For that reason, most of these graduates focus on profitable small businesses and seek to gain financial freedom rather than new experiences (travel, education, different jobs, etc.).

Urban School Graduates

Urban graduates of regular schools are less homogeneous than their rural counterparts. Schools in prosperous districts are traditionally slightly better performing than those in depressed areas. Graduates of regular urban schools typically reside in either Astana or Almaty, where they graduated from one of the main national universities. They then work at entry-level white-collar jobs in national companies and speak Russian and/or Kazakh.

Graduates of ordinary urban schools, who attended these schools in the 1990s and early 2000s, overall performed better than their counterparts in the next decade. As the principal of one lyceum in Almaty described it:

They built Haileybury nearby (English private schools in Almaty and Astana) and rich parents transferred their children to that school. They built NIS and parents of the high-achievers transferred their children to that school. We, the lyceum, that used to be one of the best schools in Almaty, are left with underperforming students from low-income families.

School management admitted that they can forecast the career prospects of their graduates. A principal of a regular school in Shymkent, located near the railway station and bazaar, explains:

After many years working in schools, I have learned how to identify the potential of students and forecast

their career path. In the early stages of my career, the career opportunities and overall potential of our students were higher and more diversified. Today, our school graduates are prospective plumbers, carpenters, and general laborers for bazaars. Of course, there are some exceptions, but this is the overall tendency—we have become the school that prepares the working class, because of elite schools and intellectual segregation.

Elite School Graduates

Elite school graduates are considered to be high achievers, fluent in three languages. NIS, as well as the Murager, Daryn, and Bilim-Innivatsialyk lyceums (formerly the Kazakh-Turkish Lyceums) are the top-notch schools that come to mind. Elite school graduates live in Astana, Almaty, or abroad. They have extensive experience abroad, including attending international competitions, exchange programs, or just travelling. They have studied abroad for some period of time, usually at the Master's level. Most of them are white-collar workers in international organizations and companies, where they occupy mid-level positions.

There is a significant difference between elite school graduates and graduates of regular schools. Elite school graduates set themselves apart from the first minutes of interaction with them, due to their level of self-confidence and even the advanced vocabulary they use during conversation. A good level of foreign language proficiency is one of the key factors allowing them to deepen their knowledge and be quite successful in their careers. Among other factors is a capacity for critical thinking, which was gained during their school years.

To sum up, graduates of the same type of educational institution pursue almost the same career paths, achieve comparable levels of education, and tend to live in the same areas or social bubbles. There is almost no interaction between different groups of students, meaning that high achievers have friends from the same background. Schools therefore play the role of social and cultural segregator on the basis of academic performance.

Conclusion

Given the non-proportional distribution of financial resources between schools, the question of the efficiency of NIS arises. Do we need such expensive

experimental schools in every region? In light of the ongoing economic crisis in Kazakhstan, these kinds of experiments burden the state budget. Moreover, Kazakhstan's national universities are not so attractive to the best graduates of the NIS, who tend to look to foreign universities. Nazarbayev University is admitting some NIS graduates, but many pass SAT, IELTS, and other international tests, enabling them to target higher education abroad. Will the best students, educated on taxpayers' money and at the expense of other students, return home after studying abroad or contribute to "brain drain"?

Growing inequality in education has negative implications not only for specific groups of disadvantaged people, but also for society as a whole. Widening the gap between the well-educated and the uneducated will lead to a more fragmented society with high potential for social fallout and tension between various strata of the population. It is time for one of the richest countries in post-Soviet space to fight inequality in education with more relevant tools than the creation of elite schools that empty the national budget and create a parallel world for privileged children, with no guarantee of a domino effect that would improve the education of the majority of the population.

Recommendations

To mitigate the risks of a widening gap between various population groups, some fundamental steps must be taken by decision-makers and public at large. The main purpose of the paper is to initiate public discussion and start tackling this problem from the perspective of every citizen's right to quality education regardless of social origin, ethnicity, or gender. Taking into consideration the current political and economic situation in Kazakhstan, I propose the following set of recommendations to the relevant stakeholders.

To the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Education and Science:

- Initiate public discussion with the participation of civil society and parents before adopting any reforms in the field of education. Public support is very important here, not only during electoral campaigns; the sense

of ownership will aid in the successful implementation of the initiative. As of now, the population at large is experiencing fatigue and is not really enthusiastic about new reforms.

- Initiate amendments to education policy to make it more inclusive, in order to meet the needs of all groups of learners, with special attention to under-performing children. State policy should shift its focus from the best students to the children with below-average performance. The best pupils, instead, should enjoy academic freedom.
- Introduce academic mobility to improve cooperation between schools in different regions. The concentration of the most experienced teachers in one place should be avoided. Children from rural and distant areas have a right to be educated by the best teachers, regardless of where their schools are located.
- Improve state education policy regarding the inclusion of children of ethnic minorities, especially Russian-speakers. Provide free and high-quality Kazakh language courses to everyone.

To the NIS:

- Change the general direction of development of the NIS and reconsider admission requirements to make it more inclusive for children from disadvantaged groups. English language skills should not be an obstacle to talented and perspective students.
- Introduce a quota for children of various socio-economic backgrounds and/or give preferences to typically disadvantaged applicants. Children from urban areas have more opportunities for development by default.
- Introduce a mechanism that will attract graduates of foreign universities to return home for some period of time and keep them connected with Kazakhstan (through joint projects, for instance).
- Establish close long-term partnerships with low-ranking schools. This will aid in understanding the needs of these schools and making appropriate changes to curricula.
- Disclose financial reports and ensure transparency in all NIS expenditures. During fi-

nancial crises, such an unequal distribution of the budget funds between schools must be well-justified. Transparency is needed to objectively assess the activities of the NIS. In the long run, it will be useful for attracting investment (including from abroad) and developing a sustainable financial strategy.

To civil society and international organizations:

- Initiate public discussion and build a platform for constant dialogue between parents,

children, school management, and relevant state agencies.

- Develop a valid assessment tool for all completed and ongoing initiatives in the sphere of education.
- Include children from disadvantaged categories, including representatives of ethnic minorities, in new education projects.

Chapter 11.

Improving Governance in Kazakhstan's Mining Towns

Dinara Nurusheva¹ (2017)

Introduction

The future of single-industry towns has long been on the social agenda of European and North American countries. Profound changes to industrial production and the rapid shift to the tertiary (service) economy have presented challenges to the development of single-industry towns. In the former Soviet Union, these changes have been even more dramatic.² Soviet urbanization policy resulted in the emergence of single-industry towns built around extractive industries and agricultural raw materials.³ The Soviet state treated these towns as priorities, though investment in industry often outpaced improvements in urban services.⁴ Once the Soviet system collapsed—and with it the economic logic that had brought these towns into being, as well as the welfare system that had encouraged people to remain there—these towns became economic and social enclaves. Their markets, management, capital, and technology are typically far from the region where they are located, if not abroad.⁵

As one of the most industrialized post-Soviet states, Kazakhstan faces similar challenges. Of the

country's 87 urban settlements, 27 have the status of single-industry town, and they are home to 17 percent of the country's population.⁶ To different extents, these towns face specific challenges, such as a lack of economic diversification, difficulty retraining the local labor force, the need to reduce high dependency on commodities markets, and the desire to improve local living conditions. Addressing these challenges would require the kind of substantial resources only possessed by developed countries.⁷ In Kazakhstan, a first-of-its-kind national program introduced in 2012, "The Program for the Development of Single-Industry Towns," identified such towns as ones where at least 20 percent of the population is employed by core companies, and these companies are in decline or bankrupt. Even if these monotowns can now benefit from specific state-sponsored programs, the gap between plans and their implementation on the ground remains large.⁸

A top-down approach to public policy analysis prevails among scholars both within Kazakhstan and abroad.⁹ Here I take a different tack, discussing the case of Tekeli, the most promising single-town in-

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2 Anu Printsmann, "Public and Private Shaping of Soviet Mining City: Contested History?" *European Countryside* 2, no. 3 (2010): 132–50.

3 "Urbanization in Central Asia: Challenges, Issues and Prospects," UNESCAP, 2013, 12.

4 Henry W. Morton and Robert C. Stuart, eds., *The Contemporary Soviet City* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1984), 262.

5 Marcelo J. Borges and Susana B. Torres, *Company Towns: Labor, Space, and Power Relations across Time and Continents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 14.

6 "Programma razvitiia regionov do 2020 goda, Postanovlenie pravitel'stva Respubliki Kazakhstan № 728," 2014.

7 Andrei Starodubtsev, "Agency Matters: The Failure of Russian Regional Policy Reforms," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22, no. 4 (2014): 553–74.

8 Madina Junussova, "Planning Economic Development of City and Region: Strategic Assumptions of the State Versus Real Local Capacities," in *Proceedings of Planning Economic Development of City and Region, 52nd ISOCARP Congress 2016*, Durban, South Africa, 16.

9 Johannes Linn, "Urbanization, regional development, and decentralization," in *Kazakhstan 2050: Toward a Modern Society for All*, ed. Aizhan Aitzhanova et al. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press-Canada, 2014), 187–223.

dustry in the country. Through analysis of this case, I aim to suggest that similar approaches to the ones that have made Tekeli successful could be applied to other monotowns. During my fieldwork in Tekeli in November 2016 and January 2017, I conducted thirteen interviews with representatives of the public, private and nongovernmental sectors in the city, as well as in the regional capital, Taldykorgan. The interviews highlight local residents' main concerns about existing government efforts and illuminate how they wish to see challenges addressed.

In this paper, I tackle the question of which strategies could improve the quality of local governance in single-industry cities and therefore help secure their future. I argue that the key is to improve the human capacity of mid-level civil servants.

Figure 1. Tekeli, Located in Southeastern Kazakhstan



Source: Google Maps

Tekeli, a Representative Single-Industry City... on the Bright Side

Tekeli embodies the challenges single-industry towns have had to face since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is located 1,000 meters above sea level in the foothills of Jungarian Alatau in southeastern Kazakhstan, 285 kilometers from the former capital city, Almaty (see Figure 1). Its administrative territory also includes the nearby village of Rudnichnyi. Tekeli developed around a polymetallic deposit discovered in the 1930s by Soviet engineers. The shortage of lead, which was sorely needed on battlefields during the Second World War, spurred the construction of a lead-zinc plant. The decision to build a fac-

tory in the mountainous area accelerated the town's expansion, drawing engineers and other specialists from all over the Soviet Union to provide industrial and urban services. Later, deported Koreans and Chechens, as well as Japanese prisoners of war, settled in the town, contributing to the construction boom Tekeli experienced.¹⁰ The plant became a de facto local municipality. It was responsible for a substantial share of local jobs and services. Buildings owned by the company were not limited to industrial facilities; they also included elements of urban infrastructure, such as kindergartens, schools, hospitals, restaurants, and recreation centers.¹¹

According to the 1959 census, more than 30,000 people lived in Tekeli. The growth of the town resulted in an increase in the number of enterprises.¹² Tekeli was an attractive place to live and work during the Soviet period. People considered themselves lucky if they could get a job there through the Soviet labor distribution system, as access to the town was restricted and under the direct control of the central government. Town dwellers could get consumer goods and necessary equipment directly from Moscow. People from nearby towns and villages traveled to Tekeli to buy certain goods they were unable to acquire at home.¹³ Tekeli became a magnet for talent, not only engineers but also poets and artists, who enriched the cultural atmosphere.

The exhaustion of the Tekeli deposit and the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred almost simultaneously. Due to a shortage of resources, in 1994, the factory ceased operations completely.¹⁴ In the face of the collapse of standards of living and in the absence of regular salaries, people became heavily dependent on their gardens to keep them from going hungry. Many skilled factory workers left the town for other mining companies in Kazakhstan and Russia. The out-migration of Slavs and Germans increased dramatically (see Figure 2). Official statistics show a decline in the population, which reportedly fell from 31,428 in 1989 to 23,982 in 1999 (Figure 4). Local people suggested that the reality may be even more dramatic, referring in interviews to a near halving of the town population.¹⁵

10 Vyacheslav Titenev, ed., *Tekeli – 60* (Almaty: Zolotaya kniga, 2012), 78.

11 Governmental Decree No. 1187 (1996), Adilet.zan.kz.

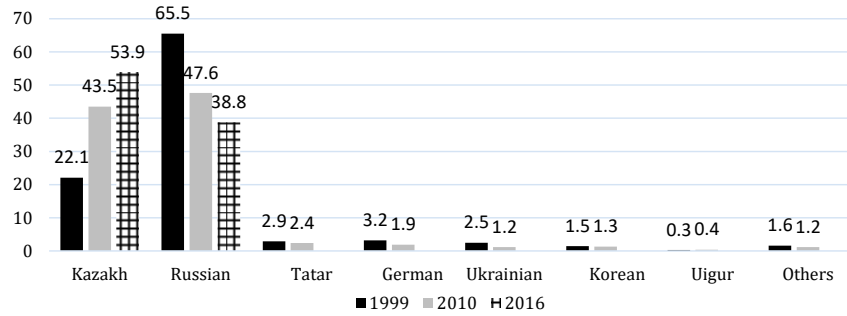
12 Titenev, ed., *Tekeli – 60*, 90.

13 Taldykorgan resident, personal interview with the author, December 6, 2016.

14 AO Electromanganese, "Istoriia kombinata," <http://www.emn.kz/o-predpriyatii>.

15 Local official in Tekeli, personal interview with the author, November 6, 2016.

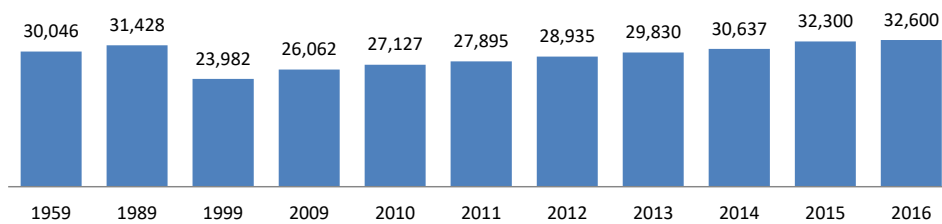
Figure 2. Change in the Ethnic Composition of the Tekeli Population, 1999–2016 (percentage)



Note: For 2016, only the share of Kazakhs and Russians is available.

Source: Tekeli socio-economic passport, 2010, 2016

Figure 3. Population of Tekeli, 1959–2016



Source: Almaty Oblast Statistics Department, 2016

In 1997, the government transferred the plant’s concession to the recently privatized Kazzinc mining company.¹⁶ The energy director of Kazzinc—and later head of the Tekeli factory—Boris Rudman indicated that the people of the town had essentially determined the company’s decision to expand to Tekeli, describing them as professional, hardworking, and dedicated.¹⁷

Kazzinc redeveloped the Tekeli plant to process the company’s metal waste, which came from Ust-Kamenogorsk, East Kazakhstan. Once these resources were exhausted, the company decided to close the mine and called for new projects that would create new jobs. Kazzinc supported several diversification projects in the town: a greenhouse, a plant for drying fruits and vegetables, and a water bottling mini-plant.¹⁸ As a result, half of the plant workers got new jobs. Some received grants from the company to run their own microbusinesses. Others remained at the plant. Later, Kazzinc sold the factory to another

Kazakh mining company, the Mining Bureau. Under new ownership, the factory equipment was modernized and the plant moved to producing steel products.

Unlike other single-industry towns, in the last 5 or 6 years, Tekeli has experienced demographic growth. The population now exceeds the pre-1990s level, reaching 32,600 people in 2016 (Figure 4) and Tekeli has become the country’s first monocity in terms of population rise (Figure 5). Teachers, doctors, private- and public-sector managers, and specialists from nearby towns and cities are settling there. Ethnic returnees (“Oralmans”) from China and Mongolia have played a significant role in population growth, as have former residents of nearby villages who have moved to the town. On top of all this, a significant flow of qualified specialists and the creation of new jobs and services are expected with the forthcoming opening of a campus of the Aga-Khan funded University of Central Asia in Tekeli.¹⁹

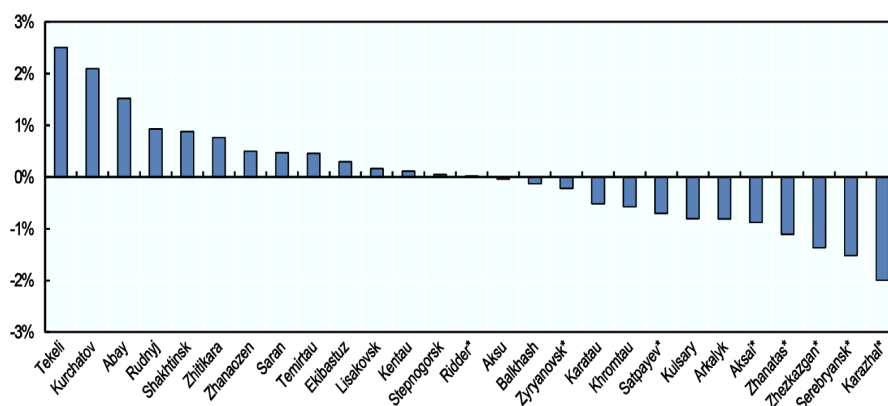
16 Governmental Decree No. 1187 (1996), Adilet.zan.kz.

17 Former Tekeli factory director, personal interview with the author, January 4, 2017.

18 Daniyar Sabitov, “Prikazano vyzhit!” *Kontinent*, January 14, 2009, <http://www.continent.kz/2009/01/6.htm>.

19 “About University of Central Asia,” <http://www.ucentralasia.org/About>.

Figure 4. Yearly net Migration, 2010–2015: Share of Resident Population in Kazakhstan's Main Monotowns



Source: OECD Urban Review: Kazakhstan, 2017

The town's location makes it an attractive destination for sport festivals, mountain tourists, and professional athletes. Tekeli is a host of the International Paragliding Festival, as well as a number of local and national tournaments.²⁰ The Olympics Training School provides instruction for local children and adults. The local climbing team is a frequent winner of top national prizes.²¹ Members of national cycling and weightlifting teams also train there.²² Some residents have moved into the tourism sector, offering guided tours for national and international tourists. Among these international tourists are former Tekeli residents who now live in Russia, Germany, and beyond.²³

The Relaunch of Government Support

Yet despite growing economic opportunities, the town continues to face challenges to its development, including an unstable job market, the lack of a skilled workforce, and youth migration. In 2012, the government announced a new state policy for socio-economic modernization, with a specific focus on single-industry towns. Later, in 2013, the newly established Ministry of Regional Development became responsible for implementing the program. However,

after one and a half years, it was reorganized and downgraded, being placed under the supervision of one of the committees within the Ministry of National Economy. That year, due to duplicity and mismanagement, the government merged five ongoing state development programs, "Development of Single-Industry Towns," "Regional development," "Modernization of housing and utilities," "Akbulak – 2020 (water supply)," and "Affordable housing-2020" into a single "Program for Regional Development – 2020."²⁴

Tekeli's position on the government-determined list of single-industry towns gave the local administration the opportunity to adjust its local development plan in line with the new state program. The town could access more resources from the central budget, allowing it to conduct new projects as well as necessary maintenance work.²⁵ Though local people may not know about the status change of the town, they did see positive improvements: mended roads, and new infrastructure for parks and sport.

State resources are vital for the town, which contributes an average of just 7 percent of local budget revenues, receiving the rest as government transfers (see Figure 6). However, Tekeli's heavy reliance on state transfers calls into question the long-term sustainability of the current model.

20 "Pervyi chempionat po paraglaidingu," *Tekeli Tynysy*, June 3, 2016.

21 Deputy Head of the Tourism and Area Studies Center, personal interview with the author, November 4, 2016; Tekeli officials, personal interviews with the author, January 5, 2017.

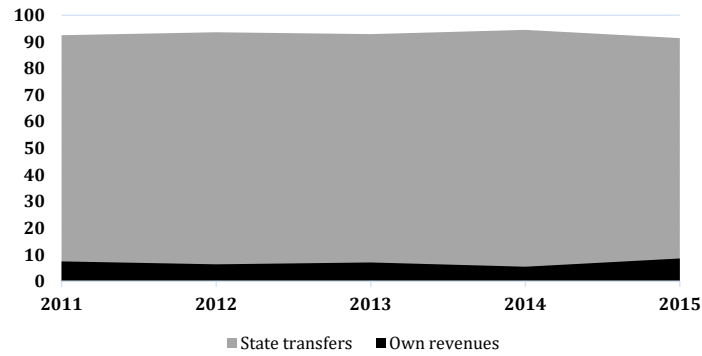
22 "Darkhan Dala, Tekeli," *Telekanal Khabar 24*, July 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jN8zUYMlO-w>.

23 Tekeli resident, personal interview with the author, January 5, 2017.

24 Programma razvitiia regionov do 2020 goda, Postanovlenie pravitel'stva Respubliki Kazakhstan No. 728 (2014).

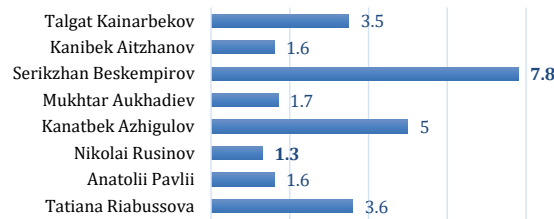
25 Realizatsiia Kompleksnogo plana razvitiia Tekeli, <http://tekeli.gov.kz/pages/306/>.

Figure 5. Sources of Tekeli Budget Revenues, 2011–2015 (percentage)



Source: Tekeli Comprehensive Development Plan 2015–2017, 10

Figure 6. The Length of Tekeli Mayors’ Terms in Office, 1992–2016 (years)



Source: Tekeli Administration website, <http://tekeli.gov.kz/pages/2/>

Quality of Governance Remains a Central Issue

The government’s current approach to support is to improve the quality of life by enhancing physical infrastructure (Table 1). However, analysis of the state program and local development plan indicates a lack of measures that would help build the capacity of human resources responsible for policy implementation. State strategies pay attention to the employment and education of the local population but do not expect local municipal officials to hit certain benchmarks in terms of their qualifications. Local people highlighted some of the limitations of this approach during interviews.

The quality of the local municipality is important to the town’s development, as it became a main public service provider after the restructuring of the plant.²⁶ Local residents I interviewed often raised the issue of the quality of public services. The local mayor’s blog also contains a large number of complaints about infrastructure support, from winter road maintenance to the quality of renovation work to housing issues.²⁷

Table 1. Priorities of the National Program and Local Development Plan

Utility and communications infrastructure	Identification of economic potential and new prospective specializations
Building affordable housing	Diversification of the economy and the development of small and medium enterprises
Modernization of housing and communal services	Infrastructure improvements
Development of infrastructure for regional industrialization projects, agricultural business and tourism	
Improving the state of the environment and increasing energy efficiency in cities	

Source: Regional Development Program - 2020, 52; Tekeli Comprehensive Plan – 2015–2017

26 Governmental Decree No. 1187 (1996), Adilet.zan.kz.

27 “Blog Akima goroda Tekeli,” <http://blog.tekeli.gov.kz>.

Private sector representatives, meanwhile, expressed concern about the inconsistency in the terms served by local mayors: "It is difficult to maintain long-term interactions with the local administration when they change very frequently and are unpredictable."²⁸ One mayor may be in office for almost 8 years, others for a much shorter period. The Law on Local Governance does not specify a mayor's term in office, focusing only on selection procedures.²⁹ This pattern, which is visible across the entire country, limits state support, institutional memory, and trust between different sectors of the local citizenry.

Representatives of the tourism sector further stressed that they have to invest their own time and effort in training new employees, since all state programs concentrate on commercial tourism but not on the alpine tourism that would actually be useful in Tekeli. The same trend applies to the industrial sector, which has to retrain current skilled employees and train new ones.

Moreover, despite the national goal of improving employment statistics, administrative barriers limit the adaptability of the local education organizations. For instance, at different stages of its history, Tekeli college provided some opportunities for the workforce to gain new skills and knowledge related to the operation of the plant and small and medium enterprises; it also cooperated with regional educational institutes.³⁰ However, state regulations currently require that at least 25 students enroll on any given course in order for it to be taught. In a small town, there is no demand for so many employees with the same qualifications, and so employees either go untaught or are surplus to requirements.

If the town-forming company was once accountable for all services, the delivery of public services is now the province of the local government. The quality of governance has a significant impact on the implementation of any public policy, and its efforts to evolve depend on the quality of the human capital on which it can draw. Competencies that were once important may now be insufficient.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Tekeli offers a unique insight into the future of single-towns in Kazakhstan and their potential for conversion to other industries, as well as diversification. Success depends on the implementation of several steps:

First, it would be necessary to have open access to all materials related to local development, as the majority of the annual surveys and research conducted by governmental bodies remain unpublished. Limited access to these documents hampers the evaluation process for all interested parties, be they public entities, private companies or non-profit organizations. The official websites of small towns should also be unified in terms of the date presented. So far, the information is published in different formats or even missing.

Second, and more importantly, a balanced approach to improving not only infrastructure but also human capacity is necessary for achieving the desired policy outcomes. In the context of Kazakhstan, the degree of policy implementation and the sustainability of a policy's results depend, to a large extent, on the quality of governance. A gradual increase in regional independence in the future would require the augmentation of human capital potential. Current government attempts to improve the capacity of civil servants center on top-level local officials, rather than encompassing the entire municipal government.³¹

However, in many cases, it is the mid-level civil servants who remain in their positions when the mayor is appointed to another job. The current public sector management puts heavy emphasis on the selection and control of staff, but lacks a way of promoting their professional development.³² Better equipped personnel, armed with the necessary data collection and analysis skills as well as communication and problem-solving capacities, would be beneficial both for local development and for interaction with central bodies, as the latter often expresses

28 Private sector representative in Tekeli, personal interview with the author, January 4, 2017.

29 "Zakon o mestnom gosudarstvennom upravlenii i samoupravlenii v Respublike Kazakhstan," No. 148-II.

30 "Tekeliiskii professionalnyi kolledzh," <http://tekeli.kz/index.php/ru/>.

31 Information provided by the Ministry of National Economy, personal communication, May 15, 2017.

32 Alma Kuljambekova, "Enhancing Efficiency of Human Resources Services in Government Agencies of Kazakhstan," *Viesoji Politika ir Administravimas* 12, no. 4 (2013): 644–49, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1491518046?accountid=11243>.

its discontent with the work of local governments. Moreover, it would empower local institutions to raise important issues, such as amendments to state education regulations.

The Aga-Khan funded University of Central Asia could, in collaboration with local and national government and civil servants, identify necessary skills for local municipality mid-level employees and design on-the-job trainings accordingly, perhaps including a bonus program.

The tourism sector also requires not only financial assistance, but educational support. International organizations working in Kazakhstan could attract specialists to provide trainings for small local tourist firms and prospective landlords to help them organize their business activity and promote their services on online platforms. Moreover, promoting mountain tourism and sport events held in Tekeli on national TV, in newspapers and on social media would be beneficial for attracting people to the region.

Chapter 12.

Empowering Local Communities in the Kyrgyz Mining Sector: The Case of Talas

Nazik Imanbekova¹ (2017)

Introduction

The Kyrgyz Republic's abundance of natural resources and minerals plays a significant role in the country's economic performance. In 2014, it was estimated that the aggregate revenue generated by five active mines – chief among them the Kumtor mine – constituted 8.4 percent of the Republic's GDP, amounting to 53.9 percent of its industrial production² and half of its total exports.³ The government sees this revenue as a way to counterbalance the country's huge budget deficiency⁴ and high level of dependence on foreign aid and loans.⁵ To achieve this economic goal, over the past 15 years, the government has accelerated the exploration and extraction of small and

medium deposits, attracting domestic (JSC “Kyrgyz Altyn”)⁶ and foreign investors (from Canada, China, the UK, Germany, Kazakhstan, Russia, Switzerland, and the USA).⁷

However, due to political instability, the absence of investment partners, implementing agencies' lack of capacity,⁸ and overlapping administrative bodies,⁹ the extraction industry remains under-developed¹⁰, policies are partially implemented (if at all),¹¹ and development indicators are not achieved.¹² Moreover, the sectoral programs have never taken into consideration external (global market price for gold and other minerals, challenges to export, unattractiveness of the mines, etc.)¹³ and internal (political, cultural and social challenges, government will, and the

1 Nazik Imanbekova is a transparency and open government activist from Kyrgyzstan, who has worked at various organizations, from local NGOs (Public Foundation “ElNaz”, EITI NGO Consortium, Human Development Center “Tree of Life”) to IGOs (UNDP). As the head of EITI public reception in Talas region, she developed a dialogue platform which the national government adopted and which led to the establishment of periodic meetings with local communities. She holds a Specialist Diploma with Honors in Economics from the Academy of Management under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic.

2 “EITI report of Kyrgyz Republic for 2013-2014,” Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) Secretariat in the Kyrgyz Republic, December 30, 2015, <https://eiti.org/document/20132014-kyrgyz-republic-eiti-report>.

3 “Eksport osnovnykh vidov tovarov,” Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, <http://stat.kg/ru/statistics/vneshneekonomicheskaya-deyatelnost/>.

4 “Profitsit i defitsit gosudarstvennogo biudzheta,” Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, <http://stat.kg/ru/statistics/finansy/>.

5 Ryskeldi Satke, “The Downside of Foreign Aid in Kyrgyzstan,” *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/06/the-downside-of-foreign-aid-in-kyrgyzstan/>.

6 Joint Stock Company “Kyrgyz Altyn,” <http://kyrgyzaltyn.kg/eng/>.

7 “Investitsii v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike na 2011–2015 gody,” Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, September 2016, <http://stat.kg/media/publication-archive/b4b5067f-4d85-4af1-98ce-cf1b357f0d52.pdf>.

8 Mahabat Baimyrzaeva, “Shortcomings of Institutional Reform in Public Sector Governance: The Case of Kyrgyzstan” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2010), 291.

9 “Improving Resource Governance in the Kyrgyz Republic: 12 Priority Issues for the Mining Sector,” Natural Resource Governance Institute, March 2017, 8.

10 “Strategiia Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki po razvitiuu gornodobyvaiushchei otrasli na 2015–2035 gody,” Ministry of Economy of the Kyrgyz Republic, February 20, 2015, http://mineconom.gov.kg/Docs/Medium_and_Long_Term_Mining_StrategyRus_10_04_2014.pdf.

11 “Natsional'naia strategiia ustoiчивogo razvitiia Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki,” Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Approved by the Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on January 21, 2013 No. 11, http://www.president.kg/ru/news/ukazy/1466_tekst_natsionalnoy_strategii_ustoiчивogo_razvitiya_kyrgyzskoy_respubliki_na_period_2013-2017_godyi/.

12 “The Kyrgyz Republic 2016 Validation,” International EITI Secretariat, March 8, 2017, <https://eiti.org/validation/kyrgyz-republic/2016>.

13 “Strategiia Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki.”

capacity of implementing agencies) factors,¹⁴ resulting in them not achieving the desired results.

The government's inability to implement and meet its targets has presented several challenges. In particular, it has created tripartite conflict between state structures, investors and local communities, which has resulted in restrictions on mine development and foreign investment. Contributing factors include, but are not limited to, the frustration of local communities that live in poverty while political elites reap the benefits of mines; a lack of transparency on the part of mining companies and government; inadequate accountability in redistributing revenues and social payments; and limited participation by local government and local communities in the decision-making processes and policy implementation.

In this paper, I focus on the mining *rayon* of Talas, home to three important gold deposits (Jerui, Andash, and Taldy-Bulak), and investigate the dynamics of cooperation between the three parties outlined above. This study is based on my personal experience working as a head of EITI public reception in Talas *rayon*, microdata collected as part of this work, and surveys of three different groups of stakeholders: national and local government, donors, and local communities. Since not all representatives of donors and the national government completed surveys, this study does not provide a comprehensive accounting of the actions of stakeholders, but indicates a common tendency.

I argue that despite the government's (primarily legislative) efforts to respond to its constituents' concerns, it failed to bring about tangible changes in terms of local communities' participation in natural resource management. Moreover, efforts by other participating stakeholders (donor-funded NGOs and mining companies) to enhance local communities' role in decision-making processes and to inform them about the mining sector resulted in only a few positive changes.

The paper begins with a general discussion and analysis of literature on the mining sector of Kyrgyzstan and Talas *rayon*, social conflicts that emerged throughout the country, and ways of overcoming them, specifically by promoting the engage-

ment of local communities as a "primary" or "key" stakeholder on a par with the government and mining companies. It then introduces region-specific (Talas) background and research questions, before discussing different conflict resolution/cooperation approaches and their outcomes. Next, I present, analyze and interpret the results of the survey. The study concludes by offering policy recommendations for each stakeholder – donor-funded NGOs, the national government, local government, and mining companies – with a view to empowering local communities in the sphere of natural resource management.

Mismatches between Mining Development and Local Communities

The Kyrgyz mining sector is highly politicized. Local communities' negative perceptions have been largely shaped by the negative publicity received by the country's main mine, Kumtor. In 1998, a 20-ton container of sodium cyanide fell from the bridge into the Barskoon River and leaked into Issyk-Kul Lake. Due to the scale of damages from the accident, compensation was a highly contentious issue. Communities in the immediate vicinity of the mine received compensation directly after the accident.¹⁵ But other communities requesting fair compensation from the cyanide accident were not compensated. Because all funds allocated for the compensation passed through Kyrgyz state structures, the mining company claimed that it fulfilled its obligations to the victims.

This event opened a Pandora's box, so to speak. In 2005, after the Tulip Revolution, local communities near Kumtor mine began to demand compensation for the damage caused to their health and the local environment by demonstrating near the company's camp. They blocked the road leading to the gold ore deposit. Immediately after the demonstration, the national government formed a commission called the "Emergency Government Commission." The mandate of the commission was to consider the claims of local communities. The commission recommended that the government compensate accident victims.¹⁶ Successive governments used

14 Baimyrzaeva, "Shortcomings of Institutional Reform," 250.

15 "Cyanide spill in Kyrgyzstan," National Institute of Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_projects/2003/action3/docs/2003_3_09_cs4_en.pdf.

16 Aida Kasyimalieva and Azamat Kachiev, "Spetsial'nyi reportazh: Zhertvy ekologicheskoi katastrofy trebuiut kompensatsii," March 17, 2006, <https://goo.gl/onbNCK>; Bruce Pannier, "Kyrgyzstan: A Commercial Tragedy Revisited," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 03, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1060387.html>.

the Commission to settle their grievances with the previous government by accusing them of making agreements that went against the interests of ordinary people, compelling Canadian investor Centerra Gold to renegotiate its natural resources exploitation agreement three times in an eight-year span: in 2004, 2009, and 2012.¹⁷

Demonstrations, conflicts, and violence became a systematic process whereby national stakeholders could enrich themselves or seek redress of domestic political grievances.¹⁸ The reasons for the conflicts varied from one region to another: ecological concerns in Talas;¹⁹ employment issues in Chui (Orlovka);²⁰ contract and revenue transparency, as well as government and mining company accountability in Issyk-Kul (Kumtor);²¹ legal violations and lack of transparency on the part of mining companies in Osh (Chon-Alai).²²

According to the State Agency on Geology and Mineral Resources, mining-related conflict peaked between 2010 and 2012, with 36 mining conflict zones throughout the country.²³ These conflicts were detrimental to the country's image, hampering foreign investors' willingness to engage in the sector.

To tackle these regional conflicts, in June 2012, the government proposed several amendments into the Tax Code and adopted a new "Subsoil" law. Results include:

1. The licensing process became more transparent. The new subsoil law improved licensing process by: instituting competitions and auctions for the right to use subsoil resources, charging fees for withholding a license, and reducing the grounds for suppression and

termination of licenses. The new "competition commission" involved local government deputies, and everyone was free to participate in competitions and auctions.²⁴

2. The subsoil law introduced a social package for local communities. This was used as a toolkit to bring about positive changes in villages.²⁵
3. The new amendment required two percent of the company's income to be directed toward national and local budgets. Charges for withholding a license are allocated to the local government in order to boost the mines' social impact.²⁶

These positive changes to the laws were welcomed and spread by the media and government officials. However, six years later, the mining industry still faces demonstrations, conflicts and violence. Local communities are still frustrated by poor governance, numerous environmental damages from mining development, previous bad legacies, negative mine experiences, and social and economic grievances. Government, for its part, still fails to respond to its constituents' demands.

Government reform efforts have, in many cases, been limited to formal legislative, organizational, and technical reforms. Such reforms and changes to the legal framework were seen as a way to both gratify donors and secure continued funding from international finance institutions. New laws have been passed and current laws amended at a rapid pace, occasionally resulting in legal expansion (i.e. legislation that sits on the shelf and gathers dust) and selective implementation of legislation and policy.²⁷

17 Kumtor, Centerra Gold, <http://www.kumtor.kg/en/deposit/history/>.

18 "Strategia Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki," 51.

19 Perizat Kubanyichbekova and Kambar Asan uulu, "Talas: Mestnyie Jiteli Vyshli na Miting Protiv razrabotki Dzheruia," *Kloop*, July 2, 2015, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2015/07/02/talas-mestnye-zhiteli-vyshli-na-miting-protiv-razrabotki-zheruya/>.

20 "Stikhiinaia zabastovka na zolotonosnom mestorozhdenii v Kyrgyzstane," Industrial Global Union, June 9, 2014, <http://www.industrial-union.org/es/ru/stihiynaya-zabastovka-na-zolotonosnom-mestorozhdenii-v-kyrgyzstane>.

21 Anna Yalovkina, "V Kyrgyzstane za piat' dnei proshlo sem' mitingov," *Vechernii Bishkek*, October 12, 2013, http://www.vb.kg/doc/247325_v_kyrgyzstane_za_piat_dney_proshlo_sem_mitingov.html.

22 Ernest Nurmatov, "Tochka v konflikte vokrug "Kaidi" ne postavlena," *Radio Liberty (Radio Azattyk)*, May 24, 2013, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_minings_conflicts/24996141.html.

23 "V Kyrgyzstane naschitali 36 problemnykh mestorozhdenii," *Time: KG*, September 9, 2012, <http://www.time.kg/vremya-novostey/4524-v-kyrgyzstane-naschitali-36-problemnykh-mestorozhdeniy.html>.

24 "Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki o nedrah," Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic, approved by the Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on August 9, 2012 No. 160, <http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/203760>.

25 "Zakon Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki o nedrah."

26 "Kyrgyzskaia Respublika: Gornoi otrasli trebuetsia otsenka," World Bank, June 2013, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/pt/687851468047369947/text/876860WP0P13310t00000date0june02013.txt>.

27 Mahabat Baimyrzaeva, "Institutional Reforms in Kyrgyzstan 1992–2010," *International Journal of Public Administration* 34, no. 9 (2011).

Talas, the Most Violent and Intense Case

Talas is the smallest of Kyrgyzstan's seven regions (*oblasts*), both in terms of area (11,400 square km) and population (247,200 people). It is located in the northwest of the country and divided into 4 districts (*rayons*): Talas, Manas, Bakai-Ata and Kara-Buura.²⁸ 85 percent of the population of Talas lives in rural areas.²⁹ It is estimated that two-thirds of the region's population depends on agriculture³⁰ for their livelihood; the mining sector, by contrast, represents less than one percent.³¹

The mining history of Talas rayon can be traced back to the Soviet era, with the discovery of deposits at what is now Andash mine in 1963, at Taldy-Bulak in 1967, and at Jerui in 1969.³² But industrial extraction did not occur during the Soviet period, as the government did not consider these mines as economically viable as others in Kyrgyzstan, which contained minerals such as antimony, mercury, uranium and coal.³³ In 1994, the Kyrgyz government issued the first license for gold mining at Andash mine to UK investors, the Ala-Too Gold Mining Company.³⁴ To date, 21 licenses have been issued for Talas rayon, including four (Andash, Taldy-Bulak, Jerui, and Aktash) for gold and copper exploration and one (Jerui) for gold extraction.³⁵

All the mines are located very close to the villages: Andash is 1.5 km from the village Kopuro-Bazar; Taldy-Bulak 9 km from Aral village; and Jerui 23 km from the Kara-OI (Bekmoldo) village.³⁶ This proximity stokes public concerns about the presence of

mining in the area.³⁷ A resident of Kopuro-Bazaar village, Zhumabek Sabatarov, summarized the public's concerns in this way:

We are against [mine development] because they [the mining company] want to open the [gold extracting] factory despite it being detrimental to health, environment, quality of life, and the future of our children. They made it too close to burial chambers and the tailing constructed on the shore of the river. They did not take into account the direction of the wind. The factory has been opened through deception and human venality. It is located at a distance of less than a kilometer from the residential settlement, and therefore cannot be run.³⁸

Villagers are concerned about the potential environmental impacts of mine development. Although agriculture is a seasonal activity that does not bring much profit, they believe that they are better off with agriculture than with mining, which offers substantial profit in the short term but leaves a legacy of extensive environmental problems long after mine deposits have been exhausted. An estimated 21.5 percent of Talas residents lived in poverty in 2015,³⁹ a level lower than any other region of the country or even the capital, Bishkek. As such, local communities are less driven by their personal economic motives and needs.

Anecdotal evidence of negative experience of mine development in other parts of the country, which locals receive from newspapers, TV, neighbors, friends, and other government officials, fuels anxiety

28 Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, statistical data on Talas oblast, <http://stat.kg/ru/talasskaya-oblast/>.

29 Data on Talas oblast, Gosudarstvennoe agentstvo po delam mestnogo samoupravleniia i mezhnatsionnykh otnoshenii, <http://gamsumo.gov.kg/ru/news/full/27.html>.

30 "Talas Oblusunun Sotsialdyk-Ekonomikalyk Abalyi 2016," Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, <http://new.stat.kg/kg/statistika-talasskoj-oblasti/>.

31 "Employed population by economic activity and territory," Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, <http://stat.kg/en/statistics/zanyatost/>.

32 V. Nikonorov et al., *Zoloto Kyrgyzstana. Opisanie mestorozhdenii. Rudnie*, Vol. 2 (Bishkek: Gosudarstvennoe agentstvo po geologii i mineral'nym resursam pri Pravitel'stve Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2016).

33 Valentine Bogdetsky, Karybek Ibraev, and Jyldyz Abdyrakhmanova, "Mining Industry as a Source of Economic Growth in Kyrgyzstan," World Bank, 2005, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTOGMC/Resources/3360991156955107170/miningsourceeconomicgrowth.pdf>.

34 Sanji Tuytunova, "Skandal vokrug mestorozhdeniia Andash, kotoroe stalo istochnikom shumikhi, ne uspev otkryt'sia," *De Facto*, March 22, 2012, http://www.gezitter.org/economics/9833_skandal_vokrug_mestorojdeniya_andash_kotoroe_stal_istochnikom_shumihi_ne_uspev_otkrytsya/.

35 Gosudarstvennyi komitet promyshlennosti, energetiki i nedropol'zovaniia Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, spisok deistvuiushchikh litsenzii, <http://www.gkpen.on.kg/Licenses/Licenses/LicensesList?isLicense=True>.

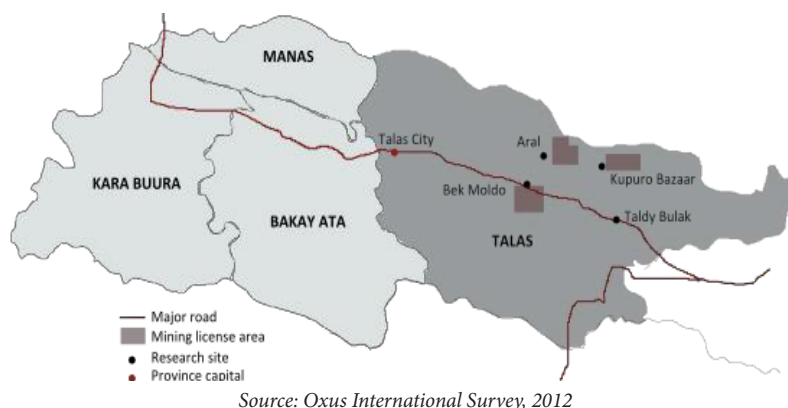
36 Nikonorov et al., "Zoloto Kyrgyzstana"

37 "V Parlamente rassmotreli zhaloby na razrabotchikov mestorozhdeniia Andash," *Vechernii Bishkek*, May 20, 2013, http://www.vb.kg/doc/228643_v_parlamente_rassmotreli_zhaloby_na_razrabotchika_mestorojdeniia_andash.html; Daniyar Karimov, "Predstaviteli ZAO 'Dzherualtyn' rasskazali Kyrgyzstanskim sel'chanam o sostoianii i perspektivakh zolotogo mestorozhdeniia," *24.kg*, December 9, 2006, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/economics/11061-2006/12/09/11441.html/>.

38 Muhammedali Toktakunov, "V konflikte Andash tochki eshche ne postavleny," *Radio Liberty (Radio Azattyk)*, August 16, 2011, http://www.gezitter.org/society/4316_v_konflikte_andash_tochki_eshche_ne_postavlenyi/.

39 "Uroven' bednosti," Kyrgyz National Statistics Committee, <http://stat.kg/ru/statistics/uroven-zhizni-naseleniya/>.

Map 1. Mining Sites and the Nearest Settlements to Them



Source: Oxus International Survey, 2012

about the potential negative impacts of mine development. Mining companies and the government have worked together to try to change this perception, organizing exchanges where some community representatives can visit operational mines. However, this approach has backfired: though participants in the exchange trips speak positively about the work of the mines, other people suggest that they have been bought off by the company and are prepared to sell out the rest of the village, increasing concerns about mining.⁴⁰

Between the first mine development activities in Talas rayon and the present (1994–2016), massive meetings, demonstrations, and violence have occurred near three mines. It is sometimes said that these activities are not spontaneous, but organized by members of opposition parties who fund protesters in order to advance their own agenda and destabilize the region, especially around elections.⁴¹ Whatever the origin of the protest, all social movements demand the cessation of mine activities, calling for a 50-year moratorium.⁴²

Table 1. A Story of Conflicts (1994–2016)⁴³

Mines	Ownership Change	Present Licensee	Current status	Court cases	Peaceful protests	Violent protests
Jerui	7	Russian investor Vostok Geolodobycha	Construction works started for further exploration	2	12	-
Andash	5	Australian investor Robust Resources	Suspended for an unspecified period	1	9	2
Taldy-Bulak	2	Australian investor Robust Resources	Suspended for an unspecified period	0	5	2

Note: Mining activities in Andash and Taldy-Bulak have been on hold since 2012 and old license holders have passed their right to Australian investor Robust Resources, which is in no rush to start development. In 2015, Jerui mine was licensed to the Russian company JSC Vostok Geolodobycha; construction began a couple of months ago. The company is planning to extract its first gold product by 2018.

Source: Author's analysis based on media reports and personal microdata

40 Ulugbek Babakulov, "Kirgiziia: Tam kury ne nesut kvadratnikh iaitz, ili ekskursiia po Rudniku Kumtor," *Fergana News*, September 26, 2007, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/5370>.

41 Mirbek Aytikeev, "Talas: Uchastniki mitinga po Dzheruiu ob'javili golodovku," *Radio Liberty (Radio Azattyk)*, May 15, 2013, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/24986621.html>.

42 Asel Shabdanova, "Talasty poobeshchali miting protiv razrabotki Dzheruiua," *Vechernii Bishkek*, April 16, 2013, http://www.vb.kg/doc/224777_talasty_poobeshchali_miting_protiv_razrabotki_djeryia.html.

43 Author's analysis based on media (*Radio Azattyk*, 24.kg, *Vechernii Bishkek*, *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, *Kabar*, *Tazabek*, *Fergana News*, *Eco Partner*, *Gezitter*) in the period 1994–2016 and review of personal reports (Conflicts and Demonstrations Monitoring reports) in the period 2011–2014.

The contentious issue of mining development in Talas has divided the population into two irreconcilable groups. The majority opposes mining development, while a minority supports the mining companies and mine development as whole.⁴⁴ Thus, disputes have resulted in the suspension of most mining activities; all mining projects are currently suspended or non-operational for different reasons.

The government wants to change local communities' attitude toward the projects by highlighting the economic benefits of mining activities.⁴⁵ Top officials and the heads of main state agencies in the mining sector cite figures of projected revenues from mine development and tax and social payments, as well as employment opportunities, in their official statements and meetings:

As soon as the Jerui mine starts to operate, considerable income will be generated through taxation. This will reduce annual pressure on the budget, which will stimulate the development of the region. The Russian investor will also allocate money for social needs to build educational institutions, hospitals and roads.⁴⁶

To date, there is a standoff between the government, local communities, and mining companies over mining activities. Collaboration between main stakeholders has been transitory, failing to secure consistent cooperation, find shared perspectives, and ensure the persistent involvement of all parties in decision-making processes.

Conflict Resolution and Cooperation Approaches

There have been numerous efforts to bridge the gap between stakeholders and resolve existing conflicts while preventing backlash in the future. Depending on their mandate, opportunities, and capacities, local

government, mining companies, and donor-funder NGOs have approach conflict resolution and cooperation in different ways.

Five national NGOs⁴⁷ funded by international organizations worked on conflict resolution and building cooperation between stakeholders in Talas rayon. They conducted capacity-building activities, created platforms for dialogue between interested stakeholders, and funded existing consultancy and information centers. They also held trainings to enhance local communities' and local government's awareness of the legal framework governing mining, EITI, ecological impacts, and the like. Dialogue platforms included roundtables and conferences where all interested stakeholders could work together and discuss urgent issues at the local and national levels. EITI public reception spread information to three village communities.

The government focused its conflict resolution efforts on informational campaigns. After the new subsoil law was adopted in 2012, the local government was in charge of informing local communities about mine development regulations. However, this information-sharing approach had limited success due to the insufficient capacity of local government and the challenge of involving local communities.

In the wake of violent conflicts, mining companies began to collaborate more closely with local communities.⁴⁸ Some companies, especially Western ones,⁴⁹ deployed communications teams to interface with local communities, an approach that led to a number of steps:

- The signing of a tripartite agreement between the mining company, local government, and local communities;
- The participation of mining companies in regular meetings with local communities, including the spreading of information about

44 Bolotbek Tashtanaliev, "Zolotoe mestorozhdenie Andash - prichina uteriannogo edineniya zhitelei sela," *Alibi*, May 15, 2012, http://www.gezitter.org/economics/11186_zolotoe_mestorozhdenie_andash_-_prichina_uteryannogo_edineniya_jiteley_sela/.

45 Mirlan Alyimbekov, "Zhiteli Talasa razbogateiut, esli nachnetsia razrabotka "Dzheruia," *Fabula*, April 28, 2017, http://www.gezitter.org/economics/59600_jiteli_talasa_razbogateiut_esli_nachnetsya_razrabotka_djeruya/.

46 Prime Minister Temir Sariyev, in a meeting with the local population of Talas region on July 10, 2015. See Nazgul Begaliev, "Sariyev pristydil zhitelei Talasskoi oblasti za mitingi protiv Dzheruia," *Vechernii Bishkek*, June 10, 2015, http://www.vb.kg/doc/319637_sariyev_pristydil_jiteley_talasskoy_oblasti_za_mitingi_protiv_djeryia.html.

47 EITI NGO Consortium (EITI public reception in Talas rayon), Public Foundation "Haba," Novyi ekologicheskii progress, Golos Grazhdan, and ZIOM.

48 Talas Copper Gold (Gold Fields Limited), Andash Mining Company (Kentor Gold), and JeruiAltyn (Corporate Exploration Holding Ltd. and Visor Holding).

49 "Issledovanie povedeniia i vospriiatia Media auditorii 2012 goda (2-ya Volna)," Vol. 2, Issledovatel'skoe agenstvo M-Vector, USAID, 2012, <https://www.slideshare.net/lazattakyrbashova/2012-14286349>.

the mining process, payments, and ecological impacts;

- The involvement of elected members of local communities in employment and ecological monitoring committees;
- The implementation of social projects (enhancement of infrastructure and roads, stipend programs for village youth, etc.)

However, as the survey results show, these mechanisms are not sufficient to address problems on the ground, including the local population's perception that they are powerless in the face of mining development.

Survey Results

To better capture the expectations of local communities, I implemented a survey targeting local communities, national and local governments, and international organizations. Respondents include 44 inhabitants from the three main villages (Aral for Taldi-Bulak mine, Bekmoldo and Manas for Jerui mine, and Kopuro Bazaar for Andash mine), representatives of eight international organizations (World Bank, USAID, University of Central Asia, Eurasia Foundation in Central Asia, Soros Foundation, Publish What You Pay, GIZ, and UNDP), representatives of four national governmental agencies (the State Department of Industry, Energy and Subsoil Use Regulation under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Industry Department of the Parliament Committee, the Ministry of Economy of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the State Agency for Geology and Mineral Resources), one subnational governmental agency (Oblast regional department for industry development), and three local government representatives.

The survey addresses three key points:

- How much awareness is there about the government decisions and policies on the ground?
- How participatory are decision-making and policy discussions? and
- How effective are capacity-building activities?

The survey results were categorized by distinguishing three different groups of respondents (government

officials, donors, and local communities). We also need to differentiate between the perceptions of national and of local government, which can often be sharply divergent due to their differing levels of interaction with locals, differential access to official information, and the allocation of powers and functions.

Awareness of Government Decisions and Policies Relating to Mining Development

The government and donors, as well as NGOs, cite the lack of information about mining activities, mining companies, and the financial impact of mining as the main reason for anti-mining demonstrations on the part of local communities. To prevent these demonstrations, government, NGOs, and mining companies in Talas region have accordingly been gathering information and enhancing awareness since the violent conflicts of 2011-2012.

Local Communities

The results of my survey indicate that local communities are reasonably informed about mining-related decisions and policies, and fairly well-disposed toward Kyrgyzstan's mining sector. When asked "Are you aware of the government decisions and policies with regards to the mining sector?," more than half (59 percent) of respondents responded in the affirmative. This was supported by the question "How do you get informed about the government decisions and policies with regards to the mining sector," which indicated that the majority of respondents (55 percent) receive information through their relatives, neighbors, friends, activists; a sizable minority receive information from local NGOs (40 percent), local government (34 percent), and from TV, newspapers, or internet (30 percent). However, when asked "How would you like to get informed about government decisions and policies with regards to the mining sector?" about 65 percent of respondents answered "Through local government," with 53 percent saying "Through local NGOs," and "From the Internet" the third most common response (50 percent).

Although local communities are primarily informed during informal gatherings and on the streets through their relatives, neighbors, friends, and activists, local communities understand that this information came from third or fourth parties. This makes the government seem a more reliable primary source of information. I should note, however, that the ques-

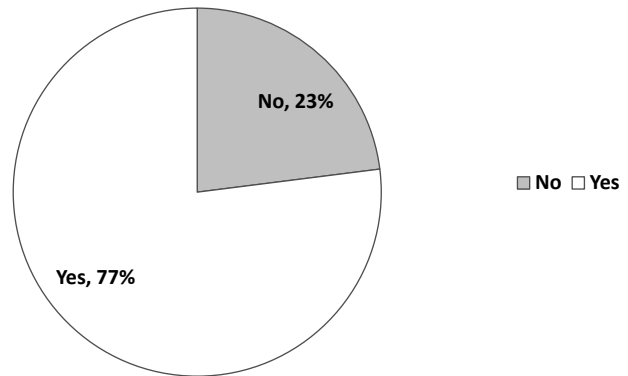
tion was only about getting how individuals are informed, and does not indicate local communities' level of trust in the government's decisions and policies. During the survey, it became apparent that most local communities would like to be informed of the decisions taken by the government and consider that it has sometimes failed to inform them. Respondents also noted that requesting information in a written form is more effective, especially when the request is registered on the official requesting journal. Local communities have a tendency to primarily appeal to the local government (*ayil okmotu* and deputies of local council) and have only limited communication with national government bodies.

It is also essential to understand what role local communities think they play in the management of mining sector in their home region. Local communities were asked "Do you believe that you can influence decision-making process and policy discussions in the mining sector?" As seen in Figure 1, the majority of respondents assume that they can influence decision-making process and policies in the mining sector.

This was followed by the question "How can you influence the government decisions and policies with regards to the mining sector?" Respondents indicated that direct participation methods—including public hearings (32 percent) and competition and auction for subsoil usage rights (17 percent)—are more effective than indirect ones.

Overall, local communities' self-reported knowledge of government decisions and policies in the mining sector can be considered acceptable. However, the majority considers that informational process could still be improved, especially at the local level through local government, NGOs, and internet sources (the last of which has improved in recent years).⁵⁰ Local communities tend to rely on local activists, and even on local government, more than on local NGOs, because NGOs do not have a vested interest in the process and are usually active only if there is financial support for them. Respondents indicated that they influence decisions and policies primarily through direct participation. Finally, appeals are directed far more to the local government than to the national government.

Figure 1. Percentage of Local Communities That Believes It Can Influence Decision-Making Process and Policy Discussions⁵¹



Source: Survey conducted by the author

Donors

International organizations working in Kyrgyzstan, in particular Talas *rayon*, believe that local communities are not sufficiently aware of the decisions taken and policies developed by the government. Respondents believe larger constituencies are required to influence policymakers; they also believe that within communities there are some active groups that have become better aware of mining sector activities thanks to their own initiative and interest. However, these groups are seen as unable to influence events due to the small size of their membership.

Low membership, they suggest, is connected to a lack of interest and awareness on the part of larger constituencies; as such, more efforts should be undertaken to inform the broader public. As one respondent put it, "Maybe smaller groups have, but more work needs to be done to inform the broader public in local communities."

The lack of interest on the part of most locals can be explained by the lack of knowledge and trust about the sector. Donors state that "the main problem is that communication is not taking place in a trusted environment; all sides assume a hidden agenda toward the other sides." To open lines of communication and create an atmosphere of trust, local communities should be informed and, most importantly, involved in the decision-making processes of both government and mining companies throughout the mining cycle.

50 Survey conducted by the author in March-April, 2017.

51 Survey conducted by the author in March-April, 2017.

To conclude, donors are still concerned about the continuous lack of information on the ground, which leads to a lack of interest and indifference on the part of much of the population. Although there are some groups of activists that are aware of and try to participate in the government's discussions, they fail to exert influence because they are in minority. Moreover, there is mistrust among stakeholders, which makes tripartite cooperation challenging. For this to work, donors believe a larger part of local communities needs to be involved in all stages of the mining cycle.

Government

National government legislation contains the right of access to information, and the government provides the opportunity to request information and participate in official government activities. Government representatives also affirm that communities are aware of decisions and policies in the mining sphere, pointing to the fact that all this information is posted on their website: "Governmental decisions are open data, which is available on official governmental websites. The government makes tens of decisions per week. And the fact that local communities does not monitor them is an unused chance for them."

When asked "How do you consult local communities with regards to government policies and decisions?" government representatives responded that such consultations occur via email and through meetings of the EITI Supervisory Board. Local communities are also informed through EITI reports, national conferences, trainings on the ground, and publications and booklets produced by donor-funded NGOs.

Local governments work closely with local communities; therefore, they are much more familiar with locals' grievances. In the survey, local government representatives suggested a low level of local community awareness: "Local government tried to convince national government that information on official state websites is not available to everyone in the villages, and mass media (TV and newspapers) are not viable and leave much to be desired;" "My personal opinion is no. Because awareness is at a low level. There are limited newspapers, TV is satellite, and there is a lack of other information sources. Local communities, for their part, are not active and interested in getting information; not all of them are aware about mechanisms of requesting information and appealing to the government."

Local government also believes that awareness enhancement has become a response to the conflicts and occurs only in the early stages: "[Are local communities aware?] Yes, but periodically. Only when the conflicts start or in the beginning of exploration and extraction activities is there a place for dialogue platforms." Both national and local government ensure that they respond to local communities' requests as soon as possible (within 14 days), according to the Law on Access to Information.

Finally, both national and local government believe that local communities can influence decisions and policies in the mining sector through public hearings, competitions and auctions for the right of subsoil usage (which they usually do not attend), as well as by researching, providing recommendations on issues, and writing petitions. Another way to exert influence is through their representatives: "Through their elected local deputies and activists who are the members of different public monitoring councils and special commissions."

In conclusion, there is a difference in the national and local governments' perceptions of communities' awareness of decisions and policies in the mining sector. The national government is certain that communities are aware, whereas local government respondents indicated several challenges, chief among them undeveloped modes of communication. Both national and local government consult their constituents using a range of approaches (emailing, distributing booklets and reports, responding to constituents' requests, etc.). Government officials believe that local communities can exert influence through direct and indirect participation as well as through their representatives.

Participation in Decision-Making and Policy Discussions

Public participation in decision-making processes and policy discussions is very complicated, and difficult to achieve even in developed countries. Like local communities' access to information (mentioned above), civil society involvement and ordinary people's ability to voice their opinions are enshrined in the laws of the Kyrgyz Republic and facilitated by various processes: public hearings, *kurultai*, competitions and auctions for subsoil usage rights, and official meetings.

Even though the government is taking steps to ensure access to information and there is room for

public participation in the decision-making process, these steps have largely failed to gain traction in local communities. The constitution makes it clear that when the government is drafting law, it should be discussed in public hearings and the opinions of civil society should be taken into account, but public apathy means that these hearings are, at present, a mere formality.

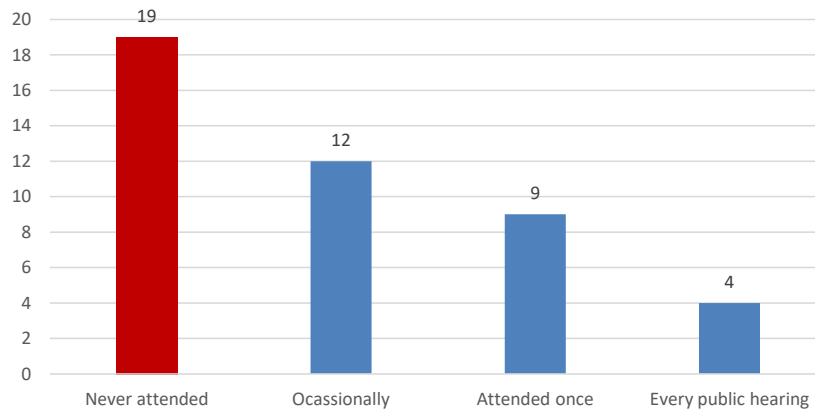
This section examines the participation of local communities in the decision-making process and policy discussions on the ground; their perception of government and donors; whether the government promotes local community involvement; and whether locals have any capacity to speak out, influence, and monitor decisions and policies.

Local Communities

Survey results revealed that almost half of respondents (19 out of 44) had never attended public hearings and more than half (27 out of 44) had never attended competitions and auctions for subsoil usage rights.

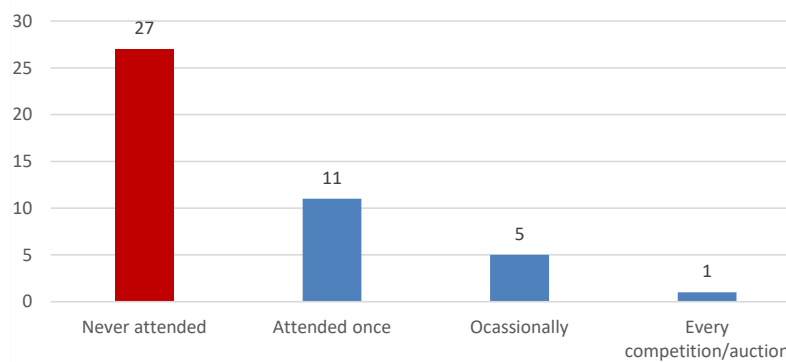
Respondents tend to be more active in attending public hearings (57percent) than competitions and auctions (39 percent). To the question “What kind of difficulties do you face in attending public hearings or competitions and auctions for the right of subsoil usage?” the majority of respondents (66 percent) noted difficulties in obtaining communication and information resources.

Figure 2. Attendance of Public Hearings in the Mining Sector by Local Communities⁵² (percentage)



Source: Survey conducted by the author

Figure 3. Attendance of Competitions and Auctions by Local Communities⁵³



Source: Survey conducted by the author

52 Survey conducted by the author in March–April, 2017.

53 “Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies,” OECD, May 21, 2012, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/better-skills-better-jobs-better-lives/foreword_9789264177338-1-en.

In conclusion, there is a low level of participation and limited expression of opinions by local communities in official government proceedings. This can be explained by the lack of a culture of participation in such proceedings, as well as a lack of interest on the part of constituents.

Donors

International organizations, for their part, believe that although there have been some efforts in this regard, local community participation is still often not encouraged. They believe that promotion of locals' participation is often no more than a temporary response to the conflicts occurring near mines. For it to become systematic, they say, state agencies need government funding: "the State Committee is promoting the local community's participation, but more as a firefighting measure, if conflicts are becoming visible. They should do it [promote locals' participation] more regularly, frequently, as part of the normal process. For this, the State Committee needs a regular budget, to be provided by the Ministry of Finance."

According to some other donors, civil society participation is just a formal proceeding that produces no real changes and involves no real openness to recommendations: "It may be different for government bodies, but it seems that more bodies are interested in at least creating an image of working with communities." However, all donors felt that locals can and should participate in decision-making processes and policy formation by promoting cooperation and collaboration with other stakeholders (government and mining companies), and take active part in tripartite dialogue: "through voicing the interests of local communities and preventing any misunderstandings between the parties." "They need to be part of the dialogue between the government and companies, directly facing the consequences of any activities, such as extraction."

Participation is important to influence, as is monitoring policies to ensure decisions are implemented. International organizations consider that, "There are certain groups that try to stay up-to-date on issues, but local communities more broadly do not." Moreover, monitoring usually does not occur in a continuous and organized manner. For that to occur, local communities need to possess the capacity to participate and be influential. As such, donors have divided into two camps: those who believe that local communities are capable of participating, but

lack information; and those who believe that they do not have sufficient capacity to participate.

Overall, donors' perception of civil society's participation is that "it leaves much to be desired (far from satisfactory)." However, they perceive civil society as a key stakeholder, suggesting that civil society should play a more purposeful role in mining resource management and that it should engage with the government and mining companies through the formal system rather than informal processes (conflicts, demonstrations and violence).

Government

National and local governments believe that local communities have many opportunities to participate in the decision-making process: through public hearings, competitions, auctions, government sessions, *kurultai*, forums, etc. The national government believes that it does not have any trouble engaging the local communities. Some local government officials, by contrast, indicate that local communities' financial difficulties impede them from attending official proceedings, a challenge local governments can sometimes address with local budget funding. However, this is not a long-term solution; they need to find a way to inspire local communities to attend these meetings of their own accord, without monetary incentives.

Government officials believe that because they lack of information, facts and evidence-based arguments, local communities' voices are weak in demanding and promoting their grievances, making it hard for them to influence some decisions: "they need to develop their capacities in environmental, financial and other areas. For instance, they talk a lot in general about environmental consequences of mine development, but never talk about how and why mine development is a threat to the environment. They do not operate with facts and researched information." For local communities to be more effective, they need systematic capacity-building programs.

The government is not entirely certain that local communities can monitor government decisions and policies. It believes that monitoring occurs through the local council deputies and activists, as well as special committees and government commissions, that represent their rights and are actively supported in monitoring processes by other stakeholders—international and local NGOs, activists, and mass media.

In conclusion, the government realizes that local communities' participation is low and that they have

trouble participating and voicing their grievances and recommendations. But the government feels satisfied that its own (legislative) efforts to promote civil society participation in the decision-making process are sufficient, regardless of the fact that said civil society has neither the interest nor capacity to fully engage in these processes.

Capacity-Building Activities

The ability to achieve set objectives is a key global challenge. To increase this capacity, a range of interested stakeholders are promoting agendas and programs that improve people's understanding of key legislation, procedures, and processes, as well as providing them with essential analysis, research, and negotiation skills. To quote the OECD, "Skills have become the global currency of the 21st century. Without proper investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society."⁵⁴ In recent years, any projects implemented by donor-funded NGOs have been followed by capacity-building efforts and technical assistance, and the Talas region is no exception. There have been a number of capacity-building activities directed toward the promotion of EITI, conflict resolution, and building cooperation between stakeholders.

Local Communities

60 percent of respondents have participated in capacity-building activities run by NGOs. Trainings, workshops, and seminars reportedly aimed primarily at increasing the knowledge and enhancing the awareness of local communities on issues including: legal framework, EITI, good governance, transparency and accountability, ecological impacts, etc. Usually, NGOs do not assess the needs of the community before conducting capacity-building workshops; local communities receive trainings and workshops that are part of the NGO's existing advocacy. In the past 5 years, international multilateral and bilateral organizations have actively financed the projects promoting EITI, the enhancement of transparency and accountability, and cooperation between stakeholders in the mining sector. Capacity-building programs included trainings, seminars, and peer-to-peer learning.

Two-thirds of respondents would like to participate in future capacity-building activities. Respondents expressed interest in learning more about: mechanisms for monitoring and analyzing mining policies and decisions, environmental mitigation and offset tools, and beneficial ownership.

Donors

International organizations have implemented various projects in the Kyrgyz mining sector, focusing on transparency and accountability; good governance; EITI standards; mining policy; law, strategy, and adjustment; conflict resolution; and development of social infrastructure. They have used capacity-building programs, technical assistance, consulting, and grant mechanisms as part of trainings/seminars, short-term programs (1–2 weeks), exchange visits, advisory services by national and international experts, and regional dialogue platforms.

Because the government had limited success at informing local communities, this function was taken over by donor-funded NGOs, which inform locals through capacity building programs. As a representative of the donor community acknowledges, "There is a broad interest in getting better informed. There is a lack of regular information from and exchange with the government at the national and also at the local level (it is important to mention that local representatives also do not share information). The main problem is the absence of regular communication, which creates rumors." Donors imply that locals are also interested in capacity-building programs because they want to be capable of promoting and advancing their rights and interests on a par with other powerful stakeholders (i.e., mining companies and the government).

When asked, "How can future capacity building programs be changed? (in terms of focus, methods, objectives, etc.)," donors suggest that capacity-building programs could be moved away from awareness and knowledge enhancement toward capacity development. However, to achieve that shift, the government should elaborate a sophisticated information provision system: "The government has to set up regular communication and exchange mechanisms (there are four main players that have to be taken into account: national government, local representatives,

54 "Natural Resources Management and Development Portal, Case studies: Forest Management," USAID, <https://rmportal.net/library/content/tools/case-studies-by-country>.

local population, and company); all four groups have to be part of the exchange. Capacity-building for the local population has to start with better information about mining economics and has to include openly accessible meetings to avoid rumors. The emphasis for all capacity-building has to be on trust and on regularity. To achieve this, funding has to be provided by the Ministry of Finance—only with such investment will future international investment in Kyrgyzstan be possible.” Other recommendations of donors addressed organizational aspects: the need to assess communities’ needs, expand the audience of capacity-building efforts, and organize events where people live.

To conclude, donors think that the base of capacity-building is awareness enhancement, and that funding should be allocated for sophisticated information exchange on a daily basis. In addition, capacity-building activities should be adapted to local needs and opportunities by focusing on on-the-ground realities rather than the situation in capitals or regional centers.

Government

National and local government support, assist, and cooperate in implementing capacity-building programs on topics such as transparency and accountability; EITI standards; good governance; mining policy; law, strategy, and adjustment; conflict resolution; and social corporate responsibility. They have supported trainings, seminars, national and local conferences, and public hearings.

National government representatives suggest creating a base of literate experts who could provide trustworthy information and enhance local communities’ financial literacy. Representatives of local government, for their part, suggest including new people in capacity-building programs, as well as focusing on social corporate responsibility and environmental themes. They also suggest ensuring that there is a practical component to these trainings, as well as that trainers are well qualified and capable of engaging with local people.

When asked how capacity-building programs should be improved, one local government official said he would recommend changing the format from traditional approaches to innovative ones: “There is a need to change traditional approaches such as trainings, seminars to more practicable ones with the usage of innovative methods and technologies.” Another replied, “Maybe we need to work out new

modules because all the previous themes are similar and have exhausted themselves. Change the structure and methods, as well as inviting new trainees who are practitioners.” Because the trainings are similar to each other, local communities are not interested in participating. A local government representative believes: “They are tired and are not interested because the content of trainings and seminars is always more or less the same. There is a need to develop new interactive trainings with themes and modules that are relevant and urgent and are conducted by competent experts and trainers who explain in simple language without complicating things that are already complicated.”

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis:

First, because the Kyrgyz government so heavily depends on the mining sector, it is naïve for local communities to hope that the moratorium on mining will be continued; most likely, the mines will be operational within a few years. This means that, given the overall political and economic situation, protests are likely to continue, both due to fears of ecological impact and regarding employment and salary issues if the companies start work. These protests will also continue to be used as tools for influencing political elites and their relationship with foreign investors.

Second, although there have been many changes in laws and regulations, which have accentuated the politicization of the mining sector, there is still deep mistrust between local communities and the government.

Third, the approaches and agendas pursued by NGOs, local government, and mining companies to address locals’ needs and concerns are NOT coherent and lack shared perspectives, making tripartite cooperation difficult. The capacity-building programs have learning objectives that are too complex or abstract and do not address communities’ concerns on the ground.

Fourth, the central government wants to generate revenue for budget; it does not have time for systematic and continuous awareness campaigns. National state bodies implement one-shot information campaigns. Moreover, the local government—which is responsible for informing the public—does not perform that function. It does not consider that it has a role in engaging local communities in deci-

sion-making processes, nor does it respond to local communities' needs and concerns.

Fifth, even though there have been opportunities to participate and influence the policies and decisions in the mining sector supported by laws, my survey revealed that local communities' level of participation, as well as their level of information, is insufficient.

Recommendations

To forge coordination and a shared perspective among stakeholders, I recommend the establishment of sustainable tripartite platforms for coordination and cooperation.

To donor-funded NGOs:

1. NGOs working in the mining sector have to learn from the experiences of community-based natural resources management (CBNRM), in particular bio-diverse and protected area management. CBNRM is not a new phenomenon in empowering local communities to manage natural resources; it is well-established, and has had success on a number of continents, including Asia,⁵⁵ Latin America,⁵⁶ and Africa.⁵⁷ The success of CBNRM is correlated to the adaptation of programs to meet each country's needs and priorities. Best practices from these regions and countries can be adopted to meet the demands and challenges facing the mining sector in Kyrgyzstan.
2. NGOs should establish a community council that will represent local communities during tripartite discussion. Members of this council should be elected by the communities every 1-3 years and be accountable to communities. The community council should also take responsibility for informing and consulting locals on important decisions. Thus, it is important for donors to have long-term funding opportunities that will allow them to build the capacity of council members. The council should be able to develop sustainable

income generation, economic, and management programs, based on the community's needs and with the community's approval. The programs should be funded by the social package fund for each community. The establishment and success of councils are in high demand by donors and donor-funded NGOs.

3. Donor-funded NGOs should better assess community needs. They need to use applicable capacity-building activities and intensify their coordination efforts in order to reduce the duplication of trainings and seminars. They should refrain from repetitive training with no clear learning objectives, widen their beneficiaries, and promote innovative and interactive approaches in capacity-building and development. Finally, they should ensure that capacity building programs have long-term programming, because short-term capacity building programs have a "one-shot" effect.

To the national government:

1. The national government must develop realistic long-term development plans and holistic regional development strategies by taking into consideration external and internal factors such as the economic, social, and cultural situation in the regions.
2. National government should hold the local government accountable with regards to their performance and work to implement efficient systems, such as by instituting a performance evaluation process for activities as well as employees.
3. The national government should also devolve more power on mining-sector issues to local government. This will help local government to identify and prevent conflicts and demonstrations before they grow or gain momentum.
4. Consider applying pilot projects for some mine operations. Development of these mines under pilot projects will allow the national government to gain experience and

55 Maria del Mar Delgado-Serrano et al., "Community-Based Management of Environmental Challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean," The Resilience Alliance, 2017, <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol22/iss1/art4/>.

56 Sheona Shackelton and Bruce Campbell, "Empowering Communities to Manage Natural Resources: Case Studies from Southern Africa," USAID, March 2000, http://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/Books/Empowering.pdf.

57 "Special Report: Norway, 'The Rich Cousin,'" *The Economist*, February 2, 2013, <https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21570842-oil-makes-norway-different-rest-region-only-up-point-rich>.

expertise through less costly mistakes and will present an opportunity to experiment with various management models, such as the CBNRM and the Scandinavian model of mining and natural resource management. Norway, the world's eighth largest oil exporter, demonstrates that it has taken into account many common missteps in natural resource management: good governance, economic diversification, the balance of income between peaks and recession, involvement and care for isolated and dispersed communities, development of soft power, etc.⁵⁸

5. Reduce the frequency of changes to the legal framework in the mining sector. The high frequency with which laws are amended in the Kyrgyz Republic, in particular in the mining sector, together with reports on the lack of proper implementation of laws and the high number of ad hoc draft laws produced, indicates that legislative projects are not always sufficiently thought-through at the outset, and then need to undergo numerous revisions. To begin with, there is a need for a better understanding of the importance of good policymaking for good lawmaking. The current policymaking process would thus benefit greatly from further development and systematization. Action plans or legislative agendas cannot substitute for proper policymaking. In addition to the fact that policies in support of proposed legislation are not discussed or developed in detail prior to preparing legislation, an overwhelming emphasis seems to be put on legislation as the principal, if not the only, means of achieving policy goals.
6. Promote international initiatives such as EITI for greater transparency, accountability, public participation, and good governance in the mining and conservation sectors.

To local governments:

1. Local government must develop and identify the activities that meet the demands of the local population and are in line with national policies for economic and social growth.

They should also have the capacity—and be given the opportunity—to influence national level policy. Local government must be given the opportunity (through capacity-building programs) to act as an honest broker between local communities and the national government.

2. Another key issue: the sustainability of community councils, which could be achieved by involving them in decision-making, monitoring, and evaluation processes with regard to mining activities in their villages. This would reduce the workload of and pressure on local government, as well as the stigma of cooperation. It would also increase local government's capacity to share information with local communities while making it harder for them to withhold it.
3. In order to avoid future conflict with local communities, local government must be able to use international best practices for monitoring mine activities and accounting for revenues and expenses from mine development.
4. Local government should involve local communities in the decision-making process by developing local development plans and implementing requirements and policies. This would be best achieved through community council representatives. Both local government and members of community councils should develop long-term development plans in line with the mining contracts and agreements, and use the revenues from the mine development efficiently, allowing them to and balance incomes across peak and recession periods.

To mining companies:

1. Mining companies should involve and cooperate with the community council in their activities, such as hiring, social corporate responsibility, environmental monitoring, etc.
2. They should comply with IFC Performance Standard 6. According to the standard, the mining company must demonstrate that the proposed development is legally permitted; follow any protected area management plan;

⁵⁸ "Performance 6 Standard," IFC, http://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/policies-standards/performance-standards/ps6.

consult with relevant managers, affected communities, indigenous peoples, and other stakeholders; and implement additional

activities to “promote and enhance the conservation aims and effective management of the area.”⁵⁹

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PART IV. GRASSROOTS PEACEBUILDING MECHANISMS

Chapter 13.

Grassroots Peacebuilding: Cross-Border Cooperation in the Ferghana Valley

Diana Mamatova¹ (2017)

Borders and border issues have enormous implications for peacebuilding. A bottom-up perspective is especially important, as people on the ground are the best resource for building and sustaining peace. Cross-border grassroots peacebuilding practices have shown how state borders do not simply divide people into territories, but in fact underlie their everyday interactions. Peacebuilding does not need to be imposed, but rather supported by cross-border communal engagement to strengthen social cohesion. This paper looks at grassroots peacebuilding through the example of formal and informal cross-border cooperation in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley.

Referred to as the heart of Central Asia and located at the intersection of three Central Asian countries, the Ferghana Valley brings together Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. The overall population of the Valley is nearly 12 million; it comprises almost one-third of

the total population of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and close to one-quarter of the population of Uzbekistan.² This is a highly populated area, with an average population density of around 360 persons per square kilometer.³ The Ferghana Valley brings together states and people with common histories, similar cultures, and nearly identical infrastructure, yet it is politically and linguistically divided. Since the 1990s, security dynamics in the region have deteriorated. Disputes over land, road use, water and irrigation, pastures, trade, ethno-national identity, and more continue to cause cross-border incidents that sometimes escalate into conflicts.

In view of the imperative to secure peace, this policy paper looks at examples of cooperation between cross-border communities and discusses how these interactions can sustain grassroots peacebuilding. It argues that there are many examples of

Map 1. Ferghana Valley



Source: "Osh and the Ferghana Valley," *Geohistory*, <http://geohistory.today/osh-ferghana-Valley/>

1 Frederick Starr, ed., *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), ix.

2 Anchita Borthakur, "An Analysis of the Conflict in the Ferghana Valley," *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2017): 335.

productive and meaningful cooperation between cross-border communities. This interaction responds to the needs of the people living around the borders, builds trust between cross-border communities, and consequently sustains peace on the ground.

Regrettably, the current policy approach of the region's governments on border issues and peacebuilding is to view these everyday interactions and practices through the lens of security—and to respond with more border posts, more border officials, more checkpoints, and more restrictions, thereby making it more difficult to communicate and collaborate across borders. While securitization is part of nation-building and state-building processes, states should place greater emphasis on its effects on ordinary people and balance border security with the everyday needs of border dwellers. Indeed, border dwellers resist such “securitization” on the part of governments and find ways to continue their grassroots cooperation, by means formal and informal. These interactions and collaborations at and across the borders have secondary, yet important, benefits that are conducive to building trust and facilitating peace at the grassroots level.

Grassroots peacebuilding could be even more effective if state policies were to support grassroots efforts. This paper first discusses the drivers of cross-border tensions and conflicts in the Ferghana Valley. It then revisits the current policy approach to border issues and peacebuilding and the limitations thereof, before discussing existing grassroots practices at the borders that sustain peace. Finally, the paper concludes with policy recommendations.

Drivers of Cross-Border Tensions and Conflicts

The Soviet Union drew the borders of the Central Asian states during the 1920s and 1930s. The process of administrative and national delineation

was complex, led by Lenin's decision to authorize maps of Turkestan and then assess the possibility of merging or dividing areas of Uzbekia, Kyrgyzia, and Turkmenia.⁴ Moscow had to negotiate the borders with the Central Asian elites, uniting national groups and dividing what had been the vast region of Turkestan in order to avoid the consolidation of Muslim leaders. Local elites and ordinary people alike petitioned Moscow to rule in their favor over contested cities, villages, and areas. Interestingly, territorial issues during those years generally had a low profile, and the redrawing of administrative boundaries did not have an immediate effect on local populations, since borders remained more or less open, boundary lines were not enforced, and local institutions were weak.⁵

However, with the independence of the Central Asian states in 1991, territorial issues began to present challenges to cross-border communities. The administrative borders of Soviet times became real, a fragmentation that led to “a painful and unpleasant lesson for the local population.”⁶ In the two decades between 1989 and 2009, some 20 dangerous conflicts took place in the Valley.⁷ Of the reported incidents between 2010 and 2013, a total of 62 occurred on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border and 102 on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁸ Over the course of 2014, the Kyrgyzstani authorities registered a total of 37 border incidents in the region: 32 on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border and 5 on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁹ In 2015, 10 border incidents took place, all of which occurred on either the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border or the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.¹⁰ Some smaller incidents presumably went unrecorded by the authorities, hence the actual number of incidents may be higher. Some incidents involve the use of weapons and result in casualties. For example, between 2014 and mid-2015, 16 incidents involved the use of weapons, causing 16 casualties and leaving 12 people wounded.¹¹

3 Sergey Abashin, Kamoludin Abdullaev, Ravshan Abdullaev, and Arslan Koichiev, “Soviet Rule and the Delineation of Borders in the Ferghana Valley, 1917–1930,” in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 94–118.

4 Ibid.

5 Anara Tabyshalieva, “Central Asia: Imaginary and Real Borders,” *The Central Asia–Caucasus Analyst* (2001), <http://bit.ly/2rqpTQo>.

6 Baktybek Beshimov, Pulat Shozimov, and Murat Bakhadyrov, “A New Phase in the History of the Ferghana Valley, 1992–2008,” in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 224.

7 Anna Matveeva, “Divided We Fall...Or Rise? Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Border Dilemma,” *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2017): 10, <http://bit.ly/2n03vIe>.

8 Data from the Kyrgyzstan Border Troops Information Department.

9 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 10.

10 Data from the Kyrgyzstan Border Troops Information Department.

11 Borthakur, “An Analysis of the Conflict,” 338.

Various explanations have been proposed for the conflict dynamics at the borders in the Ferghana Valley. Yet most of the conflicts can be understood through the prism of securitization of borders, competition over resources, and growing nationalism.

Securitization of Borders

Soviet maps were drawn and redrawn in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s, resulting in varying border lines in the Ferghana Valley. The elite gave contested lands to one country and then another. As a result of Soviet “divide-and-rule” policy, the borders were generally ill-defined and ill-suited to the on-the-ground realities of the territory, as they did not respect ethnic or geographic spaces. To wit, 8 enclaves and exclaves were created in the Ferghana Valley: four Uzbek and two Tajik enclaves in Kyrgyzstan and two enclaves—one Tajik, one Kyrgyz—in Uzbekistan.¹²

Despite more than two decades of attempts to re-define the borders and resolve conflicts in the border region, incidents and conflicts of varying intensity and scale continue to occur in the borderland. As the newly independent states attempted to establish borders in the Ferghana Valley in the early 1990s, arguments evolved around two claims: first, claims over disputed territories (linked to the pre-Soviet history

or the use of different Soviet-era maps); and second, claims regarding actual land use (linked to ethnicity or citizenship).¹³

In more than 25 years of independence, the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have managed to delimit only around 60 percent of their mutual border (519 km/322 miles out of 978 km/608 miles); negotiations continue over the remaining 459 km (285 miles).¹⁴ In total, the two governments have held 27 bilateral meetings on border delimitation, including those on 58 contested sections, especially in the Isfara river valley.¹⁵

In the case of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border, the situation began to change after Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the new Uzbek president, came to power in late 2016 and started promoting open borders and trade in the region. In fall 2017, the two countries signed a historic agreement covering 85 percent of the border, at which time they set the goal of agreeing on the remaining 15 percent by the end of 2018.¹⁶ The mutual border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan is 1,378 km (856 miles) long, with 1,170 km (727 miles) of agreed border lines and 208 km (129 miles) contested.¹⁷

The unclear international boundaries in the Ferghana Valley during the early 1990s kept border

Map 2. Enclaves in the Ferghana Valley



Source: “Ferghana Valley Enclaves: Travel Advice,” Caravanistan, <https://caravanistan.com/border-crossings/ferghana-valley-enclaves/>

12 Christine Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation Disputes in the Ferghana Valley* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 113.

13 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 10.

14 Abdulkhaloq Kholigi and Nabijon Rahimov, “Disputable Territories as Hotbeds of Tension on the Border: Political Problems of International Relations; Global and Regional Development” (2015), 188-96, <http://bit.ly/2Drpte8>.

15 Alisher Kurmanov, chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, stated as much in his speech at the CACI/AFPC Forum on Capitol Hill, “Uzbekistan in Transition: Action Strategy for Reforms,” Washington, DC, October 17, 2017.

16 “Atambaev podpishet solidnyi paket dokumentov vo vremia vizita v Uzbekistan,” *K-News*, October 5, 2017, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2BjzuIv>.

17 Nick Megoran, “Rethinking the Study of International Boundaries: A Biography of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Boundary,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 2 (2012): 464-81.

controls to a minimum. As the political and economic trajectories of these countries began to diverge, however, differentiated border policies started to emerge. The period between 1998 and 2000, in particular, was considered a border crisis: religious extremists bombed Tashkent, and in 1999 the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) invaded southern Kyrgyzstan and neighboring regions in Tajikistan, prompting tightened border controls.¹⁸ Yet it was Uzbekistan that took the most severe measures, efforts that would be redoubled following the Andijon riots of 2005.¹⁹ Tashkent suspended cross-border bus routes; sealed the borders; deployed more soldiers, border guards, customs officers, and special forces units; established new control posts; upgraded existing facilities; demolished cross-border bridges; closed border crossings; and even scattered landmines across areas of its frontier bordering Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.²⁰ Since 2000, Central Asian countries have continuously strengthened their emerging security discourse, a discourse financially supported by the international community in the name of the “global war on terror.”²¹

Competition over Resources

Typically, border incidents and conflicts start because of disputes impacting livelihoods. Agriculture and cattle breeding have been central to economic activity in the Ferghana Valley for centuries and are the primary source of many families’ livelihoods. Most of the conflicts in the region are caused by competition over access to—and distribution of—two major resources: water and land.²² As such, the highest number of conflicts and incidents often occur during spring and fall, the former period being when economic activities and cross-border interactions of local communities at the borderland begin and the latter being when the agricultural season is in full swing.

Ferghana Valley agriculture plays an important role in the economies of its constituent states. The area of cultivated land is growing, and the comparative figures between 1991 and 2006 are instructive: in Uzbekistan, the area of cultivated land expanded from around 15 percent of the total area to 40 percent; in Kyrgyzstan, from 40 percent to 50 percent; and in Tajikistan, from 13 percent to 26 percent.²³ There are claims on all sides that borders are being shifted back and forth in pursuit of fertile agricultural land.

Agricultural lands also include rangeland or land used for grazing livestock. During the Soviet period, states and collective farms used to sign special long-term lease agreements to allow animals to graze in cross-border pastures.²⁴ After independence, maintaining similarly close economic relations between border countries became more difficult. Indeed, pastures are a persistent cause of cross-border incidents. In 2014, for instance, an incident occurred over the pastures in Kok-Tash village on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. The border guards exchanged fire, leading to casualties.²⁵

The situation is exacerbated by additional problems, including the degradation of pastures, the outbreak of epidemics among livestock, livestock theft, and the destruction of cultivated land when livestock are herded through it.²⁶ In 2013, the Kyrgyzstani side reported the loss of 5-10 percent of its livestock while herding its cattle through Vorukh. The Tajikistani authorities denied such claims, countering with the contention that 150 of their own livestock had been stolen by the Kyrgyzstanis, and also charging the Kyrgyzstani side with having damaged cultivated land and crops during the cattle crossings.²⁷

Access to and distribution of water resources is yet another major cause of cross-border conflicts. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the region’s major suppliers of water, a resource central to the economic

18 Sayidfozil Zokirov and Khojamahmad Umarov, “Economic Development in the Ferghana Valley Since 1991,” in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 239.

19 Ibid; Abashin et al., “Soviet Rule.”

20 Megoran, “Rethinking the Study,” 464-81.

21 Ibid.

22 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall”; Kholiqi and Rahimov, “Disputable Territories”; Borthakur, “An Analysis of the Conflict.”

23 Zokirov and Umarov, “Economic Development in the Ferghana Valley,” 232.

24 Christine Bichsel, Kholnazar Mukhabbatov, and Lenzi Sherfedinov, “Land, Water, and Ecology,” in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 255.

25 The Editors, “Mutual Distrust Feeds Tensions on Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border,” *World Politics Review*, April 6, 2016, accessed October 20, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2mHnWsV>.

26 Asel Murzakulova and Irene Mestre, “Natural Resource Management Dynamics in Border Communities of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” Mountain Societies Research Institute, University of Central Asia, April 2016, <http://bit.ly/2n0U9wJ>.

27 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 10.

development of the Valley.²⁸ The Syr Darya, which originates in Kyrgyzstan, is one of the major rivers serving the Aral Sea basin and is the key water source for the valley. Less than 15 percent of the water of the Syr Darya is allocated to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between them, while Uzbekistan alone receives more than 50 percent.²⁹ During the Soviet period, the countries in the Valley shared in a highly integrated network of large irrigation canals, water reservoirs, and other infrastructure. With independence, by contrast, border communities have witnessed numerous low-level disputes over access to water.³⁰

Growing Nationalism

The Ferghana Valley has always been treated as a zone of social diversity, pluralism and multiple identities coexisting side by side, but today inhabitants of the three states are oriented toward three different—and distant—capital centers.³¹ The countries' political elites take every opportunity to bolster nationalism and emphasize ethnicity. Tashkent, for example, in support of its border militarization, portrayed Uzbekistan as “a united and prosperous historic homeland of the Uzbek people, governed by a strong president and standing up to the insidious threats posed by its neighbors.”³² Clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and its environs in June 2010 brought the issue of ethnicity to the fore. Scholars argued variously that ethnic discord provoked the events,³³ that ethnic communities mobilized in response to political uncertainty,³⁴ and that the events were the result of growing alienation between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities, “which over time developed a mutual antipathy, and lacked a shared vision of the future.”³⁵

This is not to argue that ethnicity per se drives conflict. Rather, ethnicity is politicized by politicians' nationalist rhetoric, the border regime, and the availability and allocation of resources. For border communities, disputes are not purely “ethnic,” but griev-

ances and accusations can easily be assigned to an ethnic group; “communities [come] to more readily affiliate with their ethnic groups and tend to stereotype the opponent in increasingly ethnic terms.”³⁶ As a result, all the socio-economic factors that cause border incidents and conflicts feed the existing inter-ethnic tensions in the valley. It is often the case that border conflict over the use of water between Kyrgyz- and Tajik-identified villages, such as Ak-Sai and Vorukh, cause clashes between young men mobilized along ethnic lines.³⁷ In the long term, ethnic divisions associated with border conflicts only reinforce negative stereotypes and cause the hardening of ethnic and national identities.³⁸

Overview of Current Policies and Effects of Border Militarization

One of the major issues in post-independence Ferghana Valley is what replaces the older order of Soviet trans-border commonality and interdependence, and how this order can sustain cross-border peace. States increase border security and militarize the border in the name of nation-formation and state-building without taking into account the effects that these policies have on ordinary people at the borders. The current policy approach taken by the authorities in the three countries in fact securitizes normal, genuine, everyday interactions and negotiations between ordinary people. The militarization of borders results in increased tension, frustration, and resentment between the states and ordinary people in border communities. It has a negative effect on familiar economic practices, personal relations and transport routes. This section looks at some of Kyrgyzstan's key policies on border issues and peacebuilding, as well as discussing the effects of border militarization on grassroots interactions.

28 “Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential,” *International Crisis Group Asia Report* 33 (2002), accessed October 20, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2n0n1Eo>.

29 Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation*, 21.

30 “Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential.”

31 Starr, *Ferghana Valley*, 395.

32 Megoran, “Rethinking the Study,” 464-81.

33 Scott Radnitz, “Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan,” *Kyrgyzstan Recovery and Reformation Policy Perspectives*, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* (2010), <http://bit.ly/2n1RhPr>.

34 Erica Marat, “Nations in Transit 2011: Kyrgyzstan,” Freedom House, <http://bit.ly/2n0lhuZ>.

35 Anna Matveeva, Igor Savin, and Bahrom Faizullaev, “Kyrgyzstan: Tragedy in the South,” *Ethnopolitics Papers* 17 (April 2012), <http://bit.ly/2n0UFLc>.

36 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall.”

37 Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 59.

38 “Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential.”

Current State Policies on Border Issues and Peacebuilding

A number of major policy documents recognize border and peacebuilding issues as key security challenges. The National Security Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic³⁹ highlights the potential occurrence of inter-ethnic conflicts, the existence of competing claims regarding borders and the use of water resources, and the lack of border delimitation with neighboring countries. In response to border and peacebuilding issues, the state seems to offer various approaches: securitization of borders, inter-ethnic unity and conflict prevention, and economic development of border territories. Several policies also mention the importance of natural resource management and simplifying border crossings for people, goods and services.

The National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic 2013–2017,⁴⁰ the country's five-year development plan, highlights:

1. Securitization of the borders, including completion of legal delimitation of the national borders with neighboring states and treating borders as an important element of “national security” and “protection from various destructive forces”;
2. Economic development of border areas—the need to “create favorable conditions for the free movement of goods, services and labor” and “stimulate economic development of border territories”; and
3. Promoting peacebuilding—it calls for “unity of the nation as a prerequisite for preserving statehood and successful development,” “fighting ethnic intolerance,” and the “creation of a system of conflict prevention with the involvement of state agencies, local government and civil society through the establishment of consultative and advisory bodies.”

a. Policies on Border Management

There are a number of specific policies aimed at managing border and related issues. In 2012, Kyrgyzstan

developed its National Strategy for the Creation and Implementation of the Integrated State Border Management System for the period up to 2022,⁴¹ identifying key challenges to border security, such as incomplete delimitation and demarcation of borders and the exacerbation of water and energy problems in the region. The Action Plan for this Strategy calls for improving border delimitation and demarcation; simplifying procedures for transporting persons and goods across the border; developing inter-state agreements on common usage of summer pastures and territories used for animal crossings; and a list of other securitized action steps, such as building a new border checkpoint.

In addition, the Law on Conferring Special Status On Separate Frontier Territories of the Kyrgyz Republic and their Development⁴² prioritizes the security and socio-economic development of border territories and calls for the rational use of natural resources in border areas. Based on this Law, Kyrgyzstan developed the State Program on Security and Socio-Economic Development of Certain Border Areas of the Kyrgyz Republic with Special Status for 2013–2016 and Action Plan,⁴³ which calls for strengthening control over illegal movement and grazing of animals from neighboring states on the territory of Kyrgyzstan; tightening the regime governing foreign citizens' residency in border areas; and introducing a ban on the sale of land plots, houses, and other objects located in border areas of Kyrgyzstan to foreign individuals and legal entities, as well as stateless persons.

Furthermore, special state structures and commissions were formed to work specifically on the issue of border delimitation and demarcation. The Department on Border Delimitation and Development of Border Territories under the Government Office of the Kyrgyz Republic⁴⁴ coordinates the work of the relevant ministries and state agencies, including the Interstate Commission on Border Delimitation and Demarcation. The Department also collects information on border issues, produces analysis, and organizes expert

39 National Security Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2001.

40 National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2013–2017.

41 National Strategy for the Creation and Implementation of the Integrated State Border Management System of the Kyrgyz Republic for the Period up to 2022 and Action Plan, 2012.

42 Law on Conferring Special Status on Separate Frontier Territories of the Kyrgyz Republic and their Development.

43 Action Plan for State Program on Security and Socio-Economic Development of Certain Border Areas of the Kyrgyz Republic with Special Status for 2013–2016.

44 Statute on Department of Border Delimitation and Development of Border Territories under the Government Office of the Kyrgyz Republic.

groups to support the commission's work. In addition, a government commission on border issues was formed to coordinate the work of state delegations on the delimitation and demarcation of state borders between the Kyrgyz Republic and neighboring states, as well as settle border, water, and land issues with Kyrgyzstan's neighbors. The inter-state commission on border delimitation and demarcation, for its part, was established to produce normative instructions on border demarcation, organize inter-state meetings, delimit the border, form and manage working groups on border demarcation, and submit protocols on agreed borders and maps for approval.

b. Peacebuilding Policies

In addition to state policies on border issues, Kyrgyzstan also has specific policies on peacebuilding. The Concept of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic⁴⁵ references border, land and water issues in the border areas and their effects on inter-ethnic relations, highlighting the need for the state to develop and adopt a special program on the socio-economic development of border territories. The Concept also calls for establishing an effective early-warning system for conflicts with a potential ethnic dimension, and encourages the involvement of all social groups, public organizations, ethno-cultural unions, religious organizations, and territorial and social groups in the process of harmonizing inter-ethnic relations.

Following the June 2010 inter-ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, the government requested that the UN respond with a plan to promote peace and trust in the country. As a result, the Peacebuilding Priorities Plan⁴⁶ was developed by UN agencies, approved by the special Joint Steering Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, and financed by the UN Peacebuilding Fund to the tune of US\$15 million. One of the Plan's key priorities is the reduction of local-level tensions through the promotion of dialogue between local authorities and the local population on natural resource management. The relevant UN agencies had completed the implementation of the specified projects as of 2016; a second Peacebuilding Plan is currently being developed.

Overall, the current state policies on border and peacebuilding issues are directed, by and large, toward greater securitization of the borders. They call for more border posts, better security, strengthening control over crossings, tightening the residency regime, etc. While securitizing the border is justified and necessary for any state, the question is *how* this securitization is done and whether its effects on people at the borders are considered. While current policies identify and address key strategic areas—such as socio-economic development of the border territories, inter-ethnic unity and tolerance, natural resource management, and the simplification of border crossings—they generally remain broad and lack specific strategies. The current policy approach, with its limited number of detailed plans for achieving the announced strategic outcomes, fails to recognize the important role that border dwellers could play in peacebuilding outcomes, thereby limiting these communities' participation in decision-making and grassroots peacebuilding. Not only do current state policies need further elaboration, but they also need to be revisited, as state policies aimed at enforcing securitized borders often negatively affect people living around the borders. They create obstacles to continuing usual interactions and collaborations, and at times even cause violence at the individual, family, or communal level.

Militarization of Borders and its Effects on Grassroots Interactions

The militarization of borders has an enormous effect on daily life and cross-border interaction for many people in the Ferghana Valley. Since the establishment of the new border regime, communities have experienced a constant "sense of danger" while crossing the border, as the rules of engagement between officials and civilians remain uncertain and depend on unequal relations of power. Border officials often use common areas on the border to generate revenues from the people crossing the border.⁴⁷ As a villager from Ak-Sai (on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border) observed, "[The government] started putting up all sorts of posts—customs posts and border posts—and all those stop people from living [*vse meshaiut liudiam zhit*]..."⁴⁸

45 Concept of Strengthening Unity of People and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2013.

46 Peacebuilding Priorities Plan for the Kyrgyz Republic.

47 Reeves, *Border Work*, 141-72.

48 Reeves, *Border Work*, 47.

The militarization of borders has also meant enforcement of the border regime at community level. A Kyrgyzstani Uzbek estimates, for instance, that Uzbekistan demolished some 250 homes on the Uzbekistani side of Dostuk (on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border) in 2007, giving land and small monetary compensation to those who had to find a new place to live. Despite some popular resistance, the state—representing authority and order—was ultimately able to enforce its will. Likewise, in 2010, Chek, another village on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, found itself facing up to the state's enforcement of the border regime. Owing to a border delimitation agreement between the authorities of the two countries, a “wire border” was put on the land where bulldozers had demolished houses.⁴⁹ Communities, families, and livelihoods were divided.

Since Uzbekistan introduced a visa regime for citizens of Tajikistan, Tajikistani students traveling from Khujand (in Tajikistan) to Osh (in Kyrgyzstan) require visas to pass through the Sokh enclave, which is administered by Uzbekistan. As such, students prefer to take the longer, rocky, and uncomfortable back road than experience delays, face humiliation, and give bribes while crossing the border without visas.⁵⁰ Sevara, a student, explained how the militarization of borders affected her experience of driving from Khujand to Osh for her studies.⁵¹ She complained that whereas before 1997 she took one bus and spent eight hours on the road, since 2000—with the new border posts and changes to the visa regime—it takes her thirteen hours on five different buses.

The militarization of borders has also meant a sharp reduction in cross-border transit and trade, creating inconveniences and economic hardships for the area's inhabitants.⁵² According to an International Crisis Group report, since independence and new restrictions at the borders, the volume of trade has

decreased, as the local population has found itself harassed and humiliated by border guards at customs posts.⁵³ Throughout the centuries, trade has been vital to the prosperity and economic security of the Ferghana Valley, which represents the most densely populated potential market in the region. Small-scale trade is especially key for neighboring regions of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where it sustains thousands of people.⁵⁴ Experts argue that there is local demand for deeper economic cooperation,⁵⁵ something that cannot be developed without “economic and human bridges between constituent national zones of the Valley.”⁵⁶

The militarized border regime has also affected the cultural links between trans-boundary family networks.⁵⁷ To take the example of Chek village, which is situated between the Jalalabad and Andijon regions on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, marriage with someone from the other side of the border was common for generations.⁵⁸ Some border villages had family members in both countries and with mixed citizenships; at different points in their lives, residents lived and worked on both sides of the border.⁵⁹ Often, however, people were unable to visit each other or attend funerals and marriages across the border. An ethnically Tajik man, who was born and lived in a Tajik-majority village in the Uzbek SSR but moved to Dushanbe, to study and work, always wanted to be buried in his ancestral land. After his death, a group of his relatives carried the corpse along the 120-mile road, but the guards did not allow them to enter Uzbekistan.⁶⁰ From a legal standpoint, this was simple adherence to the law, but culturally it was unacceptable.

Some local communities were able to resist the enforcement of border militarization. Residents of the Uzbek village of Sharhabad, a border community located within the Soh enclave in Kyrgyzstan,

49 Nick Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 179.

50 Reeves, *Border Work*, 148.

51 Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia*, 154.

52 Megoran, “Rethinking the Study,” 464–81.

53 “Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential.”

54 World Bank, 2007. Quoted in Bartłomiej Kaminski et al., “‘Asiaregio’: An Institutional Model to Deepen Integration in Central Asia's Border Regions,” *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies* 2, no. 3 (2010): 347–60.

55 Bartłomiej Kaminski, Matin Kholmatov, Saumya Mitra, and Gaël Raballand, “‘Asiaregio’: An Institutional Model to Deepen Integration in Central Asia's Border Regions,” *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies* 2, no. 3 (2010): 347–60.

56 S. Frederick Starr, “Conclusion,” in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011).

57 Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia*, 157.

58 *Ibid.*, 144.

59 *Ibid.*, 157.

60 Reeves, *Border Work*.

prevented Kyrgyz guards from establishing a mobile checkpoint in 2003.⁶¹ Initially, the post was removed only temporarily, but the locals continued to express their opposition. Negotiations with state officials took place, angry crowds threw stones at the border guards, and the checkpoint was ultimately removed.

Other border dwellers have found creative ways to resist the new rules imposed by border regimes and overcome the challenges posed. In Chek village, when the Uzbek authorities prohibited border crossings by car, the local population used donkey carts, parked their cars on one side of the border and walked the remaining distance, or built temporary bridges and passes.⁶² Reportedly, local communities know every checkpoint and unofficial route, allowing them to maximize their profits as traders or their efficiency as travelers, whether by cutting wires or bribing border officials. That said, border dwellers seek to continue their usual interaction and cooperation across borders; as such, they tend to resist or avoid the securitized regime rather than attempting to exploit it to their advantage.

Cross-Border Interactions at the Grassroots Level That Sustain Peace

Cross-border interaction between community members is unavoidable. Border dwellers cope with the effects of securitization and find ways to continue their everyday interaction at the grassroots level through formal and informal practices. This cooperation is meaningful and productive for people living in the borderlands, as it meets their everyday needs and sustains their lives. Most importantly, this cooperation has secondary benefits that are conducive to building trust between cross-border communities, thereby facilitating and sustaining peace on the ground. Examples of cross-border cooperation are evident in two major areas: resource-based interaction, such as water, irrigation canals, and pasturelands; and economic activities at the border, such as trade.

Resource-Based Cross-Border Interactions

a. Water and Irrigation Canals

Cross-border water management is rather complicated as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have taken somewhat different approaches to the issue. Kyrgyzstan was the first in the region to establish Water User Associations for the operation and maintenance of irrigation systems at the local level in a more decentralized manner. Tajikistan also established Water User Associations, but under the authority of State Water Institutions. However, due to different institutional models, the two states have yet to harmonize their approach to water management.⁶³ In addition, administrative procedures on issues like cross-border maintenance of irrigation infrastructure are complicated. For example, Uzbek authorities from Andijon province report that cross-border maintenance with Kyrgyzstan would require a joint agreement on the need for maintenance, details of all persons and vehicles to cross the border, and a number of official letters requesting permission from different Kyrgyzstani authorities, not to mention compliance with the more stringent regulations imposed by Uzbekistan.⁶⁴

Cross-border water management is even more complicated when it comes to regulating conflicts related to border dwellers' comparative access to—and share of—water. Water management policies across the border focus on technical matters and lack guidance on conflict management and resolution. A review of treaties covering 123 small transboundary tributaries in the Syr Darya Basin concluded, among other findings, that most of these treaties were narrowly focused on “hard,” or technical, issues such as water allocation (98 treaties) or operation and maintenance (15 treaties) rather than “soft” or peripheral issues such as conflict resolution mechanisms.⁶⁵

Yet there are examples of community-based water management practices at the border. Indeed, some argue that cooperation on water issues occurs more at district and provincial level than it does at national level.⁶⁶ Wegerich et al. discuss the case of Syrdarya-

61 Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia*, 168.

62 Ibid, 164.

63 Murzakulova and Mestre, “Natural Resource Management.”

64 Kai Wegerich, Jusipbek Kazbekov, Firdavs Kabilov, and Nozilakhon Mukhamedova, “Meso-Level Cooperation on Transboundary Tributaries and Infrastructure in the Ferghana Valley,” *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 28, no. 3 (2012): 525-43.

65 Bunyod Holmatov, Jonathan Lautze, and Jusipbek Kazbekov, “Tributary-Level Transboundary Water Law in the Syr Darya: Overlooked Stories of Practical Water Cooperation,” *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 16 (2016): 873-907.

66 Stephen Lam, “Cooperation in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands: Habitus, Affinity, Networks, Conditions” (PhD diss., Kings College London, 2008), <http://bit.ly/2mXhmiy>.

Sokh Basin Irrigation System Administration, noting that despite the securitization of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, workers still cross the borders informally to carry out maintenance work on water facilities. They avoid crossing the border at official border posts, where they would be arrested by border guards.⁶⁷ There are also examples of informal arrangements regarding water distribution. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement on the issue in the 1980s, but Wegerich et al. indicated that it had still not been implemented as of 2009.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, water officials in the cross-border provinces discuss water distribution from common sources over the phone every week.⁶⁹ There are also still cases where pump stations and other water management infrastructure are located in one country but are the property of another.

Another example of cooperation between cross-border communities relates to the common use of water. The Isfara River, for example, divides and unites communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.⁷⁰ Myrza-Patcha village, located in the administrative district of the city of Isfana (in Batken region, Kyrgyzstan), is not included into the hydrographic zone administered by the city Water User Association and instead relies on water from the Isfana River. This river is also the major source of water for people living in the Navruz *mahallah* (neighborhood) of neighboring Korgoncho village, Tajikistan. The Isfara River does not have any water intake structures; in the event of a mudslide, residents of both cross-border communities organize *ashar* (collective labor) and clean the river bed communally.

Cross-border communities also cooperate when it comes to maintaining shared irrigation canals, which often start in one country and end in another. The canal in Samarkandek village (in the Batken region) channels its water downstream to villages across the border in Tajikistan. Local residents from

the two countries share this canal and rely on its water. In spring, landslides regularly trap the water in Samarkandek and impede it from flowing downstream. When this happens, border communities cooperate to address the common problem.⁷¹

Finally, local dwellers cooperate across borders over the use of the community canal system. In her anthropological studies, Reeves highlights the importance of the canal system and its flaws as a marker of social relationships at the borders.⁷² The so-called *aryk* (ditch) network is a community-based means of regulating water flow and its distribution between upstream and downstream communities. For instance, a villager from Gaz, in Kyrgyzstan, knows that he/she drinks the same water as an inhabitant of the downstream village of Hushiar, across the border in Uzbekistan. All this resource-based interdependence maintains cooperation between cross-border community members.

b. Pastures

During the Soviet era, it was customary for livestock from Tajikistan to graze in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan.⁷³ With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of various policies by the Central Asian states, joint pasture use became a challenge.

A new Law on Pastures in Kyrgyzstan advanced the development of decentralized and community-based management of agro-pastoral resources with pasture users' associations.⁷⁴ However, community-level participation has not yet matured: the local population does not represent their interests through formally established democratic mechanisms, and sees the pasture users' associations as agencies that control the use of resources, impose taxes, and exclude some people from decision-making.⁷⁵ In Tajikistan, meanwhile, pastures are not recognized as a distinct land type; land tenure falls under the management of local authorities and Local State Forest

67 Wegerich et al., "Meso-Level Cooperation."

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Murzakulova and Mestre, "Natural Resource Management." Cited in Elizabeth Dusik and Mayya Nurmamedova, "Inter-State Cooperation and Joint Planning and Management of Transboundary River Basins—The Example of the Isfara River Basin," *Policy Brief 02/2015*.

71 Anonymous interlocutor who works in the development sector on the Kyrgyzstan side of the border. Phone conversation with the author, May 2017.

72 Reeves, *Border Work*, 107.

73 Irene Mestre, Aliya Ibraimova, and Bilimbek Azhibekov, "Conflicts over Pasture Resources in the Kyrgyz Republic," CAMP Alatau Public Foundation, June 2013, <https://goo.gl/LxsFU1>.

74 Jyldyz Shigaeva et al., "Decentralizing Governance of Agropastoral Systems in Kyrgyzstan: An Assessment of Recent Pasture Reforms," Mountain Research and Development, February 2016.

75 Shigaeva et al., "Decentralizing Governance."

Management Enterprises, with an option for herders to hold a rent agreement with the government or inherit user rights.⁷⁶ As a result, states employ different mechanisms of power distribution between national and local authorities and assign different roles in the pasture management process to community residents or members of the pasture committee.

According to the Land Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, foreigners cannot legally acquire land plots.⁷⁷ All pasturelands belong to the Kyrgyz Republic and renting out land is illegal. For Tajik herders to be able to use Kyrgyz pastures, both governments need to sign an inter-state agreement on leasing pasturelands. An important bilateral agreement on pasture lease has been pending since 2008.⁷⁸ This leaves Tajikistani farmers in a state of uncertainty and the Kyrgyzstani government without the economic benefits to be had from renting out pastures.

In response to the legal gridlock and in light of their mutual needs, cross-border communities continue their historical interaction and cooperation on common pasture use via informal mechanisms. There are different levels of established cooperation: informal arrangements on the use of pastures are made between shepherds, between the relevant pasture committees on both sides of the border, or between Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani heads of villages or local governments.⁷⁹ This trans-border practice is visible today between Soghd and Batken: livestock owned by Soghd shepherds is grazed in Kyrgyzstan for a service fee.⁸⁰ Another example is the case of Chorkuh village in Tajikistan, which does not have its own pastures, compelling Tajikistani farmers to graze their livestock in the Karavshin and Kashambish pastures in Kyrgyzstan.⁸¹ To avoid dealing with border guards, livestock is sometimes also taken to Kyrgyzstani pastures through the gardens on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border.⁸² Some residents of border

communities claim that livestock from Tajikistan is grazed informally on Kyrgyzstani pastures as though it were livestock raised in Kyrgyzstan.⁸³

A similar example of cooperation on joint pastures use can be found between residents of Myrza-Patcha village in Kyrgyzstan and the Navruz *mahallah* (neighborhood) in Tajikistan.⁸⁴ Residents of the Tajikistani village do not have pastures attached to their territory, hence they graze their cattle in the pastures of Myrza-Patcha. It is not entirely clear who on the Kyrgyzstani side creates grazing opportunities for Tajikistani shepherds and receives payment for this. People in the communities are aware that this is informal but recognize the need and see it as a common practice between border dwellers. In addition, since it is more convenient to water the livestock on the Tajikistani side of the border, it is informally agreed that this occurs there. These informal joint arrangements are often discussed in the mosque located in Myrza-Patcha, which is attended by individuals from both countries. As one resident of Kyrgyzstan explained, “Elders from Navruz come to us asking for permission for their cows to graze with ours.”⁸⁵

Economic Activities

While the problems of developing economies are acute—be they weak governance and corruption, shadow economy activities, or the drug trade—and need to be addressed via different measures, informal economic activities between ordinary people in border communities are small-scale and of a different nature. For cross-border traders and agricultural producers, markets across the border are often the only place to buy and sell goods in their remote areas, given the underdevelopment of road networks. These markets are a source of income and (at times) the only way to sustain their lives.⁸⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, traders are among the most interest-

76 Murzakulova and Mestre, “Natural Resource Management.”

77 Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation*.

78 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall.” Cited in “Kyrgyzstan zhdet ot Tadjhikistana variant po rastsenkam i kolichestvu skota,” *Avesta*, May 11, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2G8efwX>.

79 Murzakulova and Mestre, “Natural Resource Management.”

80 Ibid.

81 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 10.

82 Nick Megoran, “For Ethnography in Political Geography: Experiencing and Re-Imagining Ferghana Valley Boundary Closures,” *Political Geography* 25 (2006): 622–40.

83 Anonymous interlocutor who works in the development sector on the Kyrgyzstan side of the border. Phone conversation with the author May 2017.

84 Murzakulova and Mestre, “Natural Resource Management.”

85 Ibid., 30, based on interview with a local resident of Myrza-Patcha.

86 Kaminski et al., “Asiaregio.”

ed parties in maintaining peace after the conflicts in the Ferghana Valley.⁸⁷ The scale of informal trade and crossings demonstrates a high degree of cooperation and the need for a more porous border regime in the Ferghana Valley. Local traders avoid customs duties and customs fees and choose illegal trade opportunities.

a. Trade

Local border communities find ways around borders as they trade for a living. Reeves recounts the case of Mohammed, an ethnic Kyrgyz and a resident of Uzbekistan, who works in Batken's small daily market.⁸⁸ He buys up to 300 kg (660 lbs) of goods—including chocolates, white sugar, sweets, macaroni, oil and tea, among other items—in the Ferghana city bazaar in Uzbekistan and sells them in this local bazaar in Kyrgyzstan. The crossing usually takes place via *chernyi vkhod* (an informal parallel crossing point), where commodities are handed over through a house located right on the border, while the trader goes through the official border crossing, giving the customs officers a cigarette or two as he passes in order to maintain friendly relations with them, then meets his goods on the other side. The homeowner who allows commercial goods to go through his house also collects a fee, and many say that customs officers and border guards receive part of that fee. There are several similar informal crossing points at different points along the border in the Ferghana Valley; some of them even have names. The bottom line is, as Mohammed noted, that both traders and border officials are interested in maintaining harmony. In a legal sense, this practice is informal, yet it is ethically justified because it sustains families and officials at the border.

Megoran relates another story of an informal border crossing with goods to trade, this one from Chek village on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border. One family allows traders and smugglers to pass through their yard in order to bypass the official crossing point nearby. A Kyrgyzstani customs officer once took Megoran to this yard to drink and eat with Uzbekistani customs and border officers. He observed how border officials peacefully “cooperated” with that family and those who passed through

during that time, shaking their hands and receiving a fee. This prompted Megoran to ask whether this should be considered corruption, resistance on the part of the local population, a lack of patriotism on the part of those state officials who take bribes, or cooperation based on “contextual moral judgments about what is the norm, and what movements it is reasonable to facilitate, albeit illegally.”⁸⁹

Similarly, border dwellers use other innovative informal border crossings, such as water canals on the border, to transport their goods for trade. Uzbekistani residents often go to the Kara-Suu bazaar in Kyrgyzstan to buy food, commodities, and clothing. Kara-Suu, where the market is located, is not only one of the larger commercial areas in the Ferghana Valley, but was also historically a major trading point on the Silk Road. The market is made up of thousands of stallholders and brings together traders from across the region, local produce, and Chinese imports. Back in 2003, a “bridge of friendship” across the Shahrihan-san canal in Kara-Suu on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border was dismantled, threatening many communities that were dependent on it for their livelihoods. In response, an ethnic Uzbek living on the Kyrgyzstan bank of the canal offers an “inflatable tire-ferry” across the 12-meter (40-ft) wide canal, transporting goods and around 100 people per day.⁹⁰

Megoran also provides an example of small-scale trade through an unofficial border crossing on an unmarked border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁹¹ Elmira, a resident of a bordering village in Batken region, regularly goes to the Tajikistani side to purchase cheap household goods to sell in the market on the Kyrgyzstani side. There are many people who, like Elmira, smuggle small amounts of produce and goods across the border while avoiding the customs regime. Numerous other cases of illegal smuggling by small-scale traders have been observed in the Dostuk area near Osh on the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border: men on bicycles smuggling salt from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan, or women smuggling aluminum.

b. Apricot Production

Not only do border dwellers trade across the borders, but they also cooperate and rely on each other,

87 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 10.

88 Reeves, *Border Work*, 155.

89 Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia*, 171.

90 Reeves, *Border Work*.

91 Megoran, “For Ethnography in Political Geography.”

as in the case of apricot production, processing, and export. Batken region is known for its apricot gardens and farming. A number of Kyrgyz families in this border area grow apricots. Tajiks, on the other hand, engage in apricot processing and distribute the fruit to foreign markets. It is common for Tajiks to buy ripe apricots from Kyrgyz farmers; at times, they even unofficially “rent” Kyrgyz lands to grow apricots.⁹² Sometimes they sell it as “Kyrgyz-grown” produce and smuggle it back through Kyrgyzstan to markets in Kazakhstan and Russia.

A similar story of cooperation in the apricot business is described by Reeves, who introduces us to Kanysh-Ai, an apricot-grower in Gaz village, Upper Sokh Valley, Kyrgyzstan.⁹³ For Kanysh-Ai, as for many others in the Sokh Valley, apricots are the primary source of domestic income. Once the apricots are washed, dried for a couple of days, and sorted, Tajiks, who often dominate the commercial apricot market, come from the district center of Isfara to purchase the fruit. Uzbeks, in turn, travel to the border bazaar in Hushiar to buy the apricot pits, which they fry and salt to sell at the local market.

To summarize, beneath this grassroots-level cooperation—be it over water and irrigation, pastures, trade, or apricot production—lie common reasons why people cooperate, which facilitate peace. On the whole, border dwellers cooperate to respond to their everyday needs, such as access to water or the need for a free flow of people, goods, and services across the borders. This enables them to get on with their daily lives despite government-level securitization. Often, border dwellers cooperate because their needs are interdependent: they use the same water sources, share infrastructure, or are mutually benefited by joint use of pastures. This day-to-day, need-based, and often interdependent cooperation at and across borders has secondary benefits that are conducive to building trust between community members, improving relationships, and building cross-border networks, thereby facilitating and sustaining peace on the ground.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrate how existing examples of cross-border cooperation facilitate and sustain

peace at the grassroots level. Despite militarization of the borders and securitization of community interactions, border dwellers find ways to continue their usual grassroots practices and cooperate in both formal and informal ways. This cooperation is evident in the examples of water management and maintenance of shared irrigation structures, grazing practices for the cattle and joint pasture use, and small-scale trade and border crossings through informal border posts. It is through these collaborative efforts that local actors build trust at and across borders, which, in turn, is conducive to building peace. This is not to romanticize and justify informal practices, but rather to highlight the challenges that border communities face on a daily basis when the border works not for the people but for the state. Thus, the current policy approach to border issues and peacebuilding taken by the states in the Ferghana Valley should be revisited.

There is an evident need for the states to move toward greater interdependence and policy approaches that balance border security with the needs of people living in border areas. There is a substantial mismatch between what the state enforces on border management and peacebuilding efforts and what community members living in cross-border areas want (and strive to accomplish). Certainly, the solution lies in recognizing the importance of people living in the border regions, their needs and interests. This will not be possible without strengthening overall good governance practices and improving linkages between states and citizens.

The efforts of all stakeholders should begin at the grassroots level, in a cooperative and participatory manner. Decision-making should engage all relevant stakeholders; feedback on the major problems surrounding an issue should be integrated into the eventual practices and policies. This should inform local practices and policies, which should in turn complement regional and national frameworks, with the ultimate aim of being reflected at the inter-governmental level.

Unfortunately, there is always the potential for violent conflict due to major drivers of current border incidents. In order to limit this as much as possible, existing peacebuilding approaches must be revisited. Most importantly, the existing potential of

⁹² Anonymous interlocutor who works in the development sector on the Kyrgyzstan side of the border. Phone conversation with the author, May 2017.

⁹³ Reeves, *Border Work*, 105-7.

grassroots solutions must be tapped. The nature of cross-border tensions and incidents and the inevitability of interaction between community members in the Ferghana Valley provide the most compelling argument for border dwellers' participation in peacebuilding efforts. Peace can be sustained when grassroots actors continue cross-border cooperation and when borders are made for the benefit of citizens, families, and communities across the borders.

Recommendations

This policy paper argues that peacebuilding in the border areas of the Ferghana Valley should be sustained through a comprehensive, people-centric approach—not only by the state, but at sub-state level, with participation by local actors and communities in the borderlands and investment in their needs. The policy recommendations are three-fold and essentially promote multiplying the effects of existing cooperation; taking initial steps to facilitate border crossings for people, goods and services; and promoting participatory decision-making at the grassroots level. These recommendations aim to inform relevant state actors at the national and local levels, as well as the donor community and development actors.

1. Scaling up examples of cooperation

- Conduct field research in the Ferghana Valley to identify and analyze cases of cross-border cooperation
- Design evidence-based programs; invest in piloting and scaling up positive examples of cooperation

2. Simplifying border crossings for people, goods and services

- Collect data and evidence on the challenges the border regime presents to border communities
- Draft a strategy on a special regime for border communities in order to ease the crossing of people, goods, and services

Engaging border communities in decision-making

- Include representatives of cross-border communities in the existing decision-making structures (eg. a Working Group on the Inter-State Committee on Border Delimitation and Demarcation)
- Develop mechanisms for public participation on border and peacebuilding issues at the local government level

Chapter 14.

Engaging Youth to Sustain (Inter-Communal) Peace at the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Border

Jafar Usmanov¹ (2017)

Introduction

Inter-communal peace between residents of cross-border areas of northern Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan has remained under strain over the past decade. Local communities have many unresolved issues: un-demarcated borders; limited natural resources; and restricted access to shared land, pastures, and irrigation infrastructure. Among other groups, this situation is disadvantageous to youth, who lose the chance to gain the social capital necessary to support peace, both now and in the future. Young people from both sides report occasionally being beaten up on the other side. In some cases, young people even provoke the other side by throwing stones or engaging in hate speech or petty hooliganism.

To address these difficulties, various peacebuilding initiatives have been proposed for local residents, especially youth. The priorities of these initiatives include: a) raising awareness among youth and building youth capacity; b) cross-border exchange and teambuilding; c) reducing prejudice; and d) improving inter-ethnic communication.

Yet current social dynamics among young people living on opposite sides of the border have the potential to undermine future peacebuilding efforts. Firstly, youth from both countries report negative attitudes toward their contemporaries from the other. Levels of trust between young Kyrgyzstani and

Tajikistani residents of cross-border communities are low. Secondly, ethnic and nationalist feeling reportedly runs high in both groups. In conflict situations, the ethnicity of the other group becomes significant, prompting them to perceive the other group as nationalist and behave in an intolerant way toward its members. Thirdly, young people tend to accept violence as a mode of conflict resolution in their daily lives. Young people in both countries report having fought their peers; youth violence at school or in the neighborhood is no longer exceptional.

This paper looks at how local governments and donors can better engage with youth in the border communities of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in order to sustain inter-communal peace. For answers, I explore approaches that have been applied to conflict situations elsewhere in the world and propose solutions that may be relevant to the case in question. Following the agency approach to youth in peacebuilding, I suggest that if young people engage in activities that are based on shared interests, generate a certain product, and are lasting, it will reduce animosities and incentivize youth to fortify positive relationships, thus maximizing the likelihood of peaceful behaviors.

The paper unfolds in the following way. The first section discusses the backdrop to inter-communal tensions and conflicts along the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. The second section describes local governments' and international donors' current

¹ Jafar Usmanov is a researcher on youth development issues in Tajikistan. He has studied global governance and international relations in Germany, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. He holds an MA from Jacobs University (2008), an MA degree from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek (2005), and a BA from the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University (2003). In the past, Jafar co-taught Introduction to Conflict Studies⁷ at the Tajik National University and held fellowships with Jacobs University and University of Hamburg in Germany. He also advised local development partners in Tajikistan on child and youth development issues in the country. Most recently, Jafar was part of a research team looking at everyday practices of various groups in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

policies regarding youth and conflict mediation and/or peacebuilding. In the third section, drawing on recent studies of youth, I demonstrate challenges to promoting peaceful behavior among young people from opposite sides of the border. The fourth section summarizes current thinking and international youth peacebuilding practices. Thereafter, I outline approaches and concrete solutions that add value to current efforts by offering novelty and prioritizing the longevity of interactions between youth. A call for solutions that center on the positive agency of youth in peacebuilding concludes the paper, followed by relevant policy recommendations.

Background on the Current Situation

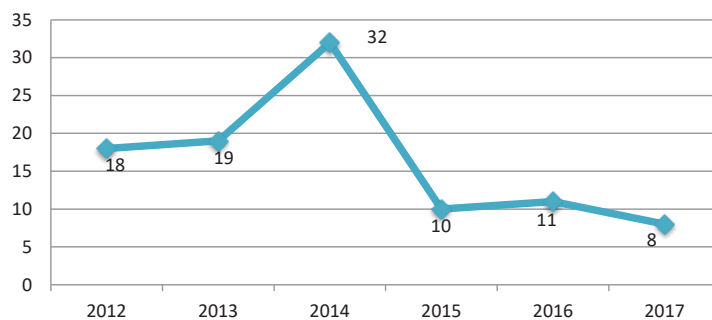
Over the past 25 years, cross-border tensions at the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border have mounted. The number of conflicts between border communities has been on the rise. In the five years between 2012 and 2017 alone, border guards registered almost 100 incidents,² some of which resulted in casualties of civilians and border officers on both sides.³ International development practitioners often describe the situation as low-intensity inter-communal tensions and conflicts with the potential to escalate to violence.⁴

These tensions are confined to certain sections of the 100-kilometer (62-mile) border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which runs through the southwestern part of the Ferghana Valley.

The communities along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border face a number of unresolved issues that drive tensions. Firstly, they experience the scarcity of natural resources—water, arable land and pastures—and suffer from limited access to agricultural infrastructure. Tajikistani communities have limited land resources: in the Isfara district, just 12,000 hectares of irrigated land must sustain 230,000 residents. As for pastures, they are mostly located in Kyrgyzstan and are rented out to Tajikistani communities for prices that the latter regard as “grossly unfair.”⁵ Communities on the Tajikistani side of the border also experience water shortages due to high demand, uncertain ability to pay for irrigation, and scarcity of water in the main water streams. In most situations, Kyrgyzstani communities live in upstream areas and have better access to water; Tajikistani communities live predominantly in downstream areas and do not receive enough water to meet their needs.

Secondly, in the past 25 years, these communities have had to contend with uncertain state borders. Of the 971 kilometers (603 miles) of border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the two governments had agreed on the delimitation of about

Figure 1. Registered Incidents on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Border between 2012 and September 2017



Source: Author's calculations using statistics from Kyrgyzstan's State Border Service and media reports

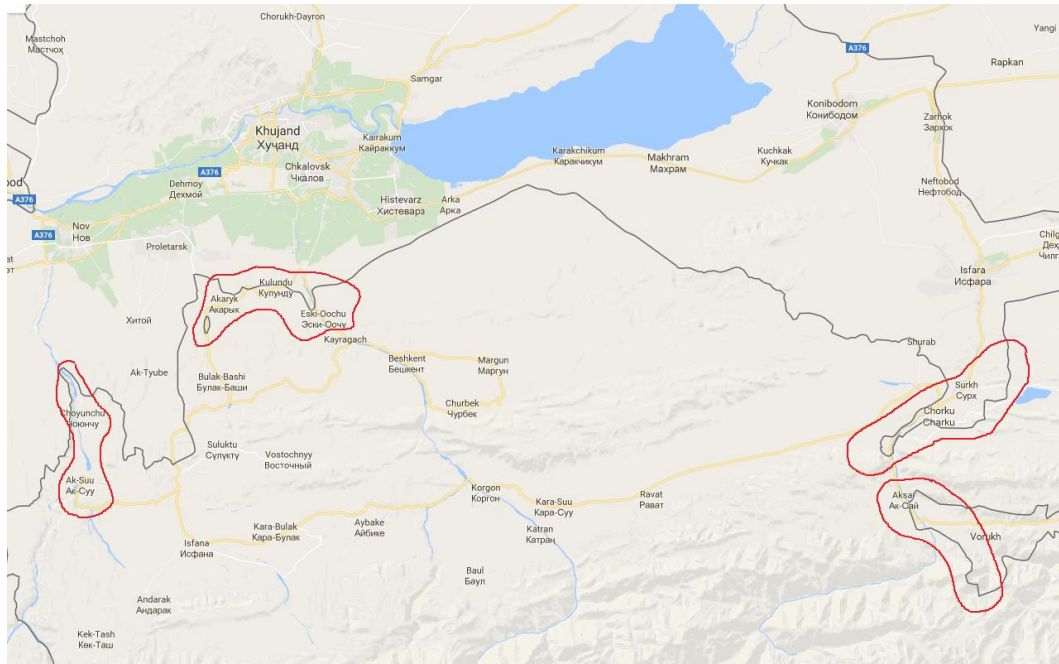
2 Author's calculations using statistics on border incidents from Kyrgyzstan's State Border Service for 2015–2017 and media reports for 2012–2014. See "Itogi sluzhebno-boevoi deiatel'nosti," State Border Service of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://www.gps.gov.kg/ru/activity/results>.

3 In January 2014, a border incident saw Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani border officers exchange gunfire using automatic rifles and mortars. Eight officers (6 from Kyrgyzstan and 2 from Tajikistan) were injured (See "Konflikt na kyrgyzsko-tadzhikskoi granitse: prichiny i versii," *KNews*, January 14, 2014, <http://knews.kg/2014/01/konflikt-na-kyrgyzsko-tadjikskoy-granitse-prichiny-i-versii/>). Full reference, please. The incident caused a diplomatic crisis in bilateral relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, leading to the closure of the border and a temporary ban on the movement of people and goods that lasted for more than three months.

4 Anonymous UNDP official in Tajikistan, personal interview with the author, August 2017.

5 Matveeva, "Divided We Fall," 8.

Figure 2. Map of “Problematic” Areas along the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Border



Source: Author's compilation using a Google map of the area and review of locations of border incidents between 2012 and 2017

520 km (323 miles) as of 2016,⁶ most of which passed through mountainous and largely unpopulated areas.⁷ The rest of the border goes through areas that are contested by Dushanbe and Bishkek, and there has been little progress on reaching an agreement in the past two decades. These uncertain borders in turn drive local communities' competing claims to land, water, and Soviet-built infrastructure.

Thirdly, the contested borders make communities reluctant to agree on efficient shared use of existing resources. For instance, when Tajik villagers in the Vorukh exclave try to expand irrigated lands, the Kyrgyz community in Ak-Say village responds with occasional blockages of irrigation water designed to prevent this expansion.⁸ Another example is the Mastchoi water canal, which supplies water to Chorkuh in Tajikistan and Samarkandyk in Kyrgyzstan. Communities blame each other for constantly exceeding predetermined water shares, as the land around the canal is disputed.

The pasture situation is even more illustrative. To avoid encountering the so-called “environmental checkpoints” in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistani citizens hire Kyrgyzstani shepherds to either take livestock to Kyrgyzstani pastures or pass through Kyrgyzstani territory to reach Tajikistani grazing lands.⁹ Livestock loss during this process is typical, but Tajikistani citizens have little leverage over Kyrgyzstani shepherds. Furthermore, while it is illegal (under the Land Code of Kyrgyzstan) to lease Kyrgyzstani pastures, Tajikistani communities often take livestock to Kyrgyzstani or contested pastures for small bribes, drawing the ire of Kyrgyzstanis.¹⁰

Persistent tensions and conflicts on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border are not conducive to lasting peace between border communities. One of the most disadvantaged groups in this situation is youth, for several reasons. Firstly, youth loses the chance to gain the human capital necessary to reject violence and support peace. In conflict environments, youths are

6 “Tadzhikistan-Kyrgyzstan: delimitirui i vlastvui (infografika),” *AsiaPlus*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.news.tj/ru/news/tadzhikistan-kyrgyzstan-delimitirui-i-vlastvui-infografika>.

7 The agreed border starts at the intersection of the Chinese, Tajik and Kyrgyz borders and end in the mountain ranges of the Mastchoh district of Tajikistan (on one side) and the Leilek district of Kyrgyzstan (on the other side).

8 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 7.

9 Kemel Toktomushev, “Promoting Social Cohesion and Conflict Mitigation: Understanding Conflict in the Cross-Border Areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” *Working Paper No. 40*, University of Central Asia, Bishkek, 2017, 13, <http://www.ucentralasia.org/>.

10 Ibid.

often found to be victims of violence, perpetrators of violence, or both.¹¹ Secondly, young people living in a context of tension and conflict are more likely to engage in violence:¹² personal experiences create frustration that may turn into aggression toward the other group. This limits opportunities for inter-group peace and increases the likelihood of conflict escalation. Thirdly, this environment of constant tension and conflict may disincentivize young people from actively engaging in peacebuilding, where they should be on the front lines, building relationships between communities.¹³

Current Youth and Peacebuilding Policies

Reportedly, inter-communal tensions in the border region have a negative impact on young people. Youth often face harassment from local police or border officers. Moreover, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that “at-risk” young people¹⁴ were often the ones perpetrating or initiating conflicts.¹⁵

Existing tensions and conflicts are shaping Tajikistani and Kyrgyzstani youths’ negative mutual perceptions. It is not uncommon to hear young people say things like “Treating them [youth from the other’s territory] as an honored guest is unacceptable; they do not deserve it; they are in a constant conflict with us, why should we make friends with them?”¹⁶ Such attitudes jeopardize the future of inter-communal peace between Tajikistani and Kyrgyzstani communities. Though they may be less likely to engage in risky and provocative behavior as adults, their attitudes toward their neighbors across the border are less likely to simply improve. Thus, the youth dimension presents a challenge to the peacebuilding initiatives currently

being undertaken by the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as by international donors. It also challenges relations between communities and puts peace in the region under strain.

Domestically, the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan support peacebuilding policies. These policies have different reference points in the two states’ recent histories and are framed differently. Whereas in Kyrgyzstan, peacebuilding policy appears to have formed in 2010 in reaction to inter-ethnic violence (or at least been boosted by these events), in Tajikistan, peacebuilding was largely set in motion in 1997, following the five-year civil war. In Kyrgyzstan, peacebuilding policy focuses on improving inter-ethnic relations,¹⁷ whereas in Tajikistan, it is primarily about securing what was restored after the civil war: the Tajikistani state, a peaceful environment, and political stability.¹⁸ In both states, cross-border peace policy falls largely within the purview of foreign policy. In addition, due to limited financial resources in both states, cross-border peacebuilding is mainly carried out by large institutional donors, United Nations agencies chief among them.

In the following subsections I will provide a brief overview of current youth and peacebuilding policies in both countries. I will then summarize the main types of peacebuilding activities implemented by international donors that are directed toward young people. This will be followed by a discussion of youth social dynamics that undermine peacebuilding efforts: animosity, ethno-nationalism, and inclinations to risky behavior.

Youth and Peacebuilding Policies in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, experts often speak of a “roadmap for peacebuilding”¹⁹ which consists

11 “Young People’s Participation in Peacebuilding: A Practice Note,” Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding, 2016, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/international-youth-day-2017/resources-on-youth-peace-and-security.html>, 10.

12 Ibid, 10-11.

13 Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, “Youth as Social and Political Agents: Issues in Post-Settlement Peace Building,” *Occasional Paper* No. 21, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, 2001.

14 Although there is no unified profile of “at-risk” youth, young people who experience certain well-being disadvantages (income, employment, education, health, family environment, etc.) are usually considered at-risk—that is, more likely to take up risky behavior (hooliganism, crime, etc.).

15 Anonymous UNDP official in Tajikistan, personal interview with the author, August 2017.

16 Young male attending a Tajik/Kyrgyz youth summer camp on intercultural dialogue, personal interview with the author, August 14, 2015. The summer camp, titled “See Things as Your Neighbor Does,” was supported by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

17 “The Concept on Strengthening the National Unity and Interethnic Relations of the Kyrgyz Republic,” <http://m.president.kg/files/docs/>.

18 See “Speeches of President Emomali Rahmon on the Occasion of National Unity Day in 2014-2017,” www.president.tj.

19 Chuck Thiessen, “Measuring Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan. Baseline Survey for the Kyrgyzstan Peacebuilding Priority Plan (PPP),” 2013, <http://www.academia.edu/15741883/>.

of two strategic policy documents (the National Development Strategy 2013–2017 and the Concept on Strengthening National Unity and Interethnic Relations of Kyrgyzstan), supplemented by the government's commitments under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and other international treaties. Per the National Development Strategy 2013–2017 (hereafter NDS 2013–2017), the government is committed to countering nationalism and ethnic intolerance,²⁰ finalizing legal settlement of the state's borders,²¹ and building inter-ethnic accord and unity.²² This last point, which is reinforced in the Concept on Strengthening National Unity and Interethnic Relations, is the guiding frame of Kyrgyzstan's peacebuilding and conflict prevention policy. Notably, an entire chapter of NDS 2013–2017 is devoted to building inter-ethnic unity, thus reinforcing its significance in government policies and making interethnic cohesion a public policy priority.

The Concept on Strengthening National Unity and Interethnic Relations (hereafter "the Concept") details the country's peacebuilding policies, which are based on three pillars: (a) building a functional conflict prevention system; (b) implementing a balanced language policy; and (c) promoting non-ethnic, citizenship-based identity. Both NDS 2013–2017 and the Concept make multiple references to youth as a beneficiary of peacebuilding policy. For instance, NDS 2013–2017 calls for engaging young people in decision-making, while the Concept emphasizes the promotion of diversity, tolerance, and a culture of peace among young people.

In Tajikistan, the youth and peacebuilding policy is framed differently; it is centered on the idea of erasing domestic social and regional divisions through nation- and state-building. Dushanbe does not have a separate policy document on peace promotion or building national unity. Instead, this policy can be elucidated in the executive statements of

the President during annual National Unity Day celebrations. Youth features prominently in those statements, and is considered one of the key actors in national policy. Youth is called upon to value national unity, reject any activities that might undermine that unity (e.g. extremism and radicalism), be willing to build the state, and cherish peace.²³

The country's National Development Strategy 2016–2030 (hereafter NDS 2016–2030) also makes references to youth and peace. Preventing potential conflicts is one of the 10 development priorities the document outlines.²⁴ That being said, the priority accorded to conflict prevention does not seem to be reflected in concrete actions and policies. A related priority is youth human capital development: the government seeks to improve behavior through cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the promotion of common human values.²⁵ Although somewhat vague, the latter refers to tolerance and peace-promotion training programs for youth by local NGOs and international donors. Finally, the government is committed to civic education and social unity programs for youth,²⁶ which are used as an entrée to broader civic education initiatives in the country.

Evidently, therefore, in neither Tajikistan nor Kyrgyzstan is the intersection of youth and peace/conflict prevention in border communities articulated as a distinct policy. Due to limited financial resources in both states, youth and peacebuilding in border areas was a peripheral issue for governments in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Although this changed in Kyrgyzstan after 2010 and in Tajikistan after 2014, youth and cross-border peace remains largely the domain of international projects.²⁷

Youth and Peacebuilding by International Donors
Donor-funded youth and peacebuilding activities in cross-border areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have a fairly recent history. Most targeted projects began after 2010; some have already been completed, while

20 "National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013-2017," President.kg, <http://www.president.kg/ru/news/ukazy/>, 19.

21 Ibid., 21.

22 Ibid., 22-27.

23 See "Speeches of President Emomali Rahmon."

24 "National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan for 2016-2030," Medt.tj, <http://medt.tj/ru/strategiya-i-natsionalnye-programmy-razvitiya>, 5.

25 Ibid., 51, 67.

26 "National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan," 67.

27 Matveeva, "Divided We Fall," 6.

others are ongoing. Prior to 2010, peacebuilding activities came under the umbrella of conflict prevention in the wider Ferghana Valley region.

Experts distinguish four “waves” of donors’ conflict prevention programming.²⁸ The first extended from the early 1990s until 2001, focusing primarily on supporting democratization and the transition to a market economy. The only exception to this convention was Tajikistan, where donors’ programming was heavily focused on post-conflict rehabilitation. The second wave came with the counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and lasted from 2001 to 2006. In this period, donors focused on trans-border security issues: terrorism, religious extremism,

cross-border organized crime, and trafficking. The third wave saw a reduction in donor support for conflict prevention, a trend that reversed in 2010. That signaled the start of the fourth wave, which made the intersection of youth and peacebuilding a focus in its own right.

Current donor initiatives on youth and peacebuilding address prejudice reduction, capacity building, and relationship building between young people from Tajikistani and Kyrgyzstani border communities that have been affected by conflict. Activities include workshops, trainings, summer camps, festivals, etc. Major donors currently working on the issue are UNDP, UNICEF, and others.

Table 1. Types of Youth and Peacebuilding Activities Implemented in the Region

Type of activity	Description
Workshops and trainings	<i>Primary objective:</i> to raise awareness and offer knowledge. Cover various topics: tolerance, communication, conflict management, planning, team building, leadership, etc. Organized for youth in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan separately and as part of joint events. Are usually short in duration (up to five days) but are organized more often than other activities.
Camps and schools	<i>Primary objective:</i> to enable exchange and support team building. Camps and schools combine several components: educational, exchange, and relationship building. They include trainings but place greater emphasis on young people exchanging their experiences and reflections. Less frequent than workshops but aim at longer-term team building.
Festivals and performances	<i>Primary objective:</i> to reduce prejudice through exposure to the other group. Festivals are mostly held to introduce youth to the other group’s culture, traditions, and common practices. Like camps and schools, they are less frequent, but often have high visibility effects. Festivals are mostly used to celebrate examples of positive communication and relationships between young people.
Sport events	<i>Primary objective:</i> to reduce prejudice through team building. Sport activities are supported by both donors and local governments. The appeal is to an occupation that transcends ethnicity—sports. Sports tournaments are often organized as separate events or as part of cross-border festivals.
Peer-to-peer activities	<i>Primary objective:</i> to multiply relationship building. These are mostly awareness-raising activities implemented by youth for their peers. Voluntary groups of pupils or other youth from both sides come together to raise awareness of peace and tolerance and showcase examples of positive communication.
Joint action plans	<i>Primary objective:</i> to improve communication through inter-ethnic teamwork. Joint action plans are used to cultivate a sense of solidarity and tolerance among Tajikistani and Kyrgyzstani youth. They also aim to build connections between youth. This approach is widely deployed by the UNDP-sponsored cross-border cooperation project.

Source: Author’s compilation based on review of donor-supported projects in Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Sughd (Tajikistan)²⁹

28 “Looking Back to Look Forward: Learning the Lessons of Conflict Prevention in the Ferghana Valley,” Saferworld, May 2011, 8, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/>.

There is some evidence that these activities produce positive results: young people show more tolerance toward the other's group, tend to communicate better with peers across the border, and develop some positive relationships.³⁰ The declining number of border incidents also seems to suggest that these activities are making a positive impact: the number of registered border incidents fell from an average of 23 in 2012–2014 to about 10 between 2015 and 2017.³¹ However, recent studies on youth in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan indicate that peacebuilding initiatives may be producing short-term effects that will be undermined in the longer term by several challenges.

Challenges That Threaten to Undermine Youth and Peacebuilding Efforts

Recent studies on youth in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,³² including those living in border communities, demonstrate in-group dynamics that may well undermine the gains of current conflict prevention and peacebuilding approaches. Firstly, studies show that young people in Tajikistani and Kyrgyzstani border communities have varying degrees of animosity toward each other.³³ Secondly, research demonstrates that ethnicity is a strong identity marker for Kyrgyzstani youth³⁴ and less powerful for young Tajikistanis.³⁵ In conflict situations, the ethnicity of the other group becomes important for youth³⁶ and

leads them to perceive the other group as nationalist, reducing youths' tolerance toward others.³⁷ Thirdly, young people tend to accept violence as a mode of conflict resolution in their daily lives.³⁸ Young people in both countries report having experienced fighting among their peers; youth violence at school or in the neighborhood is now part of everyday life.

Animosities

The 2015 UNDP-supported baseline study of conflict prevention in border communities of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan showed that young people on both sides of the border had negative attitudes toward young people on the other. On the Kyrgyzstani side, attitudes toward Tajiks ranged from neutral to hostile, whereas on the Tajikistani side they ranged from neutral to negative, with some indication of cooperative attitudes.

Similarly, levels of trust between youth in Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani border communities are low. The least trusted ethnic group for Kyrgyz communities is Tajiks, whereas the most trusted are Kyrgyz and Russians. Tajik communities mirror their Kyrgyz neighbors, regarding Kyrgyz as the least trusted. Yet Tajiks seem to have slightly more trust in Kyrgyz than Kyrgyz have in Tajiks.³⁹

Critics may argue that it is no wonder that young people from border communities, where tensions and conflicts are part of daily life, have negative attitudes toward each other. Yet the animosity

29 For details see "Livelihoods Improvement in Tajik-Afghan Cross-Border Areas," UNDP Tajikistan, http://www.tj.undp.org/content/tajikistan/en/home/operations/projects/poverty_reduction/litaca1.html; and the UNDP Communities Program in Tajikistan's Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/undp.cp.tj/>.

30 Thiessen, "Measuring Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan"; Iroda Babadzhanova, "Mir i sotrudnichestvo nachinaiutsia s nas," *AsiaPlus*, July 12, 2017, <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20170712/mir-i-sotrudnichestvo-nachinayutsya-s-nas>; "Molodezh' Kyrgyzstana i Tajikistana postroila shkol'nuii biblioteku v prigranichnom sele," *Kabar*, July 25, 2017, <http://kabar.kg/news/molodezh-kyrgyzstana-i-tadzhikistana-postroili-shkol-nuii-biblioteku-v-prigranichnom-sele/>; Ruben Garsiia, "V ramkakh proekta po transgranichnomu sotrudnichestvu molodezhi Tajikistana i Kyrgyzstana rasskazhut o tom, kak im sokhranit' mir na granitse," *Sputnik*, December 8, 2016, <http://ru.sputnik-tj.com/asia/20161208/1021257925/sotrudnichestvo-molodegi.html>.

31 Author's calculations using statistics on border incidents from Kyrgyzstan's State Border Service for 2015–2017 and media reports for 2012–2014. See "Itogi sluzhebno-boevoi deiatel'nosti," State Border Service of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://www.gps.gov.kg/ru/activity/results>.

32 "Building Capacity for Conflict Prevention and Mitigation in Cross-Border Areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," M-Vector (Kyrgyzstan) and Sharq (Tajikistan) on behalf of UNDP, 2015 (unpublished); Nina Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior of Youth in Kyrgyzstan," ACTED, 2014, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/>; "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016, <http://www.fes-centralasia.org/de/fes/fes-zentralasien/jugendstudie.html>; "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Tajikistan," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2017, <http://www.fes-centralasia.org/de/fes/fes-zentralasien/jugendstudie.html>.

33 In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this attitude is reported by the youth community across the country, whereas in Tajikistan it is mostly confined to youth living in border areas with a history of tensions and conflicts. See M-Vector and Sharq, "Building Capacity"; "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan"; "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Tajikistan."

34 Thiessen, "Measuring Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan," 14; Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior."

35 "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Tajikistan."

36 Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior."

37 Saferworld, "Looking Back to Look Forward," 13.

38 Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior."

39 M-Vector and Sharq, "Building Capacity."

of Kyrgyz youth toward Tajiks was also reflected in a 2015 nationally representative study of Kyrgyzstani youth. Twenty-one percent of young people reported that they would not like to live next to a Tajik family (see Appendix 1). In this rating of openness to living next to various social groups, Tajiks were rated third worst, behind homosexuals and Chinese.

For their part, Tajik youth do not seem to regard having a Kyrgyz family as their neighbor as a bad idea. Only 6.1 per cent of young people surveyed in Tajikistan in 2015 did not find the idea of living next to a Kyrgyz family attractive (see Appendix 1). That put Kyrgyz seventh in the rating of openness to living with other groups, with homosexuals, non-Muslims, Chinese, and other groups far less preferred.

Neither the UNDP baseline study nor the Friedrich Ebert Foundation studies explored what drives Kyrgyz youth's negative reception of Tajiks. A 2011 Saferworld assessment may offer some insight. Some Kyrgyz youth think that Tajiks are different, which makes it harder to come to an understanding and agree on complex issues.⁴⁰ Others believe that Tajiks think they are better than Kyrgyz.⁴¹

Ethnicity and Nationalism

Ethnicity plays an important role in self-identification for Kyrgyz youth. Studies show that Kyrgyz communities hold stronger ethnocentric beliefs than other ethnic groups.⁴² A 2014 study on youth in Kyrgyzstan found that ethnicity was one of three key identity markers in the south of the country, along with family and gender.⁴³ A closer look at identity markers of youth in the south revealed that almost one-third of young people in Batken region identify themselves primarily through ethnicity (see Appendix 2). Furthermore, youth in Batken region reported higher rates of ethnocentrism. In other words, youth in Batken perceived their ethnicity to be superior to that of other ethnic groups. The latter was revealed from the distribution of youth statements on three scales of ethno-affiliation: ethnocentrism (superiority of own ethnic group), normalcy of the other group (willingness to accept other cultures), and indifference (little

regard for ethnic affiliation). Rates of ethnocentrism were very high in Batken (see Appendix 2), implying that for young people in Batken ethnicity is significant and may symbolize a position of privilege.⁴⁴

Ethnocentric sentiments among young people in Kyrgyzstan feed into youth activism that develops under nationalist slogans.⁴⁵ Voluntary groups such as “Kyrk-Choro” and “Kalys” have come to prominence in recent years as a result of their often provocative and sometimes unlawful actions against non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups, including Uyghurs and Chinese. Although these groups have not been reported to be active in communities bordering Tajikistan, their cause—the protection of Kyrgyz values and territory—finds support among youth.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to plausibly describe the identity markers of Tajik youth, both on average and in the areas bordering Kyrgyzstan. There is a lack of research studying self-identification of Tajik youth and identity hierarchies in a meaningful way. Therefore, I revert to the recent findings of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation study on youth, which addressed the identity question in a broader way. The top three identity markers of youth in Tajikistan are: friendship; patriotism and belonging to the country; and being a believer (presumably a religious believer). More than 24 per cent of youth chose one of these three identity markers as their primary mode of identification.

Risky Behavior

Young people's readiness to engage in risky behavior and acts of violence is another serious challenge. The 2015 UNDP cross-border conflict prevention study revealed that border communities in Kyrgyzstan have a high preference for the following three ways of solving conflicts in border areas: participating in peaceful protests and meetings, threatening the use of violence, and blocking roads and access to local infrastructure. Willingness to protest peacefully scored highest (3.6 on a 5-point scale),⁴⁶ while the threat of the use of violence and limiting access to resources were equally important (2.1 and 2.2, respectively). On the Tajik side, preference for peaceful protests

40 Saferworld, “Looking Back to Look Forward,” 12-13.

41 Ibid.

42 Thiessen, “Measuring Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan,” 14; Bagdasarova, “Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior.”

43 Bagdasarova, “Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior,” 20.

44 Ibid., 22.

45 Gulzhigit Ermatov, “Understanding Illiberal Sentiments of Kyrgyz Youth,” *CAP Paper* No. 173, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, 2016, 7, <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/9958>.

46 M-Vector and Sharq, “Building Capacity.”

and meetings scored higher than among Kyrgyz communities (4.1 on a 5-point scale), whereas more violent modes of conflict resolution received much lower scores (1.3).

Acceptance of violence among Kyrgyz youth was also confirmed by the 2014 study on values and conflict behavior in Kyrgyzstan. It found that fights happen more often than might be expected: more than 60 percent of youth in the south reported that fights occurred either “often” or “from time to time.”⁴⁷ Almost 40 percent of youth further reported that so-called “school racketeering” (situations when senior-grade school students extort money or other valuables from younger students) is either largely developed or frequently takes place.⁴⁸ These figures had increased as of 2017, when 51 percent of boys and 12 percent of girls reported having faced monetary extortion in school.⁴⁹ Perhaps as a consequence of these phenomena, the study found that young people are willing to accept and commit acts of violence: “Youth violence is normal... It happens everywhere, every locality, every region...”⁵⁰ Although studies on acceptance of violence among Tajik youth are not available, a 2016 study identified that about 45 percent of young people in the country had experience of physical fights against youth from other neighborhoods, whether at school, at university, or in sports. In both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, this study indicated that a low percentage of young people fought against youth from other ethnic groups: 3.5 percent in Tajikistan and 4.1 percent in Kyrgyzstan.⁵¹ Evidently, therefore, many young people do not accept violence and are committed to resolving conflicts peacefully. At the same time, youths’ readiness to act violently appears to be high in concrete situations and contexts.⁵² This fact raises doubts as to whether the trainings in tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution offered by international donors can significantly reduce young people’s thresholds for accepting violence.

Language and Connections

In addition to the challenges described above, some experts mention two more issues that hamper youth and peace in the area: the absence of a language of inter-ethnic communication and limited connections between young people.

For one thing, young people seem to be losing a common language of communication. Knowledge of Russian, a common language for the older generation, is worsening among youth in border communities: unlike in Soviet times, the Russian language is no longer mandatory nor regarded as the language of inter-ethnic communication. The 2015 UNDP study found that about one-third of young people living in border communities understood some Russian, while about 13 percent did not know a single word in Russian.⁵³ This is, at least in part, a function of the bold state language policies promoted by both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan after independence. Although Russian has special status in both countries⁵⁴ and is taught in schools, its function as a lingua franca of inter-ethnic communication is decreasing. At the same time, incentives to learn the other ethnic group’s language are very limited, if they exist at all, with the result that Tajik youth do not learn Kyrgyz and Kyrgyz youth do not learn Tajik. Matveeva notes that “loss of common language works to increase the social gap between border communities.”⁵⁵

Moreover, connections between young people based on shared interests or activities are not developing naturally; those that form are supported by external actors, raising questions as to their sustainability. In her field research, Reeves found that even schoolchildren from border villages did not have relationships with each other.⁵⁶ Children would participate in trainings or sports organized by local civil society organizations but would not maintain relations beyond these periodic events. This situation has implications for peace between communities in the long run. The absence of lasting, interest-driven

47 Bagdasarova, “Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior,” 30.

48 Ibid., 31.

49 “NISI: Molodezh’ schitaet, chto problemi semejnogo vospitaniia iavliautsia prichinami shkol’nogo reketa,” National Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kyrgyz Republic, October 2017, <http://nisi.kg/139-m-report/412-nisi-molodezh-schitaet-chto-problemy-semejnogo-vospitaniya-yavlyayutsya-prichinami-shkolnogo-reketa.html>.

50 Bagdasarova, “Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior,” 33.

51 “Study on Youth in Central Asia: Tajikistan,” 157; “Study on Youth in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan,” 113.

52 Bagdasarova, “Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior,” 33.

53 M-Vector and Sharq, “Building Capacity.”

54 In Kyrgyzstan, Russian is recognized as an official language (not to be confused with state language) in a separate Law On Official Language of the Kyrgyz Republic (adopted in 2000; amended in 2008 and 2013). In Tajikistan, Russian is recognized as a language of inter-ethnic communication.

55 Matveeva, “Divided We Fall,” 6.

56 Madeleine Reeves, “In Search of *Tolerantmost*: Preventive Development and Its Limits at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border,” in *Kyrgyzstan Beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State,”* ed. Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 87.

connections may produce generations of young people who resist communication with their neighbors across the border “by default.” Fencing themselves off from the other group rather than interacting with it may lead to the reproduction of violence or readiness to engage in violence against the other ethnic group.

Theory and Practice on Youth and Peacebuilding

The challenges described above may undermine the current youth and peacebuilding efforts of local authorities and international donors. Yet the theory and international practice on youth and peacebuilding offer diverse approaches to engaging with youth in order to achieve sustainable peace. In this section, I turn to scholarship and practice on youth and peacebuilding, as well as looking at approaches that have demonstrated positive results in conflict-affected areas.

Discourses on Youth in Peacebuilding

Scholarship on youth engagement in peacebuilding has a fairly recent history. Until the early 2000s, there was fairly little theory about youth in peace and conflict studies. Though most theories of conflict resolution underline the importance of long-term intergenerational change in attitudes and behavior through social change, it was not until recently that the critical international relations literature started theorizing about youth as an actor in international relations, conflict, and peace.⁵⁷

There are three general strands of thinking about youth and conflict and peace. The first is perceiving youth as victims of conflict. This thinking is mostly informed by psychology and public health. It looks at the impact of violence on the physical and psychological maturation of children and adolescents in the post-conflict environment.⁵⁸

The second strand is looking at youth as perpetrators of conflict and violence. On this way of thinking, youths raised in a violent environment are highly

likely to use violence to deal with conflicts in the long run. One prominent approach within this perspective is the so-called “youth bulge” theory. It argues that large youth populations that experience unemployment or are not engaged in positive activities are highly likely to commit violence.

A third strand of literature looks at youth as peacebuilders. It builds on McEvoy-Levy’s proposition that “youth are the primary actors in grassroots community development/relations work; they are at the frontlines of peacebuilding.”⁵⁹ The “youth as peacebuilders” approach has produced other perspectives on youth and peace. Some see youth as knowledge producers and organic diplomats in everyday peacebuilding.⁶⁰ Others suggest thinking of youth as “organic globalizers,” who blend local and global space by constantly moving between social media and community practices.⁶¹

International policy discourse on youth and peace is centered on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, adopted in 2015. This resolution identifies six ways to engage youth in peace activities: participation, protection, prevention, partnership, disengagement, and reintegration.⁶² Youth participation in peacebuilding is further guided by nine principles that were developed by the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development in 2014.⁶³

Current international peace discourse has several points of departure with regard to youth. Firstly, it tries to refrain from taking romanticizing, demonizing, and patronizing approaches to youth.⁶⁴ Secondly, it recognizes the agency of youth in peacebuilding and calls for support for the agency and leadership of young people in peacebuilding initiatives. Thirdly, it dismisses “youth bulge” approaches, instead looking at large youth populations as “youth booms.” Fourthly, instead of prevention, it promotes “positive resilience” of young people to conflicts, something that should be founded on the positive resources, capacities, and attributes of youth. Fifthly, it mainstreams “positive”

57 See Alison M. S. Watson, “Children in International Relations: A New Site of Knowledge,” *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 237–40; Alison M. S. Watson, *The Child in International Political Economy: A Place at the Table* (London: Routledge, 2009); Helen Brocklehurst, *Who’s Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

58 Celina Del Felice and Andria Wisler, “The Unexplored Power and Potential of Youth as Peacebuilders,” *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development* 11 (2007): 1–29.

59 McEvoy-Levy, “Youth as Social and Political Agents,” 25.

60 Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, “Theorizing Youth and Everyday Peace (Building),” *Peacebuilding* 3, no. 2 (2015): 115–25, 119.

61 *Ibid.*, 121.

62 See Appendix 4 for details.

63 See Appendix 5 for details.

64 Graeme Simpson, “Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security Mandated by Security Council Resolution 2250,” United Nations, 2015, <https://www.youth4peace.info/>.

security, the interpretation of security as something to which children and youth are entitled.

International Practice on Youth and Peacebuilding

Current international peacebuilding practice offers a variety of approaches to youth engagement in conflict resolution and peace, each of which has its own rationale and theory of change. Solutions are often tailored to specific conflict situations, which makes them unique and at the same time applicable to similar contexts. Below, I highlight several theories of change that have been applied to conflict contexts elsewhere. Some of these theories of change are used (to some extent) in peace initiatives for youth in communities along the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. Yet it is a real challenge to find solutions that could simply be duplicated and applied to the case in question. Existing

solutions were developed in response to armed conflicts or severe inter-ethnic violence, a context far from the reality on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border. A recent evaluation of child and youth participation in peacebuilding confirmed that there is no “single solution to effectively engaging children and youth as peacebuilders.”⁶⁵ Rather, it is a matter of finding the right combination of approaches.

In exploring ways to better engage with young people in Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border communities, I focus on theories of change⁶⁶ that may work in a low-intensity conflict environment. In addition, following the agency approach to youth and peace, I discuss only those solutions that put youths from both groups at the heart of peacebuilding. In other words, I look only at youth-to-youth solutions, disregarding more general youth development solutions.

Table 2. Selected Youth and Peace Solutions and Theories of Change That Have Proved Effective

Theory of Change	Solutions Applied
If there is dialogue between young people on key security concerns, then young people will develop a better understanding of and empathy toward each other	Youth Participation in the Peace Process (International Alert) in Nepal
If youth from two groups have repeated interactions, it will reduce stereotypes	Local Empowerment for Peace inter-tribal football team (Mercy Corps) in Kenya
If youth are supported to make themselves responsible global citizens, they will transcend local grievances	Global Citizenship Corps (Mercy Corps) projects in Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and the West Bank/Gaza
If there is evidence of peaceful resolution of conflict between groups, then confidence in (and acceptance of) peacebuilding will develop	Youth Participation in the Peace Process (Ministry of Peace and Reconciliation) in Nepal
If youths are required to do community service in other communities, they will address prejudice and develop a sense of cohesion	Nigeria Youth Service Corps (Government of Nigeria)
If youth is engaged to stimulate other youth to develop economic activities, then the odds are better that young people will not return to violence	Youth-Led Livelihood Programming (Restless Development) in Uganda
If youths are employed as Sport for Development and Peace coaches, they will be more resilient to negative stereotyping and engage in peacebuilding behaviors	Youth Coaches (PeacePlayers International) in the Middle East
If youths are involved in media production and broadcasting, this will develop collaboration and promote peace	Golden Kids News (Search for Common Ground) in Sierra Leone; Young Journalists for Local Radio Networks (UNICEF) in Kyrgyzstan; Salam Shabab TV Series Peace Media for Iraqi Youth (United States Institute of Peace) in Iraq

Source: Author's compilation using the United Nations note on youth in peacebuilding,⁶⁷ USAID,⁶⁸ Mercy Corps,⁶⁹ and other resources

65 Michael McGill and Claire O'Kane, "Evaluation of Child and Youth Participation in Peacebuilding: Nepal, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia," Global Partnership for Children and Youth in Peacebuilding, July 2015, 21, <http://www.youthpower.org/resources/evaluation-child-and-youth-participation-peacebuilding-0>.

66 In the development practice sense. In other words, these are approaches and not theories in the academic sense.

67 Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding, "Young People's Participation in Peace-Building"

68 Susan Allen and Mary Mulvihill, "Theories of Change and Indicator Development in Conflict Management and Mitigation," USAID, June 2010, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnads460.pdf.

69 "Youth and Conflict Best Practices and Lessons Learned," Mercy Corps, 2011, <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/youth-and-conflict-best-practices>.

Some of the theories of change listed above are used, one way or another, in peacebuilding initiatives in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. For instance, sports matches and tournaments between youths in border communities are organized on a regular basis. Similarly, dialogue between young people is promoted through joint events. Youth are also supported to develop their life skills. Citizenship capacities are conveyed to youth through civic education and leadership initiatives. Nevertheless, these solutions have room for improvement, particularly in the face of challenges such as ethno-nationalism, animosity, and risky behavior.

Experiential and Practical: Youth-Oriented Solutions for Cross-Border Peace

To counterbalance existing challenges to peacebuilding among youth, solutions need to encourage joint experiential learning, be of practical use to youth, and promote longevity. Drawing on the methodology of the global education network *Communities Engaging with Difference and Religion (CEDAR)*,⁷⁰ I argue that peace-promoting solutions need to build shared experience and practice among young people. Learning about peace should not be the primary target. Activities where young people from cross-border communities experience things together are more likely to foster peaceful behaviors.

In addition, solutions should support youth to produce meaningful and useful things. All too often, joint activities pursue abstract objectives, such as improving understanding of the other group's culture, exploring differences and commonalities, etc. For youth to commit themselves to the activity, they need to be producing tangible things. In this way, youth will feel responsibility and develop cohesion by living the experience together. Potential results include start-up businesses, media products, or social innovations, to name a few.

It is also important to prioritize solutions that are driven by the shared interests of young people. Most conflict mitigation and peacebuilding activities for youth tend to be based on adults' agendas and perceptions of how youth should participate in

peacebuilding. This may not necessarily be wrong, but young people will benefit more from solutions that grow out of their own interests and aspirations.

Lastly, the longevity of interactions should be prioritized over one-off and short-term communication. However obvious it may sound, international practice proves that the longer positive interactions between young people are supported, the stronger relationships are and the more youths restrain from violence in conflict situations. Young people from both groups need to do more than simply communicate with each other during cross-border events—they need to connect to each other. This implies that there should be stronger ties based on shared interests, concerns, and aspirations, ties youth should use to keep communication ongoing and meaningful.

Below, I suggest how theories of change can be adapted to the context of Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan youth and peace. These approaches address the challenges of ethno-nationalism, animosities, and risky behavior.

Youth from Tajik and Kyrgyz communities need to engage in activities where they master practical skills. These activities may take the form of short-term apprenticeships or internships in areas where demand for skilled labor is high: farming, seed planting, harvesting, renovation works, etc. Most importantly, these activities should take place in the other group's community. In other words, youth from Tajik communities should intern in Kyrgyz communities and vice versa. This way, young people will be more likely to accept the other group, since they will look at the community as a source of knowledge and not a threat.

People develop stronger ties when these links are based on a shared cause, shared interest, or shared aspirations. Youth is particularly sensitive to such group dynamics. If youths from both countries engage in group activities together, they will likely transcend their ethnicity- or locality-driven identities and behave peacefully toward one another. Youth task forces working on environmental pollution, waste management, girls' education, or even counter-radicalization are just a few examples of how youth can unite behind a common goal.

70 Adam B. Seligman, Rahel R. Wasserfall, and David W. Montgomery, *Living with Difference: How to Build Community in a Divided World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

Table 3. Solutions to Challenges Facing Youth and Peacebuilding on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Border

Theory of Change	Challenge Addressed	Solution/s
If youth from both groups learn skills from the other group's community, it will enhance young people's acceptance of the other group	Animosities	Cross-community internships and/or apprenticeships; summer "Work and Travel" programs
If youth from both groups engage in activities based on shared interests, aspirations or common cause, they will transcend their ethnicity- or locality-based identities	Ethnicity and nationalism	Youth volunteer groups (e.g. green patrols); youth task forces on shared social ills (girls' education, radicalization, etc.)
If youth from both groups engage in activities that require the production of meaningful and useful things, it will develop collaboration and trust between youth	Animosities and trust	Radio programs; photo stories; documentary TV series about youth stories of conflict and peace in the region; startup businesses; social innovations
If youth are employed as mediators for dispute arbitration among peers in the same or other locations, they will be more resilient to negative stereotyping and engage in peacebuilding behavior	Risky behavior	Young mediators/arbiters; "Bilinguals" youth corps

Source: Author's proposals using the United Nations note on "Young People's Participation in Peace-Building" produced by the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding

Communicating for the sake of communicating is rarely the best grounds for building strong relationships. We tend to make long-term friendships when we work together on meaningful projects. If we work together to produce something tangible—something useful—the experience shapes empathy. Youth from both communities could come together to work on media products: radio programs (on young artists, local news, new technologies, etc.), photo stories, or documentary TV series. Alternatively, they could work on entrepreneurial products: microbusinesses, startups, or social innovations. These initiatives would cultivate collaboration, empathy, and trust among youth.

In view of past experience of these approaches, there are many reasons for optimism. In Iraq, children from six different ethnic groups produced a UNESCO-award winning TV series, *Salam Shabab*, based on true stories of children in the Iraqi conflict. In Uganda, after initial support, youth from different tribes started agricultural farming and entrepreneurship. Children from Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan and the West Bank/Gaza came together under the flag of Global Citizenship to bridge cultural divides and develop a sense of global youth solidarity.

Some may ask whether these solutions add value to existing initiatives. None of the proposed solu-

tions have been developed from scratch. In fact, all are based on lessons learned from youth and peacebuilding policies.⁷¹ At the same time, the proposed solutions build on the evidence of social dynamics among youth in both communities that jeopardize peacebuilding efforts. These solutions add value to current efforts, as they offer novelty and prioritize the longevity of interactions between youth. Moreover, they are in line with the current thinking and international practice of youth as peacebuilders.

Conclusion

Inter-communal tensions and conflicts on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border have a negative impact on youth. Studies of youth in both countries conducted in 2014 and 2015 found that young people living in border communities feel animosity toward one another. Furthermore, youth show readiness to resort to violence should a conflict between communities break out. These worrisome findings call into question the sustainability of peace between border communities. Although youth communicate with each other, examples of strong connections driven by shared interests are rare. Youths make one-off friendships in joint events, but lasting relationships do not seem to develop. They learn about tolerance

71 Saferworld, "Looking Back to Look Forward."

and conflict resolution, yet are ready to react violently to conflicts.

Existing challenges to youth in peacebuilding (animosities, ethno-nationalism, low threshold for acceptance of violence, lack of connections) have to be addressed using the positive agency of youth in peacebuilding. This does not come naturally; it has to be nurtured in creative ways. In this paper, I looked at how local governments and donors can better engage with the youth of Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border communities in order to sustain inter-communal peace. I suggested that solutions must support young people's engagement in activities that enable experiential learning, are based on shared interests, are of practical use for young people or their communities, and are lasting. Focusing on practical and shared activities will help reduce animosities and incentivize youth to fortify positive relationships, thus maximizing the likelihood of peaceful behaviors. I put forward solutions as varied as cross-community internships and a bilingual youth corps to address the existing challenges.

The proposed solutions are based on lessons learned from past and current youth and peacebuilding initiatives and draw on the methodology of engaging with difference developed by CEDAR Educational Network. Similar solutions have already been tested in various formats in conflict contexts as complex as, for instance, Iraq and Uganda. There is general public support, donor funding, and youth will to make things better. What should be highlighted is that by investing in youth as peacebuilders, communities invest in their future peace and prosperity.

Recommendations

To Local Governments:

- *Formulate a policy on cross-border youth interactions.* At the moment, cross-border youth interactions are not supported by any separate policy. Existing policy statements of good neighborhood need to be complemented by a more specific policy framework. This framework would detail how local governments on both sides of the border see long-term youth interactions developing. For instance, it may be a broader policy on cross-border community interactions that would include youth as a separate cluster. This does not have to be a

national policy, and may be developed at provincial level.

- *Allocate air time on public TV channels for youth in peacebuilding.* Positive examples of youth peacebuilders and youth connections need to be regularly aired on provincial TV. Local authorities could instruct provincial public TV channels to allocate space during evening prime time for video reports on positive peacebuilding by youth.
- *Offer additional Tajik and Kyrgyz language classes at schools or community centers.* Youth from both communities should have an opportunity to learn the rudiments of the other group's language. Being able to understand each other's language will help youth communicate, as well as avoid hateful and insulting speech toward each other. Local authorities can mobilize local schoolteachers or community residents who speak both languages to teach courses. Classes may be offered at schools as electives or outside of schools at community centers or youth clubs.

To International Donors:

- *Shift programming to multi-year cross-border youth-in-action projects.* Youth in the region will greatly benefit from projects and initiatives that make them experience real-life things together. Workshops and trainings are good for cognitive learning, but not experiential learning. Therefore, donors need to devise a three-to-five-year program that will support youth-to-youth joint activities. Now may be a good time for Tajikistan, as the current cross-border cooperation project ended in 2017. In Kyrgyzstan, a new three-year peacebuilding project was launched in 2017, so this project could be expanded or a separate project designed.
- *Conduct regular assessments of child and youth participation in peacebuilding.* The progress of youth and peacebuilding efforts needs to be assessed every 2-3 years. These assessments need to a) trace impact of the initiatives; and b) explore in-group dynamics among youth.

To Community and Media Organizations:

- *Identify and multiply stories of cross-border youth connections.* Cross-border youth con-

nections are often established at joint events and festivals. Stories of lasting cross-border connections between young people should be made available. To make this possible, local community organizations need to stay in touch with participants in cross-border events. They need to trace how connections evolve and follow stories of lasting ties between youth.

- *Empower youth to produce videos about positive examples of youth in peacebuilding.* Video resources on youth in cross-border peace on the Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan border are scarce. YouTube has far more videos on border incidents between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan than joint youth events between the two countries. There are almost no video stories about youth peacebuilders. Local media and community organiza-

tions should identify young people to train in video production. These youths would be expected to turn the available stories of youth peacebuilders into a video documentary series.

To Conflict and Peace Researchers:

- *Study conflict and peace in low-intensity conflict environments.* The current knowledge of conflict resolution, prevention and peacebuilding focuses, by and large, on situations of large-scale violence. Low-intensity conflict environments do not receive much attention. This leaves policymakers on the ground to “borrow” peacebuilding solutions from violent conflicts. Scholars and analysts need to study low-intensity conflict environments and propose solutions tailored to these types of situations.

Appendix 1. Openness of Kyrgyz and Tajik Youth to Selected Social Groups

Table 1. Openness of Kyrgyz Youth to Selected Social Groups (percent)

Social Group (as a Neighbor)	Very Good	Good	Bad	Very Bad
Homosexual couple	0	1.4	29.9	36.3
Family of Chinese	2.9	17.2	22.3	5.2
Family of Tajiks	3.4	19.0	21.3	1.4
Family of Uzbeks	3.5	18.9	19.0	3.5
Family of Kazakhs	6.8	21.1	6.3	1.1
Family of Russians	7.8	29.5	5.3	0.2

Source: "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016, 80, <http://www.fes-centralasia.org/de/fes/fes-zentralasien/jugendstudie.html>

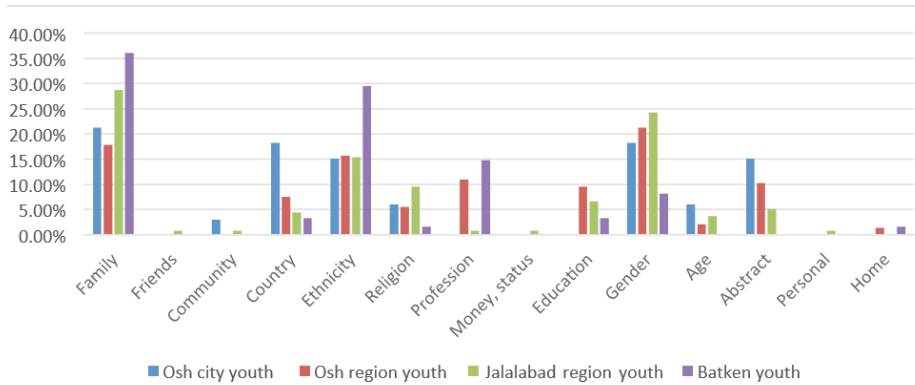
Table 2. Openness of Tajik Youth to Selected Social Groups (percent)

Social Group (as a Neighbor)	Very Good	Good	Bad	Very Bad
Homosexual couple	1.7	5.2	24.6	43.4
Family of non-Muslims	6.2	20.8	16.3	7.4
Family of Chinese	6.0	24.2	11.0	3.4
Family of Uzbeks	14.3	31.7	8.1	2.4
Family of Kazakhs	13.0	27.2	6.3	1.5
Family of Kyrgyz	11.5	30.6	6.1	1.7

Source: "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Tajikistan," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2017, 127, <http://www.fes-centralasia.org/de/fes/fes-zentralasien/jugendstudie.html>

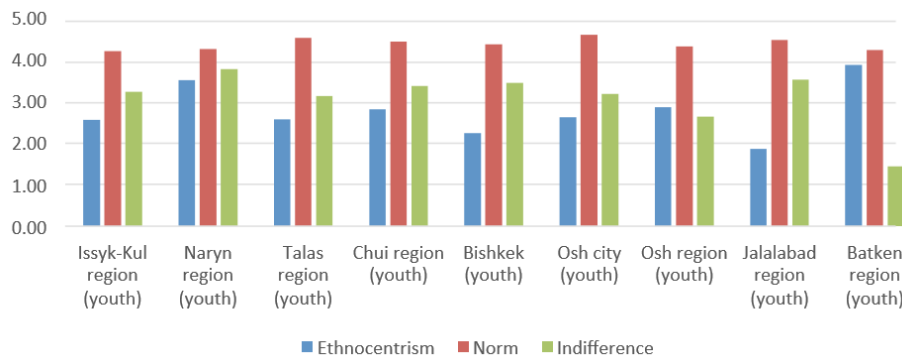
Appendix 2. Identity Markers of Kyrgyz and Tajik Youth

Figure 1. Identity Markers of Youth in Southern Kyrgyzstan



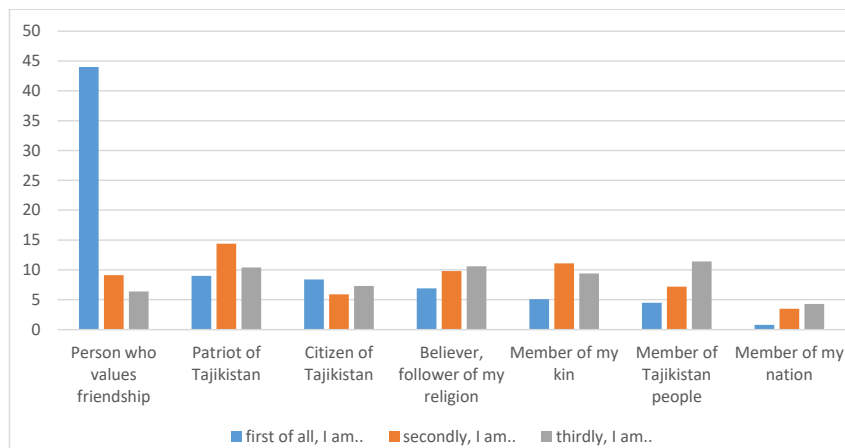
Source: Nina Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior of Youth in Kyrgyzstan," ACTED, 2014, 20, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/>

Figure 2. Distribution of Youth Statements on Ethno-Affiliation Scale



Source: Nina Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior of Youth in Kyrgyzstan," ACTED, 2014, 22, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/>

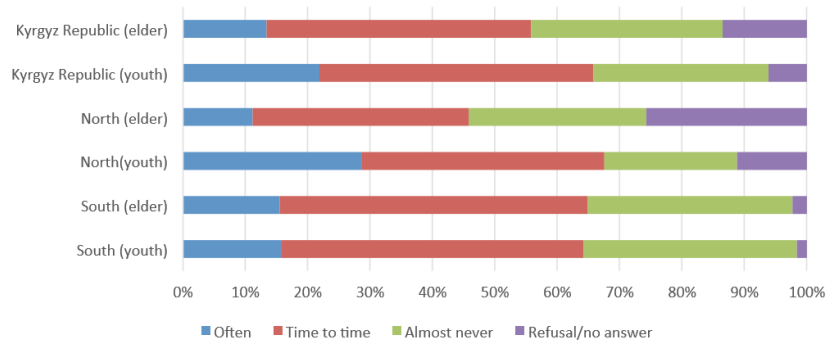
Figure 3. Main Identity Markers of Tajik Youth



Source: Author's calculations using "Study on Youth in Central Asia: Tajikistan," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2017, 121, <http://www.fes-centralasia.org/de/fes/fes-zentralasien/jugendstudie.html>

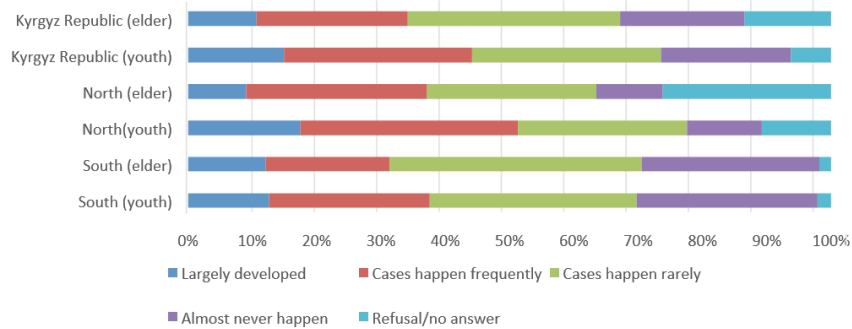
Appendix 3. Experience of Everyday Violence among Youth in Kyrgyzstan

Figure 1. Frequency of Fights among Youth in Local Communities in Kyrgyzstan



Source: Nina Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior of Youth in Kyrgyzstan," ACTED, 2014, 30, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/>

Figure 2. Spread of "School Racket" in Local Communities in Kyrgyzstan



Source: Nina Bagdasarova, "Values, Social Moods and Conflict Behavior of Youth in Kyrgyzstan," ACTED, 2014, 31, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/>

Appendix 4. Visualization of the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security



1. PARTICIPATION

- Member States should consider ways to increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels for the prevention and resolution of conflict
- All relevant actors should take into account, as appropriate, the participation and views of youth when negotiating and implementing peace agreements



2. PROTECTION

- All parties to armed conflict must take the necessary measures to protect civilians, including those who are youth, from all forms of sexual and gender-based violence
- States must respect and ensure the human rights of all individuals, including youth, within their territory



3. PREVENTION

- Member States should facilitate an enabling environment in which young people are recognised and provided adequate support to implement violence prevention activities and support social cohesion
- All relevant actors should promote a culture of peace, tolerance, intercultural and interreligious dialogue that involve youth



4. PARTNERSHIP

- Member States should increase their political, financial, technical and logistical support, that take account of the needs and participation of youth in peace efforts
- Member States should engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative



5. DISENGAGEMENT AND REINTEGRATION

- Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration activities must consider the needs of youth affected by armed conflict, including through evidence-based and gender-sensitive youth employment opportunities and inclusive labour policies
- All relevant actors should invest in building young persons' capabilities and skills through relevant education opportunities designed in a manner which promotes a culture of peace

Source: “UNSCR 225| Introduction,” Youth4Peace, <https://www.youth4peace.info/UNSCR2250/Introduction>

Appendix 5. Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

On Young People's Participation In Peacebuilding

Lead to programmes and strategies that ensure youth are engaged as partners and agents of change in peacebuilding for political stability and economic prosperity



Participation

- Prioritize young people's **participation** for peacebuilding.
- Promote that the majority of youth **strive for peace**; only a minority engages in violence.
- Link youth participation to all sectors (**social, economic, cultural and political**) and to all levels.



Diversity

- Value young people's **diversity** and **marginalized** voices.
- Develop targeted strategies to involve young people from **different backgrounds**.
- Respect the **experiences of all**, including those associated with conflict.



Gender

- Be sensitive to **gender dynamics**.
- Avoid **stereotypical assumptions** about the roles and aspirations of girls, boys, young women, men and transgender people.
- Identify strategies to seek **young women's engagement**.



Leadership

- Enable young people's **ownership, leadership, and accountability**.
- Find them, Learn from them, and Support them.
- Facilitate **mechanisms** for communication to enable young leaders to be accountable to their peers and communities.



Safety

- Always aim to **"Do No Harm"** and provide a **safe** environment for young people to participate.
- Ensure that **facilitators are trained** to handle difficult situations.
- Be cautious **not to incentivize violence**.
- Be sensitive to **inequalities**.



Involvement

- Involve young people **in all stages** of programming.
- Have decision makers, institutions and organizations **commit to accountability** to youth.
- Offer alternative sources of power to youth who have attained power **using violent means**.



Competence

- Enhance the **knowledge, attitudes, skills and competencies** of youth.
- Identify young people who can serve as **positive role models**.
- Develop **violence-prevention strategies** beyond security responses that nurture skills in **mediation and conflict resolution**.



Partnership

- Invest in **intergenerational partnerships** in young people's communities.
- Increase **dialogue and opportunities for cooperation** among children, young people, parents and elders, in order to resolve violence.



Policy

- Support policies that address the **full needs of young people**.
- Contribute to the establishment of **local, regional and national forums** that can enhance young people's participation in the development of public policies.

For more information about Guiding Principles, please visit www.sfgg.org/guidingprinciples
Brought to you by the Inter-agency Working Group on Youth Participation in Peacebuilding, co-chaired by the UN Peacebuilding Support Office and Search for Common Ground.
Designed by Seulji Kim

Source: "Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding" Youth4Peace, December 1, 2014, <https://www.youth4peace.info/node/60>

Chapter 15.

Assessing the Impact of NGO Peacebuilding Programs in the South Caucasus: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh

Jeyhun Valiyev¹ (2017)

Yet they keep hoping sometime things will change, a new
Life will dawn, and fortune's smile will beam at long last.
—Husein Javid

Learning about information war strategies with my stu-
dents...the peacebuilding knowledge that I have learned for
years, I now teach them as war propaganda.⁴

Introduction

During the four-day escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in April 2016, dozens of peacebuilding activists from Armenia and Azerbaijan posted radical and pro-war statements on social media. Among those who posted pro-war hate speech were some individuals who had formerly been known as dedicated peace activists. This tendency was highlighted in international media commentary on the escalation, the largest in scale since the 1994 ceasefire: a *Washington Post* op-ed highlighted the nationalist reactions of Armenian peacebuilding activists,² while the radical views of former peacebuilders from Azerbaijan were neatly captured in a *EurasiaNet* article.³ It is also borne out in my respondents' comments.

To take one example, on April 6, 2016, an Azerbaijani former peacebuilding activist posted a Facebook statement that read:

A similar story was unfolding on the Armenian side, where a former peacebuilder posted:

The 5-day war unleashed by Azerbaijan, barbarous in its mentality, against freedom-loving Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated the triumph of the great spirit of the Armenian people.⁵

As the above narratives illustrate, peacebuilders from both countries may become nationalists, meaning that there are some limitations on the work of peacebuilding organizations. At the same time, however, many activists passed the implicit test by expressing “solidarity for the sake of peace and urging others to remain faithful to the values of building a peaceful future.”⁶ One of my Armenian respondents shared a personal story about the escalation:

I'm an antimilitarist and a peace-building activist, but during the April War I lost two of my relatives. For those 4 days, I didn't have any information about my brother. So I

1 Jeyhun Valiyev is a junior researcher interested in political economy, energy security, conflict, human rights, and democracy-building in post-Soviet countries. He is currently engaged in a multi-media project on “Desovietization in the Caucasus” with experts from Armenia and Georgia. Jeyhun holds a BA in International Affairs from Qafqaz University in Baku, including a year-long exchange with James Madison University in Virginia, and completed a Master's in Global Political Economy at the University of Kassel in Germany. His thesis analyzes Russian-U.S. competition in Central Asia and the Caucasus by elaborating the relevance of Heartland theory and neo-Eurasianist geopolitical thinking.

2 David Ignatius, “Karabakh: A Renewed Conflict in the Caucasus,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2016, accessed December 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-renewed-conflict-in-the-caucasus/2016/04/26/e6c2c344-0bec-11e6-a6b6-2e6de3695b0e_story.html?utm_term=.c4e0b72507fc.

3 Marianna Grigoryan and Durna Safarova, “Azerbaijan, Armenia: Can Activists Keep Peace Alive?” *EurasiaNet*, April 13, 2016, accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78286>.

4 Retrieved from a Facebook post of November 27, 2017. Anonymized for ethical reasons.

5 Retrieved from a Facebook post of November 28, 2017. Anonymized for ethical reasons.

6 “Karabakh. Aprel' 2016. Po kom zbonit kolokol,” Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, accessed December 8, 2017, <http://caucasusedition.net/ru/апрель-2016-карабах-по-ком-звонит-колокол/>.

was in a very difficult situation: on this side was my ideology, which I knew I should follow throughout my life; on the other side were my pain and losses.

In this paper, my primary objective is to identify the strengths and limitations of different peacebuilding programs, specifically dialogue trainings and joint sessions of opposing groups. My findings demonstrate that dialogue programs can help to forge friendships and build empathy, but their limitations include competition instead of cooperation, unequal status in dialogue meetings, and a lack of institutional sanction/support. On the basis of these findings, I elaborate policy recommendations, including—but not limited to—arranging pre-meeting trainings for dialogue participants, establishing alternative online sources of information, and partnering with more diverse groups of locals.

I first present contextual background on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, before reviewing the methodology and discussing the key theoretical underpinnings of the study. The main body of the paper analyzes respondent interviews, and the paper concludes by presenting policy recommendations.

Background of the Conflict

The case discussed in this study, Nagorno-Karabakh, is a piece of land over which Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war in the early 1990s. This land has symbolic importance for both nations, as it is core to each country's interpretation of history.

Key Drivers

According to International Crisis Group (ICG), the conflict has existed since the end of World War I, but gained momentum after the fall of the Soviet Union, when it developed into war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁷ After World War I, Azerbaijan and

Armenia collided in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) before the Bolsheviks regained control of the South Caucasus in 1920. Elena Pokalova states that the territory of NK gained the status of an Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of the Azerbaijan SSR in 1923, but disputes between Azerbaijan and Armenia persisted during Soviet times.⁸ Tabib Huseynov, however, sees these tensions as minor, writing that Armenians and Azeris largely co-existed peacefully in NK during the Soviet era.⁹ However, as the Soviet Union opened up politically in the late 1980s, grievances from the past resurfaced and nationalism revived. The Nagorno-Karabakh regional Soviet passed a resolution in 1988 to be transferred from the Azerbaijan SSR to the Armenian SSR, a move rejected by the Azerbaijani side.¹⁰ The absence of leadership decisions played a significant role in escalating the conflict from sporadic violence to conventional war.¹¹ In fact, each side accused the other of starting the violence.¹²

The crisis turned into full-scale war between independent Azerbaijan and NK in 1991, with the latter enjoying the full support of independent Armenia.¹³ Ali Abasov and Haroutiun Khachatryan indicate that the war resulted in tens of thousands of casualties on both sides, the forced resettlement of 250,000 Azeris from Armenia and 400,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan, and the seizure of seven more regions of Azerbaijan, which displaced 800,000 Azerbaijanis,¹⁴ among them Kurds. Per the ICG Report, Baku insists that Armenia occupied the NK and seven adjacent districts, whereas Yerevan argues that it was creating a "security belt" to protect ethnic Armenians' security and right to self-determination.¹⁵ Each side rejects the claims of the other, and their claims are mutually exclusive, which makes dialogue and understanding very difficult.

Negotiation Process

Negotiations are mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group, established in 1992 and co-chaired by Russia,

7 "Nagorno-Karabakh: Viewing the Conflict from the Ground," *International Crisis Group Europe Report* No. 166 (2005): 1.

8 Elena Pokalova, "Conflict Resolution in Frozen Conflicts: Timing in Nagorno-Karabakh," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): 72.

9 Tabib Huseynov, "Mountainous Karabakh: New Paradigms for Peace and Development in the 21st Century," *International Negotiation* 15, no. 1 (2010): 13.

10 Svante Cornell, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, Report No. 46 (1999): 14.

11 J. Stuart Kaufman, "Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabakh," *PONARS Working Paper* No. 8 (1998): 32.

12 Phil Ghamagelyan, "Rethinking the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Identity, Politics and Scholarship," *International Negotiation* 15, no. 1 (2010).

13 *Ibid.*, 36.

14 Ali Abasov and Haroutiun Khachatryan, "The Karabakh Conflict. Variants of Settlement: Concepts and Reality," AREAT, Baku-Yerevan, 2006, 15.

15 "Nagorno-Karabakh: Risking War," *International Crisis Group Europe Report* No. 187 (2007): 1.

France, and the United States. According to Sabine Freizer, the sides were close to an agreement on two occasions during the Key West talks (in 1997 and 2001), but have been unable to break the deadlock. In 2005, the Minsk Group proposed a new approach, the so-called Madrid Principles,¹⁶ which are based on the “non-use of force,” “territorial integrity,” and “self-determination.”¹⁷ Not only has mediation not produced a peace deal, but tensions along the line of contact have also been aggravated in recent years, from sniper deployment in 2012 to the escalations of April 2016.¹⁸ Tabib Huseynov argues that strong domestic disapproval in both Armenia and Azerbaijan has played a significant role in the two countries’ failure to reach an agreement.¹⁹

Peacebuilding Initiatives

As Abasov and Khachatryan indicate, public diplomacy has been a feature of the NK conflict since the early 1990s, with initiatives such as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly. Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, however, peacebuilding initiatives received less support.²⁰ Along these lines, Ruben Harutunian argues that the capacity of civil society to influence the peace process has always been subject to cycles of opportunity and constraint imposed by internal political developments in Armenia and Azerbaijan.²¹

When civil society activism revived in the late 2000s, European Union actors were more visible. For example, the European Partnership over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), a consortium of five different organizations funded by the European Commission, has been actively engaged in public diplomacy since 2010.²² An ICG Report claims that peacebuilding NGOs have the potential to prepare publics for peace and increase the accountability of co-chairs, but the two sides’ political polarization, their retreat into nationalist rhetoric and military solutions, and (since 2012) Azerbaijan’s crackdown on civil society have

made public diplomacy efforts increasingly difficult.²³ Seemingly, the dehumanization of the enemy makes it more challenging to build relations. Developments since April 2016 offer no alternative to escalation and even full scale-war. It is a “no war-no peace” situation, but lately the conflict seems far from frozen.

Theoretical Underpinnings

To inform my analysis, I borrow from several theories related to peacebuilding and its practices.

What is Peacebuilding?

Peacebuilding is about reconciling adversarial parties by rebuilding relationships. Reconciliation is more than simply signing a peace agreement or conducting negotiations between governments. John P. Lederach defines peacebuilding as “a process made up of a multiplicity of interdependent roles, functions, and activities,” including peacebuilding organizations, state agencies, and community engagement.²⁴ In his book, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, Lederach argues that peacebuilding “embraces the challenge of personal transformation, of pursuing awareness, growth and commitment at a personal level.”²⁵

Furthermore, according to Yaacov Bar-Simantov, society-level reconciliation starts with profound cognitive and emotional change to beliefs, goals, and attitudes at the individual level.²⁶ Individual or personal transformation refers to change that occurs within an individual thanks to face-to-face and interpersonal communication with the opposite side. As Susan Allen puts it,

If key actors and/or enough individuals undergo constructive shifts in their consciousness, such as developing more universal identities or awareness of identity formation, then

16 For detailed review of all peace proposals, see Abasov and Khachatryan, “The Karabakh Conflict.”

17 Sabine Freizer, “Twenty Years After the Nagorny Karabakh Ceasefire: An Opportunity to Move Towards More Inclusive Conflict Resolution,” *Caucasus Survey* 1, no. 2 (2014): 3.

18 “Nagorno-Karabakh: Risks of a New Escalations,” International Crisis Group, February 2017, accessed February 3, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/nagorno-karabakh-risks-new-escalation>.

19 Huseynov, “Mountainous Karabakh,” 15.

20 Abasov and Khachatryan, “The Karabakh Conflict,” 68.

21 Ruben Harutunian, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Moving from Power Brokerage to Relationship Restructuring,” *International Negotiation* 15, no. 1 (2010): 73.

22 Freizer, “Twenty Years After,” 4.

23 “Nagorno-Karabakh: New Opening or More Peril,” *International Crisis Group Europe Report* No. 239 (2016): 8.

24 J. Paul Lederach, “Building Peace,” United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C. (1997), 71.

25 J. Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 19-20.

their commitment and capacity for the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and for resisting mobilization of conflictual identities, will increase and can influence social change in that area.²⁷

One of the methods used by peacebuilding organizations to achieve such micro-level changes is intergroup dialogue workshops. What is intergroup dialogue as a peacebuilding methodology about?

According to Adrienne Dessel and Mary Rogge, *intergroup dialogue* in peacebuilding refers to a facilitated group experience with the following goals: “generous listening, reflection before acting/speaking, openness, sense of trust, commitment to relations, equal conversation power, and mutual recognition.”²⁸ The *individual* is at the core of most dialogue-based peacebuilding practices; he/she is the motor of social change and the only true peacemaker, notes Sandrine Lefranc.²⁹ Esra Chuhadar and Bruce Dayton identify dialogue-based peacebuilding programs as process-oriented initiatives, since the priority is to build relationships, trust, empathy, and mutual understanding among adversaries in order to lay the groundwork for a widely supported peace.³⁰ Face-to-face exchange between individuals in intergroup dialogues enables “positive change in attitude,”³¹ which can eventually foster “a culture of peace”³² at societal level, Helene Pfeil argues.³³ How can intergroup dialogues succeed in reducing prejudice and building positive relationships between individuals from two adversarial groups? What are the conditions for the effectiveness of intergroup dialogues?

Gordon W. Allport suggests four positive conditions under which prejudice is reduced and community relations are strengthened in face-to-face and intergroup interactions: equal status of the groups; absence of competition; cooperative interdependence; and support from laws, customs or institutions (authority sanction for the contact).³⁴ Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp’s meta-analysis of 515 studies clearly indicates that intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice in the presence of Allport’s four optimal factors.³⁵

Success Stories

The Nansen Dialogue Network is one of the success stories of dialogue-based peacebuilding initiatives. According to Steinar Bryn, the founder of Nansen Dialogue Platform, it began as Nansen Academy in the Balkans in 1996 with a seminar for participants from all the newly-formed Balkan countries.³⁶ By the mid-2000s, there were about 300 participants in these workshops, many of whom later joined civil society agencies, including the Nansen Dialogue Centers. Bryn states that the aim of the workshops was “to understand the causes and consequences of the breakup of Yugoslavia.”³⁷ As Bryn notes, reconciliation was the focus of the Nansen Dialogue Centers between 2000 and 2005, with integration through structural changes in the field of education becoming the focus in 2010–2015.³⁸ Seemingly, individual transformations through dialogue-based peacebuilding trainings in the Nansen Dialogue Network have produced society-level changes.

26 Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “Dialectics Between Stable Peace and Reconciliation,” in *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, ed. Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73.

27 N. Susan Allen and Mary Mulvihill, “Theories of Change and Indicator Development in Conflict Management and Mitigation,” United States Agency for International Development, 2010, 4.

28 Adrienne Dessel, and Mary Rogge, “Evaluation of Intergroup Dialogue: A Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2008): 201–15.

29 Sandrine Lefranc, “A Critique of ‘Bottom-Up’ Peacebuilding: Do Peaceful Individuals Make Peaceful Societies?” *Archive ouverte en Sciences de l’Homme et de la Societe*, 2011, 10, accessed December 29, 2017, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00646986>.

30 Esra Chuhadar and Bruce Dayton, “The Social Psychology of Identity and Inter-Group Conflict: From Theory to Practice,” *International Studies Perspective* 12 (2011): 282.

31 Gershon Baskin and Zakaria Al-Qaq, “YES PM: Years of Experience in Strategies for Peace-Making,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17 (2004): 546.

32 Aviva Shemesh, “Citizen Diplomacy—Creating a Culture of Peace: The Israeli-Palestinian Case” (paper presented at the Academy for Cultural Diplomacy Annual Academic Conference, Berlin, 2011), 3.

33 Helene Pfeil, “Understanding the Dynamics of Israeli-Palestinian Grassroots Dialogue Workshops: The Contribution of a Habermasian Approach,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28 (2013): 123.

34 W. Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1955), 281.

35 F. Thomas Pettigrew and R. Linda Tropp, “A Meta Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 766.

36 Steinar Bryn, “Can Dialogue Make a Difference? The Experience of the Nansen Dialogue Network,” in *20 Years in the Eye of the Storm*, ed. Kim Sivertsen (Lillehammer: Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, 2015), 26.

37 Steinar Bryn, “Reflections from a Dialogue Worker,” *The Nansen Seminar-Dialogue in Peacebuilding Report*, 2014, 4.

38 *Ibid.*

How did the Nansen Dialogue successfully foment individual transformation and foster a culture of peace in a conflict zone like the Balkans? In this particular case, Ann Kelleher and Kelly Ryan argue, the participants in both groups had “better education for children” as a common goal and mutual need; moreover, “the executive team consists of a Macedonian and an Albanian, who share responsibilities.”³⁹ A common goal and mutual need led to cooperative interdependence, which was supported by equal status. These factors, among others, ensured the success of the Nansen Dialogue Network.

By contrast, dialogue programs between Israelis and Palestinians appear to have had limited impact. According to Helene Pfeil, “major policymaking decisions related to the peace process have been put in the hands of political elites to the point that citizens keep only a very limited sense of empowerment regarding a possible solution to the long-standing conflict.”⁴⁰ This implies that the impact of a transformed individual at societal level is weak. Authorities do not sanction the dialogue and participants fall into discourses of violence at home after dialogue meetings.

The Tekali Peace Process is a dialogue initiative between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. According to Onnik Krikorian, the Tekali platform created an opportunity for civil society activists, journalists, and ordinary people from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to dialogue.⁴¹ Yuri Manvelyan characterizes Tekali as being unique in that—unlike in other projects—no one took the official positions held by the presidents. Speakers’ statements seemed not to target their “opponents” from the other side, but instead mostly focused on their “own people.”⁴² This project, however, is no longer active. Why did it not

succeed despite equal status, cooperation, and a common goal? It lacked institutional support or authority sanction, and the two governments put pressure on Tekali until they brought the process to a halt. Georgi Vanyan was called a “public enemy” and “an agent” by mainstream media in Armenia.⁴³ Similar cases can be observed in Azerbaijan, where some peace activists have been labeled “traitors.”⁴⁴

Processes of Change

The individual-level changes that intergroup dialogues spur are indicative of the strength of those dialogues. F. Thomas Pettigrew suggests *intergroup friendship* as a fifth condition for reducing prejudice and building relationships, since friendship creates the potential for repeated contact in a variety of social contexts.⁴⁵ According to Yehuda Amir, “when intimate relations are established, one no longer perceives the other in a stereotyped way but begins to consider him as an individual and discovers areas of similarity.”⁴⁶ According to Jim A. Everett and Diana Onu, most friends have equal status and cooperate to achieve shared goals; friendship is also free of the strict societal and institutional dictates that limit romantic relationships, in particular.⁴⁷

Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp highlight several consequences of friendship: learning about the other; generating affective ties, including empathy;⁴⁸ and promoting trust.⁴⁹ If these individual-level ties fail to develop, dialogue meetings cannot be expected to have a broader impact. Thus, individual-level processes of change are too important to be overlooked. Pettigrew and Tropp tested the relationship between enhanced empathy and intergroup dialogue, finding that the former increases as a result

39 Ann Kelleher and Kelly Ryan, “Successful Local Peacebuilding in Macedonia: Sustained Dialogue in Practice,” *Peace Research* 44, no. 1 (2012): 79-80.

40 Pfeil, “Understanding the Dynamics,” 130.

41 Onnik Krikorian, “As Tensions Mount, Plans for an Armenian-Azerbaijan Peace Building Dialogue Center in Georgia,” *Osservatorio balcanico caucaso transeuropa*, February 22, 2011, accessed January 16, 2018, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Armenia/As-tensions-mount-plans-for-an-Armenian-Azerbaijan-Peace-Building-Center-in-Georgia-89479>.

42 Yuri Manvelyan, “The Tekali Process: When the Citizens of the South Caucasus Get Down to Business,” *Caucasian Circle (blog)*, July 2012, accessed January 16, 2018, <http://caucasiancircle.blogspot.com/2012/07/the-tekali-process-when-citizens-of.html> on.

43 “Press Release by Hamburg Foundation for Politically Persecuted People,” Tekali Process, March 2, 2016, accessed January 15, 2018, <http://tekali.org/index.php?p=anons032016>.

44 Elchin Mehdiyev, “Azerbaijani Public Association Urges Punishing Leyla Yunusova and Other Traitors,” *Trend.az*, August 1, 2014, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2298787.html>.

45 F. Thomas Pettigrew, “Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (1998): 76.

46 Yehuda Amir, “Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations,” *Psychological Bulletin* 71, no. 5 (1969): 334.

47 A.C. Jim Everett and Diana Onu, “Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future,” *The Inquisitive Mind*, 2013, 1-2, accessed January 28, 2018, <http://www.in-mind.org/article/intergroup-contact-theory-past-present-and-future>.

48 Pettigrew, “Intergroup Contact Theory,” 70-72.

49 F. Thomas Pettigrew and R. Linda Tropp, *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), 77-115.

of interactions between two groups, which “allows a concomitant reduction in prejudice.”⁵⁰ Thus, empirical studies look at narratives to learn about perceptions of equal status, common goals, cooperation, institutional support/authority sanction, and friendship. In my study, respondents spoke at length about the processes of change they had undergone as a result of dialogue, mentioning opportunities to learn about the other and build empathy. Trust was also mentioned in the narratives, but quite implicitly and even dubiously.

Interview Narratives

This paper is built around in-depth interviews with individuals involved in dialogue-based peacebuilding platforms. Twenty-two people were interviewed and gender balance (thirteen men and nine women) was maintained. The average age of respondents is approximately 35. The respondents were selected through the snowball sampling method. Interviews were semi-structured. Seventeen people were interviewed via Skype, while six responded in writing due to time constraints and the difficulty of arranging long-distance conversations. The majority of respondents are participants in dialogue/peacebuilding programs or peace activists, while a minority (four to five) are organizers of peacebuilding initiatives. Most of the respondents preferred to remain anonymous; pseudonyms appropriate to their country of origin are used. When a respondent is quoted for the first time, his or her full name is given; on second reference, only a respondent's first name is used.

Unequal Status

In the Nansen Dialogue Network, equal status is given as one of the key conditions for success. Yet in a range of ways, the narratives in this study indicate a lack of equal status in dialogue meetings. One issue is unequal representation at decision-making level, which causes significant discontent among Azerbaijani participants in particular. Mehriban Mutellibova, a peace activist from Azerbaijan, said:

While looking at the regional research projects, you can see that there are experts from Armenia and Georgia doing some work. When you ask why there are no Azerbaijanis,

the answer is, “Nobody could be found from Azerbaijan to conduct research.” And when you ask why no expert could be found from Azerbaijan, it seems that they don't know people in Azerbaijan. Why? Because there are no Azerbaijanis on the executive team. This is a problem with many peacebuilding NGOs in the Caucasus: the core teams are Armenians and Georgians, and as a result peacebuilding works are incomplete. Safety may be a factor, but participants from Azerbaijan can question the dissonance that the organizers are only ever Armenians or Georgians.

Selection Bias

Other factors also have a negative impact on equality. For instance, several respondents mentioned nepotism in the selection of participants—choosing friends or friends of friends—as a serious failing. Zerdusht Hesenzade, a peacebuilding program participant from Azerbaijan, argued that selecting some participants from a pool of candidates and choosing others on the basis of friendship ties creates an intellectual gap. Zara Harutunyan, an anti-militarist from Armenia, also underlined that peacebuilding NGOs should take steps to become more inclusive, including by welcoming youths who do not speak English (particularly if they do speak Russian, still the lingua franca of the region). “Even if a participant doesn't speak Russian,” Zara said, “there should be a way to engage them, such as hiring an interpreter to help them work with others.” It seems that some activists currently feel marginalized due to their lack of English language skills; the fact that they mention this as a concern reinforces their commitment to participating in dialogues.

Furthermore, depending on personal experience, respondents were either concerned with the presence of radicals in dialogue meetings or criticized the recruitment of uniformly liberal participants, which they say creates a bubble. “The selection is wrong,” stated Harut Voskanyan, a political scientist and activist from Armenia. “We need to train, communicate, contact, and change more violent people than peaceful guys.” Armenian peacebuilding organizer Karen Mkrtychyan, director of an international peacebuilding NGO, confirmed the importance of having diverse views expressed in meetings. In dialogue initiatives, Karen utilizes an unorthodox approach that gives participants from both sides the opportunity to represent various minority groups—such as fem-

50 F. Thomas Pettigrew and R. Linda Tropp, “How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38 (2008): 927.

inists, LGBTs, and others—rather than dividing participants along national lines. Gohar Grigoryan, an activist from Armenia, stressed the positive effect of this methodology: “feeling empowered to represent specific groups is both effective and useful in facilitating discussions during the meetings, helping to change perceptions.” Since participants acknowledge the positive difference this new approach brings, other peacebuilding NGOs should likewise exploit this method.

In my view, it is not a question of creating a numerical balance between, for instance, “liberals” and “nationalists” from both countries so much as it is choosing the right individuals with liberal or nationalist convictions to participate. A lack of rigor in the selection process often means that a participant chosen for their liberal views, for example, is incapable of conversing with nationalists, which is problematic for the success of a dialogue. Along these lines, Zara explained that for people from Azerbaijan and Armenia, a meeting is a venue to impress the third party, to show off that they are peace lovers, when in fact they [Armenians] are the ones who would be most outraged if the Armenian government were to support territorial concessions in the name of peace. She added, “You can see a big difference in the tones or meaning of participants’ Facebook posts in English and in their native language, but the organizers don’t monitor what participants post.” Accordingly, several respondents suggested implementing a background check on candidates as a component of the selection process.

Cultural Insensitivity

Lack of cultural sensitivity in intergroup dialogues was underlined as a characteristic of meetings between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This lack spurs competition rather than cooperation: insensitive words or actions on the part of a group member create friction between the two sides. Zara stated that most participants in the peacebuilding program see the meetings as a competition to demonstrate that the living conditions and democratic situation in their country are better than on the other side. She added:

There is a lack of self-criticism. Armenians or Azerbaijanis don’t see their own negative sides, and when you are self-crit-

ical, the Azerbaijanis think you are a good Armenian, but they [Azerbaijanis] don’t see it as a way to become critical of themselves.

Facilitators’ improper attempts to address culturally sensitive issues in intergroup dialogues is an issue that emerged from several respondents’ narratives. The story of Parvin Bahramoglu, a civil society activist from Azerbaijan, is illuminating:

In a meeting, I saw a female participant from Nagorno-Karabakh who was wearing the flag of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and introduced herself as representing Arstakh [the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh]. For me, such behavior and such a statement seem provocative. Maybe this isn’t a sensitive matter to the organizers, but they must understand the feelings of both sides.

Gor Sarkisyan from Armenia, a former participant and current peacebuilding program organizer, gave the impression that Armenians feel the same way. Gor said that during one meeting, the organizers put participants from different countries in the same room, which created problems: “There was a girl from Armenia who had lost her father in the war...but the organizers did not take it into account.” Interestingly, both Parvin and Gor stressed the importance of pre-meeting trainings to prepare participants for the meetings. To quote Parvin, “the organizations act irresponsibly in that they don’t provide a pre-meeting information session for both sides.” According to Elizabeth Paluck, empirical studies show that diversity training before meetings improves awareness of and reduces prejudice against various social groups.⁵¹ Indeed, organizing pre-meeting sessions is apparently one of the optimal ways to pre-empt culturally sensitive issues. One respondent, a dialogue organizer, said they used to do pre-meeting trainings in Baku and Yerevan, but due to tough political conditions in Azerbaijan, it is now difficult to arrange such activities. Therefore, pre-meeting trainings for Armenians have also been halted in the interests of being fair to both sides. I would suggest that this dilemma could be resolved by holding pre-meeting sessions for Azerbaijanis in Georgia.

Moreover, one of the reasons that culturally sensitive issues come up or are improperly handled is due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of local cultural contexts. John P. Lederach sees peo-

51 L. Elizabeth Paluck, “Diversity Training and Intergroup Contact: A Call to Action Research,” *Journal of Social Issues* 62 (2006): 587.

ple's cultural knowledge as fundamental to developing appropriate models for handling these issues.⁵² Empirical evidence also demonstrates that an understanding of the local context is a key factor in success, as Ann Kelleher and Kelly Ryan argue in regard to the Nansen Dialogue in the Balkans.⁵³ According to my respondents, a lack of understanding of the local context creates fundamental obstacles to the work of peacebuilding NGOs. Gor stated that peacebuilding NGOs lack interest in and knowledge of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh because it is simply too far from Europe and they are now preoccupied with Ukraine. He continued, "Once I and my colleague from Azerbaijan attended a meeting in a European country, where a roving ambassador to the South Caucasus asked, "So, guys, can you travel to each other's countries [Azerbaijan and Armenia]?"—a sign that the level of knowledge of realities on the ground by external actors can be very limited.

Similarly, Zerdusht suggested that donors' approach to peacebuilding is wrong because they lack willing and "must hire local advisors [and] work with consultants to do research to identify the issues on the ground." This narrative indicates the complexity of the problem: disregarding local specificities can negate the positive effects of face-to-face interactions.

Lack of Authority Sanction/Institutional Support

Interviewed respondents, particularly peacebuilding program organizers, emphasized the role of state policies in distorting interactions. Arzu Geybulla from Azerbaijan, the former co-director of a peacebuilding organization, stated that when participants in cross-border dialogue programs return to their home countries, they are often forced back into their previous mindsets given the reality on the ground. The desire to work together and have a common vision with the other side often prompts aggressive reactions, especially in Azerbaijan. Arzu contended that "the reality is such that peacebuilding initiatives can reach their full potential at grassroots level if only the government lets them work." Edgar Khachatryan, the director of a peace dialogue NGO in Armenia, stated that those who refuse to follow the "rules of the game" are punished or discredited by the governments or their agencies, such that the actions

of civil society actors lose legitimacy in the eyes of the broader public. Dennis Sammut, the director of London-based peacebuilding NGO LINKS (DAR), stated that "peacebuilding initiatives should contribute to changing perceptions and challenging the current war-oriented discourse in both societies." The extent to which they are able to achieve this, however, is dubious.

Lack of authority sanction influences the selection process, since the organizers became cautious about inviting random people to dialogue meetings. For instance, Adalet Mustafayev, a teacher from Azerbaijan who participated in the Tekali peace process, mentioned that the lack of trust meant that youths were often excluded from dialogue meetings. It seems that without authority sanction, the impact of peacebuilding work at grassroots or public level will be minimal, demanding unprecedented effort on the part of peacebuilding NGOs to create vertical and parallel interactions. Sabine Freizer argues that bridging the gap between civil society and government could promote synergies by creating the opportunity for non-governmental groups to share the trust, understanding, and common solutions they have identified over years of dialogue in order to help overcome obstacles in official negotiations.⁵⁴ The narratives have similar tones: Zamira Abbasova from Azerbaijan, former country director of a peacebuilding NGO, argues that such initiatives will enforce the politicization of peacebuilding work. As Arzu summarizes:

This can take shape in various formats, such as track 1.5 initiatives where government representatives are present alongside representatives of civil society during discussions, workshops, conferences, and other similar events. It is also possible to encourage ministry officials to co-author pieces or contribute to a policy paper. Surely, however, this and other attempts must be welcomed on both sides.

Harold Saunders argues that effective dialogue is not a one-time, sporadic meeting, but rather sitting together repeatedly: "Only in a process of systemic, disciplined and sustained dialogue will they learn to interact peacefully."⁵⁵ One of the weaknesses of dialogue programs, Amy Hubbard argues, is that due to

52 Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 12.

53 Kelleher and Ryan, "Successful Local Peacebuilding," 79.

54 Freizer, "Twenty Years After," 14.

55 Harold Saunders, "The Virtue of Sustained Dialogue among Civilizations," *International Journal on World Peace* 18, no. 1 (2001): 35-40.

the short duration of such initiatives, relationships between participants do not have time to develop.⁵⁶ My interlocutors often underlined unsustainability as one of the main issues limiting the effectiveness of peacebuilding projects. Among organizers, Sergey Rumyantsev, a peacebuilding facilitator from Azerbaijan who is currently living in Berlin, agreed that the effectiveness of the programs is connected with continuity: “It is naive to expect a person to change after one meeting; time and investment are needed.”

Participants were even more vociferous. Ketik Shalikhvili, a dialogue participant from Georgia, shared her story:

I have attended some international trainings. After the program was over, we returned to our countries and that was all. I did not see any further cooperation, follow-up activities, joint projects...

Zerdusht argues that short-term projects limit outcomes: “activists are less motivated and lack dedication since they know it will finish after a certain period.” This makes it easier for them to choose other professional opportunities over peacebuilding projects. To quote Sona Nazaryan, a former dialogue participant from Armenia:

I disengaged from taking active part in conflict resolution activities because they were only on a volunteer basis. At the time, I was busy graduating, and later I had to invest more time and effort in the first steps of my career.

Karen acknowledged that the lack of funding makes it hard to pay staff, who often move on to work for bigger organizations. Parvin suggested that creating an office in Tbilisi would allow activists to remain engaged in dialogue programs; the space could also be used for other projects that would allow peacebuilding teams to make a living.

Another limitation on the sustainability of peacebuilding programs comes from NGOs themselves. Guranda Bursulaia, a Georgian peace activist,

argues that there is a regional trend of NGOs changing their course of action:

When peacebuilding was a “trendy” topic in the region, many NGOs claimed that they were working on the issue. Nowadays, for example, gender equality has become more “popular.” Organizations are adapting their aims accordingly; they try to relate their work to new topics. Just doing it [changing] for the sake of grants influences the outcome of projects and NGOs’ impact in the field in general.

Funding

For Reyhan Aghayeva, a peace activist from Azerbaijan, such inconsistencies imply that peacebuilding NGOs lack strategy and dedication to a single area, and are interested in anything for which donors will provide funding. This brings us to the debate surrounding funding from donors, which is another form of institutional support.

A lack of funding from donors affects sustainability and efficiency. As Andreas explained, it is a challenge to receive funding for a period longer than a year; his organization is currently seeking to extend the duration of funding. Georgi Vanyan, a dialogue organizer and activist from Armenia, was just one of my interlocutors to condemn international donors for cutting financial support for peacebuilding in the region since 2015, especially following the escalation in April 2016.

There are also serious disparities in funding. My research indicated that some organizations have a monopoly: EPNK, a consortium of five organizations, has a budget of €4.7 million (USD\$5.8 million) for 2016-2019,⁵⁷ whereas CRISP, a small organization, received only around €50,000 (USD\$61,000) for 2016 to do trainings in the Caucasus.⁵⁸ Imagine, a middle-tier organization, was granted about USD\$800,000 over the five years between 2012 and 2016.⁵⁹ “Money continues to be given only to a small pool of international NGOs,” Ahmad Faizal, head of Mercy Malaysia, told IRIN News in an interview.⁶⁰ This is likewise an acute problem for peacebuilding projects on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As Guranda

56 S. Amy Hubbard, “Personal Change and Political Action: The Intersection of Conflict Resolution And Social Movement Mobilization in a Middle East Dialogue Group,” Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, *Working Paper* No. 7 (1992): 2.

57 European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), accessed January 7, 2018, <http://epnk.org/>.

58 “Annual Report 2016,” Crisis Simulation for Peace (CRISP), accessed January 7, 2018, http://work.crisp-berlin.org/fileadmin/ABOUT/Organisation/Documents/Annual_Reports/2016/CRISP-AnnualReport_2016.pdf.

59 “Financial Report 2016 to the Internal Revenue Service,” Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation.

60 Louise Redvers, “NGOs: Bridging the North-South Divide,” June 2015, accessed January 26, 2018, <http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2015/06/08/ngos-bridging-north-south-divide>.

explained, “donor organizations which have been around for many years prefer to stay loyal to the local NGOs with which they have experience collaborating, so it is quite difficult for new organizations to receive a grant for a serious project.” Karen was particularly critical:

The peacebuilding field is monopolized by big London and Washington, DC-based organizations. They want to control the money flow, so funding goes to big organizations, and they don't want smaller organizations to join their “club.”

The current situation is the fault of donors, who overlook this important issue. The solution is likewise in their hands. Donors should review their funding policies to avoid preferential treatment and ensure that medium-size and small organizations receive their fair share of funding. Such an approach would induce competition, which is likely to improve efficiency. One way for donors to determine which NGOs are worthy of grants would be to observe trainings, which would allow them to compare and contrast the work of these organizations on the ground.

Inefficiency of Follow-Up Projects

My respondents also questioned the quality of follow-up projects. In general, these are not considered particularly efficient.

Some organizers stressed the difficulty of measuring the impact of trainings, while others pointed to the lack of instruments for assessing follow-up initiatives. For their part, activists were openly critical of follow-up efforts. Mehriban lamented, “The quality of the follow-up projects is not sufficiently high because organizers never care if we need any help; such projects carry only formal importance, to show that something was done on the ground.” There is no continuity, as Adalet mentioned: “We created a website for one project and filled it with some information. Shortly afterwards, it stopped working, yet a report went to the donor that the project was successfully implemented.” For Zerdusht, efficiency is sharply reduced because peacebuilding NGOs work with the same group of people on the ground, and these individuals continue to receive grants regardless of their performance. Zamira echoed this point, noting

with frustration that this can lead to the exclusion of youth, even though young people are the future and therefore need to be taken seriously, engaged, and trusted.

Evidently, this group of preferred local partners, often called “gatekeepers,” distorts peace initiatives in many conflict zones. Anderson and Olson argue that this can be prevented if peacebuilding NGOs consult with a diverse range of local experts and activists, which allows them to maintain balance.⁶¹ It is certainly difficult to cooperate with a broad range of locals when the authorities do not sanction peacebuilding work. Respondents also acknowledged that trust is a factor encouraging peacebuilding NGOs to keep to their own circle of participants or co-partners. As Karen elaborated:

It is mutually beneficial as money flows through one group of organizations and enters the region through gatekeepers. It is done intentionally, I realized later, to kill any other organization, because they see it as a competition instead of cooperation to achieve peace.

Lack of Oversight

Karen was not the only respondent to mention money as a factor. Several other interviewees commented that peacebuilding projects are seen as a business. Zara said that over the past 20 years of conflict, “peacebuilding has become a way of making money.” Apparently, blaming the governments at every turn is a shortcut that allows peacebuilding organizations to avoid criticism without adopting new approaches. According to Severine Autessere, blaming others or justifying one's own shortcomings is a way for peacebuilding NGOs to maintain prominence or respond to criticism when their actions are having a negative impact.⁶² Ilkin Aliyev, a participant from Azerbaijan, argued that peacebuilding NGOs often forget the role of “collective memory” in focusing so heavily on regime type—that is, they overlook the role of “perceptions about the enemy” in both societies. For instance, the 2013 Caucasus Barometer survey shows that 99 percent of Azerbaijanis⁶³ and 76 percent of Armenians⁶⁴ disapprove of doing business with the opposite nationality. As such, it could be said that

61 B. Mary Anderson and Lara Olson, “Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners,” *The Collaborative for Development Action*, 2003, 41.

62 Severine Autessere, “International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness,” *International Studies Review* (2017): 9-11.

63 Caucasus Research Resource Centre, “Caucasus Barometer Regional Data Set (2013),” accessed January 30, 2018, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/BUSINARM/>.

64 Caucasus Research Resource Centre, “Caucasus Barometer.”

peacebuilders fail to take a holistic approach to the problem.

Common Goal

My interlocutors' narratives provided little explicit evidence of a common goal for dialogue meetings among participants from both sides. This is not to say that there is not a common goal, but this does not seem to run deeper than a desire for constructive dialogue and peace. Indeed, some respondents complained that many participants lack even an understanding of "peace." As such, these individuals need to be trained in the meaning of peace before they can hope to participate constructively in peacebuilding dialogues. The Tekali initiative is a rare example of an initiative that lacked authority sanction yet still managed to get participants to embrace a common goal: cooperation and equality.

It is important to emphasize, however, that all conditions—equal status, common goal, cooperation, and authority sanction—are equally necessary to the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. If all four conditions can be met simultaneously, a meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp finds, the success of these initiatives is likely.⁶⁵

Processes of Change: Friendship

Friendship can be an important motivator for participation in peacebuilding efforts, as well as driving a broader attitude shift. Gor explained that during one peacebuilding meeting, he made friends with Azerbaijanis. The new friends stayed in touch by continuing to attend peacebuilding programs, which Gor said motivates him to remain engaged in such projects. He continued:

My two friends from Azerbaijan and I were attending another dialogue meeting between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The Armenians arrived earlier and were waiting for the Azerbaijanis to come. When the Azerbaijanis came, there was a moment of silence and nobody wanted to shake hands. My friends jumped forward, so we three hugged. After this, other members of the two groups be-

gan to greet each other. One Armenian and one Azerbaijani girl joined our friendship network because they thought we were cool. So, in a way, our previous training helped us sort of seduce two more people because of our friendship and great relationship.

This implies that a positive relationship between interacting parties can serve to change perceptions among extended contacts, such as other friends. Indeed, other studies demonstrate that cross-group friendships reduce prejudice among indirect friends.⁶⁶ Aren Melikyan, a journalist and dialogue participant from Armenia, mentioned that he likes to tell his colleagues in Armenia about his work with Azerbaijanis. He said, "I think it helps them not to judge all Azerbaijani people in the same way. This alternative way of thinking can have a good result on the knowledge of the two societies."

Peacebuilding activists appear to be conscious of their role in transferring positive sentiments toward other groups and reducing prejudice. The physical closeness facilitated by dialogue meetings helps to break stereotypes. This is supported by the fact that "the spill-over effect of intergroup friendship diminishing prejudice on others is stronger if there are some cultural similarities,"⁶⁷ which provide a baseline for relationship formation. This is borne out in the Caucasian context. Reyhan indicated that Azerbaijanis and Armenians have lots of cultural and mental similarities, which makes building connections easier. Gohar took a similar view:

Our nations are very similar and having lived side by side for so many years we share a lot of similarities, even in our lifestyles and traditions. Involving the two sides in these meetings will help make the anti-enemy process easier.

Research by Davies et al. on intergroup friendship reveals that "time spent together" and "self-disclosure" are the best indicators of intergroup friendship.⁶⁸ In the context of dialogue meetings, organizers can increase time spent together by prioritizing longer-term projects. Self-disclosure may be enhanced through

65 Pettigrew and Tropp, "A Meta Analytic Test," 766.

66 See Stephen C. Wright, Arthur Aron, Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe, and Stacy A. Ropp, "The Extended Contact Effect: Knowledge of Cross-Group Friendships and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): 87.

67 F. Thomas Pettigrew, "Secondary Transfer Effect of Contact: Do Intergroup Contact Effects Spread Noncontacted Outgroups?" *Social Psychology* 40, no. 2 (2009): 61-63.

68 Kristin Davies, Linda R. Tropp, Arthur Aron, Thomas F. Pettigrew, and Stephen C. Wright, "Cross-Group Friendships and Intergroup Attitudes: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 4 (2011): 340.

informal story-telling sessions between the groups, an approach that has proved very successful in other conflict contexts. Judith Hoover shows that storytelling has been valuably employed in Northern Ireland through the “Healing Through Remembering” dialogue project, which established ground rules such as “genuine openness to differing points of view, willingness to listen and maintain confidentiality, and responsibility and support for others.”⁶⁹ In the Israel-Palestine conflict, personal story-sharing has replaced bias and lack of awareness with consensus around the need for a non-violent struggle, Silvia Hassouna writes.⁷⁰ For participants like Aren, who prefers to have more unstructured time and a less formal atmosphere at peacebuilding events, storytelling sessions would be a good choice. In addition, my personal experience is that story-telling is incredibly effective at creating emotional bonds.

Conclusion

Though my respondents see ways in which peacebuilding could be improved, they are universally supportive of communication and dialogue between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. We have seen that it is important to select participants in such a way as to create a sense of equality in the meetings; respondents shared stories of how poor selection processes can distort dialogues. Their narratives also illuminated that intergroup friendship can be used to extend these relationships to non-group friends. They further highlighted the need for institutional support, observing that the lack thereof—and issues with funding, in particular—can cut projects short. If these considerations are taken into account, my interlocutors are hopeful that peacebuilding NGOs can help Armenia and Azerbaijan move toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Interview Bias Observations

I found Azerbaijanis more willing to be critical or negative about peacebuilding projects. They were not shy in naming individuals and institutions. Presumably, they felt more comfortable expressing their views to

me, a dialogue partner from Azerbaijan; indeed, one of my Armenian respondents made precisely that point. This is not to discredit Armenians’ optimism, but it may be one reason for a general bias in my findings.

In addition, interviewees who are currently active participants in peacebuilding programs were hesitant to be publicly quoted or to have their thoughts expressed. For instance, one of the participants told me an interesting story, but did not want the details to be mentioned. It is hard to determine whether this is for ethical reasons or due to concerns about damaging relationship with the organizers. Whatever the case may be, this does introduce some bias to the study.

Finally, present or past organizers who had initially been participants in dialogue platforms were generally less critical of peacebuilding projects. That being said, these respondents did tend to criticize trainings organized by institutions other than their own.

Policy Recommendations

In view of the main perspectives expressed in the interview narratives I have collected, the following achievable policy recommendations are proposed.

For peacebuilding NGOs:

1. Retain individuals who have experienced personal transformation as a result of these trainings, since they are the agents for sustaining relations and making incremental changes. Three mini-steps are necessary to keep individuals engaged:
 - a. Arrange pre-meeting information sessions or trainings for participants as a way to reduce culturally sensitive encounters. This may involve organizing sessions in Georgia for participants from Azerbaijan.
 - b. Create financial incentives and provide office space, which are necessary tools to maintain activists’ motivation and long-term commitment. Organizations implementing these programs must diversify their sources of funding and take a lon-

69 D. Judith Hoover, “Dialogue: Our Past, Our Present, Our Future,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 40, no. 3 (2011): 213.

70 Silvia Hassouna, “An Assessment of Dialogue-Based Initiatives in Light of the Anti-Normalization Criticisms and Mobility Restrictions,” *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2015): 52-53.

- ger-term approach to financial security. They should also report those cases where a lack of funding reduced the effectiveness of programs, as this may stimulate donors to be more generous.
- c. Organize storytelling sessions during meetings to strengthen the emotional bond between individuals, thus paving the way for intergroup friendships.
 2. Increase inclusivity by involving more youths who speak only local languages or Russian. The historical preference of organizers for participants who speak a common language (such as English) is understandable, as it facilitates communication. However, a broader range of people could be engaged in peacebuilding processes by hiring an interpreter or paying a participant who is fluent in English to translate the discussion into a local language.
 3. Increase vertical impact by engaging youth from the regions. Based on my personal experience, I suggest the so-called “Peace Corps” model: Peace Corps volunteers held camps for teenagers in Azerbaijan to train them in gender equality, volunteer service, and leadership. This can be implemented in two phases: following the local camps, teenagers can be taken to Georgia for a joint project. Logistical and political support from embassies would certainly help handle bureaucratic issues, such as permission to camp out. One or two local co-partners with official support can ensure authority sanction.
 4. Improve efficiency by breaking peacebuilding NGOs’ dependence on a limited number of “gatekeepers.” The first step is to find new voices on the ground by hiring consultants or local advisors.
 5. Establish an alternative⁷¹ source of information in local languages,⁷² using social media tools and the internet to disseminate objective information about incidents on the border in a timely manner and fight the biased

narratives propagated by the mainstream media.

6. Build an initiative similar to Tekali, with the objective of providing equal status and cooperation in pursuit of a common goal between dialogue partners. Authority sanction is also vital.
7. Arrange tele/videoconferences to keep lines of communication open between physical meetings. Teleconferences are likely to increase participants’ commitment to cooperation.⁷³
8. Create an independent evaluation mechanism to assess the efficiency and impact of follow-up projects. To avoid bias, however, an outside evaluator can be hired to observe implementation processes.

For donors:

1. Ensure fair distribution of financial assistance to guarantee healthy competitiveness between organizations of different sizes. Competition will likely increase the effectiveness and efficiency of work on the ground.

For local governments:

1. Engage local and international peacebuilding organizations in the official stream of negotiations; let them bridge the gap between the state and the grassroots by transferring information top-down and bottom-up.

List of Interviewees

Adalet Mustafayev (pseud.), teacher and training participant from Azerbaijan.

Andreas Muckenfuss, director of an international NGO from Germany and an organizer of peacebuilding trainings.

Aren Melikyan, journalist and training participant from Armenia.

71 Bojana Blagojevic states that during the 1994 genocide, the USAID funded a “peace radio” project to counter the Rwandan government’s “hate radio.” Bojana Blagojevic, “Peacebuilding in Ethnically Divided Societies,” *Peace Review* 19, no. 4 (2007): 560.

72 Jam News, a social media outlet for news about society and politics in the Caucasus, is an example of an effective outlet. Similar projects must multiply, as one or two news outlets cannot outshout mainstream media.

73 Andrea Iro shows that teleconferences have been used to conduct meetings about the conflict in Sierra Leone. Andrea Iro, *The UN Peacebuilding Commission – Lessons from Sierra Leone* (University of Potsdam: WeltTrends Thesis 6, 2009), 44.

Arzu Geybullayeva, former co-director of a peacebuilding organization and former organizer of peacebuilding trainings from Azerbaijan

Dennis Sammut, director of London-based NGO LINKS (DAR) and organizer of peacebuilding trainings.

Edgar Khachatryan, director of Yerevan-based NGO Peace Dialogue and organizer of peacebuilding trainings.

Georgi Vanyan, director of a peacebuilding organization and organizer of peacebuilding trainings from Armenia.

Gohar Grigoryan (pseud.), anti-militarist activist and training participant from Armenia.

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**CENTRAL ASIA
PROGRAM**

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This volume gives the floor to a young generation of experts and scholars from Central Asia and Azerbaijan. They were fellows at GW's Central Asia-Azerbaijan Fellowship Program, which aims to foster the next generation of thought leaders and policy experts in Central Asia. The Program provides young professionals (policy experts, scholars, and human rights and democracy activists) with opportunities to develop their research, analytical, and communication skills in order to become effective leaders within their communities. The Program serves as a platform for the exchange of ideas and builds lasting intellectual networks of exchange between and amongst Central Asians and the U.S. policy, scholarly, and activist communities. It increases and helps disseminate knowledge about Central Asian viewpoints in both the United States and Central Asia.

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