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Post-Soviet Civilizational Transit in Central Asia

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Abstract. The relationship between politics and history is becoming complex and tense in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. The history of the countries and peoples of the region becomes the subject of an intense ideological struggle, during which Soviet historiography is partially, and sometimes completely, rejected, and new ideological myths are created that have no real historical basis. Not only historiography is being rethought, but also its context – historical memory, the historical culture of the new states of Central Asia. On the one hand, the ruling elites seek to place the historical memory of the Central Asian peoples under strict state control, affirming the ideology of state nationalism and referring to it not only political doctrines, but also traditions, religion, philosophy, social and human sciences. The rejection of society from cultural memory is typical for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. On the other hand, historical memory becomes an ideological tool of intra-elite political struggle and society (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan). This is the essence of the post-Soviet civilizational transit in Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, civilizational transit, Soviet civilization, Soviet people, cultural and historical community, Soviet heritage, Soviet industry, Soviet agriculture, Soviet science, Soviet education, Soviet infrastructure projects, transit direction

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Introduction

The concept of civilizational transit is a complex constellation of meanings and meanings of the dynamics of civilizations, due to the transitivity of the models of historical knowledge themselves and related concepts/theories of civilizations. Civilizational transit is a long transitional stage of civilizational development that arises in the conditions of discord and disintegration of society or the world community, the absence of a higher formative and guiding principle of its unity, passing through the choice of new higher parameters (higher order) of being and a new path to the future and receiving completion as

a result of the institutional and normative-value design of these parameters in as a special mechanism of social integration.

This article examines a number of aspects of civilizational transit in the context of Central Asian countries.

Materials and methods

The collapse of the Soviet Union actualized the long-standing historical problem of integration and stabilization of societies in the vast geocultural space of Eurasia, ideological and institutional support for solving this problem. The political and cultural elites of the new states can no longer rely entirely on the cultural and historical heritage of the USSR, the Soviet historical narratives that served as the basis of Soviet identity. Historical politics is becoming an important ideological and fundamentally problematic factor in the reconstruction of national-political and cultural-civilizational forms of identity – the purposeful activity of national political elites, their political and administrative structures and public organizations cooperating with the state to form and preserve certain ideas about the past within the country and in the foreign policy arena. [4]

At the new crisis stage of the development of national statehood, the ideological and contextual turn in the research of the history of Central Asia goes beyond the disciplinary framework of historiography and methodology of historical science. It is no longer possible to raise and solve the issues of the formation of full-fledged modern national states in the region, without taking into account the intertwining of old and new traditions and innovations in the new and modern history of the region. And this transfers the actual scientific, conceptual and theoretical views on the history of the region into the field of historical consciousness – the active ideological and value reproduction of historical reality in various mental, cultural and historiosophical patterns, models of history. With the incomplete, unstable, crisis state in which the processes of national state-building in the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia are today, the issue of relations, dynamics of development and mutual adaptation of two worldviews, historiosophical paradigms, and ideological doctrines of historical consciousness is of paramount scientific and cognitive importance. On the one hand, orientation towards the introduction and sustainable development of modern innovations in politics, economics and culture (doctrine, paradigm of modernity), on the other, commitment to the preservation and reproduction of tradition, preservation of old cultural forms and values, return to the laws of Islam (doctrine, paradigm of traditionalism).

In a cognitive context, both models of historical consciousness tend towards a universalist vision and understanding of history, are ideological versions of universal history, which connects them with various subject fields of universal history: from the history of social thought to the history of culture and education, religion and the church. The scientific basis of views on the correlation of views and ideas of traditionalism and modernism is the multivariance of the processes of historical development of regions,

countries, and peoples of the world when highlighting the realities of this development in concrete historical, comparative, interdisciplinary and theoretical aspects. The scientific problematization of these views in the context of global history is facilitated by the departure of historical thought from Eurocentric, basically one-line modernization theories. [8; 7, p. 269]

Studies of the changes in Central Asian societies in modern and contemporary times cannot ignore the ideas inherent in these societies and their different groups about their past and present. The problem of identifying the phenomena of the past and present in the modern history of the region has been and remains very acute in the field of scientific discourse: in what concepts to describe and characterize the transitional state of Central Asian societies – traditional / non-traditional, modernized / unmodernized, Soviet / non-Soviet, colonized / uncolonized, how to correlate these concepts with the facts and evidence of field research. [1, p. 4]

The processes of legalization and revival of Islam give a special and growing tension to historical politics in the region. After many years of Soviet imprisonment and repression, Islam was released and immediately joined the political struggle. The most active representatives of this religion began to create Islamic political parties and organizations of various kinds: from moderate to radical. Islam was the first to be «released» in Tajikistan, then in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, then in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The pace of politicization and radicalization of Islam in Tajikistan was the highest in post-Soviet Central Asia and subsequently led Tajik society to civil war (1992-1997). It is also important that the intensification of Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism in Central Asia occurs in close connection with the establishment and preservation in historical memory of patterns of traditional behavior and thinking. Discourses about the true historical «Kazakhness» or «Uzbekness», «Tajikness» or «Turkmenness» are becoming important tools for managing public consciousness and behavior.

In the context of the close intertwining of history and politics in the processes of reconstruction of cultural and historical memory, the historical heritage of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, the question of the role of historical science, its individual branches and directions as a space of professional and disciplinary knowledge in recreating the past of the countries and peoples of the region is being actualized. Since the beginning of the study of the history of the region – since its accession in 1867 in most of Central Asia to Russia, regional historical studies have begun to acquire the features of a comprehensive interdisciplinary direction, combining such elements of disciplinary knowledge as historical geography, source studies, archaeology, ethnology, history of religion, etc. As a branch of scientific knowledge, this direction was based on a huge factual material that still retains great historical value (the works of outstanding Russian orientalists V.V. Bartold, Yu.N. Roerich, etc.) At the same time, before the collapse of the USSR, the history of the region was viewed mainly from an ethnographic perspective: First, the reconstruction of the ethnic map of Central Asia, then the accumulation of information about the material and spiritual life of the peoples living there. [3, p. 74] At the same time, the dominant theoretical guideline for both Soviet and Western researchers was the modernist belief that the ethnopolitical

space of the region should be national, i.e. to correspond to the boundaries of the settlement of the dominant ethnic communities – nations, since only within the framework of the «national state is some kind of economic and social development possible»¹. The formation of sovereign national states in the late twentieth and early twentieth centuries on the territory of the former Soviet Central Asia further strengthened this vision of the history of the region, however, through the prism of the views, ideas and values of secular nationalism: national revival and national unity as an ideological way of consolidating society.[6]

Results

The modern cultural, political and ideological context of studying the new and modern history of post-Soviet Central Asia has acquired even wider and in many ways crucial importance since the end of the twentieth century, when the challenges and threats to the very project of national revival of the former Soviet republics of the region - smoothing internal socio-cultural and ethno-national contradictions according to the model of modernist, secular statehood were clearly identified. The growing poverty of large masses of the population, trends in socio-economic demodernization associated with such crisis factors as deurbanization (a decrease in the share of the urban population), the degradation of modern systems of technical infrastructure, social security, education and medicine created in Soviet times, the departure to Russia of a large number of migrant workers, including highly qualified specialists, educated, the secular intelligentsia, the growth of clan power structures and inter-clan conflicts against this background, The problems of the crisis state of secular statehood in the region and the possibilities and prospects of overcoming it were actualized. [5; 2, pp. 124-136] The problem of the crisis of secular national statehood, its factors and prospects was especially acute and evident in the events of the civil war in Tajikistan, during which the political confrontation between groups of the former Soviet elite and new nationalist and radical Islamic groups turned into a fierce confrontation between ethnic clans.

The Soviet prehistory of Civilizational transit in Central Asia

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Central Asia was an underdeveloped region, the main occupation of the population of which was agriculture on irrigated lands and nomadic cattle breeding. Therefore, the main task in the newly formed Soviet republics was the development of agriculture, which required an increase in acreage through the construction of new irrigation facilities. One of the most ambitious projects in this area was the Great Ferghana Canal, built in 1939-1940 by the method of «people's construction» (khashar). The commissioning of the canal helped to raise yields in Uzbekistan 2.2 times. In

¹ Sergey Abashin on Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia. Interview. Available from: <https://www.caa-network.org/>.

Kyrgyzstan, during the years of Soviet rule, a large hydroelectric power plant was built on the Naryn – Toktogulsky River, and the Ortotokoy reservoir was created on the Chu River².

Another grandiose agricultural project implemented under Soviet rule in Central Asia is the development of virgin and fallow lands of Kazakhstan in the 50s of the last century. Then, in two years, the acreage was increased three times. New towns with appropriate infrastructure were built on virgin land. Simultaneously with irrigation, the task of creating a transport infrastructure was also being solved. Projects for the construction of a railway connecting the lands of Turkestan with Siberia were developed back in tsarist Russia. The construction of the Turksib (Turkestan-Siberian Railway) began in December 1926, and the first train passed through it on April 25, 1930³.

Other road transport projects have also been implemented in Central Asia, for example, the construction of the Dushanbe-Khorog–Osh high-altitude highway. The problem of access to high-altitude villages, which previously could only be reached by mountain trails, was solved. The highway connected the then capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty, with the capital of neighboring Uzbekistan, Tashkent. The Bishkek (Frunze)–Osh major highway was also built in Kyrgyzstan. And this is not to mention the network of smaller regional roads, airports and river ports.

One of the key tasks of the Soviet era was the electrification of the territory of Central Asia. During the years of Soviet power, entire cascades of hydroelectric power plants were built in the region: Toktogul and Kurpsay in Kyrgyzstan, Varzob, Perepadnaya, Central, Head HPP on the Vrazob River, Nurek HPP on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan, a cascade of power plants on the Chirik River, Charvak hydropower node in Uzbekistan.

The USSR authorities paid great attention to the creation of industry. This was partly done for ideological reasons in order to cultivate the local proletariat, but nevertheless, the industrial foundations of the current Central Asian countries were laid during the Soviet era. Aktobe, Karaganda Metallurgical plants, Balkhash, Chimkenstky mining and metallurgical plants in Kazakhstan, Uzbek metallurgical plant in Bekabad, the largest electric lamp plant in the USSR in the Kyrgyz Maili Say, «Tashselmash», «Uzbekselmash», «Chirikselmash», Tashkent Aircraft Factory and dozens more industrial enterprises were built in the region during the years of Soviet government⁴.

It should be noted that both the transport infrastructure and the power plants that still supply towns and villages, industrial enterprises, irrigation canals, remained at the disposal of the newly emerged republics after the collapse of the USSR. Kazakhstan, among other things, could even get nuclear warheads, but it voluntarily gave them up, unlike the nuclear industry, which was also established in this republic during the Soviet period. And so far, Kazakhstan continues to extract uranium for power plants and sell it abroad. Thus,

² The Soviet hashar: Who and how built the Great Ferghana Canal. Asia Plus. Available from: <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20230801/sovetskim-hasharom-kto-i-kak-stroil-bolshoi-ferganskii-kanal>.

³ How the USSR developed Central Asia. Russian Eurasia. Available from: <https://rusevr.asia/kak-sssr-razvival-centralnuyu-aziyu/>.

⁴ Overview of the industry of Uzbekistan. MANUFACTURERS.RU. Available from: <https://manufacturers.ru/article/obzor-promyshlennosti-uzbekistana>.

it can be stated that in the era of developed socialism, the current Central Asian countries made a great leap in their development and gained significant industrial and economic potential.

There were other industrial projects developed during the Soviet era. A good example is the Rogun HPP in Tajikistan. It was designed back in 1976, but became relevant only in the XXI century. The development of the Kumtor gold deposit in Kyrgyzstan was also fully designed in Soviet times. Only its launch took place after the collapse of the USSR.

The post-Soviet civilizational transit in Central Asia is accompanied by the struggle for the Soviet heritage in the region. The legacy of Soviet civilization, especially in the field of system-forming infrastructure, forms the foundation of the economies of the Central Asian republics in the post-Soviet period. The Soviet legacy consists of infrastructure projects, large industrial systems, linguistic space, cultural community, as well as a set of problems left over from the Soviet era, but in many ways aggravated due to the formation of new state borders and differences in economic models of development of already independent countries.

The municipal infrastructure in modern conditions is rapidly deteriorating, which leads to large-scale man-made accidents. The situation regarding irrigation remains no less difficult. The constant struggle for access to water has long attracted the attention of the world community. The shaky foundation inherited from a previous era reminds us of the need for reforms or depreciation. Only after this foundation has become a thing of the past will it be possible to stop speaking the political language inherited from the Soviet Union. There is no doubt that this time is near, but so far the legacy still has a direct impact on many ties within the region.

In the post-Soviet period, the foundation of a new regional order is actively being formed. New economic spheres, such as information technology or communications, exist outside the infrastructure received from the USSR. But attempts to update it are still being made today, including with the active participation of the World Bank.

The media industry is a network of Soviet industrial enterprises created or designed by the efforts of an entire country with plans to include them in the system of all-Union economic relations. Many of these projects have now become monuments of a bygone era. Some have already been implemented within the framework of independent states, form a significant part of their GDP, but carry numerous socio-political challenges.

Plans for rent from the export of natural resources as the basis of national welfare are a common feature for the economies of most Central Asian states of the post-Soviet period. Although the need to attract foreign investors forces them to seek a balance between resource nationalism and the interests of transnational business. This paradox leads to problems.

An example is the Kumtor gold deposit mentioned above in Kyrgyzstan. It was discovered in 1978, and only a decade later there was a justification for the expediency of mining gold here. But the development of Kumtor has already begun in independent Kyrgyzstan, with the support of foreign investors. Undoubtedly, without their participation, the development of such a large high-altitude field in the early 1990s would have been

impossible. Nevertheless, the issue of nationalization of the enterprise did not lose its relevance and remained in the center of universal attention throughout almost the entire post-Soviet period.

The Kumtor field is geopolitically significant both for Central Asia and on a larger scale. It's not just about the direct connection between production volumes and gold quotations on world exchanges. The main foreign investor in Kumtor for many years has been the influential Centerra Gold corporation in Asia – at various times it carried out projects in a huge area from Turkey to Mongolia. In Kumtor, the company controlled almost 70 percent of profits, being one of the key beneficiaries. Everything changed in 2022, when the development companies became fully owned by Kyrgyzstan. Centerra Gold is gone, but this does not mean that foreign investors are lost. The field is still promising, and the steadily growing interest of the PRC and the Russian Federation in the economy of Kyrgyzstan in modern conditions brings local enterprises to a completely new level of relations.

The situation in the metallurgical industry of Uzbekistan, which claims to be a regional leader, is no less indicative. The enterprises founded after the Second World War have now been modernized and provide the country with the status of a leader. Uzbekistan ranks seventh in the world in terms of gold production alone, and fifth in terms of uranium. The uranium deposit in the Uchkuduk area, developed by the Navoi Plant, is closely linked to the markets of the USA, China, India and France. Throughout the entire post-Soviet period, the state has consistently had a high share of ownership in the extractive industry (compared to other countries in the region).

The aforementioned Rogun HPP in Tajikistan and the development of gas fields in Turkmenistan illustrate the same processes. Yes, the construction of the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China, which runs through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, is a positive example of post-Soviet cooperation. But this project also has its roots in the era of economic ties between the Central Asian republics of the USSR.

To be objective, the period of independence also became an era for a number of industrial projects that, due to a number of circumstances, simply could not be implemented in the USSR. Moving away from the cumbersome Soviet planning system opened up new opportunities for independent states to develop industrial facilities of a different type – with the participation of foreign investors, but based again on Soviet geological and technical developments.

Thus, during the period of post-Soviet civilizational transit, the modern geo-economic situation in Central Asia turned into a complex of three interdependent factors: Soviet heritage, foreign investment and resource nationalism. The last mentioned factor is not just a tribute to populism, rather it is part of the legacy of the Soviet era with a corresponding idea of the fairness of the distribution of natural resources. The struggle of the Governments of the Central Asian States for national control over natural resources deposits should lead to consolidation of efforts at the level of the entire region. An attempt to act as a «united front» can provide favorable economic conditions. But since the collapse of the USSR, these countries have been constantly clashing, and external actors have intervened in the emerging political contradictions: Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, Beijing and Washington.

On the issue of resource nationalism

The 21st century is characterized by the global rise of resource nationalism, and the republics of Central Asia are no exception. But the idea that only the people of that state can be the monopoly beneficiary of all natural resources on the territory of one state also has Soviet roots. The so-called “natural rent”, or payments to all citizens of the state from the profits of the extractive sector, is undoubtedly a more modern phenomenon. Interestingly, the concept of resource nationalism originates in the constitutions of the Union republics of the USSR, which enshrined the thesis that natural resources belong to the state. Article 11 of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz SSR stated: «The land, its subsoil, waters and forests are the exclusive property of the state» (while the first article declares the nature of the state itself to be socialist and nationwide). Similar formulations can also be found in the eleventh articles of the constitutions of the Uzbek SSR, Kazakh SSR, Turkmen SSR, Tajik SSR.

At the present stage, the term «nationalized» means «transferred to state ownership». Article 14 of the Constitution of modern Turkmenistan states: “Land and subsoil, waters, flora and fauna, as well as other natural resources are the national wealth of Turkmenistan, are protected by the state and are subject to rational use.” This idea does not exclude the granting of concessions to foreign investors, but ownership remains with the state. Similar provisions can be found in almost all the constitutions of the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, all of them, in fact, refer to article 11 of the basic laws of the Union republics.

In fact, Soviet law and propaganda laid the foundations for ideas about what kind of distribution of natural resources is fair. Speaking about the Soviet path dependence, we primarily focus on this experience. Populist rhetoric about national wealth with reference to the experience of Middle Eastern states is nothing more than a reception of Soviet law, reinterpreted on the basis of the experience of Arab oil-producing countries. In this context, an interesting relationship is being formed between national identity and the bowels of the earth on which this nation exists. The epithets “national wealth” and «foundation of the future» are categories of political and historical optimism characteristic of Central Asia, and they are closely related to the rhetoric of resource nationalism.

Resource nationalism is a measurable phenomenon. In particular, Verisk Maplecroft forms ratings of countries on the risk of developing resource nationalism. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have traditionally low indices in them. And this allows global players to influence the economic situation, and from the point of view of neighboring Central Asian countries, to «interfere in the internal affairs of the state». For example, in 2022. The World Bank recommended that Tajikistan reduce public costs for the construction of the Rogun HPP and increase private financing, citing the accumulation of public debt and the danger of problems with its payments. For example, the specifics of the privatization of the oil and gas industry in Kazakhstan have led to the fact that the government has been unable to pursue a consistent policy that defends national interests to foreign investors, promotes the full utilization of domestic refineries and ensures the collection of taxes from oil companies in full.

The post-Soviet civilizational transit to new economic realities was based on a very specific resource base and industrial base. At the first stage, it was important to

rethink this baggage as not Soviet, but national, however, this was done based on the Soviet language of national policy. As a result, by the beginning of the 21st century, rapidly spreading resource nationalism had acquired hybrid features of, on the one hand, peripheral capitalism, and, on the other, completely Soviet attitudes about the fair distribution of social benefits. Although it should be noted that peripheral capitalism is almost universally combined with the popularity of leftist ideas, which have their own traditions in Central Asia.

That is why we are talking about resource nationalism in this region as a kind of path dependence originating from the late Soviet era. In addition, the struggle for the Soviet legacy is ideologically linked to two polar ideological attitudes. One of them, in particular in Tajikistan, is focused on cooperation with global financial institutions in the development of mega-industrial projects of the Soviet era. Another ideology (in a mild form – in Kyrgyzstan) insists on the exclusive right of the people of the country to property or preferences from the resource industry.

Discussion

In the modern rhetoric of political leaders, Central Asia is gradually moving out of the range of formulaic assessments familiar to the post-Soviet space. But this process is quite long, and it is not based on overcoming great-power thinking. It is located in the plane of economic ties, national interests and transnational ambitions. All variables are directly related to what we call the struggle for the Soviet legacy: competition for the redistribution of spheres of influence, for access to resources, for the possibility of exporting them in certain directions and for scenarios of political integration. And there is also a struggle to comprehend the common past, which is actively used as a tool of competition for access to the same deposits of natural resources.

A way out of this situation is possible provided integration within the EAEU or in the EAEU+ format. This will allow the Central Asian countries to gain a stable and strong regional position, which will directly affect relations with foreign investors and the coordination of supply and demand in the markets. It takes time to realize this objective necessity. Now only resource nationalism acts as a more or less popular program to counter the predatory exploitation of resource deposits and infrastructure for their export by multinational companies.

Over the years of independent existence of the republics of Central Asia, regardless of the degree of authoritarianism or democracy of the regimes, under the influence of rich resources, as well as the Soviet legacy, political institutions, ideologies and appropriate approaches to governance have been formed, which are projected into the system of power structures. A striking example is Kyrgyzstan, where the open political struggle of parties is reflected in political programs and election rhetoric, and the formation of governments based on the party principle, the creation of appropriate parliamentary factions clearly show the weight and importance of certain committees, ministries and departments.

The struggle for the Soviet legacy continues, as the industrial base and infrastructure created within the framework of Soviet civilization will arouse the interest of world powers and multinational corporations for a long time to come. That is why there are references to the common past, and to the main point of no return – the collapse of the USSR. The emergence of qualitatively new relations is possible in the case of either a final redistribution of spheres of influence, or the emergence of economies of a completely different type, not based on the export of natural resources.

Conclusion

All of the above is not a problem exclusively for Central Asian countries. In many ways, this directly affects the very reflection of Russia as the legal successor of the USSR and the Soviet heritage as a whole. Theoretically, it is possible to raise the question not only about the attitude to the Soviet heritage in the domestic Russian discourse, but also about the projection of today's Russian Federation on the same heritage already in the newly independent states that were part of the USSR. This is especially important in the new geopolitical picture of the world, the active phase of which began at the end of winter 2022.

Gold, fresh water, uranium, gas – all these are in demand so much that the level of competition for them will only grow in the future. The geographical proximity of major consumers, China and India, will also affect the nature of the competition. In essence, the struggle for the Soviet legacy is a confrontation over the contours of the new geo-economy of Asia.

Last but not least, the problem of the Aral Sea, inherited by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from the Soviet Union, is an important example. By and large, this is a whole range of environmental and political issues that need to be addressed in the long term. Many of them have a direct impact on the nature of interstate relations: the future of not only individual countries, but also the entire region as a whole depends on how they are resolved (or not resolved).

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Contribution of the author

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