CENTRAL ASIA: FROM ETHNIC TO CIVIC NATIONALISM

VLADIMIR FEDORENKO
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Summary

Recently there was a wave of celebration of the 20th anniversary of independence in all Central Asian states, yet their nation-building process is not complete and the perception of the national identity is still distorted. By its nature national identity should bring people together and unite them around common values and goals, in Central Asian states, however; national identity, conceived on ethnic basis, is a divisive force fragmenting people along the lines of ethnicity, religion, language, birth place, and social status.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—faced the difficult task of state- and nation-building. Although every Central Asian state had its own challenges determined by its geography, ethnic and cultural composition, availability of natural resources and other factors, all of them faced same complexity that hindered the attaining of unity in those countries. As a result of abrupt dissolution of the Soviet Union, politically unstable, economically weak and interdependent, institutionally unprepared, and socially disorientated Central Asian states were in a serious crisis.

In order to forge a new national identity, the political elites in all five Central Asian republics decided to implement a nation-building policy based on ethnicity. Ethnocentrism was a convenient and promising strategy capable of providing a sense of stability by uniting majority groups around the common and powerful link of ethnicity. In order to increase people’s in-group affiliation and attachment to the newly-forged national identities, attractive national myths regarding ethnic identities were created. In all of the Central Asian countries, the strategy of creating a national myth was similar. It consisted of rewriting history in order to show a strong attachment of the majority group to the present geographical location of the country as well as of choosing a historical charismatic figure that boosted the national pride of the dominant ethnic group. Consequently, Uzbeks have been putting emphasis on being successors of the famous conqueror Tamerlane who established the Timurid Empire (1370–1526), Kyrgyz have been promoting the image of the mythical hero Manas, and Tajiks have been rediscovering their history that was linked to the Samanid Empire (819–999) ruled by Ismail Samani, Kazakhs have been promoting nomadic culture and traditions, and Turkmens have been focusing on the Turkmen spiritual leader Magtymguly Pyragy.
However, an important barrier to the nation-building process around single ethnicity is the fact that all Central Asian states are multiethnic and multicultural societies. Thus, while ethnic nationalism provides the majority group a sense of belonging to the nation, minority ethnic groups in Central Asia are reluctant to embrace this new national identities and feel excluded from the nation-building process. Moreover, it leads to in-group favoritism since majority ethnic groups realize their dominance and often treat minorities unjustly. This creates tension and conflicts among the different ethnic groups. This paper addresses the question of how Central Asian societies can move away from divisive to inclusive form of nationalism.
Central Asia: From Ethnic to Civic Nationalism

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—faced a difficult task of state- and nation-building. The Central Asian republics celebrated the twentieth anniversary of their independence, yet the nation-building process is not complete and the perception of national identity is still distorted. While national identity should bring people together and unite them around common values and goals, in the Central Asian states, it is divisive force fragmenting people along the lines of ethnicity, religion, language, birth place, and social status. This is a result of the policy adopted by all newly born Central Asian republics in which they preferred to employ an ethnicity-based process of nation-building. This approach consisted of the construction and dissemination of a nation's image based on a dominant ethnic group. In such a way the elites neglected the fact that their societies have been very diverse, multiethnic and multicultural in nature. Due to this trend, ethnic minorities felt excluded from the nation-building process, and instead of achieving unity and solidarity, divisions among the different ethnic groups became more manifest.

Throughout its relatively short history nationalism has become a power of both fragmentation and aggregation. In his book, Faces of Nationalism, Tom Nairn¹ compared nationalism to the double-faced Roman God Janus, with one side representing liberty, fraternity and the attainment of positive goals and the other symbolizing fragmentation, violence, war and destruction. Therefore the engineering of a national identity is a very delicate process requiring careful calculations and accurate decisions, otherwise instead of creating nation-wide unity it could appear to be dividing and counterproductive.

National identity consists of many different elements. There is no agreement over the number of these elements and their nature; many scholars see national identity as fundamentally multi-dimensional. Whereas, some would stress objective elements such as race, language, religion or territory, others would give greater importance to subjective factors such as the “perception which group members themselves have

of national category to which they belong and also strength of feeling which they evince in support of their unique identity”. Anthony Smith argues that the fundamental features of national identity are: historic territory or homeland; common myths or historical memories; and common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members; common economy with territorial mobility for all members. Although scholars might have different understanding of what constitutes national identity, most of them agree that features of these elements of national identity have a unifying force that leads to social cohesion and unity among the particular nation’s members and helps differentiate them from members of other nations.

**National Identity in Central Asia before the Soviet Union**

It is hard to speak of the existence of concrete form of national identity among the Central Asian people before the Soviet rule. In fact the five Central Asian states did not exist before the Soviet rule. Before its incorporation to the Russian Empire, Central Asia had been a place of “nomads and sedentary farmers subject to a shifting and overlapping patchwork of khanate and clan authority”. Scholars argue that the Central Asian people’s perception of group consciousness was present in different forms, but hardly on a national level. Identities were constructed through the intermingling and the amalgamation of different non-national elements. For example, the pre-Soviet ‘Uzbekistan’ identity consisted of such features as loyalty to one of the local khanates, geographic affinity to a certain city or region, membership in the Islamic community and a sense of kinship. In the early Kyrgyz people, identity was also based mostly on kinship and religious ties. Kyrgyz people considered themselves ‘Muslims’ rather than Kyrgyz and family ties were much stronger than any kind of ethnic ties. Arne Haugen argues that the people of Central Asia identified themselves primarily as Muslims and secondarily as residents of a particular town or district. The idea of belonging to a particular people

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6 Ibid, 90.
7 Ibid, 107-108.
or nation was totally insignificant for them. For example, being an inhabitant of Bukhara represented more salient identity for Central Asians than being “Uzbek” or “Tajik”. The formation of a national consciousness in the Central Asian states started only with the Soviet Union coming into the power.

**National Identity during the Soviet Era**

The creation of national identities in Central Asia was originally implemented by the Soviet elites who believed that dividing Central Asian region along national lines would make administering the region easier and also would help to speed up the modernization process in the area. Since the base upon which national identity would be constructed was very complex and many elements of this identity had to be created almost from scratch, the task of the Soviets was very difficult. Stalin, who was in charge of the nationality problem in the Soviet Union, thought that a modern nation could consist of four mandatory elements: territorial unity, linguistic unity, cultural unity and economic unity. Therefore, territorial unity was to be created through a national delimitation policy that would divide Central Asia into five territorial regions. Linguistic and cultural unity within each of the created state was to be achieved through a policy of language planning and history writing.

The most prominent step of the Soviet policy toward creating a national identity in Central Asia was the setting of the boundaries which lead to the establishment of five ‘Stan’ Republics. In 1924 the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkmen SSR) and Uzbek SSR were created, in 1929 the Tajik SSR, and in 1936 Kazakh and Kirgiz SSRs were established. As a result of such demarcation, major ethnic groups were allocated their own territory. Although most scholars agree that this border delimitation was largely a ‘divide and rule’ practice, many of them admit that this demarcation was not random, but done after long and thorough analysis of the area’s demography. Shirin Akiner writes that scholarly preparation for the border delimitation was extensive, taking into

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account ethno-linguistic data collected from previous Central Asian censuses. In such a way, border delimitation managed to achieve more or less a true ethnic distinction. Black et al. write that “although the division of Central Asia was arbitrary, the territorial divisions did bear a rough correspondence to the traditional ethnic, linguistic and anthropological contours of the sprawling region”.

It is well-known that language is a powerful symbol of social identity serving to bring people together. After the creation of the five independent SSRs, the Soviet government encouraged the adoption of a single dialect for each republic to serve as national language. The aim was not only to unite the population within each of the republics and but also to distinguish it linguistically from the population of the other Central Asian nations. National languages were set up in such a way that it was very difficult, for instance, for a Turkmen to understand Uzbek. Also, in order to make linguistic unity a reality, the Soviet rulers focused on improving literacy, which was very low in all of the Central Asian republics. Besides introducing language lessons in elementary schools, many special literacy schools and places were established, instructing ordinary people in reading and writing. These policies proved effective: literacy began to increase rapidly and the aim of Soviet language planners to attain linguistic unity in Central Asian nations was largely attained.

Before Soviet rule, the Central Asian people lacked adequate history telling them about their origins and about their social and political development this time. For example, Mahmut Khoja Behbudiy (1874-1919), a leading intellectual from Samarkand, declared, “We, Turkistanians are completely uninformed about the situation of our deceased forefathers as well as the historicity of Turkistanian events.” Existing history about the Central Asian people was mostly concerned with Islam and dynastic history, and historical books were rarely published and hard to access for local people. Soviet planners attempted to change this situation by introducing new history focusing on the ethnic origins, important events and the leading individuals of

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each nation. The goal of the Soviet rulers, again, was to consolidate unity within the new Central Asian republics and but differentiate them from each other. The histories of each nation were to become inspiring stories sure to awake the feelings of national unity and pride. Historical reading materials were approved and assigned by the Soviet leaders and distributed through school system, making sure that every individual was aware about the history of his/her nation from the early childhood.

In the 1930s, the Soviet policy of constructing national identity in the Central Asian republics changed. The focus was on ‘republican’ national identity shifted to a Soviet one. The goal of creating a national unity within the Central Asian and the other Soviet republics transformed into an aspiration to establish international solidarity within the Soviet Union by creating more salient identity - Soviet Identity (Soviet Citizenship). Accordingly, national languages and histories were no longer the center of attention. The Soviet planners initiated a policy of promoting Russian language as the single unifying language for all Soviet people. As a result of the extensive promotion of Russian through education, other national languages were marginalized. With regards to history, the new focus of Soviet historiography was to recreate a part that would unite all the people of the vast multi-ethnic state rather than differentiate among the populations of the national republics. In new publications on history, the details of the internal conflicts and clashes were omitted and the cooperative aspects of relationship among the Soviet nationalities were emphasized. The historian Mustafaev wrote “The friendship of the peoples of the Soviet Union with the Russian people has deep historic roots and a remarkable history”.

Another important tool for embedding uniform Soviet identity was the process of massive secularization through the promotion of atheism as the main religious ideology. Christianity, Islam and the other religions of the multi-ethnic Soviet society were brutally suppressed. The most important tool of eradicating religion, just as in case with language and history, was education. Before Soviet the rule, being ‘Muslim’ was one of most salient identities of the Central Asian people, while by the end of

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17 Ibid.
the Soviet empire, the situation has changed drastically. While several decades of atheistic ideology failed to fully extinguish the presence of religion, most people retained only ‘nominal’ or cultural adherence to Islam and relatively few people actively practiced any religion.

In sum, during the Soviet era there were attempts focused to create national identity for the Central Asian nations. This national identity was two-layered: the more important and salient layer was the Soviet identity which enabled achievement of consolidation within Soviet Union as a whole; and the second one was the national identity within each of Central Asian republics. Therefore it is important to understand that Soviet identity-building process created a sense of belonging and in-group solidarity within each of the Central Asian nations; and also forged Soviet identity that became more salient, pushing the first one on the second plan. For example, majority of Central Asian people perceived themselves as a Soviet citizen first and then as a native of their national republics.

**National Identity Crisis after the Breakdown of the Soviet Union**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries have been pulled into a major identity crisis. During the Soviet period, people had developed an overarching Soviet identity, which can be described as a firm sense of belonging to a great multi-ethnic communist ‘world superpower’\(^{19}\). The Soviet identity was a strong mechanism that created uniform mindset for all individuals in the Union and united people of all ethnicities and religions. This mindset made people perceive themselves as Soviet citizens first and foremost, and ‘impeded the consolidation of ethnic and national identities’.\(^{20}\)

This Soviet identity was deeply rooted as it was forged and nurtured by decades of shared experiences, common ideological values, ideas of collectiveness and friendship, a uniform education system, and standardized entertainment and recreational activities. The Russian language was also an important tool that helped to shape the Soviet identity. It was used throughout the Union and became the main language of communication for all the Soviet people. With the sudden

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dissolution of the Soviet Union that strong sense of belonging to one union was lost and population of the newly independent Central Asian states faced an identity conundrum. The consequences of this vacuum have been similar in all of the Central Asian states. After enjoying a long period of domestic stability under Soviet rule, the newborn states confronted with an urgent need to build new national identities from which they could derive legitimacy and authority.

Although every Central Asian nation had its own unique situation determined by its geography, ethnic and cultural composition, availability of natural resources and other factors, all Central Asian states generally faced similar challenges that hindered the attaining of unity in those countries. These complexities were generally ethnic or religion-based and split the nations into various divisions such as ‘Russian-Kazakh’, ‘Tajik-Uzbek’, ‘Muslim - non-Muslim’ etc. On one hand, the task was to deal with and overcome these divisions; on the other hand, it was to create a new national identity which would unite all people under the roof of one nation. The creation of such post-Soviet national identities in Central Asia hindered by many factors, major among which the internal divisions and clashes and the desire of the external players such as the United States, Russia, China and Islamic states to extend their influence on the region.

Kazakhstan: The Lure of the Kazakh Nomadic Tradition

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan faced the tenuous task of nation-building. The search for national identity was complicated because Kazakhstan was the state with very diverse ethnic composition. In 1989 Kazakhs constituted 40 percent of the population and Russians made up around 38 percent. Other ethnic groups such as Tatars, Uighurs, Germans, Ukrainians, Uzbeks and Cossacks were also significantly represented. Later in the 1990s significant number of Russians left

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Kazakhstan, but today Russians still constitute the largest minority group in Kazakhstan about 24 percent of the total population.\footnote{Republic of Kazakhstan Statistical Agency. 2009. \textit{Census for the Republic of Kazakhstan.} Astana.}

Despite the fact that Kazakhstan attempted to create a national identity that would suit to the multi-ethnic population of Kazakhstan and unite it together under common values, ideas and goals; today the national identity of Kazakhstan is mostly ethnicity based. Why? During the Soviet rule ethnic Kazakhs were economically and socially disadvantaged. Russian language had much greater importance than Kazakh. It was generally ethnic Russians who lived in the cities and enjoyed good employment and educational opportunities, while the Kazakhs resided mostly in rural areas and had poor access to high administrative, financial or educational positions. With Kazakhstan’s independence Kazakhs became politically powerful and took charge of forging national identity, and one important concern became to address past grievances and elevate the status of ethnic Kazakhs within the country. As Edward Schatz puts it, ‘state efforts to shape patterns of language use, rewrite histories, alter demographic balances and promote ethnic cadres were routinely justified as stability-enhancing mechanisms,’\footnote{Schatz, Edward. 2000. “The Politics of Multiple Identities: Lineage and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan.” \textit{Europe-Asia Studies} 52 (3) (May 1): 489-506.} but in reality these efforts generally attempted to strengthen the position of ethnic Kazakhs.

The process of nation-building in Kazakhstan is based on reviving the old ethnic traditions. This approach is reflected, among other aspects, in Kazakhstan’s language policy. The status of Kazakh language was upgraded right after independence, when Kazakh was officially proclaimed as the state language and Russian was degraded from the status of official language to a language of inter-ethnic communication. Various campaigns to strengthen the status of Kazakh language were introduced. Together with a regular educational reform campaign, Kazakh language tests were introduced for all
bureaucrats and political office holders, making it basically impossible to attain political posts for those who did not know Kazakh.\textsuperscript{25}

Another aspect of the ethnicity-based process of nation building was the reinvention of the nomadic tradition which was largely widespread in Kazakhstan before the Soviet rule. An ethnic Kazakh was portrayed as proud and free nomad—his homeland was the vast steppes of Kazakhstan. Substantial amount of funds from state budget were invested in popularizing this nomadic tradition. In 2005 a historical epic film called \textit{Nomad} was released in Kazakhstan and worldwide. The Kazakh government allocated $40 million for the movie production making it the most expensive Kazakh film ever made. The film was set up in the 18th century Kazakhstan and told the story of a young man (nomad) who struggled to unite the country's three warring tribes. Another example of the reinvention of nomadic culture is Khan Shatyr—a gigantic shopping center opened in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, in 2010. The shopping center has the shape of traditional yurt (nomadic tent), which has “great resonance in Kazakh history as a traditional nomadic building form.”\textsuperscript{26} The structure cost to the Kazakh government more than $300 million.\textsuperscript{27}

Making the nomadic tradition such an important aspect of the nation-building process created divisions in Kazakhstan’s multiethnic society. While establishing strong attachment of ethnic Kazakhs to their homeland, it diminishes the attachment of non-Kazakhs to Kazakhstan. Kazakh political scientist and intellectual Yevgeniy Zhovtis admitted that all sociological surveys conducted since independence show a clear trend that non-Kazakhs in the country feel excluded from the nation-building process: “They are working here, they are living here, but they also feel like they are guest, and they don't associate their future with the country.”\textsuperscript{28} In addition, ethnic Kazakhs have changed their perception towards non-Kazakhs. Kazakhs have become aware of their

more important status within Kazakhstan and have distanced themselves from the other ethnic groups. In such a way, nation building process creates in-group favoritism, polarity and division, rather than unity in the republic.

**Kyrgyzstan: Revitalization of Manas and Social Cleavages**

At present, the interethnic relationships in Kyrgyzstan are quite tense and complicated. The whole country is divided among different ethnic groups, regions, clans and tribes. Besides apparent strained relationship between Russian and Kyrgyz, there are even more complicated divisions between the country’s north and south, between Uzbek and Kyrgyz who reside in southern Kyrgyzstan and between the minority ethnic groups such as the Meskhetian Turks, Chechens, Tatars and others. In 2010, conflicts between ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz in cities of Osh and Jalalabad killed about 893 people and displaced thousands more. Although the roots of these ethnic tensions go deep in the past, the ethnic-based approach to nation building also played a significant role in creating social divisions and hindering national unity.

It needs to be emphasized that that the nation-building process in Kyrgyzstan was even more complicated task than that in neighboring Kazakhstan. This complexity was reflected in several factors. One of them was the fact that Kyrgyzstan’s independence from Soviet Union in 1991 was met with relatively little enthusiasm. To Kyrgyz people, who were quite ‘Russified’, the separation of their small mountainous landlocked country from core was of a relatively small advantage. Therefore they were less enthusiastic about their independence and less prepared for the necessity to create a new nation, than the other republics of the former Soviet Union. Another factor complicating the creation of unified nation state was the complexity of the ethnic composition of Kyrgyzstan. In 1993 ethnic Kyrgyz made up 56.5 percent, ethnic Russians constituted 18.8 percent of the population. Ethnic Uzbeks were also a sizeable group making around 12.9 percent of the population. Other ethnic groups represented in Kyrgyzstan were ethnic Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars and others. National identity was to be created in a very careful manner and was to serve two purposes: strengthen Kyrgyz culture and identity and protect the interests of the

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other ethnic groups. Askar Akaev, who was elected to be the first president of independent Kyrgyzstan, came up with the slogan, "Civil Consensus and National Unity – Yes; Chauvinism, Nationalism and Extremism – No".32 Despite these aspirations, more emphasis was put on elevating the status of ethnic Kyrgyz than on preserving the status of the ethnic minorities.

The myths and stories surrounding Manas omit details featuring non-Kyrgyz, so the promotion of the ‘father’ Manas at the national level automatically prioritizes ethnic Kyrgyz and diminishes the importance of other nation groups within the state.

Similar to the Kazakhstan case, nation building in Kyrgyzstan has been mostly ethnicity based and thus causing tensions and divisions in the multi-ethnic society of the country. Language planning was one of the most important tools in creating the new national identity. By the late 1980s, Kyrgyz language was one of the least preserved languages in the Soviet Union. Almost all people in Kyrgyzstan were able to read and write in Russian, while knowledge of Kyrgyz was mostly limited to the rural areas.33 The administration realized the necessity to support Kyrgyz language as the primary marker of national identity, and so immediately after independence Kyrgyz language was made the official language of the Republic. However, the administration also realized that a rushed and strict Kyrgyz language policy would create unwanted tensions among the country’s Russian and Uzbek population. Therefore the language policy was relatively cautious and gradual, aiming to make Kyrgyz more widespread in the long run. Despite this, the new generation is now well aware that the Kyrgyz language had been transformed from the language of shepherds and farmers, as it was in during Soviet times, to the language of opportunities granting access to the highest offices.

The image of an ethnic Kyrgyz has also been reworked by rewriting history. Kyrgyz people have been portrayed as ‘brave, strong and warlike people with respect for property and love of community’34, protecting ethnic unity despite of presence of enemies and loving of

freedom and independence. There was also a need to choose a notable historical figure that could inspire feelings of national pride and distinction, and the mythical figure of Manas, who was believed to be an ancient warrior fighting for unity of Kyrgyz people, was chosen to represent the ‘father’ of the nation. There were colossal attempts to embed Manas in the national consciousness of Kyrgyz people. Manas suddenly appeared everywhere: on banknotes, books, films, operas, bottles of drinks and boxes of cigarettes. The myths and stories surrounding Manas omit details featuring non-Kyrgyz, so the promotion of the ‘father’ Manas at the national level automatically prioritizes ethnic Kyrgyz and diminishes the importance of other nation groups within the state.

Another important factor of nation building process was the fact that after independence adherence to tribalism reemerged in every sphere of Kyrgyz society and became “a fundamental aspect of modern Kyrgyz national consciousness” Attachments to certain tribes, regions or clans gained currency as strong manifestations of one’s identity, in the way it was in the pre-Soviet times. Politicians who wanted to attain certain political influence found it advantageous to use their ties to certain clans and families. In the initial draft of the Kyrgyz Constitution, it was even suggested that the position of the President be reserved for an individual of the titular ethnicity as it was done in Turkmenistan, but in the final version this stipulation was removed. Nevertheless, the clan distinctions among the Kyrgyz people became more visible and salient after independence and prevented the formation of national unity.

In addition, there is a great division between Kyrgyzstan’s Russified North and the Southern areas where Jalalabad and Osh cities have a substantial number of Uzbek population. The great mountainous barrier dividing the northern and southern parts of the country prevented communication and intermingling of people from the two regions. The South remained more attached to Islamic and Asian values and rural style of living, while the North was heavily industrialized and westernized by its Russian population. Also, there is a competition between northern Kyrgyz and southern Kyrgyz clans. During the Soviet period, a clan from the North administered the republic, until Absamat Masaliev, from a southern clan, came into power in 1985. Masaliev was

defeated by the northerner Akaev in 1990s, leaving southern politicians in great distress. It is clear the Kyrgyz aspiration to create a united nation is heavily perplexed by these various ethnic, regional, tribal and familiar divisions.

Uzbekistan: Successors of Tamerlane and 'Uzbekization'

After its detachment from the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan faced the difficult task of constructing a new nation and new national ideology. The national ideology to be constructed was highly ambitious. Islam Karimov, who led the new Uzbek government, proclaimed, “with all its criteria, shape and conditions basing on the national spirit, language, customs, ancient traditions of our people, should in the future install in our minds belief, mercy, tolerance, fairness and the great thirst for the knowledge.” In reality installing all those values in the minds of the young generation proved highly problematic, because just like in the other Central Asian republics, nation-building in Uzbekistan adopted an ethnicity-based approach. Reintroducing Uzbek language, history and culture became dominant tasks in political agenda of nation building.

In the process of constructing a new national ideology Uzbekistan followed the other Central Asian countries. It sought to revive traditional ethnic Uzbek identity and make it the core of new its national identity. Uzbek language, which had inferior status during the Soviet era, was recognized as official language in new constitution. The Uzbek elite believed that strengthening the Uzbek language would play a crucial role in the process of 'Uzbekization' of the state and of the consolidation of Uzbek identity. The Russian names of cities, streets, monuments and other landmarks were replaced with Uzbek names. The history of Uzbekistan was rewritten in order to emphasize the key features of national character of the Uzbeks. These features were love for independence, commitment to the motherland, bravery, honor and solidarity among Uzbeks. Tamerlane, the leader of the Timurid Empire (1340–1405), was chosen to symbolize the national father figure. He was a brave warrior born near modern city of Samarkand. Although his Uzbek ancestry is contested by historians, Tamerlane was promoted as the most important Uzbek historic individual and his image and name appeared everywhere. While the government strived to promote ethnic Uzbek culture as core identity base of the country, it automatically left out other ethnic groups from the nation building process. Thus, the

38 Ibid, 125.
40 Ibid. 93
newly constructed Uzbek national identity worked well for the dominant ethnic group, yet it was not readily accepted by the other minority groups, which made significant a part of country's population.

Uzbekistan is a country with a complex ethnic composition. Although Uzbeks constitute the majority of the total population, there is significant number of other ethnic groups. Despite the official figures of 5 percent, by some estimates the Tajik population is as high as 25-30 percent of country’s population.\(^{41}\) The historical cities of Bukhara and Samarkand are believed to be almost entirely consisting of Tajik population.\(^{42}\) These two ethnic groups have significant differences. Uzbeks are of Turkic and Tajiks are of Persian origin; they also speak different languages and have different cultural values and traditions. There is, however, one important common trait shared by Uzbeks and Tajiks—both ethnic groups have been residing on the territory of present-day Uzbekistan since ancient times, and so both ethnic groups have strong attachment to this region. With a new national identity and ethnocentric approach based on the cultural characteristics of the ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks found themselves displayed as outsiders in a place that they perceive as their homeland.

Another division in Uzbekistan is the regional one. There is a perceived unofficial competition among the country’s five regions: Fergana, Khorzom, Samarkand/Bukhara, Surkhandarya/Kashkadarya and Tashkent. In Uzbek society, regionalism is a strong divisive force that has become even more powerful with the ethnocentric approach to nation-building. Each region has its own unique mix of ethnic groups, cultures, tribes and kin networks. The newly constructed national identity based on 'Uzbekization' is further increasing the divisions among these regions.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
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Tajikistan: Rediscovery of the Samanid Empire and Tajik Civil War

The nation building process in Tajikistan was perhaps the most complicated one among all the Central Asian states, largely because of its civil war between 1992 and 1997. Like all other Central Asian states, Tajikistan has built its new identity on ethnic terms. In Tajikistan there is a visible polarization between its dominant Tajik and minority Uzbek populations. This division is in some ways a result of the strategy of national identity construction. This strategy largely entailed a separation of ‘Tajik’ from what was perceived as ‘Uzbek’ and protection of ‘Tajik’ heritage from ‘Uzbek’ influences43.

Primordialism was the main instrument in creation of Tajik national identity. A great effort was put in proving that the Tajik nation was not new and had very ancient roots. Great importance was put in tracing down ethnic Tajik roots. The present official history of Tajikistan links the origins of Tajikistan to the Samanid Empire that existed in the 9th and 10th centuries. Ismail Samani, who was believed to be the most powerful and just leader of Samanid Empire, was chosen as the ‘father’ of the Tajik nation. In order to embed Samani as the main historical figure of Tajikistan, officials named the state currency after his name (Somoni), renamed the highest mountain in Tajikistan after him, and erected various monuments throughout the country to honor him. While this approach provided ethnic Tajiks with a sense of belonging, it alienated minorities.

Tajikistan has an autonomous province, Gorno-Badakhshan, which constitutes almost half of the country’s territory. It is a predominantly mountainous region in the Pamir Mountains populated by various ethnicities such as Yazgulami, Shugnoni, Rushoni, Munji, Wakhi, Yidha, Vanji, Ishkashimi. Most of these ethnic groups are Ismaili, which is a branch of Shia Islam. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the local authorities attempted to secede from Tajikistan by declaring the province as Pamir-Badakhshan Autonomous Republic on April 11 in

1992.44 During the civil war that followed the declaration, ethnicity and regionalism in Tajikistan turned into divisive issues.

Another important strategy of nation building was the reinstatement of the Tajik language as the official language of the Republic. When Tajikistan received independence from the Soviet Union, the use of Tajik was considerably lower than the use of Russian. In 2002, there was a proposal to make Russian the second official language; however, the Tajik government feared that the Uzbek population might demand the same status for the Uzbek language and rejected the proposal.45 The Tajik language was promoted as the language of the intelligentsia and political elites, and all officials were strongly encouraged to use Tajik. This ethnicity-based policy with a strong emphasis on the Tajik language has further divided the society and increased the level of alienation between Tajiks, Uzbeks, Russians, Turkmens and the people of Pamir.

**Turkmenistan: ‘National Revival’**

Turkmenistan has been constructing its new national identity since its independence from the Soviet Union. The leader who was the main ‘constructor’ of the newly independent state and its new national identity, Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi), always used the term ‘national revival’ instead of ‘nation-building’ to emphasize that Turkmenistan is returning to its original condition, to the state it was before the Soviet Union.46 However, prior to its incorporation to the Soviet Union, a state of Turkmenistan and a nation of Turkmens hardly existed. The nation known presently as Turkmen was used to be a confederation of different tribes with common ethnic roots and religion yet with different traditions and dialects. In order to build a national identity, the government promoted a notion of Turkmen nation, history, language and culture. And just was the case with the other Central Asian states, the Turkmen national identity was heavily based on its dominant group’s ethnicity—the Turkmens.

One of the primary goals of the Turkmen leaders in constructing national identity was the creation of shared Turkmen culture and unity among its

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five main tribes: Teke, Yomut, Ersary, Salyr and Saryk\textsuperscript{47}. The goal of unity was emphasized in every major aspect of national identity. Thus, for example, the national flag of Turkmenistan has five different carpet ornaments and five stars under a crescent that demonstrate the unity of the five tribes. The common Turkmen language was heavily promoted as the ‘national cement’ aimed at erasing differences among the tribal dialects as well as ‘de-Russifying’ the Turkmen society\textsuperscript{48}. History was also rewritten in order to inspire unity and solidarity among Turkmen. A poet and a social leader Magtymguly, who lived in 18th century was chosen as main historical figure of Turkmen, largely because throughout his life he promoted the idea of unity and integrity among Turkmen tribes\textsuperscript{49}. Verses from his poems which tell about the necessity and benefits of unity and solidarity frequently appear in Turkmen media, on billboards and monuments.

The nation-building process in Turkmenistan was based on Turkmen ethnicity; however, the situation in this country is quite different from that in other the Central Asian states. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have a rather diverse ethnic composition, and ethnicity-based approach to nation-building has a higher probability of causing discord and clashes within those societies than in Turkmenistan, which has a relatively homogeneous composition. Eighty-five percent of the Turkmen population consists of ethnic Turkmen; 5 percent of ethnic Uzbeks and 4 percent of ethnic Russians\textsuperscript{50}. Consequently, although the minority ethnic groups may feel excluded from this nation-building process, no major incidents involving clashes among ethnic groups similar to those in Kyrgyzstan have been reported since Turkmenistan’s independence.

**Conclusions and Recommendations: Toward Civic Nationalism**

It is important to see that the problems concerning national identity in the Central Asian States do not stem from the canons of law and de jure regulations. Moreover, in all national constitutions the definition of citizenship is quite democratic and pluralistic. Central Asian national constitutions protect all citizens against any discrimination based on

\textsuperscript{47} Dünyedeki Türkmenler 1991. 15. Ashkhabat: Harp.
However, the de facto situation is rather different. The creation of national myths based on ethnicity not only developed ethnic majority’s perception of belonging and a sense of pride, but also created a perception that other minorities did not belong to this national identity. The perception of ethnic superiority may not be that evident on the official level, obviously because it is against the law. However, in informal relations, in day-to-day affairs, and even to the certain degree on the official level as well, ethnic divisions are present and has a negative effect on the relations among the multiethnic citizens of the state. Therefore the root causes of the problem lie not in laws and legal regulations, but rather in norms and values, in political/public practice that formed as a result of the ethnocentric identity-building approach that in its essence “legitimates” in-group favoritism, scapegoating, stereotyping and discrimination.

In light of the discussed challenges faced by the Central Asian republics, civic nationalism seems to be the appropriate remedy. Civic nationalism assumes that a society’s collective identity and political sovereignty is based on its adherence to a common set of political values and on its common allegiance to a territorially defined state. Unlike ethnic nationalism, which prioritizes certain ethnic group within a society, civic nationalism encompasses all people living in the country. According to Michael Ignatieff, civic nationalism “maintains that a nation should be composed of all people – regardless of race, color, creed, gender, language or ethnicity – who subscribe to the nation’s political creed.” This type of nationalism is called ‘civic’ because it sees the nation as a “community of equal, rights-bearing citizens united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values.” Ignatief sees this nationalism as necessarily democratic, “since it vests sovereignty in all of the people.” National identity should represent the essential demands of the populace and be endorsed by the whole

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
society; otherwise it will not only fail to motivate people and united them around a single goal, but it will also turn into a major source of discontent and conflicts.

If civic nationalism is adopted in the Central Asian states, it could not only unite people domestically but also contribute to friendly relations among the neighboring states. It is obvious that the way the governments and majorities treat their ethnic minorities domestically, directly affects the public opinion in homeland country of that minority. In this respect, for instance, the fair treatment of Uzbek minority by the Kyrgyzstan will obviously find a positive resonance in the neighboring Uzbekistan. Ethnic nationalism creates boundaries and in-group and out-of-group members not only domestically, but also internationally. As a result it leads to divisions both within and among states. Therefore, national policy in Central Asian States should shift from ethnocentrism to civic nationalism based on a common set of values and shared homeland. Instead of putting emphasis on historical roots, which are not only a source of pride for achievements in the past, but also a source of traumas and inter-ethnic conflicts, a focus on the contemporary achievements of the nations would be more beneficial.
About the Author

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