Societal Shifts in Central Asia: Figures and Trends

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ABSTRACT. *Central Asia has been undergoing considerable transformations by becoming mature independent states in international arena and experiencing socio-demographic shifts. It clearly resembles the dynamics described in Moises Naím's "The end of power" where he argues that "the more, mobility, and mentality" revolutions challenge political leaders with fluid and unpredictable environment. This article aims to do an empirical analysis of the socio-demographic changes in Central Asia to test the assumption in the regional context.*

KEYWORDS: *Societal shifts in Central Asia, human capital, demographic changes, social development, population growth*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia, a region known for its geopolitical significance, has been undergoing considerable transformations not only becoming mature independent states in the international arena but also experiencing internal socio-demographic shifts – more than half of the region's population is under 30 years old (Stoll, 2023)

The changes reflect not only the evolving composition of the population including population growth, urbanization, educational development, migration patterns, and evolving societal values, but also the changing expectations and needs of citizens.

This presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it can be a driving force for innovation, economic growth, and social change. On the other hand, if the needs and aspirations of this young demographic are not adequately addressed, it could potentially lead to social unrest and political instability.

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The current pivotal moment for Central Asian countries resembles the dynamics described in Moises Naím's "The End of Power", where he argues that "the more, mobility, and mentality" revolutions challenge political leaders with fluid and unpredictable environments.

This article aims to review existing literature on managing socio-demographic changes as well as look into a range of data sources to provide insights into societal change patterns in Central Asia. It will allow us to reveal key variables and trends for drawing more evidence-based conclusions.

Our research seeks to contribute to academic knowledge and spur more similar research focused on the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in Central Asia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze socio-demographic changes in Central Asia, combining quantitative data analysis with a review of relevant academic literature and theoretical frameworks. The methodology is designed to investigate the underlying trends and dynamics of societal shifts in the region, as well as to contextualize these changes within broader global patterns.

The study relies on a variety of secondary data sources, including demographic statistics, population projections, and socio-economic indicators provided by international organizations. It employs statistical methods to analyze the collected data, focusing on identifying trends and patterns over time. This includes calculating growth rates, median values, and other relevant indicators to assess demographic changes in Central Asia from 1990 to 2024, with projections extending to 2050. The article compares demographic indicators across different Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and against selected global benchmarks, including Russia, China, Europe, and the United States. This comparative approach helps to contextualize the socio-demographic changes in Central Asia within a global framework.

The concepts from Moises Naím's "The End of Power," are applied to interpret the data. This theoretical lens allows the study to explore how increased mobility, changing mentalities, and the proliferation of new societal actors are influencing the socio-demographic landscape in Central Asia.

The study acknowledges certain limitations, including the potential for data discrepancies due to varying data collection methods across different sources. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data may introduce biases inherent in the original data collection processes. The projection of future trends is based on existing data and established models, which may not fully account for unforeseen socio-political developments or shifts in regional dynamics.

By combining quantitative analysis with a theoretical framework, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the socio-demographic changes in Central Asia, offering insights that are both empirically grounded and theoretically informed.

MANAGING SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES: ACADEMIC VIEW

The mainstream academic view towards the management of socio-demographic changes is mainly based on the debate on how human capital should be managed, covering the question from both very broad and very specific perspectives.

In particular, the issues of inequality and redistribution of wealth risen widely in the books of Nitzan and Bichler (2009), Piketti (2014), and Mokyr (2017) encourage an academic dispute over what should be the line of action for developing countries in the global capitalist reality.

Scholars generally agree that the key component in human capital management appears to be economic incentives and interests. However, if previously the mainstream idea was that income, both individual and social, stems from productivity (Marx, 1954; Clark, 1899; Wicksteed, 1932), contemporary scholars such as Fix (2021) argue that the level of the population's income is largely dependent on people's power rather than their productivity. Yet there is still a scholarly controversy in the quantitative dimension on how skilled workers' relative earnings should be determined (Jones, 2014; Caselli & Ciccone, 2019). This corresponds with the model built by Acemoglu (2003), who argues that skill premia differing over time and across countries, can be used to explain the impact of international trade on wage inequality.

Another direction of scientific research is the exploration of nature and sources of economic power. Kurz (2018) basing his focus on modern economics, states that power is largely embodied in various institutions, social and political institutions, which impose the laws, political order, and norms, eventually leading to economic gains of particular interest groups. Klomp and de Haan (2013) attempt to examine the relationship between the political regime and human capital, as a result of which they find out that democracies and stable governments positively affect both basic and advanced human capital, while unstable ones tend to have a negative link having a limited impact on income.

This idea is complemented by the view that a significant impact can also be made by the values of political elites and societal structures. Rubin (2017) looking at human capital management from the perspective of history and religion, gives the debate an interesting input implying that the values the ruling economic elite pursues may also have a significant say in a country's development level. This idea is also mentioned by Weber (2012), which is then broadly summarized in the overview of the role of religious values in economic history by Becker & et al (2020).

On top of that, it is necessary to point out an attempt to find a balanced method to measure human capital by varying approaches made by Abraham and Mallatt (2022), who see considerable correlations in investments in formal education, when cost and income approaches are used. It is worth mentioning that this kind of view was anticipated by corresponding studies (Cohen & Soto, 2007; Björklund & Kjell, 2011; Gang and Fraumeni, 2020).

Despite the abundance of theoretical considerations of human capital management at a global level, there is a certain limitation of academic discussion looking at the specifics of this issue in Central Asia. Yet, the scientific attention on gleaning peculiar trends in Central Asian human capital development is notable, including the recent works of Yormirzoev (2023), Isiksal & et al. (2022), Ovezmyradov & Kepbanov (2021), Demirgüç-Kunt & Torre (2020).

Meanwhile, the theory of Moises Naím, indicated in his book called 'The End of Power' appears interesting for researching socio-demographic changes in Central Asia. He described a revolution of "the more, mobility, and mentality," which has the potential to shed light on the dynamics of socio-demographic changes in Central Asia.

This "revolution" outlined by Naím can be particularly insightful when considering the rapid socio-demographic transformations in Central Asia. His concept of "the more, mobility, and mentality" suggests that the increase in the number of players in any given field (more), the greater movement of people, goods, and information (mobility), and the evolving mindset and attitudes of people (mentality) are key factors driving the dispersion of power. In the context of Central Asia, this framework can be used to analyze how these elements interact and influence the region's human capital development.

For instance, the increase in educational institutions and training centers (the 'more') in Central Asia enhances the accessibility of education, potentially leading to a more skilled workforce. The mobility factor can be seen in the migration trends, both internal and external, which impact the labor markets and cultural exchanges within these nations. Finally, the changing mentality, particularly among the younger generations in Central Asia, who are more connected to global trends and ideas, could be reshaping traditional views on employment, education, and social roles.

Applying Naím's framework to Central Asia, researchers could examine how these factors contribute to the region's socio-demographic changes. This includes studying the evolving dynamics of power in Central Asian societies and how they relate to changes in human capital development. Such an analysis might reveal unique insights into the region's adaptation to global trends and its internal socio-economic evolution.

Furthermore, considering the historically unique position of Central Asia, sandwiched between powerful neighbors and with a rich cultural heritage, the application of Naím's theories could uncover specific regional dynamics of power shifts. It raises the question

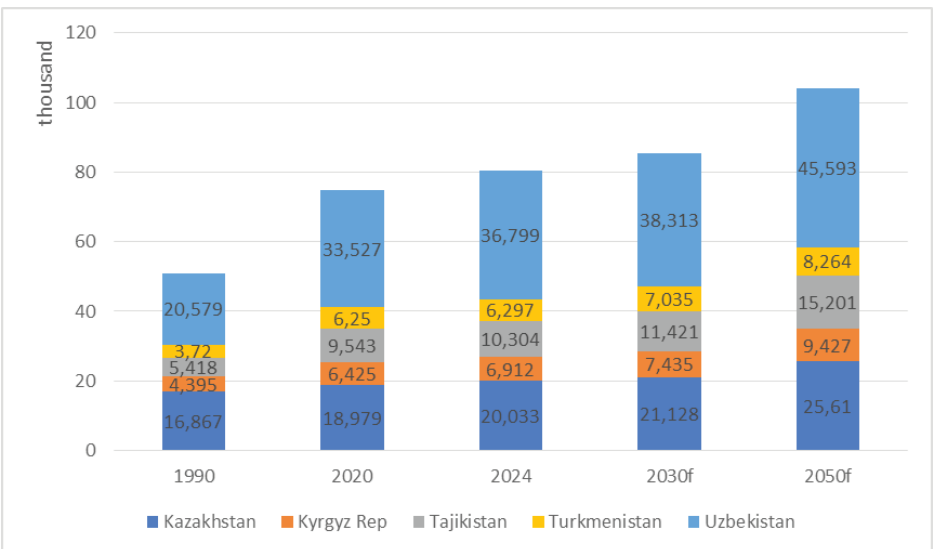
of how traditional structures and hierarchies in Central Asian societies are adapting or resisting these global trends of power dispersion.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN CENTRAL ASIA: THEORY IN REALITY

The "revolution of the more," as articulated by Moises Naím, is unfolding robustly within the Central Asian region through population growth, changing birth and fertility rates, infant and maternal mortality as well as life expectancy.

From 1990 to 2024, the **collective population** of the Central Asian countries surged from 50 to 80 million, marking an increase of 60 percent or an addition of nearly 30 million people[1]. This substantial demographic expansion, albeit at a decelerating absolute growth rate, is poised to persist across the region. Projections for 2050 estimate the population to exceed 103.9 million, with Uzbekistan (45.5 million) and Kazakhstan (25.6 million) maintaining their status as the most populous nations, followed by Tajikistan (15.2 million), Kyrgyzstan (9.4 million), and Turkmenistan (8.2 million). These figures reflect a significant demographic transformation, underlying the region's increasing socio-political and economic influence on the global stage.

Figure 1: *Population of Central Asian countries, selected years*



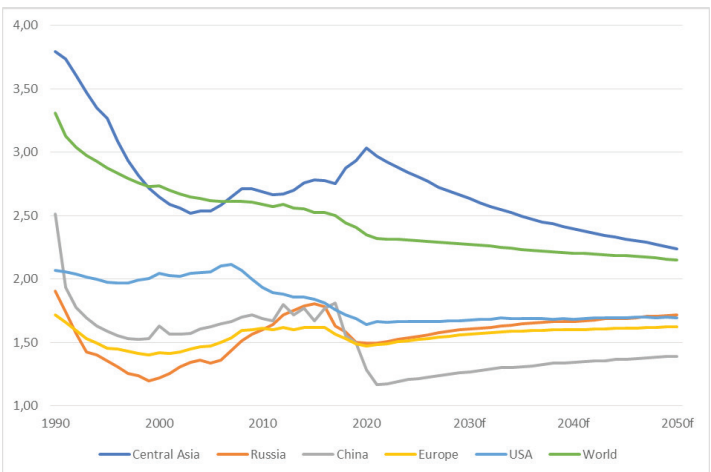
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

[1] (Экономика Центральной Азии: новый взгляд [Economy of Central Asia: New View], 2022)

Population growth in Central Asia will not continue indefinitely. There is an observable deceleration in **birth rates** across most of the region, with Kazakhstan being an exception; it had a relatively low birth rate in 1991 at 22 per 1,000 population, in contrast to Uzbekistan's 35 and Tajikistan's 41 per 1,000. By 2022, Kazakhstan's birth rate remained stable at 23 per 1,000, whereas Uzbekistan and Tajikistan experienced marked reductions to 26 and 27 per 1,000, respectively. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan also witnessed notable declines in fertility, with the former decreasing from 29 to 24 births per 1,000 from 1991 to 2022, and the latter from 34 to 22 per 1,000 in the same period. [2]

Nevertheless, the total **fertility rate** in the region remains above the global average; in 2021, Central Asian women had an average of 2.97 children, surpassing figures in Russia (1.49), China (1.16), Europe (1.48), the United States (1.66), and even the world average of 2.32. This sustained fertility underscores the region's demographic resilience, suggesting a youthful demographic profile that may have profound implications for its future socio-economic development.

Figure 2: *Total Fertility Rate (live births per woman) in selected countries and regions*



The **median age** in Central Asian countries has been experiencing a notable upward trend, indicative of changing demographic profiles in the region. From 1990 to 2024, the median age in Kazakhstan has increased from around 24.7 to over 32 years, demonstrating a significant shift towards an older population. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, the median age has risen from approximately 20.5 to nearly 31.5 years. Tajikistan, starting at the lowest median age of 17.2 years in 1990, has seen a steady rise to about 29.4 years by the forecast year of 2050. Turkmenistan's median age has also ascended from 18.8 to a projected 30.1 years, while Uzbekistan shows a progression from 20.8 to 27.6 years in the same period. This trend suggests an overall increase in the median

[2] (Birth rate, crude (per 1000 people), 2023)

age across the region, reflecting a combination of declining fertility rates, increasing life expectancy, and potential shifts in migration patterns. By the middle of the 21st century, the median age in these countries is projected to align more closely with global averages, pointing to a maturing demographic structure with profound implications for labor markets, healthcare systems, and social services.

The median age trajectory in Central Asia, when compared globally, demonstrates a marked increase, yet remains lower than selected other regions. From 1990, where the Central Asian median age was approximately 20.5 years, it is projected to rise to 30.5 years by 2050. This is a considerable increase but still below the global median age, which is expected to advance from around 23 to 35.9 years within the same timeframe.

In contrast, more developed regions exhibit significantly higher median ages, indicative of older populations. China's median age shows a steep ascent from around 23.7 years in 1990 to a projected 50.7 years by 2050, the highest among the compared groups. The median age in the USA is also increasing, from roughly 33.8 years to an anticipated 43.1 years, while Europe's is set to rise from about 33.6 to 47.3 years, reflecting its rapidly aging population due to historical one-child policies. Russia's median age follows a similar upward trend, from nearly 32.2 years in 1990 to a forecasted 43.6 years by 2050.

This data illustrates diverse demographic dynamics across the globe, with Central Asia's relatively youthful population providing potential demographic dividends, while more developed regions may face challenges associated with aging populations, such as increased pressure on pension systems and healthcare services.

Figure 3: *Median age of the total population of Central Asian countries*

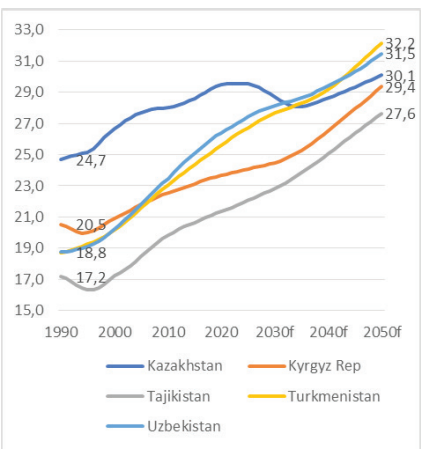
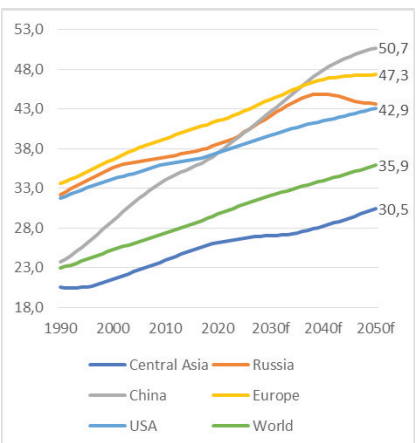


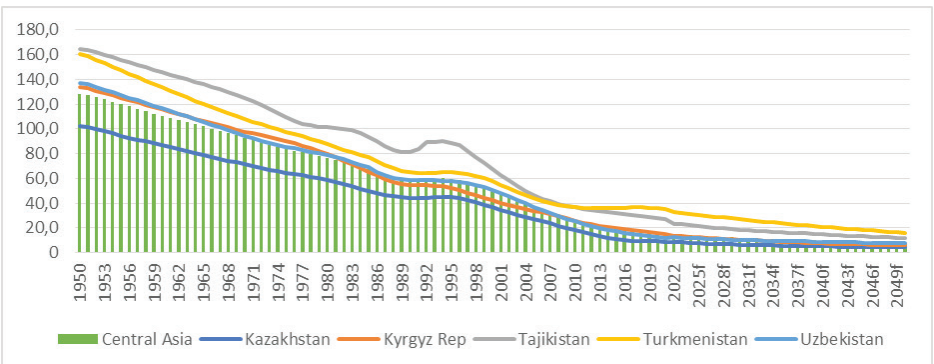
Figure 4: *Median age of the total population of selected regions*



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

Over the past decades, Central Asian countries have witnessed a remarkable decrease in mortality rates, encompassing both infant and maternal categories. Since the year of 1991, the **Infant Mortality Rate** (IMR) in the region has seen a steep decline, dropping from 58.6 to a regional average of 15.4 by 2021. Kazakhstan leads the advancement with the lowest IMR at 8.9, followed by Uzbekistan at 11.7, Kyrgyzstan at 15.0, Tajikistan at 27.1, and Turkmenistan at 35.1. This positive trajectory is expected to continue, with projections suggesting a further decline to an average IMR of 7.7 by the year 2050, signaling ongoing improvements in public health initiatives and healthcare systems across the Central Asian nations.

Figure 5: *Infant Mortality Rate (infant deaths per 1,000 live births) in Central Asian countries, selected years*



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

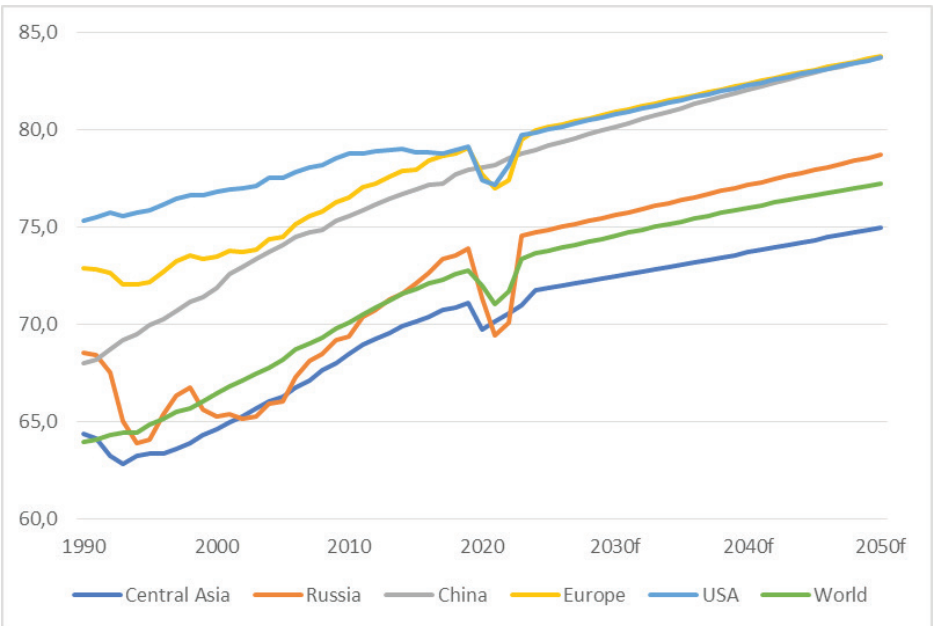
In two decades, Kazakhstan has achieved a remarkable reduction in **maternal mortality**, with rates plummeting from 56.3 to 13.4 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2000 and 2020. Kyrgyzstan also reported significant progress, albeit at a more modest pace, with maternal mortality decreasing from 86.9 to 50.4 in the same period. Tajikistan's reduction was profound, with rates declining from 67.5 to 16.6. Turkmenistan exhibited the most dramatic improvement, with a decrease from 26.1 to a mere 5.1, while Uzbekistan's decline was more gradual, from 42.6 to 30.2[3]. These figures not only reflect the enhanced healthcare frameworks in place but also underscore the region's dedicated efforts towards improving maternal health outcomes.

Consequently, these health advancements have led to an elevation in regional **life expectancy**, averaging at 70.1 years in 2021, despite the setbacks from the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise in life expectancy from an average of 64.1 years in 1991 to 70.1 years

[3]https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/vis?fs[0]=Area%2C1%7CCountries%20or%20Territories%23COUNTRIES%23%7CKazakhstan%23KAZ%23&pg=0&bp=true&snb=2&df[ds]=ds-demo-design&df[id]=SDG_Dataflow&df[ag]=ESCAP&df[vs]=2.7&pd=%2C&dq=UZB%2BTKM%2BTJK%2BKGZ%2BKAZ.G03_01_01..A&ly[rs]=INDICATORS_SDG%2CSERIES&ly[rw]=REF_AREA&ly[cl]=TIME_PERIOD&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false&lo=2023&lom=LASTNPERIODS

in 2021 has not been steady. The tumultuous 1990s saw a decline to 62.9 years amidst the dissolution of the Soviet healthcare system and diminished investment in social services.[4] Nevertheless, the region has shown resilience, with life expectancy recovering and surpassing pre-transition levels, reflecting a broader trend of health improvement despite socio-economic challenges.

Figure 6: *Life Expectancy at Birth in selected countries and regions*



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

Primary markers of the mobility revolution are evidencing themselves with a growing proportion of the population residing in urban areas, involvement in worldwide web use and world's migration processes.

The regional **urbanization** level has reached 45.2 percent, mirroring the worldwide shift towards urban living, albeit with notable inter-country variability. World Bank data indicates that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have the lowest urbanization rates; Tajikistan's urban population decreased from 31 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2022, while Kyrgyzstan's remained static at 37 percent across the same period, despite a dip to 35 percent between 1999 and 2011.

Conversely, Uzbekistan has experienced the most pronounced surge in its urban populace, ascending from 42 percent in 1991 to 50 percent in 2022. Turkmenistan too

[4] (Life expectancy at birth, total (years), 2023)

saw its urban population rise from 45 to 53 percent. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, boasts the highest proportion of urban dwellers. Despite a modest increase from 56 percent in 1991 to 58 percent in 2022, the latest figures from 2023 show an uptick to 61 percent.[5] This growth is indicative of the expanded availability of advanced education, healthcare, and technology for its urban residents, reflecting the broader socio-economic evolutions within the region.

The urban landscape has also undergone significant transformations, with the proportion of the **population living in slums** in Kazakhstan dramatically decreasing from 24.5 percent in 2000 to just 0.8 percent in 2020. Similar trends are observed in Kyrgyzstan, where the figure has dropped from 15.9 to 2.4 percent, and in Tajikistan, from 60.3 to 17.1 percent. Turkmenistan's reduction is more modest, from 9.3 to 8.5 percent. However, there is a notable gap in data for Uzbekistan, precluding a comprehensive regional analysis. These figures underscore the strides made in urban development and the improvement of living conditions within these transitioning economies.

The technological landscape of Central Asia presents a dynamic picture of connectivity and internet penetration. With over 71 million SIM cards distributed among a population of 78 million,[6] mobile connectivity is widespread, indicating a substantial embrace of mobile technology.

Internet access, however, exhibits stark regional disparities. In 2021, Kazakhstan led the way with a staggering 94.5% of households having internet access at home, a figure that climbed to 96.2% by 2022. Uzbekistan followed closely with a steady increase from 95.1% to 95.5% in the same period. Kyrgyzstan also demonstrated high access rates at 91%. Turkmenistan, on the other hand, lagged at 66%, while Tajikistan had the lowest at 32.5%.[7]

When it comes to Internet usage, Kazakhstan again topped the chart with 90.9% of its population using the Internet in 2021. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan reported lower, yet significant, usage rates at 77.9% and 76.6%, respectively[8]. The lack of recent data for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan suggests a need for further research to understand the full scope of internet engagement in these countries. These figures underscore the rapid adoption of digital technologies in Central Asia, which is reshaping access to information, education, and economic opportunities across the region.

Along with that, people are now traveling much more frequently, with millions of citizens going abroad, primarily to Russia, South Korea, the EU, and the USA. More

[5] (Уровень урбанизации в Казахстане достиг 61,5% [The Level of Urbanization Reached 61,5%], 2023)
[6] (Note: 71 mln is the sum of number of sim cards in each country. "How is Mobile Communications and the Internet Developing in Central Asia?, 2021)
[7] https://datahub.itu.int/query/
[8] https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/vis?fs[0]=Area%2C1%7CCountries%20or%20Territories%23COUNTRIES%23%7CKazakhstan%23KAZ%23&pg=0&bp=true&snb=2&df[ds]=ds-demo-design&df[id]=SDG_Dataflow&df[ag]=ESCAP&df[vs]=2.7&pd=%2C&dq=UZB%2BTKM%2BTJK%2BKGZ%2BKAZ.G17_08_01%2BG11_01_01%2BG11_0a_01..A&ly[rs]=INDICATORS_SDG%2CSERIES&ly[rw]=REF_AREA&ly[cl]=TIME_PERIOD&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false&lo=2023&lom=LASTNPERIODS

and more diasporas from the region's countries are also appearing in Western countries, especially in the United States. According to some reports, about 50,000 immigrants from Uzbekistan live in New York alone.[9]

Central Asian states are increasingly dependent on labor migrants for two main reasons. First, remittances from labor migrants, mainly from Russia, are a critical source of wealth in Central Asia. According to the World Bank, by the end of 2021, the volume of transfers was equivalent to 35 percent of Tajikistan's GDP and 33 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP. In Uzbekistan, the share of remittances was still quite significant at 13 percent of GDP. At the same time, Kazakhstan had the smallest share – only 0.2 percent of GDP. [10]

Secondly, the number of Kyrgyz citizens living in Russia, which accounts for around 1 million,[11] constitutes a critical mass that could influence the outcome of the elections in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, the potential simultaneous return of millions of migrants, mostly young men, to their homelands due to force majeure in Russia could lead to serious tension in the region's countries and deterioration in the economic and political situation.

The population of the region has become mobile not only outside the region but also within countries, although internal migration is highly dependent on legal restrictions and the labor market in each country. In Kazakhstan, where all restrictions on movement have been lifted, more than a million people annually participate in internal migration, 88 percent intra-regionally and 12 percent inter-regionally. This dynamic entails overcrowding in major cities and regions and population imbalances elsewhere. The main vector of internal migration remains movement from different regions of the country to the cities of Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent. These three cities' share of the total population of the country increased from 11.1 percent in 1992 to 22.6 percent in 2021.[12]

Similar trends are observed in the Kyrgyz Republic, where more than one-third of the population changed their place of residence between 1996 and 2011 and where the largest cities were also the main points of attraction: Bishkek, Osh, and Jalal-Abad (Belekov, 2011).

In Uzbekistan, about 5 percent of the population lived in a region other than where they were born. Similarly, in 2018, about 0.3 percent of the population changed their place of residence (Seitz, 2023). The difference in migration cannot, of course, be explained by purely legal norms; one must take into account the traditions and mentality of the

[9] (Узбеки в США: переезд, адаптация, открытие бизнеса [Uzbek in US: moving, adaptation, opening business], 2020)
[10] (Как спад денежных переводов из России отразится на Центральной Азии? [How will the decline in remittances from Russia affect Central Asia?], 2022)
[11] https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-national-bank-predicts-20-decline-in-remittances
[12] (Более 1 млн казахстанцев ежегодно становятся мигрантами внутри страны [More than 1 million Kazakhstanis annually become migrants within the country], 2021)

local population. Uzbeks and Tajiks have stronger ties with their *mahallas*, their place of birth, than traditionally more mobile peoples like Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

In terms of the revolution of mentality, it can be said with confidence that the Central Asian region is already a completely different region than it was 30 years ago. The speed of change is astonishing. Moreover, the population has become younger. In 1990, the average age was 34 years; now, it is 28.7 (Kazakhstan's average age of 31.7 is slightly older) (Shabalin, 2022). Thus, the majority of the population was born after the collapse of the USSR, and they are generally alien to nostalgia for the collapse of the USSR. They are distinguished by national identity and at the same time, openness to everything new, including new technologies.

In the region's countries, obviously, to varying degrees, there is a growing demand for the decolonization of consciousness – the deconstruction of the Soviet legacy, a demand for understanding the historical past as a way of determining the future of their countries as national independent states. The region's countries are still at the beginning of a long journey of building sustainable and high-quality ideological constructs based on tradition, national identity, and, at the same time, the modernity of current societies. One such obvious evidence of this is the absence of a broad public discourse on the issue of decolonization. Individual and sporadic scientific articles and speeches by scientists have not yet had much influence.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DO WE END UP WITH?

Most of the population of the region is young people under 30 years old; they are more mobile, urbanized, and better educated than their parents, with incomparable opportunities to receive information and communicate with the whole world. The population naturally wants to live better and freer lives and is much more critical of the authorities and bolder about expressing the will to remove barriers.

The revolutions of the more, mobility, and mentality have also come to Central Asia, and they pose serious challenges to the old models of state governance.

In a positive scenario, their pressure and energy could become engines for developing the region's countries, building more sustainable and inclusive models of public administration, and removing barriers to cooperation within the region.

But in a negative scenario, these changes could bring several challenges for the authorities in the face of which the existing models of public administration will not be so effective; this could become a source of many conflicts both within these countries and between them.

This means the political elites must take into account the ongoing unprecedented social changes in the region and quickly adapt to them and use these "revolutions" for the benefit of the development of Central Asia.

The countries of Central Asia have yet to find their formula for a narrow corridor between the need for a strong and effective government and the development of a strong civil society, the emergence of which, taking into account these revolutions, may not be far off.

The "revolutions of the more, mobility, and mentality" taking place in Central Asia should not necessarily lead to a decline in power, but they certainly have an impact on the established political and economic systems of the region's countries.

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