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## **The Region of Central Asia: Introduction**

**Report on the ECMI Expert Workshop on Central Asia**

Sergiusz Bober, Aziz Berdiqulov and Craig Willis

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## 1. Introduction

In 2018, the ECMI organised a workshop on Central Asia aiming to advance the knowledge and understanding on the region. The workshop covered mainly 4 countries – Kazakhstan (KZ), Kyrgyzstan (KG), Tajikistan (TJ) and Uzbekistan (UZ) and was attended by the ECMI staff. The discussions were organized along four cross-cutting topics:

1. Current Political Situation;
2. Human and Minority Rights;
3. National and Ethnic Minorities (including a sub-section on religion);
4. Border Issues.

The present report will provide an overview of the discussions that took place during the workshop, highlight the key points and conclude with suggested follow-up actions by the ECMI. The structure of the report will follow the thematic order of the workshop.

## 2. Discussed Topics

### *(1) Current Political Situation*

*Kazakhstan:* KZ tries to increase its influence in the region through a soft-power approach. This tendency is illustrated especially by the

scope of activity of its embassies in the regional capitals. In addition to that, the country acts as an aid-donor, since it is the richest country in the region, with a relatively diversified economy. KZ bilateral and multilateral activities in the region are primarily focused upon the intensification of trade- and cross-border relations. At the same time, it needs to be mentioned that the country's relative economic affluence based on natural resources is also contributing to the preservation of autocratic power-structures. The country tries to position itself as a Central Asian Singapore, due to its aforementioned relative prosperity, combined with authoritarian power-structures.

*Kyrgyzstan:* KG had been identified as the most democratic of the Central Asian countries, with a functioning party system. There are relatively open political debates during the electoral campaigns and beyond that period elections themselves are also relatively free and widely reported in multilingual media. However, one should be cautious when assessing the country as there are numerous major issues (including regional tensions, violation of minorities' rights, the intra-elite struggle for political influence/dominance, external influence –



due to campaigns funding – on electoral processes), which make Kyrgyz ‘democracy’ unstable, unpredictable and limited in its nature. In the Central Asian region KG is frequently perceived as a chaotic country and thus a bad example or anti-model. The participation of national and ethnic minorities in political life of the country is uneven: some minorities, e.g. Russians, are more visible in those terms. At the same time, the Uzbek minority, due to the unaddressed legacy of the major ethnic conflict of 2010 between Uzbek minority and Kyrgyz majority, which was centred in the southern city of Osh (a similar conflict took place in 1990), remain politically marginalized.

*Uzbekistan:* In 2016, the regime in UZ changed due to the election of the new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev (the elections followed the death of the long-serving and authoritarian first president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov). Mirziyoyev introduced numerous political and economic reforms, which are perceived as revolutionary mainly due to the lack of positive developments in the country over the last 27 years. Though positive, the recent developments in Uzbekistan need to be assessed carefully. The relative opening of the economic and political systems in the country may still lead to tensions inside the governing elite and loosening of the presidential administration’s control of the country. It cannot be excluded, that such tendencies in the future can limit Mirziyoyev’s reformist enthusiasm and turn his focus instead to the preservation of the current political set-up. It needs to be remembered that Karimov’s rule started in a similarly promising way, but at the end led to

the creation of a very authoritarian regime (of which Mirziyoyev had been an important part).

*General issues:*

- Ethnic and religious political parties are banned in CA. Mainly, constitutions in CA are based on the French model (centralized presidential structures of power).
- A strengthening of ethnic nationalism is noticeable in all countries of the region – the governments represent the major ethnic groups (i.e. titular nations).
- In CA, Russia tries to adopt both a soft-power approach, through research and cultural centers promoting Russia-related issues, as well as exert military influence, by offering possibilities of intense security cooperation and continuing military presence in the region. China plays a significantly bigger economic role in the region, thanks to – among others – infrastructure projects and provision of loans. At the same time, strong economic links with Russia, labour migration, remittances and Russian populations in Central Asian states remain a feature of the region (examples: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan).
- Ethnic tensions in the region have solidified identities, currently resulting in a less-flexible approaches to civic conceptualizations of identity.
- In most of the Central Asian countries, organized crime constitutes a serious security challenge, while at times it may also influence the perception of minority



communities (as predominantly focusing on criminal activity etc.).

- The ruling elites of Central Asia to a significant degree still are a product of the Soviet system and of its approach to politics. This shared legacy at times affects personal relations between Central Asian leaders and politicians, creating a specific type of bond.

- The political life of Central Asian countries is to a very significant degree gender-imbalanced (the dominance of male politicians) and build around personalities rather than political structures.

- The relationships between citizens and the state in Central Asia are paternalistic and frequently also additionally influenced by clientelist structures and tribal/clannish loyalties.

- The question of political exiles is very important for the region, also in the context of minority issues.

- Each of the Central Asian countries established institutions responsible for the development of strategies and policies (kind of governmental think tanks), which – as an element of power structure – are not supposed to challenge the governments' directions. The states of the region also control how research is undertaken. In that context, KG can be considered a relatively good example in terms of educational and academic freedom; it hosts the American University of Central Asia and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, which potentially can

be promising research partners for such institutions as the ECMI.

- It is highly advisable to conduct some informal work first, to build partnerships and foster trustful relations with the governments, research community and wider society in CA. It is necessary to be careful with wording in research and publications.

### **(2) Human and Minority Rights**

Although there is a formal recognition of cultural, linguistic and educational rights of the national/ethnic minorities in the region, their implementation leaves a lot to be desired. For example, the lack of textbooks in minority languages is widespread. It is usually compounded with the absence of adequate facilities. Besides that, minority communities need to learn official languages if they are willing to succeed in education and later to achieve employment in state bodies. The aforementioned difficulties result in the 'migration' of minority groups to the private sector. The number of universities training teachers capable of providing education in minority languages is also severely limited. Kyrgyzstan presents an interesting example, where around 75% of schools teach in Kyrgyz, while about 75% of universities provide education in Russian.

The lack of media in minority languages is noticeable throughout the region. An additional challenge is a widespread (self)censorship (regarding also the access to and the content of online sources), affecting also media producing minority-addressed content.



It is important to stress that numerous NGOs active in the field of human and minority rights have operated in the region since the early 1990s. However, the concept of human rights soon started to be perceived as an alien and menacing western ideology. Currently, both liberal democracy and human rights are mainly associated with the collapse of living standards in the 1990s and threat to internal security and stability ('imported chaos').

Usually in the region the term "national/ethnic minorities" is used to describe non-Central Asian communities, e.g. Koreans, Germans. The local autochthonous communities frequently do not identify themselves as minorities and, thus, never claim/claimed minority-specific rights. Therefore, it is very important to carefully choose terminology used in research activities while operating in CA, since the 'imported' concept of minority rights may be interpreted as potentially destabilizing for regional regimes.

The above-mentioned issue of censorship, together with a tightly controlled social media sphere and its regular closures (it usually occurs during electoral campaigns, border skirmishes or social disturbances), limits the opportunities of minorities to formulate their needs. Hate speech is not prevalent in public discourse, however, it cannot be claimed that is entirely absent from it and can be found online.

### **(3) National and Ethnic Minorities**

*Kazakhstan:* In the early 1990s, KZ saw itself as the home of all ethnic Kazakhs. It launched

a programme to encourage Kazakhs living elsewhere to move to KZ. One of the reasons to develop this programme was the substantial number of Russians residing in the country. In order to create a demographic balance more favourable to the titular nation of the newly created Kazakhstan, the policy of 'home-coming' had been initiated. Due to the still substantial presence of the Russian community, especially in the northern part of the country, KZ became nervous after the annexation of Crimea, fearing the same scenario could happen in the regions bordering Russia.

*Kyrgyzstan:* In KG, the Uzbek community was wary of Uzbekistan's repressive regime under Islam Karimov, whilst Uzbekistan was hesitant towards 'liberal' Uzbeks residing in KG. In 2005, the situation changed with the revolution in KG – the Uzbeks became slightly more active and thus visible in KG's internal politics. In 2010, after interethnic clashes in Osh – resulting from (among other factors) a widespread perception of Uzbeks as separatist - Uzbek businesses were closed, media shut down and lands seized from Uzbeks. In general, the situation resulted in further marginalization of the Uzbek community in political and economic life of KG.

The above-mentioned events and trends contributed to the current position of Uzbeks as virtually second-class citizens. Oftentimes, the hostility towards the Uzbeks is explained (and justified) because of their supposedly better economic situation. It is important to add that anti-Uzbek sentiments run parallel with increasing Kyrgyz nationalism of the ethnic kind.



Several theories aspire to explain why the events in Osh in 2010 took place. Amongst those are: civilizational rift – legacies of settled (Uzbeks) vs nomadic (Kyrgyz) ways of life; political – clashes were the result of political tensions resulting from the recent collapse of the Kyrgyz government; at times external interference is mentioned, usually in the context of conspiracy theories. Some studies suggested that ethnically-driven economic divisions contributed to the conflict as well.

At the same time, it can be argued that 2010 Osh events significantly contributed to the resolution (it has been done through the means of physical violence) of three crucial dilemmas present in Kyrgyz politics since the beginning of independence:

- (1) ethnic vs civic approach to identity (ethnic identity prevailed);
- (2) geopolitical dilemma: pro-Russian vs pro-American/pro-Western orientation (the first option prevailed);
- (3) presidential vs parliamentary system of government (the first approach prevailed).

It is important to remember that rural vs urban cleavage plays important role in KG. While the urban population can be more nationalistic, rural is very mixed. Socioeconomic identity can also add to internal divisions, for example in the shape of regionalist rivalry between Bishkek and Osh, which are the country's most important urban centres. In general, the rural part of the population also tends to be more family-orientated.

*Tajikistan:* Uzbeks have been perceived as a threat – this led to manipulation of the results of the most recent state census, in which the number of Uzbeks residing in TJ was diminished.

*Uzbekistan:* Historically a major tension with TJ can be identified as connected to Samarkand and Bukhara – two Uzbek cities, with historic Tajik claims and large Tajik populations. In the first half of the 2000s, Tajiks were able to enjoy certain minority rights in UZ, for example the ability to learn their language. Afterwards, the situation became aggravated and therefore many minority schools were shut down, including a Tajik academy that had lasted for 15 years after independence.

When it comes to the mutual relations with KG, the new president of Uzbekistan (Shavkat Mirziyoyev) is popular among the Uzbeks residing in KG. The Presidential administration is providing money for schools and cultural exchange trips – a possible evidence of UZ's intention to use its soft power, which may result in a new opening in UZ-KG relations. This should have a positive influence on the situation of minority communities living in both countries.

### *General Issues:*

- Uighurs: mainly live in China. In the 1990s, the migration of Uighurs to Central Asia increased, their destinations being mainly KZ and KG. In KZ, Uighurs were historically intellectuals and part of the elite. Due to China's distrust of Uighurs and pressure exerted on KZ, the latter stopped the



promotion of Uighurs, in order to preserve good relations with China. In KG, Uighurs mainly live amongst Uzbeks and with growing frequency self-identify themselves as such.

- National minorities in Central Asia usually focus their activities on cultural events, during which traditional costumes, folk dances and music, and cuisine are presented. Conversely, these groups only very rarely get involved in politics (as minorities or minority representatives). Cultural centres where activities similar to the ones mentioned above usually take place are perceived as the Soviet era legacy and thus are not popular with the younger generations.

- Generally, minority groups residing in Central Asia very weakly, if at all, identify with their kin-states across borders. Bilateral agreements involving minority issues are more likely in the case of countries with similar numbers of minorities on each side of the border (e.g. between KG and TJ). Therefore, establishing agreements is more difficult with UZ.

- Throughout the region, several attempts were made to establish bilateral educational co-operation involving minority groups, however inability to reconcile conflicting historical, political or even geographic (border disputes) perspectives contributed to their failure.

- Frequently the issue of minorities is securitized in the region, as they are perceived as pro-separatist and thus

constituting a threat to both territorial and national integrity.

- In certain areas and periods of time, ethnic tensions were resolved through the mechanism of authoritarian conflict management (for example, during 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan not all areas within relative proximity of Osh had been affected by inter-ethnic clashes to the same degree). Such mechanisms can be successful, as they efficiently use local power-structures and social contexts. At the same time, the question arises, whether such methods of conflict management are sustainable in the long-term, especially as the authorities capable of using them efficiently are no longer in power.

- According to a certain number of experts, and due to numerous factors already mentioned above, it is much more important – when analysing the situation of minority communities in the region – to focus not on existing formal structures or legal frameworks, but rather on current political arrangements or informal networks.

### **(3.1) Sub-section on Religion**

The predictions of the early 1990s that predicted large-scale religious mobilization around Islam in the region and of a potentially dangerous influence of Saudi Arabia and its very conservative interpretation of Islam, did not materialize. At the same time, an increase in piety is noticeable across the region. This is reflected in numerous new mosques, religious seminars or clothing inspired by the





teachings of Islam. This wider and general trend coincides with patches of radicalization. Frequently, both phenomena are connected by both internal and external observers resulting in overestimation of risks resulting from radicalization. Although the threat related to religious radicalization should not be downplayed, at the same time it has to be seen in the right proportions.

Currently, religious parties are banned throughout CA, although in TJ the Islamic Renaissance Party had been allowed to operate until recently (it was banned in 2015). At the same time, imams have emerged as influential political and social actors frequently gaining substantial popularity. Another consequence of the above-mentioned processes are frequent references to Islamic values and norms in public pronouncements by secular politicians, and their cooperation with religious figures.

The majority of Central Asians self-identify as Sunni Muslims; there is a smaller number of Shi'a Muslims and Christians (including Korean Christians) in the region too. It is important to stress that religion is not a key dividing factor between ethnic groups.

Policies and legal frameworks influencing religious life are usually determined by the legacy of the Soviet system and are adapted to the constitutional models inspired by French tradition, which are prevalent in the region. All Central Asian states are secular, whilst discrimination on the grounds of religion is not allowed. Since power structures in the region are secular, religion is frequently seen as an alternative power

structure and thus a threat to the existing order. Christianity can also be perceived as a threat because of missionaries and 'foreign' values inspiring their teachings.

The governments of Central Asian states undertake serious efforts in order to prevent religious radicalization. Radicalized groups and individuals are regularly persecuted by state authorities (it can be argued, that a relatively high level of efficiency in this field contradicts opinions of certain observers of the region which claim that Central Asian states are weak). On the other hand, at times different approaches prevail; for example, in UZ, due to the introduction of Mirziyoyev's liberalizing reforms, a substantial number of condemned radicals were given amnesty (this act of clemency has not been universally perceived as uncontroversial there). It needs to be remembered that the label of radical is at times used as a handy tool aimed at the political opposition. As security measures targeting radicals are very tight throughout the region (for example; in UZ mosque gatherings are filmed by the authorities; TJ introduced numerous policies leading to the state's tight control of religious activities and involving, for example, age-limits for mosque attendees, constraints on religious education abroad or even banning of 'Islamic-looking' beards), usually the process of radicalization takes place abroad and frequently is connected to work-related migration (for example, to Russia). To a certain degree Tajikistan – in spite of policies mentioned above - can be perceived as an exception, since the legacy of civil war created certain conditions, allowing such processes to happen inside that country.



Importantly, CA is perceived – in the region and beyond - as being potentially threatened by radicalized individuals returning from warzones such as Syria. The proximity of highly unstable Afghanistan and the fear of radical movements operating there, constitute additional internal as well as external security challenges for Central Asia countries.

#### **(4) Border Issues**

The borders drawn up by the Soviet state were not intended as international borders. They emerged as such only with the fall of the Soviet Union and resulted in severed social and economic ties (numerous residents of former Soviet Central Asian republics used to cross borders almost on a daily basis, in order to access schools and work places or participate in family festivities). Emergence of national borders also had a psychological effect on minority communities, as they were cut off from their kin-states. It is important to stress that in some cases physical barriers had been constructed, such as border fences. Uzbekistan even mined borders next to Tajikistan. Technology necessary for the surveillance of borders is frequently provided by countries striving for influence in the region, such as Russia or Turkey.

The borders featured/feature prominently in the new national narratives across the region. For example, in UZ governed by president Islam Karimov, the authorities frequently described borders as a barrier against chaos rampaging on the other side and thus justified their authoritarian practices. The new Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev reversed the policy of tightly controlled (not to say closed)

borders, which contributed to the growth of his popularity.

In general, the process of border delimitation in Central Asia went rather quickly (also when it comes to borders with China, where the focus was on resources). At the same time however, some issues remain unresolved; areas disputed by KG, UZ, and TJ still exist. Several borders were established along ethnic lines, so any potential acts of violence in such areas can quickly escalate into inter-ethnic clashes.

The potential of fruitful cross-border cooperation cannot be overestimated. Previous attempts aiming at such arrangements were not successful (also when external actors – such as United Nations – were involved) and at times resulted even in escalation of tensions. It can be also very hard to be able to implement one project simultaneously on both sides of the border, due to differences stemming from different political or legal contexts. At the same time, the political developments taking place in Uzbekistan (as having repercussions on a regional scale) can potentially lead to some changes in that regard.

### **3. Concluding Recommendations Regarding the ECMI's Potential Activities Focusing on Central Asia**

- Participation in the upcoming European Society for Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) Conference at the Exeter University in June 2019, where the CA region will be compared



to the Balkan region, is highly advisable due to networking and research opportunities.

- Research further on the multi-language educational model introduced in KZ; it can potentially function as an inspiration for other countries (for example Ukraine).
- Comprehensive analysis of the activities of other international organizations and non-governmental organizations present in the region is necessary. A substantial number of projects within the fields of activity similar to these of the ECMI had been implemented in the region. As a result, there is a pool of substantial institutional knowledge to be drawn from, regarding risks and difficulties involved. At the same time, it is important to avoid any potential overlaps with projects already carried through.
- It is highly advisable to organize a follow-up workshop(s), this time focusing also on intersectional aspects of minority issues in the region, and drawing upon knowledge gathered not only by academics, but also by practitioners operating in the region.
- It is essential to underline for the Central Asian governments that the status of minority communities in one country is linked to their status in another (e.g., the status of Danish and German communities in the region of Schleswig-Holstein). Invitation of Central Asian officials to the Danish-German border region should be considered, in order to present the life of national minorities in the region, based on bilateral agreements and wider international frameworks. Such visits may create both a good climate for further cooperation and provide inspiration for Central Asian officials dealing with minority issues. It is also important to try to present good examples to the general population,

however for this a previous engagement of authorities is necessary.

- A detailed needs assessment should be completed, in order to identify niche areas for the ECMI activities in CA.
- It is crucial to closely monitor political developments taking place in UZ. Since it is the most populous country in the region, with substantial diasporas in neighbouring countries, kin-state policies introduced by Tashkent may contribute to the creation of opportunities for a more intense engagement of the ECMI in the region. Within this context, the relations between UZ and KG need to be most intensely analysed.
- In terms of research, it may be also fruitful to explore the intersection(s) of ethnic and religious identities, as well as of ethnic and gender issues in the region.
- Bridge-building and bottom-up activities (also within the field of cross-border cooperation) are certainly needed in the region and thus highly advisable.
- Generally, every research or other activity involving national minorities undertaken by the ECMI in the region, needs to be consulted beforehand with state authorities. The lack of such authorization may result in severely limited access to the region, minority groups etc.
- It is important to adequately phrase all ECMI plans regarding the region, when both authorities and minorities themselves are contacted. It is important to avoid the label of outsiders trying to impose foreign concept, which are intrinsically alien to Central Asian reality.



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