

Tajik Artists Lead Social Change: The Role of Art in Questioning Tajik Traditional Values

□ CAP Paper 227, January 2020

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We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.
Franklin D. Roosevelt

This quote from American president Franklin D. Roosevelt calls for action in education, social development, and support of youth. This same aspiration should be true for the Tajik government: young people are the main agents of social change, economic development and technological progress. The Tajik authorities have introduced several laws to support their policy on youth and culture since the country's independence in 1991, but with mixed results. In the cultural domain, they promote a traditional art that reflects mostly asocial topics, depicting reality without any hint of disobedience or protest—sometimes even praising the current government.

But a recent boom of non-conformist thinking in the artistic field shows that young artists are much more innovative. Using theater, visual arts, photo-video media, and rap and rock music, they address difficult subjects such as eroticism and sexuality and conduct social messaging that borders on protest. At least two prominent names among many others, Marifat Davlatova¹ and Dorob Dorobov (Dorob Yan's),² illustrate this trend of artistic unrest and disobedience. In this paper, I ask how Tajik artists reconcile their non-conformist thinking with the traditional narratives about art promoted by the authorities. I argue that, despite a lack of cultural acceptance from the authorities, non-conformist art is developing and can thrive further. Secondary sources being scarce, this article relies mostly on interviews with local artists, critical analyses of artworks, and my almost 20 year-long professional experience as an art manager and art activist in Tajikistan.

Youth and Culture in Tajikistan

According to official data, the average Tajik citizen is 25 years old. About 2.7 million people out of more than 8.9 million, or 30% of the population, are between 14 and 30 years of age.³ Their creative imagination, ideals, powerful energy, and insight are of great importance for ensuring the continuous development of the society in which they live. However, the current rates of illiteracy, unemployment, and poor health conditions among Tajik youth are higher than those of their parents. There has been an unrecorded surge of illiteracy,⁴ and the 2018 National Study on Adolescents and Youth in Tajikistan finds that 53.6% of adolescents do not use a computer, and 64% of them do not use internet.⁵

The Tajik government has released several laws on youth and culture. Tajikistan's Youth and Youth Policy law from 2004 defines youth as people aged 14 to 30 and regulates the pillars for their legislative, social, economic, and cultural development. The main implementing body of this law is the Youth Committee under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, whose role is to provide integrated services in

the field of education, culture, health, and economy and to distribute state grants. In 2016, the government approved the National Program on Youth Social Development of Tajikistan for 2016-2018, which primarily focuses on patriotic education.

The latest edition of the Law on Culture, enacted in 2011, regulates activities in a wide range of artistic genres and directions such as fiction, cinematography, scenic/dancing/musical/fine arts, photo/video art, etc. On paper, this law is based on the basic principles of freedom of creative activities, recognition of pluralism of opinions, and assistance to the development of the creative potential of citizens. The body tasked to implement this law is the Ministry of Culture. A Conception of the Cultural Development of Tajikistan states that the law's implementation depends on a "direct appeal to the national traditions of the country"—an obscure terminology that limits artistic expression and remains blurrily defined. For instance, in August 2017, the state signed amendments to the Law on Observing National Traditions and Rituals, compelling citizens to wear "national clothing" at weddings and funerals.⁶

The authorities stress the importance of keeping Tajik youth inside a framework of restrictive national traditions. They also insist on integrating youth into state performative production as much as possible. For instance, youth are invited to march at parades and festivities such as Independence Day (September 9), Navruz (March 21, spring equinox), and National Unity Day (June 27). Additionally, the state has a grant program for supporting youth. According to anonymous respondents from the officials of the Youth Committee in Dushanbe, the state offers about 10 grants annually (approximately \$1,000 per grant) for organizations that affiliate with youth issues and 10 additional grants (approximately \$1,000 per grant) for increasing patriotic feelings and attitudes among youth.

Traditional Art and the Different Perceptions of "National Traditions"

Through their cultural policy, the authorities target mostly Tajik-speaking youth, especially rural youth. The Tajik population is approximately 73.6% rural and 26.4% urban.⁷ The inequality of opportunities

and participation between urban and rural youth is massive, with rural youth largely excluded from the main efforts in development.⁸ Indeed, rural Tajiks have little access to even the basic amenities that urban populations normally consume, including central sewage systems, water pipes, central heating, etc. They receive information almost exclusively from the official controlled media and have no access to alternative sources of information, precisely because they possess little to no Russian language skills and have even less knowledge of English. In addition to these hurdles, rural communities often do not have proper access to the internet because of its low speed and unattainably high prices.

There is no data on the perceptions that rural and urban youth have regarding state-backed traditional values. However, considering the results of 14 of the 16 interviews I conducted between June and September 2019, it seems that rural, Tajik-speaking youth conform more closely to so-called traditional values than their urban counterparts. Conversely, Tajik youth in urban settings tended to display subversive countercultures that are considered by authorities to be dangerous—either because of their Western borrowings or because they are judged to draw too much inspiration from radical Islam.⁹



Ivan Lisikov, 1965, "Group of Tajik Intellegentsia", Tajik National Museum, photo-Ulugova's archives.

A relatively active cultural life can be found only in the capital, Dushanbe, and sometimes in Khujand.¹⁰ Situated in the center of the Sugd province, Khujand is the second-largest city in Tajikistan and is considered to be the business center of Tajikistan because of its close economic ties with neighboring Uzbekistan and historical connection to the Fergana Valley. In these urban

areas, young people can access both government-founded and alternative events, such as rock/jazz/fusion parties and festivals. Rural youth outside these centers, in contrast, remain deprived of access to such events.

Tajikistan's state-promoted traditional values focus mostly on respect for traditional hierarchies such as the family's authority, an obvious metaphor for the political order. Tajikistan is indeed both a gerontocratic and patriarchal society, where the parents make choices for their children regarding marriages, education, and the way of living (including customs, traditions, social norms).¹¹ The traditional authoritarian style of parenting teaches children and adolescents that it is impolite and inappropriate to speak in the immediate vicinity of adults. In her research on this subject, Helene Thibault mentions "controversial legal measures to promote national values" in the Law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children, introduced in 2011. The law "patronizes moral recommendations focusing mainly on female clothing and virtue, which have come to embody national values;" consequently, wearing any non-local clothes—whether it is a hijab, tight jeans, or a short skirt—contradicts and betrays national values."¹²

When Soviet Tajikistan received the status of federal republic in 1929, it started shaping its own arts unions, such as Painters Unions, Literature Unions, and Architecture Unions. Socialistic realism was the official doctrine used to beautify the national traditions and garner support for the new state ideology.¹³ The schools of realism and academism promoted strictly controlled versions of each ethnicity's cultural traditions. They spanned all genres of European visual, musical, and performing arts traditions. Pictorial arts in a naturalistic style that conformed to the principles of social realism were encouraged. There was little space for "formalist" arts, and as a result, Tajik arts developed within the state-proclaimed Socialist Realist philosophy and style.¹⁴

Larisa Dodkhodeva, a Tajik expert in art theory and history, considers the Tajik arts to be asocial from the Soviet times, depicting the beauties of nature and people—mostly women and children—but rarely touching acute social problems. She states

that Tajik artists rarely turn to criticism and give prevalence to Soviet-era constructs of national mythology.¹⁵

Non-Conformist Artistic Production

Yet, even in an unwelcoming environment, non-conformist artistic production is on the rise. Contemporary Tajik art can trace its origins to a project called *Starter* that was launched in 2005 by the Swiss Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Tajikistan. Led by Tajik People's Artist Sabzali Sharifov, students from various art educational



Sharipov Murodjon, 2012 "Granat", Dushanbe, photo: Sharipov's archives

institutions in Dushanbe and Khujand took part in the project as a first attempt to introduce innovative approaches to the arts into the curriculum of the Tajik educational system.¹⁶ It resulted in some follow-up exhibitions, mostly presented by a small group of artists who used video as their main medium. The first exhibition of contemporary arts was *Parallel*, which opened in 2006 as a series of outcomes from the *Starter* workshop. The exhibition had national coloring but was at the same time grounded in a more modern conception of art as questioning society.

Censored arts

Well acclimated to and integrated with globalized

cultural trends, some Tajik artists have been using new styles like rock and rap music to express themselves. In 2014, the authorities banned the broadcasting of rock and rap music, considering it to be alien to national and universal human values and in confrontation with the national culture.¹⁷ Paradoxically, they rely on a Soviet definition of what traditional art is: for instance, opera, ballet, and symphonic music, now considered as traditional, were never part of Tajik “traditions” before the Russian colonization, and integrated with the national pantheon only during Soviet times. Even jazz is not perceived today as a hostile art, but rock and rap are because they convey social messaging which confronts the official state doctrine, pointing out problems and criticizing the authorities for failing to tackle corruption, unemployment, and other acute problems.

Following this ban, the Open Society Institute – Assistance Foundation (OSIAF) (Open Society Foundations - network) launched a project—which I coordinated as an Arts and Social Activism Program Coordinator—to help Tajik rappers find ways to reconcile their lyrics with the demands of authorities.¹⁸ To meet the project’s strategic goal of supporting freedom of expression, OSIAF aimed to brush up the artists’ rap lyrics, avoid curse words, and try to find analogies in Persian poetry and literature to substitute the current reality with the Tajik verbal heritage of the past. Topics of lyrics were varied but each track denounced injustice in general, drug abuse, unemployment, migrant nostalgia for their home country, etc. Unfortunately, the project was ultimately unable to persuade the authorities to recognize the rappers’ lyrics as socially acceptable

The most vivid example of disobedience and protest in rap music has been the Pamiri singer Dorob Dorobov (1989).¹⁹ Escaping the civil war of the 1990s, he made a bitter track on how Dushanbe authorities treat the GBAO (Gorno-Badakhshan Oblast) region. During the 2012 anti-government riots in Khorog,²⁰ a close relative of his died, causing him to express his pain and resentment towards the state in a new series of songs. In his tracks, he criticized the government for its inability to control the situation and for letting innocent dwellers be killed. Furthermore, he reflects the situation in the country as one of excess power and abuse. He was

detained in 2013 and interrogated for two weeks in a detention center in Russia.²¹ He was freed afterward, but he has been banned from entering Tajikistan and continues to receive threats on social media.

Although, the state restricts rappers and rockers by banning them from public performances, it seems ready to support artists who sing patriotic rap songs on state television and radio.²² This is the case with Baron’s song “Diyori Archmand” (Motherland), which praises the authorities, especially the President, and was widely broadcast on state television channels. The lyrics, more than the musical style per se, are therefore at the center of the authorities’ attention.

Uneasy but Safer Subjects

Unlike rap and rock, which are officially banned, many other sensitive topics find themselves in a grey zone: not officially forbidden, yet still not welcome by Tajik authorities. In this broad category, one may find artists addressing issues such as the memory of the civil war, abuse of power, corruption, violence in the army or prisons, domestic violence, sexuality, etc. In these cases, the issue of self-censorship has played and continues to play a huge role; artists have to be careful in choosing each word/scene, and they have to balance their ability to provoke with their social status and the patronage they may benefit from—as some well-placed patrons can protect them from repression.

Denouncing violence

The level of violence in Tajikistan is high, and illegal cases of torture and abuse in the country’s army and prisons are widespread.²³ Several artists tackle this issue with caution. I can say from my own experience in 2019, when I produced a performance against illegal actions such as torture and abuse called “Youth for Laws Supremacy,” I weighed each word in the script.²⁴ The public response often stated that it was too brave to produce such a performance in which a range of acute social issues were directly addressed.

These performances often have a very limited audience and do not attract the public. This was the case with the recent exhibition of Farrukh

Negmatzade,²⁵ which marked June 26, the United Nations' International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, by depicting different forms of violence, both physical and psychological.²⁶ The same goes for Murodjon Sharifov²⁷ and Anisa Sabiri,²⁸ two prominent young artists who use painting along with video media and photo media/cinematography



Shabi dur az Vatan (Nostalgia) play, 2017, Nozim Melikov director, Dushanbe Javanon theater, photo: Ulugova

respectively to address social problems on the subject of violence. Sharifov's recent works reflect migration issues, the war in Syria, and the conflict in Gaza, while Anisa Sabiri, in her film *Nolai Tanbur*, reveals the wounds of the civil war in Tajikistan. The topic of the civil war of Tajikistan (1991-1997) has been sensitive and is painful to cover for any artist in Tajikistan, whether they are visual artists, theater or cinema directors, or journalists. Discussions on the civil war can still ignite tensions between the different sides in the conflict, so artists tend to avoid this difficult topic.

Women and environmental issues

Topics of gender, domestic violence, abuse towards women, and environmental issues find themselves in more of a safe zone for non-conformist artists.

The Rumansevs, Alla and Alexey, are the most prominent Tajik artists that contribute to youth education regarding non-conventional thinking over arts.²⁹ Alla's *Modality-3* project³⁰ invites youth to rethink the role of women in society. Surayo Tuichieva³¹ also helps analyze the ways that society impacts women's daily life and ways of thinking. Her video entitled "Generation Next" reveals "the transformation of political ideology in Tajikistan through the prism of changing accessories worn by women."³² The recent ironic cartoons of Azam Mirzones,³³ widely circulated on social media, echo issues of environmental damages, domestic violence, and cultural norms such as required behavior in public transport, etc. The Nihohi Nav (New Vision) theater group, which has brought documentary trends into the Tajik theater scene since 2012, touches subjects of abuse, labor migration, and psychological problems that youth face as they grow up.³⁴

Nudity

The topic of nudity—along with all aspects of sexuality—is not a welcomed subject but is not officially banned. The first "nude" exhibition, *Green and Orange, Blue and White* of a visual painter Farrukh Negmatzde, was organized by me, Lolisanam Ulugova, with the support of the Swiss



Marifat Davlatova, 2018, Desire, Dushanbe, photo: Ulugova's archives

Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Tajikistan. It was one of the first art exhibitions after the civil war, celebrating peace and the hope for reconstruction of the country. His exhibition was quite a success and, despite this being one of the first “nude” exhibitions, it did not cause an outburst from Tajik officials—perhaps because of the weakness of social media at that time. Similarly, a later exhibition by Mizrob Kholov also presented several nude works, and here too, the exhibition concluded without raising vocal criticisms.³⁵ Things changed in 2018 when Marifat Davlatova displayed her nude paintings at the Serena Hotel, one of the most popular places to exhibit arts in the capital due to its open-minded management policies.

The subject of her exposition was showing her contemporaries’ daily life, denuding their inner and outer world. Davlatova expressed her protest of the existing traditional practice of arranged marriages, imposing a woman as a trading symbol for beauty. This event divided the viewers into her admirers and critics. For the latter, Tajikistan’s traditional unwritten code of laws regulates that women show her body only within the marriage links.³⁶ The fact that the author of nudes was a woman herself—and not a man as with the two previous cases mentioned—may have played a crucial role here. Her work “Hopelessness,” which shows a half-dressed girl wearing traditional pants and eagerly inhaling a cigarette, depicts any Tajik girl who restrains herself to show her real identity publicly. It proves the hypocrisy and dominance of the honor-and-shame system which hinders citizens from being honest in public. “I depicted my counterparts as sincere and without hypocrisy,” said Marifat in my interview with her, adding, “our society is closed, hypocritical, and cruel; people do not say the truth to each other and for themselves.”

Colette Harris’s research on women in Tajikistan in the 1990s has proven to remain relevant as it provides background information that is helpful for understanding the situation surrounding Davlatova’s exhibition. The artist has indicated her protest over the patriarchal dominance in Tajik society. “Tajikistan is influenced by the honor-and-shame system; in Tajikistan, shame (*ayb*) has become reified and is a notable hindrance to virtually everything a girl or young woman wishes to undertake.”³⁷ The fact that viewers of artists’

works rushed to defend their honor or *namus* (appropriate gender performances) shows the piety of a growing part of the society. These cases show how Tajik public opinion accepts male artists’ depictions of women’s nude bodies while simultaneously condemning female artists for doing the same thing, reflecting the whole society’s traditional mindset.

Youth resistance

In the past few years, Tajik youth subcultures have become more active globally. In 2019, footage on social media of Tajik-Russian Slavonic University graduate student Azamat Ziyaev reflects a revolt against the state media for its dull and outdated programs. The video, entitled “A Lie, the Truth, and a Stupidity,” metaphorically denounces the three main components of state television, and calls for resistance to obedience and the platitudes of Tajik journalism.³⁸ I asked Ziyaev if he was not afraid of publishing his diploma work on the same topic. He said there was no panacea from the punishment of dissidence so far. However, he admitted that he did not criticize any senior officials directly and used metaphors to protect himself from reverse accusations. He believes that the video will force the authorities to react and improve the quality of its television programs.

Conclusion

Since its independence, Tajikistan has faced many challenges that cannot be easily solved, such as the trauma from the civil war and the lack of economic development. However, the main obstacles to the country’s improvement can actually be found in the state’s own limitations to freedom of expression, speech, and faith. Preservation of “national traditions” may be important in a time of nation-building, but it does not have to limit artistic expressions, especially as freedom of expression is officially inscribed into Tajik legislation. The current definition of Tajik art has been too narrow to integrate the modernity of new forms of arts, from rap music to street art.

The country still has to overcome the Soviet legacy of banning formalism and allow for a more critical perspective on how art can depict society and

address its social ills. The authorities cannot develop the country economically without empowering the younger generation and giving them room to blossom and imagine another future. A dialogue between national traditions and non-conformist art is thus possible and should be seen by the authorities as paving the way to use culture as a tool to foster national identity and unity, and to help the country integrate more successfully on the international scene. The rich cultural legacy of Tajikistan, particularly in Persian poetry and music, as well as the Soviet repertoire, constitutes fertile soil for contemporary artists to develop new forms of art that can be both national and globalized—so long as the state is ready to accompany them and support them.

Recommendations

To the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education for encouraging the Contemporary Arts:

- Increase the number of art galleries in the country. Each art educational institution (there are just a few) might open its own art gallery: the Tajikistan State Institute of Art, Visual Arts and Design University, and College of Arts. In addition, there are some abandoned buildings across the country. Some of them could be the contemporary arts galleries;

- Update the educational curricula on art subjects, ensuring an increase in the development of contemporary arts subjects;
- Update the maps/guidance for tourists including the location of galleries and art studios;
- Launch a series on TV programs describing art trends worldwide; invite non-traditional artists to take part in these TV programs to discuss their art.

To the Embassies in RT, European Union Commission to RT, Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation (OSIAF), Swiss Cooperation Office and Consular Agency in Tajikistan (SCD), and other internationally affiliated organizations:

- Include in your grant-making programs support for individual artists and art institutions for developing the contemporary arts in the field of visual and performing arts as well as other artistic genres and styles;
- Facilitate dialogues between the Ministries of Culture and Education and non-traditional artists by bringing renowned experts in the field to help bridge the gap between artists and the state.

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