

JOURNAL OF ———

JCAS

**CENTRAL ASIAN
STUDIES**

№ 4 (96)

October – November – December

Founded in 2003
Published 4 times a year

Astana
2024

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Re-registration certificate No. KZ72VPY00088070 dated 23.02.2024.

Journal of Central Asian Studies is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal specializing in social and political sciences relating to Central Asian countries. Its scope includes a comprehensive examination of Central Asia's geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural aspects, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The journal also explores the interactions between the region and important neighboring regions and powers, such as Afghanistan, Caucasus, China, and Russia.

Published by **Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan**

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Social capital in Central Asia: how civil society shapes democracy in the region?

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ABSTRACT. *Networks and mutual trust have long been integral to the traditions of Central Asian peoples. The collective cultural practices among nomadic populations have historically served as crucial tools for their survival. Social capital has influenced various aspects of Central Asian society since the Soviet era. Despite the Sovietization of local communities, traditional social actors continued to exist. Since gaining independence in 1991, institutions of social capital have played an important role in shaping the governance processes of Central Asian states. Social capital embodies the concept of "rule from below", which is a fundamental component of democratization. However, in Central Asia, while social capital institutions are pre-democratic, they still uphold democratic values. Informal communication, evident in various forms across the region, remains one of the primary sources of social capital. These forms can serve as carriers of democratic values. However, it is also essential to recognize the existence of negative social capital, which can adversely affect individuals or specific social strata. This paper aims to emphasize the role of traditional civil society, which constitutes social capital, in fostering democratic values in these countries. Additionally, it will highlight the significance of informal social and historical practices as elements of neo-institutionalism in Central Asia. This study will utilize a literature review methodology complemented by the author's analytical approach to address research gaps and provide evidence-based insights.*

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, civil society, democratization, social capital, socio-cultural institutions*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of democratic governance, it is crucial to assess the role of traditional civil society in Central Asia. Serving as a bridge between the state and society, civil society plays a pivotal role in political processes by providing constructive opposition and fostering social movements, thereby contributing to the development of democratic practices. Additionally, it is imperative to explore how traditional civil society can adjust to changing realities while effectively fulfilling its intended functions in the region's sociopolitical landscape. Central Asian social capital is essentially constituted of traditional institutions and social practices. Therefore, it is imperative to define these terms in the Central Asian context.

Social Capital is “the networks, norms, relationships, values and informal sanctions that shape the quantity and cooperative quality of a society’s social interactions” (Aldridge et al., 2002). According to the OECD, social capital is the network with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups (OECD, 2020). Social capital is built on a concrete network of relationships among individuals. Additionally, for these relationships to be effective, they should be characterized by trust, mutual support, and positive feelings. While social capital shares similarities with civil society regarding voluntary associations, it also encompasses crucial elements like personal trust (Paxton, 1999). Central Asian social capital can be defined as the interplay of traditional groups and clans that helped mobilize society through interpersonal communications, trust, support, and informally set norms. Trust is one of the most important characteristics of Central Asian social capital. Traditional groups/ clans are the essence of Central Asia's social capital. Therefore, the definition of Social Capital put forward by Putnam, “the features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”, is closest to the Central Asian social capital (Putnam, 1993). However, the level of trust and the role it has played in shaping the society of five Central Asian countries vary temporally and spatially. For instance, according to Roger Sapsford and others, trust levels were higher in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan in 2001. However, trust in Kyrgyzstan declined due to political turmoil in 2010, while it stayed the same in Kazakhstan. This shift in trust is attributed to changes in both countries' economic and political conditions (Sapsford et al., 2015).

There has been constant change over the century in the working of traditional groups of Central Asia. Despite their varied contributions to the social capital, the social fabric of pre-Soviet and Soviet local societies has been carried forward to post-Soviet societies (Roy, 2002; Toktomushev, 2023). Pre-soviet clans of Central Asia- ‘mahallas’, ‘awlads’, ‘qawms’, ‘ashars’, ‘gashtaks’ or courts of ‘aksakals- adapted themselves into new Soviet social, political, and economic realities. According to Oliver Roy, these clans operated at three levels: first, to facilitate mutual support among citizens (such as through rotating groups that collect and distribute interest-free loans); second, to shield individuals from the intrusions of an authoritarian state; and third, to integrate individuals into the state apparatus via patron-client relationships. Therefore, this social capital could be considered the most fundamental unit of the governance system from the grassroots level. However, Central Asian republics are not conventionally democratic systems, yet they have democratic values that vary in all five republics. Due to their history and culture, the political reforms in Central Asia have been different. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian states began reforming their political systems to align with democratic principles. However, they rejected some Western ideals that conflicted with their cultural traditions, leading them to pursue a unique approach to democracy that blends these standards with their societal norms, adhering to more collectivist values as compared to Western individualistic values (Kukeyeva & Shkapyak, 2013; Kudebayeva et al., 2022).

Another important point to note is that civil society in Central Asia differs from the conventional Western model, which is predominantly composed of NGOs, pressure groups, and similar entities. In Central Asia, civil society primarily consists of traditional institutions and practices, which will be described in the later section. Accordingly, this paper, while discussing social capital in Central Asia and its impact on democratic governance, assumes these traditional groups to be the primary forces within civil society, albeit with a minor role played by NGOs and civil-political groups in influencing governance.

Sociocultural institutions: Civil society institutions in Central Asia, which constitute the social capital, are those socio-cultural institutions that have their origin in several traditional practices. For instance, Mahallas are traditional self-governing bodies that were recognized by the Uzbek constitution post-independence. The Uzbek government recognizes Mahalla as a vital element of civil society, with its participation in various areas of public life regulated by numerous laws and regulations, aligning with the concept of transitioning "from a strong state to a strong civil society" (Uzbek Embassy in India 2017). Various tasks attributed to these Mahallas are- engaging in law-making, crime prevention, legal awareness (especially among youth and women), supporting vulnerable populations, promoting healthy lifestyles, organizing youth activities, and protecting the environment- all of which activities can be integral to democracy, as they reflect the principles of participatory governance, social justice, and community empowerment in a democratic framework.

The traditional groups in Central Asia that constitute social capital make up collective identities. Post-independence, traditional networks of solidarity and clientelism served as a safety net during periods of increasing poverty and the state's inability to meet the population's basic needs. One example is the informal gap system, where groups, often composed of women, pooled funds to provide interest-free loans to members, who were then responsible for repayment (Roy, 2022).

Several studies have been done on social capital and how it shapes or impacts democracy in a country. There are two perspectives regarding the role of social capital based on trust, associational factors, and developmental goals – positive and negative. However, relatively little work has been done on the comparative analysis of social capital across the five Central Asian countries and its relationship to democratization. Therefore, this study aims to address the temporal and spatial deficiencies in the democratic processes in Central Asia.

By the impact of social capital on democratization, this research refers to how traditional groups, which mainly form civil society in Central Asia, influence the processes and various elements of democracy- positively or negatively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper's methodology is based on analyzing existing studies on civil societies across five Central Asian countries. The available literature on civil culture, which forms the

foundation of social capital, primarily employs qualitative approaches with a focus on explanatory methods. To explore the causation and correlation between civil society as the independent variable and democracy as the dependent variable, a comparative approach has been utilized to highlight the differing roles of civil society in these countries. The use of case study methodologies in the existing literature has been a key reference point for this paper, particularly in examining topics such as 'civil society in post-Soviet Central Asia' and the concept of 'negative social capital'. The reviewed works highlight diverse data collection techniques, including surveys, archival research, interviews, and observations, often integrated within single studies, which supports the empirical element of this paper. This multifaceted approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined while identifying existing gaps in research. The study seeks to fill the gaps in the literature on the interrelationship between social capital and democratization within the Central Asian context. Therefore, intermediary variables such as clans, negative social capital, and traditional practices have been considered to support the causation and correlation between independent and dependent variables. The analyzed literature has also made use of historical methods to explore the history (pre-Soviet to Soviet) of traditional groups in Central Asia to discuss contemporary social capital, which draws its legacy from countries' old traditions and practices within Central Asian communities. However, to address the gaps, empirical research is essential. The findings of ethnographic research by prominent scholars conducted through surveys or interviews have been widely used for gaining a nuanced understanding of the effects of traditional groups within institutions like Mahallas, Ashar, and Ru-ba-ru on the political processes of their respective countries.

It is crucial to describe the different groups and practices that have existed since Soviet times- with some even predating that era- within contemporary civil society. This description will help illuminate the functioning of these groups over time, providing an analysis of their roles in the political systems and governance of their respective countries. The role of such practices and groups has been mentioned as part of the literature review, along with the impact of such roles on the democratization process of these countries, as part of the subjective analysis provided in the 'discussion' section of this research.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The practices and institutions that constitute social capital vary significantly across countries. In this research, all five countries of Central Asia are considered, recognizing the substantial similarities among these "five Stans." This approach acknowledges ongoing scholarly debates regarding the lack of regionalism in the region (Bohr, 2003; Allison, 2008; Rosset & Svarin, 2014). However, it is important to note that despite the presence of regional conflicts and the absence of any cooperative mechanisms like regional organization among the five, the similar cultures of these five countries cannot be denied. All countries speak Turkic languages except Tajikistan, which has Persian as its official language. These share commonalities in nomadic heritage, cultural traditions,

Islam, Turkic linguistic roots, and historical influences from the Silk Road and Soviet rule while retaining distinct cultural and political identities.

Civil society in pre-Soviet Central Asia: Civil society in pre-Soviet times reflects the traditional practices and institutions integral to these societies. The various institutions discussed in a later section of this paper existed in Central Asia long before the Soviet era, forming a part of Islamic community traditions. For instance, historically, mahallas were independent social institutions rooted in family ties and Islamic customs, serving as a bridge between the private and public spheres and fulfilling local self-governance roles. Therefore, these communities formed the social capital in Central Asia.

Civil Society in Soviet Central Asia: Community practices in Central Asia could be considered informal civil society initiatives that differed from Western civil societies (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). The civic culture of Central Asia during the Soviet era lost its significance. Centralization and practices like collectivization (Kolkhoz) attacked the traditional groups of the Soviet republics, which significantly impacted the functioning of communities as social capital (Roy, 2000). Nevertheless, practices like Kolkhoz characterized the social fabric of Central Asian societies. Sovietism can be credited with shaping the anthropological reality of social life in the former Soviet Union beyond the ideological curtain. Neighborhoods such as mahallas were institutionalized by the Soviet system through the establishment of local bodies under the authority of city districts (Makarova, 1999; Roy, 2000). Guzar served as a communal meeting space for engagement and information sharing within mahallas, which the Soviet government exploited by controlling these spaces, transforming teahouses into "red corners," and promoting pro-Soviet activities within informal networks like gap (Abramson, 2006; Dadabaev, 2013; Toktomushev, 2023). Soviet atomization hampered social capital in Central Asia. Despite the Soviet attempt to extinguish traditional groups, clans played an important role as political actors. For example, collectivization led them to remain leaders of the newly state-run farms (Collins, 2002; Roy, 2002). Despite the lack of conventional market-driven entrepreneurial practices during the Soviet period, informal economic activities within social capital communities like Ashar and Kotel could still be considered forms of entrepreneurship. Local Central Asian communities managed to balance Sovietism (Russification) and localism by adapting to new "Soviet nationalities" while promoting their folklore. While remaining loyal to Moscow, they escaped direct Soviet encroachment until 1983. After 1983, accusations by the Soviet Communist Party against local elites for corruption led to clashes between local communities and Moscow. However, the Sovietized traditional civic bodies continued to exist throughout this period.

Nevertheless, sociocultural institutions like mahallas in Uzbekistan underwent significant transformations during the Soviet era, influenced by the interplay of cultural identity and collective memory. It is evident that the social capital of Central Asian societies experienced substantial changes, as reflected in the historical memory of sociocultural institutions that were Sovietized in an effort to formalize them. Consequently, these institutions lost much of their cultural essence and informal nature.

Post-Soviet Central Asia: Anna Matveeva, in her work, emphasized that during Soviet times, civil society in Central Asia was suppressed mainly, with the state controlling public opinion while leaving the private sphere relatively untouched. Traditional groups like families and kinship networks persisted but lacked political roles. After the Soviet collapse, alienation and cynicism, products of the era, hindered collective action and voluntary associations, while conspiracy theories and sensationalist media gained traction (Matveeva 1999). Therefore, traditional groups did not adequately represent social capital in the post-independence period. Post-independence, the role of traditional groups became more complex, often characterized by one elite group being politically influential. This situation resulted in conflicts among various social groups. The concentration of power within one cohesive group led to significant ethnic tensions in Tajikistan in 1992 (Roy, 2002). As previously described, existing social organizations were integrated into the state apparatus to promote Communist ideology among specific social groups (Toktomushev, 2023). In 1993, President Karimov issued a decree granting mahallas certain social control powers, such as the authority to issue wedding certificates. He even introduced a "President's contest for the best daughter-in-law," which rewarded those who demonstrated obedience to their mothers-in-law. Through this process of state intervention, the social capital of Central Asia gained political recognition and saw the manipulation of traditional institutions by political entities to enhance the state's legitimacy (Dadabaev, 2013). Meanwhile, the revival of traditional practices occurred simultaneously with these developments (Roy, 2002).

Traditional groups and Social Capital: In the Central Asian context, it is imperative to highlight the pre-Soviet social groups that were formed based on shared interests rather than solely on clan ties. Cultural concepts such as informal social clubs and community support initiatives are widespread across various ethnic groups. They are not limited to specific communities and are rooted in pre-Soviet networks. Some pre-Soviet solidarity networks were indeed based on shared interests, extending beyond family connections. For example, Central Asian merchants' guilds played a crucial role in the region's economic growth during the Silk Road trade. However, these professional associations are less researched and are not often linked with the social capital of Central Asian countries (Barisitz, 2017; Usmanov and Naidenova, 2019).

Many cultural affiliations are shared across the region rather than restricted to specific ethnic groups. For instance, while Uzbeks refer to informal gathering clubs as gaps, in Tajikistan, they are known as gashtak, and in Kyrgyzstan, they are called sherine. These gatherings foster a sense of community, with members rotating hosting duties and providing entertainment for one another. Additionally, the concepts of ashar, khashar, or hashar involve collaborative efforts among neighbors, where community members come together to assist with projects benefiting everyone, such as building irrigation canals or helping a neighbor construct a new home (Toktomushev, 2023). Furthermore, it is essential to mention the self-governing pre-Soviet traditional institutions that connected the private sphere to the public sphere, illustrating how these social structures contributed to community cohesion and resilience. While highlighting the

roles of traditional groups, it is imperative to mention the historic women's traditional groups. Kavioni were the elderly women who played a key role in passing information to community members.

Mahalla- Mahallas have historically been one of the few traditional structures in Uzbekistan that can unite people of different ethnic and religious groups. During the Soviet era, mahallas emerged as important communities of self-governance that were based on shared residence, as these became the source of information sharing and engagement (Dadabaev, 2013; Kandiyoti, 2007; Rasanayagam, 2002; Troschke, 2012).

For centuries, the chaikhona (teahouse), masjid (mosque), and souk (market) have been central to local discussions on self-governance in Central Asia's Muslim-majority societies, with mahalla serving as the organizing social structure. Unlike other Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan's mahallas operate primarily under customary laws known as *adat* rather than Islamic Shariat. This emphasis on tradition sets Turkmen society apart, especially from the Uzbek mahallas that adhere to Shariat law. *Adat* encompasses community values and norms, addressing social customs, family matters, and issues related to land and livestock management. As a legal framework, *adat* evolves, reflecting shifts in social norms, pressures, and economic conditions (Denison, 2006).

Asar- Social groups like Asar/Hashar/Ashar became significantly important in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Asar is an old Kazakh tradition that has survived and is still popular. "Asar" means collective labor aid, usually provided for building a house or other tasks of a labor-intensive nature that requires a lot of manpower and interfamilial cooperation (Kenzheahmetuly, 2007). To address the challenges arising from unstable economic conditions, people in post-communist countries after 1991 largely depended on informal networks instead of official state support (Rose et al., 1997).

Kotel- is the organised collective accumulation and circulation of money. This practice of informal rotating saving and credit became widespread in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period. Both Kotel and Asar operate on principles of deep solidarity and mutual trust within the community. In contemporary Kazakhstan, nurturing social capital through regular gatherings is considered a vital social norm, almost an informal duty. A significant expectation exists to accept invitations, reflecting a commitment to respect and strengthen communal bonds, which are essential for a vibrant civil society. This emphasis on social interaction not only reinforces relationships but also enhances collective decision-making and democratic participation.

Chaikhon/Chaikhona- Chaikhon, a traditional tea stall in Tajikistan, serves as a community gathering place where people discuss national politics. During the Soviet era, these venues were repurposed as "Red Chaikhon" to promote communist ideology. This practice fostered political discourse, which continues today, enabling community members to engage in discussions and make collective decisions about governmental

policies. Thus, chaikhon exemplifies the role of informal spaces in nurturing democratic values and civic engagement (Scott, 2009).

DISCUSSION

Democracy and Governance: While discussing democracy in the Central Asian context, it is imperative to highlight the condition or availability of such a notion in these five societies. None of the five countries is de facto democratic. However, all five countries' constitutions mention adherence to the values of democracy. However, the Freedom House ranks these five states among the least democratic countries depending on the nature of elections and media freedom. Following independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian states began reforming their political systems, blending universal democratic principles with their own cultural and historical traditions. Fatima Kukeyeva and Oxana Shkapyak argued that by rejecting aspects of Western democracy that conflicted with local norms, these Central Asian countries are forging unique democratic models tailored to their societal and political contexts (Kukeyeva & Shkapyak 2013). It is important to note that the social realities of these countries differ from Western pre-decided vectors for democracy. In this context, traditional civil institutions have a significant role to play in the democratization of these societies.

It is undeniable that most of these countries have been having a wave of democratization in the last few years, which can be substantiated by different facts in the case of different countries. The level of democratic spirit varies significantly based on time and space in these societies. Kazakhstan's constitution officially mentions being a democratic republic, yet lack of transparency and other issues hinder this. Despite this, as argued by Mukesh Kumar Mishra, "the country has a strong basis on which it could move forward to democratization" (Mishra, 2009). For instance, in 2021, the Council of Public Trust was a key initiative in Kazakhstan's democratization, facilitating dialogue among civil society, political parties, and the public to develop inclusive policy recommendations. It enhances participatory governance and fosters trust between citizens and the state.

Kyrgyzstan has been the oasis of democracy since independence. Despite the current changes in the political structure after the regime change in 2021, the culture of contestation and dissent has not disappeared where the masses are able to influence the governance. Here, the relationship between traditions and democracy is rather complex. According to Azamat Temirkoulov, the traditional civil society operates through a mix of informal pressure mechanisms and formalized traditional institutions. While these institutions are leveraged to support democratic consolidation, they are also used to control public opinion (Temirkoulov 2005).

Since the adoption of the Strategy of Actions in 2016 by Shavakat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has prioritized strengthening civil society by enhancing NGO capacities, institutional frameworks, and public engagement mechanisms in governance (Eldor 2021). As the available literature highlights, the role of mahallas and similar practices is predominant

in Uzbek society, emphasizing the growing importance of sociocultural communities in Uzbekistan's governance.

Julie Fisher's long-drawn research opines that Tajikistan's civil society has weakened over the last decade; however, at the grassroots level, traditional local organizations and internet-based initiatives reveal a more nuanced relationship between community participation, civil society networks, democratization, and development (Fisher 2023). The importance of Mahallas in Tajikistan's context is undeniable, as they bring grassroots democratic value to the country despite political repression. They facilitate public deliberation, promote voluntary community work, and support projects such as infrastructure development. With elected leaders and absolute authority, Mahallas also contribute to local governance, providing a space for civic participation and social justice based on traditional Islamic values. Their resilience and adaptability make them key actors in the ongoing development of Tajik civil society.

Turkmenistan's civil society has comparatively less influence on political matters and is more tightly controlled than in other Central Asian countries. Its traditional institutions differ from the other four, as they are based on customary laws rather than Sharia, which is more prevalent in the others. Consequently, social capital plays a minimal role in shaping Turkmenistan's political discourse.

Social capital serves as a barometer of democracy, as it helps gauge the extent of direct or indirect and active or passive participation of people in the democratic process. Therefore, social capital is linked to democracy in this sense. The relationship between social capital and democracy has attracted significant scholarly attention. The available literature attempts to explain the importance of trust, norms, and social participation, which lead to different types of groupings within society. Scholars like Putnam and Fukuyama argue that connections between different groups can create positive social benefits that support democracy, improve government performance, and encourage tolerance and inclusiveness (Putnam, 1995; Fukuyama, 2001). In contrast, some scholars believe that strong ties within a single group can negatively affect democracy (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). Therefore, there are debates about the different forms of social capital that impact a country's democracy. In the Central Asian context, the unavailability of democracy as a form of government makes it a different case than other Asian countries like Taiwan and Singapore. The transition from communist to capitalist societies makes these five countries distinct from other South Asian countries. Depending on this, the connection between traditional groups like mahallas and enhancing democratic traditions varies. For instance, scholars like Putnam and Ellickson exclude mahallas from social capital that facilitates democracy, viewing them as primary and non-voluntary associations (Putnam, 1992; Ellickson, 1998). They believe that bonding traditional associations like mahalla or ashar do not facilitate democracy, unlike bridging social capital, which refers to inter-group bonding. Pamela Paxton argues that social capital influences democracy in two key ways. First, it can foster democratic development in a non-democratic country by empowering citizens

and creating a space for organized opposition. Second, in an existing democracy, strong associations encourage tolerance, promote compromise, enhance political participation, and nurture leadership, all of which strengthen democratic health (Paxton, 2002). In this sense, the Central Asian case exists somewhere between the two aforementioned categories.

In the case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, *asar/hasar* demonstrates the legacy of nomadic cooperative practices. It fosters strong solidarity and unity across class, gender, and ethnicity, reinforcing democratic values (Kenzheahmetuly, 2007). According to Kathleen Collins, clans are social (non-state-created) groups with a corporate character that shapes individuals' behavior through informally set norms, rules, and practices. Affective ties of kinship are its essence (Collins, 2004). However, clan structures show notable variation; for instance, clans in Bukhara and Samarkand are often ethnically diverse. These distinctions are influenced more by geographic and socioeconomic conditions than ethnonational affiliations (Collins, 2003). Therefore, the traditional associations among Central Asian clans are not only intra-ethnic, as evident in Collins's work but also inter-ethnic, which helps develop strong ties among people. Civil society serves as a platform for diverse interests, with organizations advocating for members such as women, students, farmers, and professionals by engaging with parliament and government ministries. *Kotel* exemplifies such an organization, facilitating financial circulation among its members while deepening social connections within the group (Darменова & Koo, 2021). By fostering these relationships, *Kotel* enhances social capital and supports democratic engagement.

However, traditional groups in Central Asia, like any other NGO, have cohesion and an elected representative, facilitating communication between people and the state. In post-Soviet society, they bridge the gap between two institutions of government, if not with other communities. This is how they play an important role in the governance system by working with the government hand in hand. Non-voluntary organizations like these traditional groups might have other negative externalities that arise during their functioning, which will be explained later. However, the role and movement of traditional social capital in Central Asia are undoubtedly significant. There is a form of direct-action democracy in Uzbekistan. The *Mahalla* contrasts with Western political models centred on parliamentary debate and individual rights. While it may be more effective for the Uzbek community, it lacks the essential checks and balances typical of Western governance, a feature often missing in Central Asian countries. Emphasizing community and shared responsibility, the *Mahalla* is a conduit for the *Mirziyoyev* government to engage directly with communities, facilitating a reciprocal relationship that promotes change (Ben Aris, 2021).

Civil Society and NGOs. The concept of civil society in Central Asia diverges significantly from conventional definitions. It is essential to note that NGOs are not the only key entities constituting civil society in this region; traditional groups also play a crucial role. Empirical research has extensively examined the functioning of NGOs and

various societal groups, including Women's Councils. These councils are instrumental in fundraising efforts and facilitate the circulation of resources, especially in the absence of government financial support (Toktomushev, 2023). Anna-Lena Honig's work on the civil society in all five Central Asian Republics suggests that Civil societies in the Central Asian states are more diverse than the prevailing political systems suggest, and these remain active even in non-democratic settings (Honig, 2024). One of the most notable studies is Toktomushev's case study, "Life in Kyrgyzstan." He emphasizes that many NGOs do not automatically indicate shared values or collective action for the common good. Instead, he advocates for focusing on organic forms of community life that have endured and adapted to new economic, social, and cultural realities (Toktomushev, 2023). The challenges faced by democratic reforms in Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s can largely be traced to a limited understanding of civil society, which overlooked the significance of "community civil society" entities such as women's councils at present. Recognizing the role of these traditional groups is vital for appreciating the diverse dynamics that shape civil society in Central Asia (Collier, 2002; Buxton, 2005; Toktomushev, 2023). Understanding this broader landscape is crucial for fostering genuine democratic engagement in the region.

Negative Social Capital and its impact on the democratic culture. Looking at the darker side of social capital, its associations might not always lead to positive outcomes. It is imperative to highlight the role of negative social capital in influencing a country's democratic processes. While trustworthiness and social affinity can reduce transaction costs, they can also lead to exploitation. Certain functions and roles, which are part of the norms attributed to respective traditional groups and civil society in Central Asia, contribute to negative social capital. These negatively impact society and governance overall. For instance, Uyat (shame) serves as a powerful mechanism in Kazakhstani society, nudging individuals to follow social norms and participate in collective actions (Koo, 2017). However, "shame" carries a negative connotation, as it can adversely affect specific segments of society by making adherence to rules compulsory in the name of Uyat, particularly concerning women and other inferior individuals. Another example is the role attributed to mahallas by Karimov, which includes issuing marriage certificates and rewarding women for being the "best" daughter-in-law (Karimov, 1998). Consequently, women often find themselves on the receiving end of severe patriarchy enforced through traditional civil society practices, restricting their agency and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Due to this, women in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have had greater chances to engage in newly established community groups compared to traditional community institutions. In contrast, in Tajikistan, women often lead many traditional organizations. In Tajikistan, there are legal protections specifically for women, such as improved access to credit and government-managed maternity leave benefits, which can offer women greater economic opportunities than those in Uzbekistan (World Bank, 2021). Some observers, like Fatima Akhmedova, claim that in Tajikistan, women's roles are underestimated by political leaders due to Islamic influence, which contributes to negative social capital (F. Akhmedova, 1999).

RESULTS

The main goal of this paper is to highlight how social capital fosters democratic values in otherwise authoritarian Central Asian regimes. This study is particularly significant in the context of a global transition, where civil society engagement has increased over the last decade, enabling civil society to influence political systems. It is evident from the available literature that Central Asian civil society differs markedly from Western definitions, making it essential to emphasize this uniqueness. Although these countries are classified as non-democratic, they still exhibit democratic practices such as free elections, equal representation, and respect for human rights. Except for Uzbekistan, where the political transition toward a democratic framework is relatively recent, other countries in the region have gradually opened their systems since the post-Soviet era.

Scholarly works suggest that the low levels of trust in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have diminished democratization levels in these countries compared to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (Kuldebayeva, 2021). I contend that while “trust” and “democracy” are correlated, the question of whether a causal relationship exists is still contested. The traditional groups of Central Asia, which predate the Soviet era, serve as foundational associations for contemporary civil society institutions in the region. These groups differ from modern NGOs and do not fit neatly into the conventional definition of civil society, particularly in countries like Kyrgyzstan, where there is a lack of robust associational life. Nevertheless, trust levels in Kyrgyz society remain relatively high.

The first step of my paper outlines the transition of pre-Soviet traditional groups, such as Mahallas, into the Soviet context. Despite adapting to Soviet norms of nationality, these groups managed to maintain localism and elements of trust among their members. However, they were unable to exert significant political influence. Post-Soviet groups, which carry heritage from pre-Soviet times, have often been transformed into modern civil society groups that inherit Soviet legacies. Thus, these groups represent a blend of organic traditional values and cultures alongside Soviet influences. Consequently, civil society in Central Asia cannot be categorized solely by NGOs and conventional civil society. The second step focuses on the formation of not only “clan-based” groups but also those founded on “shared interests.” The final steps of this study demonstrate that social capital in Central Asia, despite some negative connotations associated with being coercive and traditional, serves as a fundamental pillar of democratic values in these states. Traditional groups in Central Asia, although characterized by strong intra-personal affinities rather than inter-personal connections, play a crucial role in the governance of their respective countries. These groups are essential to the civil society, social fabric, and civic culture of Central Asia. It is clear from the literature review that for over 15 years, no scholarly research has thoroughly examined the role of clans in the political transitions of Central Asia. Kathleen Collins’ work 2004 analyzes how clans, by promoting formal institutions, attempted to inhibit the agendas of both authoritarian and democratic regimes, thereby preventing their consolidation and leading to decreased regime durability (Collins, 2004). This hypothesis remains relevant today, albeit in

a different context. Recent significant political transitions in all five countries, along with the roles played by clans, societal groups within these clans, or other civil society organizations, have been altering the durability of political systems in the contemporary landscape. As stated by Charles E. Ziegler, “Despite the limited space for civil society and the extensive obstacles that NGOs face in Central Asia, including cooptation and repression, there is potential for transformation in the governance process from below” (Ziegler, 2015).

The recent regime changes and the transition of political systems necessitate further empirical research to engage with locals in their natural settings. Nevertheless, the age-old traditional groups will continue to play a crucial role in the political systems and governance of Central Asian republics, shaping their futures and influencing democratic practices as these societies evolve.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that social capital in Central Asia plays a key role in introducing democratic values into political processes, even though these countries are far from achieving full democracy. Communities built on traditional values of cooperation, bonding, and communication are central to the political structures of the region. While these institutions were influenced by Soviet rule, they survived and continued to shape governance in meaningful ways. After independence, many of these traditional structures were formalized by governments and integrated into political systems. These groups have adapted to new realities and constitute a distinct form of civil society in Central Asia, differing from the Western concept of civil society yet fostering democratic principles in their unique context. While these traditional groups may occasionally have negative societal impacts, their presence underscores the existence of a unique civil society model in the region. In contrast, the role of modern civil society, represented by NGOs, is often constrained due to controlled environments and restrictive laws, such as foreign agent regulations, which conflict with democratic ideals. Thus, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of traditional sociocultural institutions and practices when discussing civil society in Central Asia, as they remain integral to fostering democratic values in these societies.

FUNDING

The author received no financial support to carry out this research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Water Scarcity Dynamics in Central Asia: Implications for Regional Stability

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the dynamics of water scarcity in the Central Asian region and its implications for regional stability. It discusses how global environmental disasters and crises affect climate patterns and freshwater availability, emphasizing the critical shortage of fresh water anticipated soon. The research findings highlight water scarcity's significant challenges, threatening social stability and potentially leading to geopolitical conflicts. Central Asia is identified as particularly vulnerable due to its limited water resources, which could exacerbate existing tensions and hinder regional development. It underscores the need for regional cooperation in managing water resources and implementing effective policies to mitigate the risks associated with water scarcity. Additionally, it predicts that population growth will worsen water scarcity in the region, intensifying interstate conflicts over water and energy resources. The article aims to thoroughly analyze water scarcity as a critical issue for regional stability.*

KEYWORDS: *water scarcity, Central Asia, climate change, geopolitical tensions, regional cooperation.*

INTRODUCTION

Sudden environmental events like climate change, unexpected heat waves, or unseasonal snowfalls don't discriminate based on location; they affect humanity. Over

recent decades, earthquakes, floods, droughts, wildfires, and other natural calamities have claimed millions of lives worldwide and incurred billions in economic losses. Furthermore, water scarcity and ongoing soil erosion in regions across Asia, Africa, and Australia have led to significant humanitarian crises. Projections suggest that by 2050, over 140 million people from Africa, South Asia, and Latin America could be displaced due to climate change (UN, 2020).

The World Bank warns that without intervention, the world could see 216 million climate change refugees by 2050. Coastal countries already face the brunt of hurricanes, floods, and volcanic eruptions, contributing to the migration crisis witnessed in European nations, fueled by environmental refugees whose lives are endangered by natural disasters (UN, 2022). Additionally, in 2020, an international consortium of scientists conducted a comprehensive analysis of the environmental outlook, projecting various scenarios for rising global temperatures and population growth. Their findings suggest that by 2070, between 1 and 3 billion people worldwide could confront uninhabitable climate conditions (Xu et al., 2020).

Central Asia grapples with numerous environmental challenges, both natural and human-induced, including persistent droughts, excessive water extraction from rivers and lakes, desertification, soil salinization, and infrastructure damages from industrial accidents. These widespread issues not only jeopardize the well-being of people and economies across Central Asian nations but also pose a significant threat to regional stability. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive examination of water scarcity dynamics.

The significance of addressing water scarcity stems from the exacerbation of political and socio-economic issues by climate change and global warming. Disruptive changes to people's familiar surroundings can result from sudden catastrophes or the gradual accumulation of environmental problems, leading to deteriorating living conditions and economic hardships. Migration, being an inherent aspect of societal life, is a multifaceted process with diverse causes and intricate consequences. Presently, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies examining the intricacies of water scarcity within the Central Asian region. Hence, investigating water scarcity dynamics in Central Asia, characterized by unique natural and climatic conditions, resource disparities, ethnic diversity, and socio-economic challenges, emerges as a pertinent and crucial research endeavor. Such circumstances underscore the necessity of selecting this research topic.

In his address at a meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Founders of the International Fund for the Rescue of the Islands, President K. Tokayev of Kazakhstan cautioned about the severe repercussions of drought in the Central Asian region by 2050 if preventive measures against environmental disasters are not implemented. He emphasized, "The security of Central Asia is imperiled by global climate change, water resource depletion, and inadequate irrigation water availability." Tokayev highlighted that temperatures in the region are escalating faster than the global average, resulting

in glacier shrinkage, which serves as the primary water source for the Aral Sea basin. Over the past five decades, glacier volume has declined by 30 percent. Experts predict that by 2050, drought in Central Asia could cause a loss of 1.3 percent of GDP annually and prompt approximately 5 million internal “climate” migrants (Tengrinews, 2023).

The focal point of the discussion revolves around identifying the primary implications of water scarcity for regional stability, as well as deciphering the root causes and ramifications of this phenomenon in Central Asia. The findings of this study have the potential to enhance water policy and ensure environmental and demographic security. A political analysis of water scarcity issues will provide invaluable insights for Kazakhstan, enabling the nation to draw essential lessons from the research outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Water scarcity in Central Asia has become an increasingly critical issue, drawing significant attention from scholars and policymakers alike. The region, characterized by its arid climate and limited water resources, faces numerous challenges that threaten both its ecological and socio-economic stability.

Research on water scarcity in Central Asia has been extensive, with scholars examining the multifaceted nature of the problem. Studies by Sembayeva et al. (2023) and Amirgaliev et al. (2022) delve into specific issues such as land cultivation and transboundary reservoir pollution, underscoring Kazakhstan’s multifaceted nature of water security challenges. Additionally, Duzdaban (2021) emphasizes the priority of water resources and water security for regional countries following their independence, reflecting the broader significance of this issue.

The implications of water scarcity extend beyond immediate environmental concerns, affecting regional stability and international relations. Researchers have highlighted the importance of international cooperation in addressing water security issues. Brassett et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity of collaboration with countries beyond the region to effectively manage shared water resources and mitigate conflicts.

Further, the global dimension of water security has been noted by scholars like Wegerich et al. (2015), who underscore the prominent place of water issues on the global agenda concerning river resources. Similarly, Karatayev et al. (2017) and Park et al. (2022) highlight the global nature of water-related challenges, including shortages, pollution, and environmental degradation, with significant implications for human development.

Central Asia’s water scarcity is exacerbated by several factors, including excessive water extraction from rivers and lakes, desertification, soil salinization, and industrial accidents. These issues not only threaten the region’s environmental sustainability but also have profound socio-economic impacts. Studies suggest that without effective intervention, water scarcity could lead to significant economic losses and social upheaval.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies that incorporate political analysis, regional cooperation, and long-term planning. Scholars emphasize the need for policies that not only manage current water resources efficiently but also anticipate future challenges posed by climate change and population growth. By focusing on these areas, Central Asian countries can enhance their water security and ensure regional stability.

In summary, the existing literature highlights the urgent need for a coordinated approach to managing water resources in Central Asia. By leveraging international cooperation and implementing effective policies, the region can address the pressing issue of water scarcity and its implications for regional stability. This study aims to build on this body of work, offering insights and recommendations to inform policy and ensure sustainable water management in Central Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

Given the multifaceted nature of water scarcity issues in Central Asia, an interdisciplinary approach was imperative for this study. This approach enables a comprehensive examination of the diverse factors influencing water resources and facilitates an understanding of their interconnectedness and repercussions for regional stability. To address the research objectives, a combination of conventional and specialized scientific methods of analysis was employed.

Historical analysis was utilized to provide insights into changes in water availability and usage over time, helping to contextualize current challenges within a broader temporal framework. This method allows for the identification of long-term trends and patterns in water management and scarcity.

Systems analysis was employed to examine water scarcity issues within the framework of systemic interrelations. This method considers the impacts of water scarcity across various spheres of life, including economic, social, and political dimensions. By employing systems analysis, water scarcity problems were not only viewed as isolation but were also regarded as integral components of regional security. This approach highlights the interconnected nature of water resources with other critical areas such as agriculture, energy production, and socio-economic development.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study revealed that Central Asia, characterized by a dry climate, has witnessed a consistent rise in average annual temperatures since the late 19th century, with projections indicating a further increase of 3-5°C by 2080. These environmental shifts have been accompanied by phenomena such as drought, desertification, and heightened occurrences of extreme events like floods, dust storms, and landslides, all attributed

to climate change. These developments significantly impact people's livelihoods and regional stability (RCPDCA, 2023).

Furthermore, the research highlighted the significant dependence of the economies and lifestyles of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan on transboundary rivers of interstate significance, given the arid steppes, deserts, and semi-deserts characteristic of the region. A key feature of this area is the uneven distribution of water resources, with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan situated in the upper reaches of river flows originating from the Alatau and Pamir ranges, while the remaining republics occupy lower areas along these waterways (Evolvelium, 2020).

For instance, the average annual flow of the Syrdarya River, spanning 2212 km, amounts to 37 cubic km, with distribution as follows: Kyrgyzstan claims 74%, Uzbekistan 14%, Kazakhstan 9%, and Tajikistan 3%. Similarly, the average long-term flow of the Amudarya River, stretching 1415 km, totals 78 cubic km, with over 80% originating in Tajikistan, 6% in Uzbekistan, 2.4% in Kyrgyzstan, 3.5% in Turkmenistan and Iran, and 7.9% in Afghanistan (Tileukulova, 2022).

Moreover, more than two-thirds of the Shu and Talas rivers originate from the glacial peaks of the Kyrgyz Alatau. It is projected that within the next 25-50 years, the flow of these rivers could decline by 25-45% due to climate change, posing a risk of glacier melting and disappearance in the two river basins by 2100. The Shu-Talas Basin Inspectorate reports a total of 41 reservoirs (5 large, 36 small) under republic ownership in the basin of these rivers. Additionally, communal ownership includes 111 reservoirs and 80 ponds, while private ownership encompasses 9 reservoirs and 5 ponds. However, the feasibility of filling these reservoirs with water shortly appears increasingly uncertain (Zakon.Kz, 2023).

Furthermore, on January 31, 1983, based on the order of the USSR Ministry of Water Resources No. 1/1-36-4279428 dated April 27, 1981, Deputy Minister of Land Reclamation and Water Resources of the USSR I.I. Boradovchenko signed the "Regulations on the distribution of the Talas River flow." According to this regulation, all water resources in the Shu River basin are subject to distribution, amounting to 6.6 million cubic meters (with 42% allocated to Kazakhstan and 58% to Kyrgyzstan). Similarly, the resources of the Talas River (1.6 million cubic meters) were divided equally, with 50% allocated to each country (Borisova, 2021).

Water plays a crucial role in sustaining agriculture, the primary economic sector of the region. Recent data indicates that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, situated in the lower reaches of the region's rivers, are the largest consumers of available water resources, utilizing up to 80-90% of the total. Tensions between the upper (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan) and lower (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) riparian countries in Central Asia primarily stem from differences in water usage regimes (Orynbayev & Muminov, 2024). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, being economically developed and having substantial

reserves of oil, gas, and other natural resources, are also the most populous countries in the region. However, downstream countries heavily rely on upstream countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, situated in the mountains, which effectively control the main waterways, such as the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, Shu, and Talas (Morozova, 2021).

Furthermore, the impacts of climate change are significantly evident in Central Asia on a global scale, with weather fluctuations becoming increasingly frequent. Over the past century, international sources have documented a rise in air temperatures and a decrease in precipitation across the region. A comprehensive study published in the journal *Science* highlights that glacier melt in Central Asia is projected to peak between 2035 and 2055, with glaciers melting at a faster rate than the global average (Buzan et al., 1998). Water consumption is projected to increase by 46% by 2040, creating a deficit of up to 12 m³/year, especially in the scenario of possible reductions in flows from neighboring countries. Without large-scale action, water shortages could triple by 2050 (Orynbayev & Tumashbai, 2022).

The prevailing trend reveals a worsening of climatic conditions, particularly evident in the alarming levels of water shortage and drought. This deterioration has led to a significant environmental catastrophe: the desiccation of the Aral Sea. During the Soviet Union era, extensive agricultural practices in the Aral Sea basin, including the cultivation of water-intensive crops like cotton and rice, coupled with the construction of numerous artificial reservoirs, exacerbated regional water scarcity. For instance, in the Amudarya River basin alone, 63 reservoirs were constructed, with Tajikistan hosting 12, Turkmenistan 19, and Uzbekistan 32. Similarly, along the Syrdarya River, 66 reservoirs were built, with Uzbekistan accounting for 39, Kyrgyzstan 15, Kazakhstan 9, and Tajikistan 3. Consequently, between 1960 and 2009, the Aral Sea's surface area dwindled from 67,499 km² to a mere 6,700 km², a reduction of over tenfold. Presently, more than 35 million individuals residing in the sea basin endure the repercussions of this ecological crisis. Moreover, over 20,000 square kilometers of former seabed have transformed into barren wastelands laden with mud and salt (Ulukbek uulu & Abdyldaev, 2022).

Each year, gusts from wind-raised dust storms lift thousands of tons of fine sand, pesticide and herbicide residues, dust, and soil infused with sea salt particles into the atmosphere, carrying them across vast distances from Central Asia to Antarctica, traversing the globe. The aerosols composed of chemical contaminants and sea salt not only pose health risks to local populations, flora, and fauna but also contribute to accelerated glacier melting in the Tien Shan and Pamir mountains of the region (Peña-Ramos et al., 2021).

The primary cause behind the desiccation of the Aral Sea stems from the diversion of water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers into artificial canals, coupled with excessive consumption for the expansion of irrigated agriculture, particularly focused on cotton and rice cultivation. Notably, the Karakum Canal in Turkmenistan stands as

the world's longest irrigation canal. Initially stretching 1,350 km from Akhun Khan to Ashgabat, it traversed the southern expanse of the country, drawing water from the Amu Darya River. This artificial waterway serves to irrigate desert regions and cotton plantations in Turkmenistan. With a formidable capacity of 500 cubic meters per second, the Karakum Canal supplies water to the Ahal and Balkan vilayets in the northern regions of the Kopet Dag Range, as well as the Murgab oasis in the southeast. Constructed between 1959 and 1976, the colossal canal initially irrigated an area of approximately 500,000 hectares. In response to the environmental catastrophe unfolding in the Aral Sea, Turkmen authorities extended the canal's length to 1,435 kilometers and augmented its water flow to 1,000 cubic meters per second, aiming to expand irrigated lands to cover 1 million hectares. However, the Turkmen government acknowledges that 28 percent of the canal's water is lost due to seepage or evaporation before reaching its intended destinations, although scientists argue this figure could be as high as 60 percent (BBC, 2021).

Furthermore, authorities in Turkmenistan are constructing a vast reservoir dubbed the "Lake of the Golden Age" within the Karashor depression, situated amidst the Karakum desert. Spanning 120 kilometers in length, 65 kilometers in width, and 80 meters in depth, this reservoir comes with a price tag of \$4.5 billion. Proponents claim that this artificial lake will harness water currently lost in the desert, bolster agricultural water supplies, moderate scorching temperatures, and ensure enhanced water reserves for the future. However, they display a dismissive attitude toward the fate of the Amu Darya River and the Aral Sea, discounting the severity of potential environmental repercussions for the planet (Boyarkina, 2024, pp. 72-73).

Moreover, the shrinking of the Caspian Sea in recent years has been a cause for significant concern. The Caspian Sea's water level is heavily reliant on inflows from the Volga and Ural rivers, while its water content, and subsequent drainage, is contingent on basin precipitation. In total, approximately 325 cubic kilometers of water are poured into the Caspian Sea by all its rivers, accounting for 83% of the sea's water balance. On average, around 180 millimeters of precipitation, in the form of rain and snow, falls onto the Caspian Sea's surface, constituting about 16% of its water balance. Groundwater contributes the remaining 1% to the sea's inflow. Throughout the year, a significant portion of water from the Caspian Sea is consumed by evaporation from its surface (95%), with the remainder flowing into the Kara-Bogaz-Gol Bay (5%), where it also evaporates (BBC, 2021).

In terms of water consumers, recent UN data projects that the population of Central Asia will reach 82 million people by 2030 and 100 million people by 2100. Demographically, Central Asian countries are experiencing steady growth, with Tajikistan leading the trend with a population surge of 60% over 20 years. In 2001, Tajikistan's population stood at 6.2 million, and by 2021, it had increased to 9.9 million. Following closely in terms of population is Uzbekistan, boasting a growth rate of 42.3% over two decades, with its population rising from 24.8 million to 35.3 million. Turkmenistan and

Kyrgyzstan exhibit similar growth patterns, both in total population and rate of increase. Turkmenistan's population grew from 4.5 million to 6.1 million, while Kyrgyzstan's rose from 4.9 million to 6.7 million, representing growth rates of 35.6% and 36.7%, respectively (Boyarkina, 2024). Kazakhstan, on the other hand, demonstrates the slowest population growth in the region, with its population expanding by 28.2% over the past 20 years, from 14.9 million to 20 million people.

The surge in population and industrial growth has led to a notable rise in water consumption rates, a trend observed not only in Central Asia but globally, according to UN statistics. Despite possessing abundant water resources, Central Asia faces various challenges contributing to water scarcity. These challenges include geographical limitations, inefficient water management practices, political tensions, technological deficiencies, the necessity to continuously bolster agricultural and industrial output to meet the demands of a rapidly expanding population, and the degradation of irrigation infrastructure and reservoirs.

Presently, water scarcity is acutely felt in regions such as Zhambyl, Turkestan, Kyzylorda, Aktobe, Atyrau, and Mangistau in Kazakhstan, along with central areas of Ulytau and Karaganda. These regions, including Sary-Arka, Betpak field, Irgyz, Ustir fields, Moyynkum, and Kyzylkum, are predominantly desert regions (Orynbayev et al., 2024). For instance, in 2023, a state of emergency was declared in the Zhambyl region due to summer droughts, while the Shalkar district of Aktobe faced the threat of sandstorms. The drying up of rivers like Zhem, Sakig, and Oyil in the western region has resulted in a shortage of drinking water not only for crops but also for livestock. Given the severity of the situation and the necessity for a revised water policy, President K. Tokayev of Kazakhstan proposed the establishment of the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation on September 1, 2023 (Vohra, 2021).

Similarly, much of Uzbekistan grapples with water shortages, particularly arid regions such as Karakalpakstan, Karakum, Kyzylkum, bordering the Aral Sea, and the adjoining Aralkum desert, along with Khiva, Bukhara, Navoi, and Surkhandarya regions. Approximately 80% of Turkmenistan's territory comprises desert regions devoid of regular river flow. Rivers exist only in the southern and eastern regions, with the Murgab and Tedzhen rivers disappearing into the Karakum Desert. The Amu Darya River serves as the primary water source, diverted through the Karakum and Shavat canals, along which reservoirs like Zeyd, Khauzhan, and Kopetdag have been constructed. These artificial water channels have significantly contributed to the retreat of the Aral Sea. Lake Sarikamys, situated on the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan border and fed by the Amu Darya River, contains saltwater, exacerbating the challenge of water scarcity for Turkmenistan's populace, given its predominantly sandy, desert landscape susceptible to drought and salinization.

The mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are experiencing the adverse impacts of global warming and climate change. Each year, the glaciers that feed mountain

rivers are diminishing in size, leading to a reduction in the availability of running water. Abnormal weather patterns have also resulted in an increase in landslides, mudflows, floods, and earthquakes in these areas. Consequently, these natural disasters wreak havoc on the traditional way of life and economy of the people inhabiting these regions. In summary, the factors driving environmental issues in the Central Asian region are exacerbating, unsettling the population.

While there are indeed regions in Central Asia that are conducive to human habitation and possess adequate water resources, these areas are typically already densely populated, with flourishing agriculture. However, in the future, even these regions may witness increased strain on water resources, exacerbating existing challenges. Furthermore, as water scarcity exacerbates, the need for sustainable water management practices becomes increasingly urgent. Many Central Asian countries are already taking proactive measures to diversify their economies, ensure the sustainability of climate-sensitive industries, and integrate climate priorities into national development strategies and public policies.

In the context of regional security, the main question for Central Asian states is whether transboundary river waters can cause conflict between Central Asian states. And how can this be prevented or, if it happens, how can it be regulated? From 2012 to 2022, 144 conflicts occurred between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The most common cause of conflict is water (Gazeta.Uz, 2022). Although Central Asia comprises only five states, the region was the scene of twenty conflicts over thirty years, namely from 1990 to 2019 (Sorbelli, 2024). The cause of the conflict in the village of Kok-Tash, Batken district in 2021 was the water intake of Golovnoy (BBC, 2021). This facility is used by both Tajiks and Kyrgyzs. The main reason for the interstate dispute is that both sides consider this object to be theirs.

There are several types of settlement of transboundary river conflicts:

Mediation: With the collapse of British India, the unified system of water management was destroyed, and internal rivers became transboundary. At the same time, on the territory of India, which became the “upstream state,” there were a few hydroelectric complexes that supplied water resources to the irrigation canals of downstream Pakistan. Thus, Pakistan became dependent on India’s water policy. The problem is complicated by the fact that, in an arid climate, 92% of Pakistan’s territory requires water, and more than half of the country’s population is employed in agriculture, which is the basis of the state’s economy. In April 1949, India completely blocked the Indus, changing the course of the river, and Pakistan had to pay for the water. In addition, Pakistan was also denied access to the Ravi and Sutlej rivers. The dispute over water rights to international rivers was resolved only in 1960, when the conflicting parties concluded the Indus Waters Treaty. An important role was played by the World Bank (WB), which acted as a mediator in resolving the conflict (Alekseeva, 2024).

Mutual Benefit: In November 2021, Israel, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed an important agreement that will set an example not only for the Middle East, but for the entire world. According to the contract, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will build a solar power plant in Jordan that will operate 300 days a year. The plant produces 600 megawatts of solar energy and exports \$180 million annually to Israel. The proceeds will be divided between the UAE and Jordan. But more importantly, Israel will instead send 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water to Jordan. The project is expected to become operational in the next five years (Vohra, 2021).

Today, the four Turkic states of Central Asia (except Tajikistan) are solving the problems arising around water through negotiations. The sharing of the Kempir-Abad water reservoir between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was decided within the framework of negotiations. At the end of 2022, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan ratified an agreement on sections of the state border and an agreement on the joint management of the Kempirabad (Andijan) reservoir. As part of the documents, 4,957 hectares of the reservoir territory and an additional 19.5 hectares for maintenance and protection of the dam were transferred to Uzbekistan; 1,019 hectares of pasture land were transferred to Kyrgyzstan as compensation (Gazeta.Uz, 2022).

Also, the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan agreed on April 15, 2024 to establish a joint company for the construction of the Kambar-Ata-1 dam on the Naryn river, around 150 kilometers south-west of Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek. The significance of the Kambar-Ata-1 dam and hydroelectric power station (HPP), if built, will improve energy security in a region with growing power shortages. Kazakhstan (33%), Kyrgyzstan (34%), and Uzbekistan (33%) will co-own the company responsible for the construction, according to the agreement. Funding will come both from government budgets and from loans and grants from international financial institutions, like the World Bank and the IMF (Sorbello, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the environmental challenges and water scarcity prevalent in the Central Asian region. The analysis reveals a complex interplay of natural, anthropogenic, and technogenic factors contributing to these issues. Historically, political decisions aimed at transforming Central Asia into agricultural hubs disrupted the region's natural balance. Massive irrigation projects and extensive planning during the Soviet era led to significant environmental consequences, including the drying up of the Aral Sea. The study highlights critical challenges in Central Asia's water security, including aging infrastructure, outdated management methods, weak flood protection, inadequate training, and regulatory framework issues, emphasizing the imperative for coordinated regional cooperation and innovative policy reforms to address water scarcity risks and promote sustainable development and regional stability.

Addressing these challenges necessitates a coordinated water policy among countries in the region, particularly those situated at the headwaters of Mountain Rivers and in river deltas. However, achieving consensus remains challenging, as each country prioritizes its national interests and security. Despite the inevitability of water shortages in the region, proactive measures can mitigate their severity and consequences. Strategies include maximizing water conservation through modern irrigation technologies, combating environmental disasters like desertification, promoting water-efficient agriculture, and fostering a culture of responsible water usage. Additionally, efforts to increase forest cover, protect against wildfires and illegal logging, and facilitate planned resettlement from environmentally vulnerable areas are crucial. Collectively, these actions can help promote sustainable development in the Central Asian region and ensure the long-term viability of its ecosystems and communities.

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Ethnic Identity: Research by Central Asian Scientists

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ABSTRACT. *Globalization has changed some aspects of ethnic identity. On a theoretical basis, this article examines the analysis of studies of ethnic identity conducted by scientists in Central Asia. The maintenance and development of ethnic identity in the face of globalization and sociopolitical upheavals is the main topic of this study. Various research approaches to defining ethnic identity, the main stages of its formation, and the influence of political, historical, and sociocultural processes on the formation and change of ethnic identity are considered. Drawing upon research from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, political science, sociology, and psychology, the article delves into the complexities of ethnic identity formation, its significance, and its impact on individuals and communities. Using data from 17 scientific papers indexed by the keyword “ethnic identity” in the Scopus database, the article identifies key factors influencing the formation and understanding of ethnic identity. The author summarizes various approaches to the study of ethnicity, analyzes the factors affecting the formation of ethnic identity, and presents the main conclusions made by Central Asian researchers. Through a synthesis of empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and case analyses, the article offers insights into the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity within the region. The article represents an important contribution to political science and cultural and sociological aspects of ethnic identity and can be used for further research. Our research reveals a significant interdependence between ethnic identity and historical-political contexts, showing how these factors shape contemporary social reality. Research findings underscore the value of viewing ethnic identity holistically and offer a paradigm for promoting social cohesiveness and cultural continuity in Central Asia.*

KEYWORDS: *ethnic identity, globalization, religious, language, ethnicity.*

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is one of the key concepts in the social sciences. It represents a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group, which is based on common cultural, linguistic, and historical traditions. In Central Asia, the study of ethnic identity is of particular importance since this region is one of the most multi-ethnic in the world. The diverse ethnic groups in this region, including Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks, among others, have unique histories, cultures, and traditions that contribute to the complexities of ethnic identity formation.

Understanding ethnic identity in Central Asia requires a critical examination of nation-building, contemporary national identity, and post-Soviet studies. By examining how nations are imagined and constructed, Smith (1991) and Anderson (2016) have clarified the procedures involved in nation-building among multiethnic communities. Smith (2009) emphasizes how myths, recollections, and symbols influence national identity through his notion of ethno-symbolism. This is especially important in Central Asia, where historical narratives play a major role in national discourse. Because state-controlled media play a significant role in the development of national identities in many Central Asian countries, Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" reveals this process.

The study of "Ethnicity without groups" by Brubaker (2006) highlights how political elites play a decisive role in forming ethnic identities as well as how ethnic boundaries are fluid. This viewpoint is particularly important in Central Asia, where elite discourses and governmental actions have a big impact on how ethnic identities are constructed. Marat's (2018) research on reforms state-building in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan highlights the impact of historical legacies and external influences on national identity formation. Marat argues that the interplay between Soviet-era policies and contemporary nation-building efforts has created a unique national identity that blends civic and ethnic elements. Such insights are valuable for understanding the broader patterns of ethnic identity in the region.

The topic of ethnic identity has been studied widely throughout the world, and academics like Clifford Geertz, Stuart Hall, and Rogers Brubaker have made important contributions, in our judgment. A theoretical framework for investigating ethnic identity in Central Asia is established by their research on nationalism, ethnic identity construction, and cultural interpretation. Geertz's (1973) interpretive approach to culture provides insights into how ethnic identities are symbolically constructed and maintained. Hall's (1996, pp. 110-121) work on cultural identity emphasizes the fluid and constructed nature of identities, which is pertinent in the dynamic, multi-ethnic societies of Central Asia. Brubaker's (2002) concept of "groupism" challenges the notion of fixed ethnic groups and highlights the contextuality of ethnic identities, a perspective particularly relevant for understanding Central Asia's diverse populations.

Besides, the impact of Soviet-era policies on ethnic relations (Torun, 2021), the significance of language and education in the creation of identity (Fierman, 2006), and the impact of regional geopolitics (Bayarkhuu, 2004) on interethnic development have been the main topics of research on ethnic identity in Central Asia. Soviet policies, such as the promotion of Russian and the establishment of ethnically defined administrative boundaries, have had lasting effects on ethnic identities in the region (Hirsch, 2000).

Post-Soviet transitions have complicated interethnic development as newly independent states grapple with the legacy of Soviet rule while attempting to forge new ethnic identities. Dave's (2007) research on Kazakhstan's nation-building strategies illustrates

how the government promotes Kazakh language and culture to strengthen national identity while managing ethnic diversity. Similarly, Reeves' (2014) work on Kyrgyzstan highlights the role of political and social changes in shaping ethnic identities and interethnic relations.

Faranda and Nolle's (2011) study delves into the intricacies of ethnic identity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, particularly examining the perceptions of both titular and Russian populations regarding ethnic communities. The findings of their research suggest that ethnic boundaries are not rigid or universally defined but rather fluid and context-dependent. By demonstrating the variability and context-dependence of ethnic boundaries, their study contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals and communities perceive and define their own identities within multiethnic societies like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Shnirelman's (2012, pp. 15-36) study provides insights into the intricate relationship between nationhood, identity, political authority, material culture, and the built environment throughout Eurasian history. Specifically, he emphasizes the significance of archaeology in shaping ethnic identity in Central Asia. According to Shnirelman, the historical dynamics of power exert a crucial influence on the development of the "national idea" within this context. By examining the material remnants of past civilizations, archaeology contributes to the construction of narratives surrounding ethnic identity. The interpretation of archaeological findings often intersects with political agendas and power dynamics, shaping the collective understanding of history and identity. The historicity of power - exhibited via invasions, territorial domination, and cultural assimilation - plays a crucial role in forming ideas of nationhood and ethnic identity in Central Asia, a region where many cultures and civilizations have interacted for millennia. Shnirelman's argument underscores the difficult interaction between historical narratives, archaeological evidence, and the construction of ethnic identity. By acknowledging the influence of political authority and power dynamics on the formation of the "national idea", his study highlights the multidimensional nature of identity formation in Eurasian history.

Lubin's (2023, pp. 53-70) rationale underscores the complexity of identities in Central Asia, highlighting how ethnic, religious, and cultural identities intersect and influence each other. By emphasizing the fluidity and context-dependency of identities in the region, he suggests that they cannot be neatly compartmentalized in analysis. This fluidity implies that identities can shift and adapt based on various factors, making their role in domestic and foreign policy ambiguous and subject to interpretation. Understanding this complexity is critical to this study's efforts to understand Central Asian scientists research on ethnic identity.

Kazakhstani scientists have approached the study of ethnic identity from multiple perspectives. Anthropological studies by domestic scientists have focused on the historical roots and cultural practices that shape ethnic identity in the region (Baigabatova et al.,

2018; Boivin, 2015; Nurgaliyeva et al., 2017). Sociological studies have examined the social structures and processes that influence ethnic identity formation and maintenance (Kappassova, 2018; Otpenov et al., 2019; Yefremov, 2021). Additionally, educational and psychological studies have examined multicultural educational experiences and psychological factors that contribute to ethnic identity (Fahrutdinova et al., 2023; Mukhamejanova & Konurbayeva, 2023).

With the use of the “Article title, Abstract, Keywords” and “Article title” capabilities in the Scopus database, you can find out how many works have been published by scientists from Central Asia by using the keyword “ethnic identity” (Table 1). These findings, in our opinion, demonstrate the degree to which Central Asian scientists value this idea and the depth of research that has been done on the subject.

Table 1. *Number of published works by Central Asian scientists using the proposed keyword*

Central Asian countries	Article title, Abstract, Keywords (found materials – 11 272)	Article title (found materials – 2 580)
Kazakhstan	52	7
Kyrgyzstan	6	-
Tajikistan	2	-
Turkmenistan	-	-
Uzbekistan	2	-

Data collected by the author using the Scopus database (accessed March 1, 2024).

This study aims to analyze the research conducted by Central Asian scientists on issues of ethnic identity within the framework of interdisciplinary connections, incorporating perspectives from political science, history, anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology. By synthesizing existing scientific knowledge and empirical evidence, we set out to explain the complex processes underlying the formation, maintenance, and change of ethnic identity in different contexts. Through this effort, we hope to contribute to a greater understanding of the complexities inherent in ethnic identity and its implications for contemporary society. However, several limitations must be acknowledged to clarify the scope and ensure a more accurate and context-sensitive analysis.

Focused on publications from the Scopus database: the research is specifically limited to Central Asian scientists who published articles in journals from the Scopus database. The rationale for sampling is written in the research methodology section.

Language and accessibility: much of the research analyzed is published in English. We analyzed two publications published in Russian. The scientific literature selected during the processing of primary data is indicated in Appendix 1. A few closed access articles were taken into consideration in addition to open access ones.

Ethnic identity complexity: ethnic identity is inherently complex and intersects with other social identities such as cultural identity, nation, religion, language, belonging, and class. While acknowledging these intersects, the primary analytical category in this study is ethnic identity. Because of this approach, overlapping identities that could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the social forces at work are not thoroughly examined.

Contextual sensitivity: the study recognizes that ethnic identities cannot be equated across different nations, as each represents a distinct identity shaped by unique historical, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, findings and conclusions drawn from one country may not be directly applicable to another. This limitation necessitates careful contextualization and caution in making broader generalizations.

Data limitations: since this study examines on a theoretical basis the analysis of ethnic identity research, the study relies on existing research and secondary data sources. Primary data collection, such as interviews or ethnographic fieldwork, was not conducted as part of this analysis.

By acknowledging these limitations, this study aims to provide a clear and context-sensitive analysis conducted by Central Asian scientists. Establishing these boundaries helps clarify the scope of the research and ensures that the conclusions drawn are both accurate and relevant to the specific contexts being studied.

Key terms and specialized vocabulary used in this study include: ethnicity: a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group, often defined by shared cultural practices, language, and ancestry; ethnic identity: a feeling of being a member of a specific ethnic group, typically indicated by common ancestry, language, and cultural customs; globalization: globalization affects ethnic identities by increasing cultural exchange and intensifying ethnic awareness; religion: a significant cultural and social force that shapes ethnic identities and community structures; language: the promotion of national languages is a critical factor in the region's ethnic development.

Based on the foregoing, in this article, the author aims to analyze studies of ethnic identity conducted by scientists in Central Asia. To do this, the following questions will be considered:

- (1) What approaches to the study of ethnic identity are used by Central Asian scientists?
- (2) What factors, according to Central Asian researchers, influence the formation of ethnic identity?
- (3) What are the main conclusions made by Central Asian researchers in the field of studying ethnic identity?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As noted above, the primary data of the research work was obtained using the “Article title, Abstract, Keywords” and “Article title” functions from the Scopus database. The results obtained using “Article title” for scientists in Kazakhstan and “Article title, Abstract, Keywords” for scientists from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were analyzed (Table 1). We explain the restriction created for Kazakh scientists by the large number of materials found under “Article title, Abstract, Keywords”. Systematizing the found materials using the keyword “ethnic identity”, in this study we paid attention to 17 scientific works (Appendix 1). It is important to note that scientists from Central Asia have collaborated with researchers from other nations on a number of their papers.

Several analytical methods were used to analyze the studies found during the primary data collection process and obtain information about ethnic identity, including (1) theoretical and empirical synthesis, (2) analysis of scientific literature, (3) comparative analysis, and (4) generalization. (1) Theoretical and empirical synthesis involves synthesizing both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence from various sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of ethnic identity. By integrating existing theories and concepts with real data, the author of the article created a holistic analytical structure for the study. (2) The analysis of scientific literature involves analyzing relevant scientific literature to gather insights, theories, and findings related to ethnic identity. This involves reviewing academic papers and books to identify trends, debates, and gaps in the existing literature. (3) Comparative analysis involves examining similarities and differences across different cases and contexts related to ethnic identity. We compared different ethnic groups, regions, historical periods, and socio-political environments in Central Asia to identify patterns, variations, and factors influencing the formation and expression of ethnic identity. (4) Generalization involves drawing overarching conclusions and principles based on the analysis of specific cases and data. Generalizing the results of empirical research and comparative analysis, we were able to draw our own conclusions about the nature and consequences of ethnic identity in various contexts.

Explanations of the research methodology application:

Application of theoretical and empirical synthesis: to develop a comprehensive understanding of ethnic identity, we integrated both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. We created a comprehensive analytical framework that spanned the gap between theoretical viewpoints and empirical facts by combining ideas and concepts from various sources. The intersection of theoretical models of ethnic identity formation with case studies by Central Asian scientists created an analytical framework that informed the entire study.

Application of analysis of scientific literature: this process involved systematically searching for and analyzing relevant academic papers, books, and other scholarly sources

in the Scopus database. Examining the literature turned up important discoveries, theoretical disagreements, and gaps in the field's knowledge. This methodology provided a foundation for understanding the current state of knowledge on ethnic identity and highlighted areas that required further exploration. The direction of this research was determined after separately detecting trends in the study of ethnic identity in the works of Central Asian scientists.

Application of comparative analysis: comparative analysis was a critical component of methodology, as it allowed for the examination of similarities and differences across various cases and contexts. We compared different publications by Central Asian scientists that determined patterns and factors of ethnic identity in Central Asia. This method helped to uncover factors that influence ethnic identity, such as migration, economic changes, cultural policies, etc.

Application of generalization: after conducting theoretical research using analytical methods, we drew overarching conclusions and principles about ethnic identity based on research by Central Asian scientists. In order to create a broader that could be used in different situations, generalization required combining the research and data from scientists from Central Asia. For instance, based on our analysis, we generalized that economic development and political stability play significant roles in shaping ethnic identity in Central Asia. These generalizations helped to establish theoretical findings that can be investigated in further studies and gave insight into the nature and implications of ethnic identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH BY KAZAKHSTANI SCIENTISTS

Kazakhstan scientists are actively researching various aspects of ethnic identity, which are determined by the multinational nature of the country and the dynamic processes of ethnocultural development. Their comprehensive approach reflects the complexity and multifaceted nature of ethnic identity, which is shaped by historical, cultural, social, political, and individual factors.

Researchers have examined how cultural policies influence the restoration and preservation of ethnic identity. The ethnic identity of Kazakhstani Russians has been a subject of interest, exploring how they navigate their dual cultural heritage and interact with the dominant Kazakh culture. Studies have looked at the role of Catholicism among ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan and its influence on their ethnic identity. The importance of language, especially for young people from interethnic families, has been studied to understand its role in shaping ethnic identity and cultural belonging. Researchers have explored how ethnic identity can be mobilized for political purposes, examining its role in political participation and activism. The impact of Kazakhstan cinema on the formation of cultural and ethnic identity has been studied to understand how films shape

perceptions of Kazakh culture, history, and values. The veneration of saints and local heroes, such as Genghisids and warrior-batyr, has been examined to understand its role in the generation of ethnic identity among Kazakhs in specific regions.

Kazakhstan scientists have employed various research methods and approaches, including qualitative research, cognitive anthropology, constructivist research, historical analysis, sociological surveys, symbolic research, case studies, and historiographic research. These diverse approaches allow researchers to explore ethnic identity from multiple perspectives, incorporating insights from history, policy, culture, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Overall, the studies conducted by Kazakhstani scientists provide a rich and nuanced understanding of ethnic identity, highlighting its complex nature. By exploring various aspects of ethnic identity and employing diverse research methods, Kazakhstan scientists contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that shape ethnic identity in Kazakhstan and beyond. Their research underscores the importance of considering multiple factors and perspectives when studying ethnic identity and highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches to this complex phenomenon.

Cultural policy plays a pivotal role in the restoration and preservation of ethnic identity. Myong and Chun (2015) delve into the practice of street renaming as a strategic approach to express and reinforce ethnic identity. Their study specifically examines the impact of renaming streets in Almaty, focusing on how this practice contributes to the preservation of historical memory and the creation of a new public space aligned with the values and ideals of the ethnic group. Street renaming serves as a visible and enduring form of cultural expression. By renaming streets with names that resonate with the cultural heritage and history of the community, a sense of belonging and connection is fostered among the residents. One of the significant outcomes of street renaming is the preservation of historical memory. Renaming streets with names that have historical significance to the ethnic group helps in keeping alive the stories, struggles, and achievements of the community's ancestors. This act of commemoration through street names serves as a constant reminder of the rich heritage and contributions of the ethnic group to the broader societal tapestry. Furthermore, renaming streets aligns the public space more closely with the values and ideals of the ethnic group. Choosing names that reflect the cultural, social, and political values of the community, the public area becomes a symbol of identity and pride. This transformation of public spaces fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among the residents, encouraging active participation in community activities and initiatives.

Sengirbay (2019) conducted a comprehensive study to explore the intricate relationship between language and ethnicity among Kazakhstani Russians. By employing observation, semi-structured interviews, cognitive anthropology, and case studies, the research offers valuable insights into how language influences people's conceptions of their ethnicity. Language serves as more than just a means of communication; it

acts as a powerful cultural identifier. Senggirbay (2019) discovered that one crucial determinant of ethnic identity is the continued significance of the Kazakh language in shaping the ethnic identity of the diaspora. Speaking Kazakh to people of the diaspora is still a significant means for people to express their ethnic consciousness and to reaffirm their sense of ethnic identity. Language significantly influences people's internal self-perception of their ethnicity. Speaking Kazakh can evoke feelings of pride, identity, and cultural continuity among the diaspora population. Moreover, the ability to speak the Kazakh language fluently is seen as a key indicator of preserving it with friends. Externally, the use of the Kazakh language serves as a clear marker of ethnic identity, facilitating recognition and differentiation from other ethnic groups.

The weakening and liquidation of religious institutions during the Soviet period posed significant challenges to the preservation of religious practices and beliefs. However, religion persisted and thrived in the spaces of family and individual religiosity. In-depth analysis of the significant influence of Catholicism on the lives of Polish deportees to Kazakhstan is provided by Shapoval (2020), who shows how, in the face of deportation, faith became a vital survival tactic and a pillar for maintaining ethnic identity. In conditions of deportation, where individuals are forcibly separated from their homeland, culture, and community, faith emerges as a beacon of hope and comfort. For deportees, religion played a decisive role in their survival by providing spiritual sustenance, resilience, and a sense of purpose amidst adversity. The practice of faith offered emotional and psychological support, helping individuals cope with the challenges of displacement and uncertainty. Religious communities serve as vital social support networks, offering assistance, solidarity, and a sense of belonging to those in need. These religious communities played a pivotal role in mitigating the social and psychological impacts of deportation, fostering resilience and mutual aid among the displaced population. Religious traditions and rituals serve as powerful tools for preserving one's cultural identity in exile. Religious ceremonies, and rituals provided opportunities for cultural expression, storytelling, and passing down traditions to younger generations, thereby ensuring the continuity and preservation of their ethnic identity. Furthermore, faith acts as a unifying force that helps maintain a sense of community among the deported. Faith fostered a strong sense of solidarity, mutual support, and shared identity among the displaced population. Despite the challenges of deportation and displacement, the shared faith created bonds of unity and cohesion, reinforcing a collective sense of belonging and community. By offering comfort in the face of deportation, highlighting the tenacity of faith in trying times and its crucial role in maintaining ethnic identity, faith builds communities.

The study by Rakhmetova et al. (2022) found that language plays a crucial role in shaping the ethnic identity of young people and that their ability to speak the Kazakh language fluently is a key factor in their sense of belonging to the Kazakh ethnic group. Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of cultural heritage, values, and identity. For many young people, fluency in the Kazakh language is not just a skill but also a connection to their roots, family history, and cultural

heritage. It provides them with a sense of continuity and belonging to the broader Kazakh community. The study's findings emphasize that language proficiency since childhood is a crucial parameter of a linguistic personality. Early exposure to and proficiency in the Kazakh language can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Kazakh culture, traditions, and values, thereby reinforcing ethnic identity. Furthermore, the dominant role of the Kazakh language in society and its importance in professional career prospects indicate that language proficiency has practical implications beyond personal identity. It can also influence social integration, educational attainment, and economic opportunities for young people. The alignment between linguistic and ethnic identities for a majority of respondents (87%) underscores the close relationship between language and ethnic identity. This suggests that for many young Kazakhstanis, their ability to speak the Kazakh language fluently is not just a reflection of their linguistic skills but also a manifestation of their ethnic identity.

According to Czuba (2023), layered ethnic identity in Central Asia is an underappreciated feature of ethnicity and has its own political consequences. Layered ethnic identity in Central Asia brings attention to the complexity and diversity of ethnic identities in the region. Central Asia is home to many ethnic groups, languages, cultures, and histories that have interacted and evolved over centuries. As a result, many individuals in this region navigate multiple layers of ethnic identity, which can include national, regional, linguistic, tribal, or even clan affiliations, among others. Czuba's (2023) observation that layered ethnic identity has its own political consequences is particularly significant. In a region where ethnicity often intersects with politics, governance, and nation-building, the complexities of layered identity can influence political development in various ways.

Firstly, layered ethnic identity can impact political mobilization and representation. Individuals may align with different ethnic and regional groups based on context, leading to diverse political affiliations and alliances. This can contribute to a more fragmented political development where multiple ethnic groups and identities vie for representation and influence.

Secondly, the recognition and accommodation of layered ethnic identities can have implications for state policies, including those related to minority rights, cultural preservation, and language promotion. Governments may face challenges in balancing the diverse needs and interests of various ethnic groups, especially in multiethnic states where one dominant group may hold more political power.

Thirdly, layered ethnic identity can also influence interethnic relations and social cohesion. While shared cultural heritage and linguistic ties can foster unity and mutual understanding among different ethnic groups, differences in identity lead to tensions, conflicts, and divisions.

Moreover, external factors such as geopolitical interests, international migration, and global cultural influences can further complicate the situation of ethnic

identity in Central Asia, adding another layer of complexity to the region's political development. Recognizing the complexities of layered ethnic identity can contribute to equitable political processes, policies, and interethnic relations in Central Asia.

In today's globalized world, where cultures are constantly interacting and influencing each other, cinema has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping and transmitting ethnic identity. Therefore, it is important to consider the role of Kazakhstan cinema in the formation of ethnic identity (Matkerim et al., 2023). Kazakhstan cinema has a long history, dating back to the early 20th century. Over the years, it has produced a diverse range of films that have shown themes of Kazakh history, culture, and identity. These films have not only entertained audiences but have also served to educate and inform them about the Kazakh way of life. Kazakhstan cinema has also played a role in promoting the Kazakh language and culture. Many Kazakh films are made in the Kazakh language, and they often feature traditional Kazakh music, dance, and costumes. This exposure to Kazakh culture has helped to strengthen the identity of Kazakh people, both within Kazakhstan and abroad. Overall, Kazakhstan cinema has played a vital role in shaping and transmitting ethnic identity. It has helped to create a sense of national pride and unity among Kazakh people, and it has promoted the Kazakh language and culture to a global audience. As the industry continues to develop, Kazakhstan cinema is sure to play an even more important role in the future of Kazakhstan.

The adoration of saints, especially Genghisids, warrior-batyr, and charismatic tribal leaders, is a fascinating way to understand the distinctive features of ethnic identity creation in the North Kazakhstan region. This is especially true among Kazakhs. This form of saint worship, which differs from mainstream Islamic practices, reflects the region's historical, cultural, and social context, as well as its complex relationship with neighboring ethnic groups (Kaziev et al., 2023). In a region marked by constant hostility and distrust towards neighboring ethnic communities, the choice of Genghisids, warrior-batyr, and tribal leaders as objects of veneration is significant. These figures represent strength, leadership, and resilience, qualities that resonate with the local population and symbolize the region's history of resistance and autonomy. The cult of local saints, known as batyr-auwliye, serves as an important integrative force within the community. By venerating these figures, local Kazakhs reinforce tribal principles and values, fostering a sense of unity, identity, and belonging among community members. This form of saint worship not only strengthens social cohesion but also contributes to the deep ethnicization of tribal principles, shaping the collective identity of the local Kazakh population. Furthermore, the cult of batyr-auwliye reflects a syncretic blend of Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. This blend of religious and cultural elements highlights the adaptive nature of religious practices and their ability to evolve and accommodate local customs, beliefs, and values over time. It also underscores the resilience and flexibility of ethnic identity, which can incorporate diverse influences while maintaining its core principles and values.

Considering the research of Kazakhstani scientists, we offer some proposals on the problems of ethnic identity in the country. Development and implementation of comprehensive language education programs stimulate proficiency in native languages from an early age. These programs should be integrated into the national education system to reinforce cultural heritage and ethnic identity among younger generations. We need to provide support to religious and cultural institutions that play a defining role in maintaining ethnic identity. This includes funding, legal protection, and community development initiatives that help preserve religious practices and cultural traditions. Power should recognize the complexity of ethnic identities and incorporate this understanding into state policies. To achieve balanced governance and societal harmony, this entails supporting minority rights, cultural preservation, and equitable representation. Investment in the local film industry to produce and distribute films that highlight the cultural heritage, history, and values of various ethnic groups promotes ethnic identity. Cinema can be a powerful tool for cultural education and international cultural diplomacy, promoting a positive image of the nation's diverse identities.

RESEARCH BY KYRGYZSTAN SCIENTISTS

Kyrgyz scientists have shown a deep commitment to understanding the complexities of ethnic identity, addressing a range of issues that are both relevant to Kyrgyzstan and resonate with broader global concerns. Research by Kyrgyzstan scientists concerns the concept of “kyrgyzchylyk” (Kyrgyzness), the life of migrants in Russia, the Russian language in the context of ethno-regional differences, the influence of conservative ideas, the transformation of consciousness in the context of globalization, and the study of the epic heritage.

Their research reflects a multifaceted approach, employing various methodologies and perspectives to explore the problems of ethnic identity in a rapidly changing world. Researchers employ a systemic approach to understand the interconnectedness of various factors influencing ethnic identity, considering social, cultural, historical, and economic dimensions. Ethnographic studies provide rich, qualitative insights into the lived experiences, practices, and beliefs of Kyrgyz people, offering a deep understanding of their cultural identity. Cognitive mapping helps researchers visualize and analyze the mental representations and perceptions of ethnic identity among individuals and communities. Surveys and thematic research allow researchers to collect and analyze quantitative data on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to ethnic identity. Philosophical and comprehensive research approaches enable researchers to explore the underlying philosophical principles, values, and worldviews that shape ethnic identity, offering a holistic understanding of the subject. The variety of research approaches used by Kyrgyz scientists highlights the comprehensiveness of their approach. With this combination, they are able to collect information from several angles and create a more comprehensive image of Kyrgyz identity.

The concept of “kyrgyzchylyk” (Kyrgyzness) is an interesting and multifaceted term that encompasses various aspects of Kyrgyz identity, culture, and spirituality. Rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of the Kyrgyz people, it serves as a means of navigating the complexities of the past, particularly the Soviet era, while also emphasizing Islamic values and correct thinking (Aitpaeva, 2008). The Kyrgyz people, like many other Central Asian ethnic groups, experienced significant transformations during the Soviet era. The Soviet regime imposed its own cultural and ideological framework, which often clashed with traditional Kyrgyz values and practices. “Kyrgyzchylyk” can be seen as a way to reconcile and make sense of this complex history, allowing Kyrgyz people to maintain a connection with their past while moving forward. Islam has played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and spiritual identity of the Kyrgyz people. We think “kyrgyzchylyk” incorporates Islamic teachings and principles, providing a moral and spiritual foundation for the community. This Islamic influence can be seen in various aspects of Kyrgyz life, from daily practices to cultural traditions. The concept of “correct thinking” within “kyrgyzchylyk” emphasizes rationality, wisdom, and a balanced approach to life. It encourages individuals to think critically, make informed decisions, and act responsibly. This aspect of “kyrgyzchylyk” reflects the importance of intellectual and moral integrity in shaping the identity of the Kyrgyz people.

Nasritdinov’s (2016) research provides important insights into the chances and difficulties of migrant integration in Russia. It focuses on Central Asian migrants and their relationships with locals in Kazan and Saint Petersburg. In contrast to pushing for assimilation or developing supra-ethnic identities, the author’s viewpoint highlights the need of accepting variety and building mutual understanding. One of the key arguments put forward by Nasritdinov is that successful migrant integration requires an acceptance and appreciation of cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. Instead of expecting migrants to conform to the dominant culture or adopt a homogeneous identity, there needs to be a recognition and respect for the diversity that migrants bring. This approach fosters a harmonious society where individuals from different backgrounds can coexist peacefully. Nasritdinov criticizes policies that aim to Russify migrants, as these can be counterproductive and lead to feelings of exclusion. Forced assimilation can undermine migrants’ cultural identities and hinder their integration into society. Instead, policies should focus on creating an environment that values and accommodates diversity, allowing migrants to maintain their cultural heritage while also participating in the broader community. Similarly, the author cautions against the promotion of supra-ethnic identities as a solution to migrant integration. While such identities can provide a sense of belonging and solidarity among migrants, they can also contribute to divisions between different ethnic and cultural groups.

The study by Agadjanian and Nedoluzhko (2022) offers an intriguing perspective on the relationship between ethnic heterogeneity, proficiency in the Russian language, and labor market outcomes in Kyrgyzstan. Their findings refute prevailing knowledge and provide insight into the intricate processes at work in a multiethnic community. One of the key findings of the study is that proficiency and use of the Russian language tend to

increase as the ethnic heterogeneity of the community rises. This suggests that in more ethnically diverse settings, individuals are more likely to learn and use Russian as a common language for communication. Interestingly, despite the increasing proficiency in the Russian language, the authors did not find a strong perception among respondents regarding the importance of Russian language skills for success in the domestic labor market. This finding is surprising given that Russian is often considered an important language for economic and professional advancement in many post-Soviet countries.

Abdoubaetova's study in 2023 (Abdoubaetova, 2023) presents a perspective on the growing influence of conservative ideas promoted by Kyrgyz-speaking illiberal public activists. Her argument revolves around the confluence of re-traditionalization, the resurgence of religious values, and anti-Western sentiments as key factors driving this trend. The process of re-traditionalization refers to a return and re-emphasis on traditional cultural, social, and moral values. In the context of Kyrgyzstan, this could mean a renewed focus on traditional customs, practices, and norms, which may be perceived as being under threat due to modernization, globalization, and external influences. Alongside re-traditionalization, Abdoubaetova highlights the growing influence of religious values in shaping public discourse and activism. Religion can serve as a powerful force in mobilizing individuals and communities around shared beliefs and principles. In the case of Kyrgyz-speaking illiberal activists, religious values may provide a moral and ideological framework for their conservative ideas and actions. Anti-Western sentiments can be seen as a reaction against perceived Western cultural, political, and economic influences. For some, the West may be seen as a threat to traditional values, national identity, and sovereignty, leading to a rejection of Western ideologies and practices. The promotion of conservative ideas by Kyrgyz-speaking illiberal public activists has implications for public discourse, political mobilization, and social dynamics in Kyrgyzstan. It can shape the narrative around issues such as gender roles, family values, national identity, and foreign policy.

The research by Botokanova, Alybaev, and Mursahmedova (2024) illuminates, in the context of globalization, the opportunities and difficulties experienced by post-nomadic peoples in the Kyrgyz Republic. According to their results, cultural identity is still crucial for successful adaptation to contemporary living situations, even if globalization has had a substantial impact on the traditions, culture, ideology, and identity of nomadic and post-nomadic peoples. Globalization has brought about profound changes in various aspects of life, including culture, economy, and technology. For nomadic and post-nomadic peoples, these changes can pose challenges to their traditional ways of life, cultural practices, and identity. The loss of traditional characteristics due to globalization can lead to feelings of cultural dislocation and identity crises. We are thinking that cultural identity serves as a source of resilience, cohesion, and meaning, providing individuals and communities with a sense of belonging, continuity, and purpose. The researchers contend that unique advancements that tastefully blend traditions and innovations are essential to maintaining ethnic identity in the face of globalization. This method embraces the chances and advantages provided by modernization and technical

breakthroughs while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of traditional knowledge, customs, and values. Therefore, it can be argued that by embracing both the richness of their cultural heritage and the opportunities of modernization, post-nomadic communities can navigate the challenges of globalization while maintaining a strong sense of identity, belonging, and continuity.

The study of the epic heritage of ethnic groups, which plays a significant role in preserving their ethnic identity and original socio-cultural space, faces challenges in the era of globalization (Murzakhmedova et al., 2024). As globalization progresses, doubts arise regarding the preservation of this heritage due to several factors. Firstly, globalization often brings about a homogenizing effect, where diverse cultural expressions, including epic heritage, may be overshadowed in favor of more standardized, globally accepted norms and values. This standardization and unification of societal aspects can erode the uniqueness and distinctiveness of ethnic identities and their cultural expressions. Secondly, the rapid spread of technology and media platforms facilitated by globalization can lead to the dominance of mainstream, commercialized cultural products over traditional forms of expression such as epic poetry. As a result, there may be less space and attention given to the preservation and transmission of epic heritage within ethnic communities. Thirdly, economic and social changes accompanying globalization can disrupt traditional ways of life and community structures, impacting the transmission and continuity of epic heritage across generations. Migration, urbanization, and changing employment patterns may lead to the dispersion of ethnic communities and a loss of connection to their cultural roots. Overall, the process of globalization raises questions about the resilience and sustainability of ethnic identities and their cultural heritage, including epic traditions. Efforts to address these challenges may involve promoting cultural diversity, supporting grassroots initiatives for cultural preservation, and fostering intercultural dialogue to ensure that ethnic groups can maintain their unique identities and cultural spaces in a globalized world.

Ethnic identity is an important tool for guiding one's future vision at the nexus of spirituality and culture. This viewpoint emphasizes how important it is to comprehend one's spiritual practices and ancestry. We can obtain understanding of our possible trajectories and the ideals that might direct us forward by thinking back on our spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage. But it's important to acknowledge that migrants face many difficulties in their daily lives as they frequently juggle many cultures and spiritual backgrounds. Resilience and flexibility are necessary to adjust to a new situation while maintaining one's cultural and spiritual identity. Language hurdles, cultural misunderstandings, and the effort to preserve a connection to their history in the face of assimilation pressures are just a few of the challenges that migrants commonly encounter. Additionally, speaking various languages becomes essential in our increasingly interconnected society. There might be impediments to communication and understanding as well as limited chances when someone just uses their mother tongue and neglects to acquire other languages. Because it has the potential to cut people off from larger social, economic, and cultural contacts, it is a harmful phenomenon.

Being multilingual promotes empathy and a respect for different cultures in addition to improving one's chances in both the personal and professional spheres. Therefore, it is critical to recognize the intricacies of migratory life and the significance of linguistic diversity, even as ethnic identification at the intersection of culture and spirituality might enlighten one's destiny. Accepting people from different languages and cultures opens doors to both individual development and greater communal harmony.

RESEARCH BY TAJIKISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN SCIENTISTS

Noticeably, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan scientists have more publications on the identified issues compared to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan scientists. We note that publications by Turkmenistan scientists using the keyword were not found.

Tajikistan scientists focus on dimensions of national identity, nationalism, and colonialism. They investigate the complexities of national identity formation, the impact of nationalism on society, and the historical legacies of colonialism in Central Asia. Tajikistan scientists employ correlation, factor, and conceptual research approaches. These approaches involve quantitative analyses, statistical modeling, and theoretical frameworks to explore the relationships between different variables and dimensions.

Uzbekistan scientists primarily focus on issues related to Central Asian refugees and the migration of nomads. They examine the historical context, socio-economic factors, and cultural implications of refugee movements and nomadic migrations in Central Asia. Uzbekistan scientists mainly use a historical research approach. This approach involves archival research, historical analysis, and the examination of primary sources to uncover patterns, trends, and dynamics related to refugee movements and nomadic migrations in Central Asia.

Gharibyan's (2015) model for measuring the degree of national identity among young people provides a structured framework to understand the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity. This model highlights several key dimensions that contribute to the formation and expression of national identity, particularly among the youth. If we delve deeper into these dimensions and their interrelationships, we can identify the following patterns:

Shared beliefs: this dimension refers to the common values, beliefs, and ideologies that members of an ethnic group share. Shared beliefs play a crucial role in shaping collective identity, providing a moral and ideological framework that binds individuals together.

Historical continuity: emphasizes the importance of a shared historical narrative and collective memory. A strong sense of historical continuity helps to anchor the identity of a group, providing a sense of continuity and connection with the past.

Active identity: refers to the active engagement and participation of individuals in expressing and shaping their ethnic identity. This dimension emphasizes the nature of

identity, highlighting the role of individual agency and collective action in defining and redefining identity over time.

Common land and location: the geographical dimension, including common land and location, plays a significant role in shaping ethnic identity. Shared geographical spaces and locations contribute to a sense of belonging and attachment to the land, reinforcing ethnic identity.

Shared social culture: encompasses the customs, traditions, rituals, and practices that define the social fabric of an ethnic group. Cultural expressions, such as language, arts, and music, play a vital role in reinforcing ethnic identity and fostering a sense of community among its members.

Relationships between dimensions:

Interconnectedness: shared beliefs, historical continuity, and active identity contribute to the formation of a common cultural and social framework, while common land and location serve as tangible manifestations of this shared identity.

The changing nature of ethnic identity: the changing nature of ethnic identity emphasizes the role of individual and collective agency in shaping and reshaping identity over time. This changing interplay between different dimensions allows for flexibility, adaptation, and the evolution of ethnic identity in response to changing social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Importance for young people: comprehending the diverse facets of national identification can aid young people in the development of a comprehensive comprehension of ethnic identity, cultivating a feeling of belonging, self-worth, and affinity with their cultural legacy.

Nationalism and colonialism have a complex and intertwined relationship with ethnic identity. Khomyakov's (2020) argument aligns with the idea that some forms of modern nationalism see expansion and dominance as inherent. This can fuel colonialism, which often relies on portraying colonized people as inferior based on ethnicity. In our opinion, nationalism can solidify a sense of shared ethnicity by emphasizing a common history, language, and culture. This can be a force for unity against perceived external threats. It can also be used to create a sense of "us vs. them" mentality, marginalizing and even oppressing ethnic minorities within a nation. Colonial powers often imposed artificial boundaries and administrative systems, grouping together disparate ethnicities under a single colonial state. This could lead to a sense of shared identity under colonial rule. Colonial powers sometimes exploited existing ethnic divisions to maintain control, leading to lasting tensions in post-colonial states. Ethnic groups can use nationalism to resist colonialism and define their own identity on their own terms.

The migration of Uzbek and Uighur refugees to Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR is a significant chapter in the history of these communities, impacting their cultural, religious, and ethnic identities. Balci (2007) provides insight into the intricate processes of identity formation and transformation among diaspora communities, arguing that most of these refugees abandoned mystical Islamic traditions in Central Asia in favor of Saudi religious traditions and helped reislamize their countrymen. Migration often entails cultural and religious adaptation as individuals and communities navigate new social, cultural, and political conditions. The experience of Uzbek and Uighur refugees in Saudi Arabia led to significant shifts in religious practices, beliefs, and affiliations, as they adapted to their new environment and interacted with Saudi religious traditions. Saudi Arabia, with its Wahhabi/Salafi Islamic traditions, represents a distinct religious and cultural context that differs from the typically Central Asian mystical Islamic traditions. Maybe the interaction between Uzbek and Uighur refugees and Saudi religious traditions contributed to the adoption of new religious practices, beliefs, and interpretations among these communities. The reislamization process among Uzbek and Uighur refugees can be seen as a form of identity reconfiguration, where religious identity becomes a central aspect of their ethnic and cultural identity. This reislamization not only impacted the refugees themselves but also had broader implications for their countrymen in Central Asia. Returning migrants often brought back new religious beliefs, practices, and ideologies, influencing the religious situation in their home countries.

Abdullaev (2012, pp. 73-98) suggests a strong connection between historical events and the migration patterns of nomadic tribes in Central Asia. The focus on nomadic tribes in Central Asia indicates the research is specific to a particular region with a rich history of nomadic movement. This suggests considering how the cultural background and sense of belonging of these tribes might have influenced their movements. Migration routes directly point to the nomadic lifestyle and the patterns of movement these tribes followed. Historical events played a significant role in shaping the migration patterns of nomadic tribes. This connection between historical events and migration makes sense. Nomadic movements could be driven by various factors influenced by historical events: war and conflict: nomadic tribes might have migrated to escape war and seek new territories after conquering others; trade and economic opportunities: changing trade routes and resource availability could have prompted movement; political shifts: the rise and fall of empires, or changes in political alliances, could have impacted migration patterns. We may understand the underlying patterns and reasons for nomadic migrations by looking at historical settings, which helps to clarify the intricate connection between these societies' movements and history.

Creating reliable models to gauge a population's level of ethnic identity is essential to comprehending and addressing the complexity of ethnic identity in the modern world. The degree to which people identify with their ethnic groups would be quantified with the use of these models, and this would have implications for social cohesion, policy formation, and cultural preservation. Through an examination of nationalism

and colonialism's histories, we reveal a complex political-historical relationship. As a reaction to colonialism, nationalism frequently emerged, attempting to defend native identities from foreign hegemony. This interaction has greatly influenced modern national identities and their customs, creating a lasting authority that still has an impact on the sociopolitical environments of today. The philosophies and religious beliefs of other nations present a special challenge in Central Asia. External religious influences have the ability to tear apart the historical and cultural fabric of the region, which could cause social unrest and instability. Therefore, preserving social stability and religious peace in Central Asian nations requires an understanding of and ability to manage these factors. Furthermore, historical occurrences have a significant influence on migratory trends. People have historically migrated due to political unrest, economic opportunities, wars, and environmental changes, which have had an impact on the demographic and cultural development of both their home nations and the countries they have moved to. Developing knowledgeable and humane immigration policies requires an understanding of these historical forces. It is critical to assess the impact of outside religious ideas, comprehend the complex relationships between nationalism and colonialism, quantify ethnic identity appropriately, and take the historical context of migration into account. Collectively, these elements influence the social and cultural development of communities in Central Asia. An all-encompassing approach to these problems can promote social cohesion, cultural preservation, and more efficient government.

CONCLUSION

The study of ethnic identity by Central Asian scientists reveals the intricate interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors that contribute to its formation and significance. While each ethnic group in the region has its unique identity, shared histories, languages, and cultural practices often intersect, fostering a sense of regional identity alongside ethnic ones.

Understanding ethnic identity in Central Asia is crucial for promoting intercultural dialogue, fostering social cohesion, and addressing the challenges of cultural diversity in the region. As Central Asian societies continue to evolve in the context of globalization and socio-political changes, further research on ethnic identity will remain vital to building harmonious societies.

This study highlights how important cultural policies, language ability, and religious practices are to maintaining ethnic identity in the face of globalization and sociopolitical change. We would like to draw attention to the significance of creating precise models to quantify ethnic identity, comprehending the relationship between nationalism and colonialism, and addressing the influence of foreign religious beliefs on the region in light of the findings of Central Asian scientists. In the future, it will be critical to support laws of tolerance and neighborhood-based programs that honor cultural variety and guarantee the resilience of ethnic identities in Central Asia. Through the integration of

these various aspects, the research offers a holistic framework for comprehending and maintaining ethnic identity in Central Asia, promoting social cohesiveness and cultural persistence in the face of modernization and globalization problems.

This research was funded by the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Grant No. AP19677146. Cross-cultural and axiological analysis of the processes of national identity of ethnic minorities in the southern region of Kazakhstan).

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Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia: An Overview of Radical Groups

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ABSTRACT. *In January 2019, the United States announced the defeat of the terrorist organization "Islamic State" (hereinafter referred to as ISIS). This marked an interim milestone in the years-long international fight against ISIS. However, zones of instability continue to attract radical groups. Today, they operate in Syria's Idlib province, Lebanon, Mali, and Nigeria. In addition, in 2021, the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, significantly changing the status quo in the broader Central Asia+ region. In October 2023, a military operation began in Gaza, which also set various terrorist organizations in motion and pointed to a global ideological divide. In the context of events in Syria and Afghanistan, which over the past decade have become centres of the so-called "global jihad," the potential threats and risks posed by terrorist and extremist organizations from Central Asia are of significant scientific interest.*

The purpose of this article is to analyse the activities of the main radical groups originating from Central Asia. The interest is primarily driven by the fact that an active process of institutionalization of Central Asian militant groups has taken place in Syria and Afghanistan, leading to the emergence of new associations. The study examines the conditions under which religious extremism spreads and presents a chronology of the formation of radical groups, as well as their place in the overall architecture of regional security. The novelty of this article lies in the assessment of existing trends, which suggest that religious extremism and terrorism will continue to be one of the main factors destabilizing the situation in the Central Asian region.

The ability of Central Asian countries to demonstrate resilience and leverage their internal strengths in addressing threats plays a crucial role in shaping the region's future as a secure, competitive, and prosperous part of the international landscape.

KEYWORDS: *religious extremism, terrorism, security, ISIS, terrorist groups, Central Asian militants, institutionalization, risks, radicalization.*

INTRODUCTION

Kazakh experts noted that Central Asia has never been considered a priority area of activity for international terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, but has been viewed more as a recruitment ground (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). Nevertheless, in the summer of 2014, the rapidly expanding terrorist organization "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" declared the expansion of its Islamic Caliphate's borders and published a geopolitical map. According to the group's plans, the countries of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were included in the Khorasan province of the ISIS Islamic Caliphate. Today, an "ISIS-Khorasan" cell operates in Afghanistan.

During the same period, Al-Qaeda also attempted to establish its ideological claims on Central Asia by creating a group with a similar name, "Khorasan." Yerlan Karin, in his book "Between ISIS and Al-Qaeda: Central Asian Militants in the Syrian War," notes that Al-Qaeda, through its "Khorasan" cell, only formally marked the region as within its sphere of interest, possibly to attract new recruits from Central and South Asia. Central Asia has never become a macro or micro center for the concentration of foreign militants, despite some participation in the Tajik civil war (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). Until 2017, there was no significant activity by international terrorist groups in the region (ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing of a police officer in Bishkek in October 2017 and the attacks in Tajikistan in 2018).

However, currently the problem of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia is increasingly brought to the forefront in national and regional discourses. On one hand, this is due to the emergence of new radical elements within the countries of the region (terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2016), which, in turn, exposes the problem of " sleeper " cells. Another risk is associated with the issue of Central Asian citizens returning from combat zones in the Middle East and Afghanistan. As a result, both within and outside the region, concerns about the increased risks of terrorist threats in Central Asia are becoming more frequent (Terrorist attacks, cyber shield, and risks to the economy, 2024), (U.S. and British intelligence agencies create conditions for instability at the southern borders of the CIS, 2023).

It is also important to note that Central Asian citizens have become a dangerous tool in the hands of international terrorist organizations. Between 2016 and 2017, several terrorist attacks were carried out by Central Asian radicals in other countries. In January 2024, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence reported that the explosions in the city of Kerman were carried out by suicide bombers from Tajikistan. In March of the same year, Tajik citizens became the main suspects in the case of a terrorist attack at the "Crocus City Hall" shopping centre in Krasnogorsk, Russia.

Given the observed dynamics of events, it is crucial today to understand how Central Asian countries will be able to overcome potential challenges from terrorist groups and strengthen regional subjectivity.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the problems of religious extremism and terrorism through the lens of the activities of key radical groups from Central Asia.

The following tasks were carried out:

The chronological stages of the formation of key radical groups were examined.

The role and potential of modern radical groups in regional security processes were analyzed.

The object of the study is the regional radical militant groups. The subject of scientific interest is the features of the radicalization process in Central Asian countries.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed several classical scientific methods, including analysis, synthesis, and comparison. A retrospective analysis was conducted to examine the process of radicalization in Central Asia. Through a comparative approach, the activities, formation, and institutionalization of the principal radical groups were thoroughly investigated.

The theoretical and methodological foundation of this research is rooted in the security-development nexus theory. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the intricate relationship between security concerns and developmental challenges in the Central Asian region. Applying this theory in the context of Central Asia allows for a nuanced understanding of how socio-economic factors contribute to the emergence and appeal of extremist ideologies among specific population groups (Lemon, E., 2018). For instance, researchers emphasize the connection between addressing governance, human rights, and socio-economic development and their potential to contribute to stability and mitigate the risks of radicalization in Uzbekistan. (Uzbekistan-UNSDCF 2021-2025).

The security-development nexus also presumes that effective counter-terrorism strategies must integrate development initiatives that address the root causes of extremism. This involves investing in education, economic opportunities, and political inclusion to foster resilience against radical ideologies (Hill, F., 2003).

In assessing risks and threats, expert forecasts concerning the stability of the regional security system in Central Asia were critically examined. Consequently, the concept of sustainable security serves as an additional analytical framework for understanding the region's developmental processes. This concept advocates for a multidimensional approach to security, encompassing not only military and law enforcement measures but also socio-economic and political reforms. Such an approach is particularly relevant in Central Asia, where the historical context of conflict and the socio-political

landscape demand a comprehensive understanding of security threats (Sharipova, D., Beissembayev, S., 2021).

Given the transnational nature of terrorism, sustainable security also calls for enhanced cooperation among Central Asian states and international partners. Collaborative efforts can address shared vulnerabilities and promote stability across the region.

Additionally, the Case Studies method was employed in this research, allowing for an in-depth analysis of various Central Asian radical groups. This method facilitated a detailed examination of their formation processes, growth trajectories, and the diverse patterns of their activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of radicalization has been a pressing concern for the Central Asian republics since their independence in the early 1990s. This phenomenon was notably influenced by events in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where various groups sought to establish an Islamic caliphate in opposition to the prevailing secular governance. While Uzbekistan managed to address this issue more peacefully, Tajikistan experienced a civil war from 1992 to 1997.

Today, many issues that arose during the initial stages of independence are being revisited and politicized. Additionally, the ongoing instability in neighboring Afghanistan exerts considerable pressure on the security system of the region. Therefore, the study of radicalization in Central Asian countries remains a critical topic within the academic and expert discourse.

In Kazakhstan, one of the leading researchers on the nature of religious extremism and terrorism is Yerlan Karin, who has published several books on the subject, including “Soldiers of the Caliphate”, “Between ISIS and Al-Qaeda: Central Asian Militants in the Syrian War”, and “Zhusan”. In these works, Karin traces the chronological development of Central Asian groups in Kazakhstan. Likewise, experts Marat Shibusov and Vyacheslav Abramov have produced a report titled *Terrorism in Kazakhstan: 2011-2012* (Shibusov, M., & Abramov, V., 2012), in which they attempt to outline the main lines of terrorist activity in the country. In addition, various well-known political scientists, sociologists, and historians such as Sultan Akimbekov, Gulmira Ileuova, Botagoz Rakisheva, Erkin Tukumov, Bolat Auelbayev, Dina Sharipova and Serik Beysembayev have provided expert assessments through analytical articles.

In Uzbekistan, significant contributions to the study of radicalization have been made by Bakhtiyor Babajanov, who has repeatedly highlighted key threats posed by radicals from Central Asia in his interviews (*Post-Soviet Wahhabism has found its niche in geopolitical confrontation*, 2013). Vladimir Norov has actively promoted the "Uzbek

model" of combating terrorism at both the national and regional levels (The "Uzbek model" of combating terrorism is attracting interest abroad, 2018).

The scholarly contributions of international experts on Central Asia are also noteworthy. American scholars such as Noah Tucker, Jacob Zenn, Marlene Laruelle, and Maria Omelicheva have focused on the processes by which Central Asian citizens become involved in radical activities. Martha Olcott, in her book "In the Whirlwind of Jihad", explores the complex relationships between religion, society, and the state (Olcott, M. B., 2012).

Russian experts, including Arkady Dubnov, Andrey Knyazev, Alexander Malashenko, Stanislav Pritchkin, and Andrey Kazantsev, have studied the conditions and causes of the spread of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia, emphasizing the political stability of the republics and their capacity to counter threats.

Chinese scholars, such as Ning Yu and Wang Tao, note that extremist organizations involving individuals from Central Asian countries are forming networked and even systemic structures. (Ning, Y., & Wang, T., 2021). While jihadist Salafism is considered the primary ideology of many modern extremist organizations, recent years have seen a trend toward the involvement of non-Salafis in radical movements. Zhang Ning, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, analyzes the consequences of the large-scale return of extremists from Syria and the Middle East to Afghanistan and Central Asia (Zhang, N., 2020).

Overall, it is important to note that the issue of radicalization has been the subject of extensive research, resulting in a substantial body of popular science books, academic articles, and other analytical materials. Thus, religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia are actively discussed and analyzed in all their manifestations both within the region and in the international expert community.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

Central Asia is a geopolitically significant region that draws international interest because of its abundant natural resources, strong economic and cultural connections with Russia and China, and its strategic location near Afghanistan, all of which present both unique challenges and valuable opportunities in the evolving global landscape.

Today, in the context of geopolitical fragmentation, the ability of nations to strengthen their national and regional agency has become increasingly significant. The current situation in Afghanistan poses a challenge to Central Asian countries' efforts to create a secure environment. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Afghanistan remains one of the primary hubs of terrorism, with a high incidence of attacks and casualties (Global Terrorism Index, 2024). In 2023, it ranked first globally.

Table 1. *Top 10 Countries Most Affected by Terrorism (2024 Global Terrorism Index) [14]*

Rank	Country	Index Score*
	Burkina Faso	8.57
	Israel	8.14
	Mali	7.99
	Pakistan	7.91
	Syria	7.89
	Afghanistan	7.82
	Somalia	7.81
	Nigeria	7.57
	Myanmar	7.53
	Niger	7.27

Source: *Global Terrorism Index 2024*

*(calculated on a scale from 0 to 10 based on the number of terrorist incidents, deaths, injuries, and hostages in each country)

The rise to power of the Taliban and their subsequent policies have contributed to a deterioration in security, impacting Uzbekistan's ranking, which fell to 70th place in 2022, while Tajikistan was ranked 50th (Global Terrorism Index, 2024). Previously, Uzbekistan had been among the countries with a score of zero on the index. In 2023, the rankings for these two republics improved slightly, with Uzbekistan at 77th place and Tajikistan at 69th. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan were among the 76 countries that maintained a zero score, occupying the last position, 89th, on the index.

Table 2. *Central Asian Countries in the 2024 Global Terrorism Index*

Rank	Country	Index Score *
	Tajikistan	0.871 (-1.335)
	Uzbekistan	0.423 (-0.297)
	Kazakhstan	0
	Kyrgyzstan	0
	Turkmenistan	0

*(calculated on a scale from 0 to 10 based on the number of terrorist incidents, deaths, injuries, and hostages in each country)

Given this security status quo, there is significant scholarly and public interest in assessing the risks and threats posed by internal " sleeper cells " and external radical groups. In this context, it is crucial to investigate the key drivers of radicalization and the conditions that facilitate the institutionalization of terrorist groups originating from these two republics. Historically, the evolution of such organizations can be segmented into phases based on their location: the Afghan and Syrian periods.

Afghanistan as the initial stage of institutionalizing radical groups from Central Asia

The first Central Asian radical groups emerged in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, filling the ideological and institutional void left by this historic event (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). In Uzbekistan, for instance, mass protests occurred, primarily focused on determining the country's governmental structure. In December 1991, during a massive rally in Namangan, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov has faced with demands of protesters to establish an Islamic Republic governed by Sharia law, abolish Article 51 of the Constitution, which enshrined the principle of a secular state, designate Friday as a day off, disband the pro-communist parliament, and schedule presidential and parliamentary elections for the spring of 1992. Tahir Yuldashev, leader of the "Adolat" party, was one of the main organizers of this public protest. In 1993, he fled to the Afghan-Pakistani region, where, together with another Uzbek citizen, Juma Namangani, he founded the first Central Asian jihadist group – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). As some experts note, the IMU later became the organizational foundation frame for groups such as the Union of Islamic Jihad, Jamaat Ansarullah, and Kazakh Islamic Jihad (United Nations Security Council, 2011).

By the time the Syrian war began in 2011, analysts noted that the IMU had become entirely dependent on the Pakistani Taliban, leading the group to focus its operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The organization lacked a strong leader and strayed from its original goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. To change this situation, IMU leader Usman Ghazi made the strategic decision to align with ISIS and pledged allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan swears allegiance to ISIS, 2015). According to Taliban reports, Ghazi was killed for breaking his oath of loyalty to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Ultimately, this decision led to the disintegration of the IMU. As one member of the group stated, "What the U.S. couldn't achieve in 14 years, the Taliban accomplished in 24 hours." In 2016, the remnants of the group, consisting of a few militants, declared their loyalty to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Today, the IMU no longer exists in its original form. However, its members significantly influenced the institutionalization of a new generation of radical groups.

In January 2019, four members of the terrorist organization "Jamaat Ansarullah," including the son of the group's former leader, Amriddin Tabarov, were extradited from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. The first mentions of this group appeared in September 2010 when it claimed responsibility for an attack on the RUBOP building in Khujand. The group, composed of Tajik militants, is believed to have split from the IMU and operated in Afghanistan. In 2012, Tajikistan recognized "Jamaat Ansarullah" as a terrorist organization and banned its activities within the country. According to Tajikistan's intelligence services, the group was involved in transferring Central Asian militants to Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, according to recent UN data, members of "Jamaat Ansarullah" have been recruited by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) operating in Afghanistan (Burke, J., 2024).

Another splinter group from the IMU was the Union of Islamic Jihad (UIJ). According to German researcher Guido Steinberg, in 2001, a radical faction within the IMU

demanded that the group's activities be extended to all of Central Asia and only then to Western countries ("Islamic Jihad Union": A portrait of a terrorist organization, 2016). In 2002, they announced the formation of the UIJ. In the spring of 2004, the group claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on Uzbek, Israeli, and American targets in Uzbekistan. However, in the following years, the group has not shown up in Central Asia any more.

Smaller groups of Kazakh and Kyrgyz militants were represented in minor factions like "Jund al-Khalifa" (responsible for the 2011 attacks in Kazakhstan) and "Jaishul Mahdi" (attacks in Kyrgyzstan in 2010). Despite being linked to a series of attacks in Kazakhstan in 2011, the well-known terrorism expert Yerlan Karin argues that "Jund al-Khalifa" is not a Kazakh group. The group's leader was a Belgian citizen of Tunisian origin. After his death in 2012, the group effectively ceased to exist. One Kazakh militant from "Jund al-Khalifa," Rinat Khabidolla, is reportedly in Syria.

The Kyrgyz organization "Jaishul Mahdi" first came to attention when 12 of its members were arrested for a terrorist attack near the Sports Palace in Bishkek. They were also accused of attacking an American citizen in Sokuluk, attempting to blow up the Bishkek Police Department building, and killing police officers and civilians (The "Jaish-ul-Mahdi" case gains new details, 2016). Currently, the absence of any signs of activity suggests that neither of these two organizations still exists.

Regarding Turkmenistan, there is limited information on the presence of specific paramilitary groups originating from the country. However, instances of Turkmen citizens engaging in radical activities abroad have been recorded. For example, in July 2023, a Turkmen citizen was arrested in Germany on charges of forming a terrorist group within Germany and providing support to the terrorist organization Islamic State (Islamists from Central Asia charged in Germany, 2024).

The chronology review of the development of Central Asian radical groups before the Syrian war leads to the following conclusions:

The first radical groups from Central Asia started as nationalist movements, and then transformed into jihadist movements of an internationalist nature.

The military actions in Afghanistan contributed to the initial institutionalization of these groups' activities.

Central Asian radical groups were never independent and often aligned with larger terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. They depended on them financially and received informational and military support.

Radicals from Central Asia have never given up hope of returning to the region and establishing their own caliphate.

Today, according to Andrey Serenko, head of the Center for the Study of Afghan Politics, Afghanistan poses a serious problem for the region, both in terms of the potential for a large-scale war and the possible expansionist jihadist policies of the Taliban (Serenko, A., 2023). The situation, especially regarding the status of women, drastically changed in 2021 after the Taliban came to power. One of the most alarming aspects is the deterioration of women's rights, particularly in the field of education. According to the UN, by April 2023, 80% of girls and young women of school age were not attending educational institutions, including 1.1 million girls of the age corresponding to secondary school education. (UN Women (2024).

The instability and violence emanating from Afghanistan could spill over into neighboring countries, risking the resurgence of radical groups and exacerbating existing security vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the Taliban's increasingly aggressive posture and ideological agenda may encourage the spread of extremist ideologies across borders, potentially inspiring like-minded groups within Central Asia to pursue similar goals. Radical groups have already begun to intensify their activities in the region. Notably, in November 2024, media reports indicated an attack on Chinese citizens in the Khatlon region, which borders Afghanistan. Furthermore, representatives of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have previously announced their intent to target Chinese citizens, institutions, and infrastructure across Central Asia. (Serenko, A. (2024).

The geopolitical implications of Afghanistan's situation are profound, as regional powers must navigate the delicate balance between security, economic interests, and humanitarian concerns. The possibility of increased refugee flows, the trafficking of arms and drugs, and the revival of insurgent activities pose urgent threats that require coordinated responses from Central Asian states and their international partners. In this context, addressing the root causes of instability and fostering resilience within Central Asian societies will be crucial to mitigating the risks posed by the Taliban's influence and ensuring a more secure and stable regional environment.

The Syrian conflict facilitated the involvement of a significant number of Central Asian citizens in radical activities

In 2011, the so-called "Arab Spring" contributed to the emergence of a new hub for various radicals from around the world – Syria. According to the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), Central Asia became one of the primary (third largest) "suppliers" of foreign fighters who fought for terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq (Zhirukhina, E., 2024). Various sources estimate that since the beginning of the conflict, over 4,000 individuals from Central Asia have traveled to the Middle East (The war that never happened: How Kyrgyz citizens who returned from Syria live now, 2019). Initially, they joined radical organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda or ISIS. However, they eventually began to form separate ethnic groups, which later evolved into well-known Central Asian factions, such as "Katibat Tawhid wal-Jihad" and the Imam Bukhari Brigade.

As previously noted, despite the de facto fall of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the traditional connections of this organization became the foundation for the unification of other radicals. One possible explanation for the emergence of the Imam Bukhari Brigade (IBB) is the fact that some of its members were previously part of the IMU. Another theory about the origins of the IBB is that its predecessor, the Seifuddin Uzbek Jamaat, was led by a former IMU member known as Abu Hussein. The group began attracting new radicals in 2012 and eventually evolved into the Imam Bukhari Brigade, choosing an inspiring name for the group in honor of Imam Bukhari, a ninth-century Islamic scholar who lived in Bukhara, located in modern-day Uzbekistan (Karin, E., Zenn, J., 2017). In one of the latest mentions of the organization, it was reported that the group had relocated to Afghanistan (Rehabilitation of "deceived victims" returning from Syria begins in Uzbekistan, 2019).

Another group of Central Asian militants that gained prominence in Syria is "Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" (KTJ). From the outset, KTJ was a branch of the Syrian wing of al-Qaeda. According to some reports, the leader of KTJ was a native of Kyrgyzstan known by the alias Abu Saloh, whose real name is believed to be Sirojiddin Mukhtarov. According to Kyrgyz security services, Mukhtarov received theological education in Syria in the early 2000s. Upon returning to Kyrgyzstan, he worked as an imam's assistant at one of the mosques in Osh. In 2012, he joined the Imam Bukhari Brigade (IBB) in Syria, but later, from among its supporters, he founded KTJ (The leader of militants from Kyrgyzstan, Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov, was eliminated in Syria, 2022). Although KTJ's primary activities were in Syria, it gradually began to expand its operations beyond Syrian territory, with Central Asia being the first region affected by this strategy. The following facts support this assumption:

According to an official report by Kyrgyz security services, KTJ was responsible for the terrorist attack near the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in August 2016 (Anti-Terrorist Center of CIS Member States, 2016);

The Russian Investigative Committee considers KTJ to be involved in the organization of the terrorist attack in the St. Petersburg metro in April 2017 (The St. Petersburg attack led to Abu Salah, 2017);

In November 2023, a Kyrgyz citizen who was a member of KTJ was arrested (A Kyrgyz man was detained on suspicion of participating in hostilities in Syria, 2023);

In February 2024, it was reported that the Russian Federal Security Service detained 49 members of the terrorist network "Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad" (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, 2024).

Among the new Central Asian radical groups, "Malhama Tactical" stands out, which some experts call the first Islamist private military company (PMC). According to open sources, it consists of ten or more well-trained militants from Central Asia and the North Caucasus who specialize in training other militants. It is believed that this group was founded by

someone named Abu Rofik, a 24-year-old Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan, who was killed in an airstrike in February 2017.

The PMC gained notoriety in 2017 when international media described it as the first "Blackwater of Syrian Jihad" (Komar, R., Borys, C., & Woods, E., 2017). The group's uniqueness lies in its extensive and active promotion of its services across various digital platforms. For example, on its YouTube and Facebook pages, they released a series of training videos aimed at improvised or beginner groups. These "training films" demonstrated how to use less common battlefield weapons, such as M16 and M4 automatic rifles. The videos also provided instructions on how to make improvised grenades from discarded ammunition. In the materials presented, the group's instructors conducted online sessions on first aid, the use of grenade launchers, tactical hand signals, and ambush strategies in cases where direct consultation was impossible (Komar, R., Borys, C., & Woods, E., 2017). The militants' services were paid for. According to experts, "Malhama Tactical" represents a new phenomenon in the Islamic world, marking the beginning of the professionalization of jihad.

In addition to training various extremist groups in Syria, including "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham," "Ajnad al-Kavkaz," and the Islamic Party of Turkestan, they also played the role of special forces in various jihadist movements.

In Syria, as in Afghanistan, Central Asian terrorist groups were never independent organizations; they were strategically (ideologically) and tactically (financially and militarily) dependent on major international players such as al-Qaeda or ISIS. Alongside new Central Asian groups that emerged in the context of the Syrian conflict, remnants of the "old guard," such as "Jamaat Ansarullah," continue to operate in Afghanistan.

At the same time, Central Asian radicals periodically redirect their focus back to their home region, issuing various statements and attempting to orchestrate terrorist attacks. These actions serve not only as a means of asserting their ongoing relevance but also as a declaration of their intent to return and impose their own vision for the national future. By utilizing social media to amplify their messages, these militants aim to resonate with disenfranchised segments of the population, seeking to recruit new followers and destabilize existing political structures. Their efforts underscore a persistent ambition to reclaim influence in their home countries, driven by a belief that they can reshape the socio-political landscape according to their ideological frameworks. This duality – operating within global jihadist networks while simultaneously aiming for local impact – highlights the complexities of countering radicalization and terrorism in Central Asia, where the challenges of ideology, identity, and governance intersect.

The governments of Central Asian states recognize the aforementioned trends and have established institutions to develop practical counter-terrorism measures. A notable example of their contribution to combating international terrorism, as well as a key regional framework for collaboration, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Within

the SCO, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) plays a pivotal role in addressing the “three evils”: terrorism, extremism, and religious radicalism. Member states actively conduct military exercises designed to address scenarios involving international terrorism and cross-border threats, with the host country for each exercise rotating among the members.

Beyond these exercises and measures involving security forces, law enforcement agencies, and the protection of critical infrastructure and public spaces, SCO member states are also focused on developing an effective system to counter extremist ideologies. Particular attention is given to preventing the recruitment of youth into radical groups, which remains a significant concern for regional authorities.

Additionally, counter-terrorism strategies are being advanced within other multilateral frameworks, notably the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

In light of recent geopolitical shifts, there is a growing need to intensify regional cooperation, particularly in the areas of security, trade, and infrastructure development. Strengthening collaboration in these domains will better prepare regional actors to adapt to potential changes in the geopolitical landscape and reduce their susceptibility to external shocks.

CONCLUSION

The process of radicalization and the rise of terrorist organizations in Central Asia following the collapse of the USSR is intricately tied to both regional factors and broader global jihadist movements. The disintegration of the Soviet Union left a significant ideological and political vacuum in the newly independent Central Asian states. This void, combined with the challenges of constructing new national identities, prompted some individuals to turn to radical Islam as a potential solution. The aspiration to create an Islamic state became a central theme for certain factions, but these efforts often conflicted with the secular, authoritarian regimes that emerged in the region. The governments' repression of jihadist movements intensified, pushing many radicals to seek training and experience in international conflict zones, particularly Afghanistan and later Syria.

Afghanistan as a radicalization hub. Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the radicalization process, serving as a key destination for Central Asian militants during the 1990s. With the rise of the Taliban and the country's status as a safe haven for jihadist groups like al-Qaeda, Afghanistan became a central point for Central Asian radicals seeking ideological guidance and military training. The Taliban's rise to power created an environment conducive to the growth of global jihadist networks. Central Asian militants were able to join these groups, receiving not only combat training but also establishing crucial connections with other global jihadist movements. This relationship allowed these groups to strengthen their operational capabilities, bolstered by logistical support, financial resources, and advanced military training provided by the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Syria as a new epicenter. As the Syrian Civil War intensified, Syria emerged as the new epicenter of radicalization for Central Asians, drawing in a new generation of jihadists eager to participate in the broader global jihadist cause. Groups such as ISIS and the al-Nusra Front attracted many Central Asian fighters by offering both an ideological purpose and tangible opportunities for combat. The call for the establishment of an Islamic state resonated strongly with Central Asian radicals, who were drawn not only by the ideological promises of jihad but also by the material support offered by these larger terrorist organizations. The financial and logistical backing from global jihadist groups, including ISIS, further propelled Central Asians into the conflict, where they could participate in the establishment of what they viewed as a legitimate Islamic state.

Institutional transformations of Central Asian groups. Over time, Central Asian militant organizations underwent significant transformations as they integrated into the broader global jihadist movement. Groups aligned with ISIS, for instance, gained access to state-level resources, including sophisticated military training, financial support, and strategic guidance. This institutional integration allowed smaller, local Central Asian extremist groups to evolve into more organized, transnational networks. The involvement of these groups with larger, more resource-rich organizations like ISIS significantly enhanced their ability to operate across borders and execute increasingly sophisticated attacks, thus becoming integral players in global jihadist activities.

Security risks and " sleeper cells ". The return of foreign fighters from Syria and Afghanistan to Central Asia poses an acute security threat. Many of these fighters maintain their affiliations with international terrorist organizations, which raises the risk of re-establishing dormant " sleeper cells " within their home countries. These cells, often composed of returning militants, can destabilize the region by engaging in terrorist attacks or further propagating radical ideologies. The geographical proximity of Central Asia to conflict zones like Afghanistan, combined with the high level of ideological fervour that persists within returning fighters, amplifies the risks posed by these sleeper cells. In this context, Central Asian governments are confronted with a dual challenge: preventing the return of militants while addressing the underlying causes of radicalization, such as political repression, poverty, and religious extremism.

Strategic responses to mitigate terrorism risks.

To counter the growing influence of extremism and mitigate the risks posed by returning fighters, Central Asian states must adopt a comprehensive strategy that tackles both the symptoms and root causes of radicalization. Several concrete measures can help in this effort:

Prevention. Strengthening counter-radicalization programs that address underlying socio-political issues – such as unemployment, ethnic tension, and political disenfranchisement – is crucial in preventing individuals from turning to extremism. Ensuring that young people

have access to education, economic opportunities, and avenues for political participation can reduce the appeal of jihadist ideologies.

Community engagement. Engaging local communities in counter-radicalization efforts is equally important. By fostering dialogue, promoting tolerance, and providing alternative narratives to extremist ideologies, communities can play an essential role in preventing radicalization. Religious leaders should also be involved in countering radical interpretations of Islam, which often provide a justification for violence and terrorism.

International cooperation. Given the transnational nature of terrorism, Central Asian countries must enhance their cooperation with regional and global partners. This includes sharing intelligence, conducting joint counter-terrorism operations, and building the capacity of law enforcement agencies to detect and prevent cross-border terrorist activities. Stronger international collaboration will enable Central Asian states to more effectively tackle the threat posed by global jihadist movements.

By addressing both the local and international dimensions of radicalization and terrorism, Central Asia can move toward greater stability. However, this requires a multifaceted approach that integrates domestic reforms with regional and international cooperation. Each Central Asian country will need to tailor its strategies based on its unique political, social, and economic realities. This holistic approach is critical for ensuring long-term peace and security in the region.

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