

Research Reports and Briefs

Communal and Political Change in Central Asia: Some Preliminary Findings

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Research on this project started at the London School of Economics in 1995, where I was enrolled in the M.Sc. Program in Political Theory and studied theories of development in order to gain an applicable theoretical framework for the study of social and political change in Central Asia. In the course of my studies I came to realize that the structural analysis that I envisioned could not be done without analyzing the complex pre-Soviet and even pre-tsarist social order, and so I limited the doctoral dissertation to pre-Soviet Central Asia. It was submitted to the Department of Political Science of the University of Vienna in 2000 as *Communal Commitment and Political Order in Change. Pre-tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia*. As part of that research I conducted research trips to Central Asian countries. Since October 2000 I have continued research on communal and political change in Soviet and independent Central Asia as a research fellow at the German Institute for Middle East Studies (Deutsches Orient-Institut) in Hamburg. In this research report I suggest an alternative theoretical perspective which strives for nomothetic knowledge in the studies of social and political change in Central Asia.

The sovietization of Central Asia was linked to externally induced social, economic and political changes, which significantly transformed Central Asian societies and introduced new social spaces and collective identities. The transformation of Central Asia was unique in that it took place within a highly centralized hegemonic state apparatus. This apparatus penetrated into society and imposed the cultural values of Russian and other European communists, who adhered to a universalistic, egalitarian and teleological political ideology rooted in the ideas of the European Enlightenment and secularized Christian culture.

During the Cold War political and social changes in Central Asia received controversial assessments — Soviet acclamation of successful socialist mobilization and industrialization of backward societies competed with the Western emphasis on totalitarianism, political intolerance, and violation of human rights. Scholars reproduced these controversial assessments. Some claimed Central Asia as a development model for other Asian countries (Ali 1964, Nove and Newth 1967, Khan and Ghat 1979, and Black et al. 1991), while others pointed at the economic, ecological and social failures in the region (Fierman 1991, Rumer 1990, and Geiss 2000).

Glasnost and the dissolution of the Soviet Union changed the conceptual framework of political discourse on authority relations. After independence Central Asian politicians and scholars also viewed their past Soviet regime as a repressive totalitarian system that had to be replaced with democratic institutions. But they argued that the establishment of democratic institutions is a long and difficult process identified with a “transitional period,” with strong executive powers needed to prevent interethnic strife and civil conflict. For this reason democratization policies had to be carefully and slowly adapted to local conditions (Geiss 2000).

Western perception of political change — following Samuel Huntington’s Third Wave paradigm — also expects Central Asia to move towards democracy. However, Western assessments disagree about the willingness of the current ruling elite to implement democratic reforms. They cite presidents and their increasing powers as the main obstacle to political and economic reforms. The growing control over journalists and political opposition in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are interpreted as further moves towards

authoritarianism, while mahallization of Uzbekistan is perceived as an attempt to extend state control over local communities. Overwhelming corruption among the ruling elites is regarded as one of the main obstacles to political and economic development. Political analysts prescribe political decentralization as an effective means to make politicians more responsive to the needs of local populations. On the other hand, the "civil society" promoted by grants to NGOs is viewed as a counter force to the state and as the main advocate of democratization (Anderson 1999, Goble 1999, Melvin 2000, and Eschment 2000).

Recently social anthropologists Cynthia Werner and Boris Petric have adopted a different approach, free of ethnocentric conceptualizations. Practices that appear corrupt to a Westerner they describe as a "culture of gift making" (Petric 2002, 2001), or "household networks of mutual indebtedness" (Werner 1997, 1998). They study the cultural orientations of people with an emic approach that doesn't impose their own cultural values. They conduct extensive fieldwork in local communities, and translate the emic terms into the analytical language of cultural anthropology. They advance theoretical knowledge by comparing results of ethnographic studies from different areas and generalizing observed causal relationships in an inductive way.

Scholars explaining sociopolitical change and seeking nomothetic knowledge about the limits and preconditions of political reform cannot base their research on fieldwork, as their subject is too broad. They might interview political actors, read newspapers, look at economic and administrative statistics, observe political developments, or interpret and reproduce political language found in their sources. However, which analytical language should be used if Western concepts cannot be properly applied when analyzing non-Western political orders? The application of the proper analytical framework is also complicated by the fact that the mere analysis of formal institutional arrangements in non-European countries cannot explain divergent outcomes of similar institutions in European and non-European contexts. Thus, we also need theoretical knowledge about societies, and the evolution and transformation of their internal order.

The best way to avoid the arbitrariness of the extremely popular single issue models is to use classical sociological theory, especially that of scholars such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber,

who also discuss the experiences of non-European civilizations. They provide analytical concepts and theoretical knowledge that spare us the need to reinvent the wheel. This is an insight developed after my study of variants of modernization, dependence and world-system theories had not yielded a satisfactory theoretical framework to study political change in Central Asia.²

I found Richard Münch's reconstruction of Durkheim's, Weber's and Parsons' contributions to the theory of sociology within the framework of an action theory to be the most useful for my research (Münch 1988). Münch promotes the concept of "interpenetration" to explain social change and the emergence of a new societal order from the interpenetration of opposed action orientations of social actors. His reinterpretation of the classical contributions to sociology leads him to conceptualize Weber's sociology of religion from the perspective of voluntarist theory of action and enables him, for example, to explain capitalism as a result of the interpenetration of economic action orientations and Calvinist religious ethics. Similarly, the emergence of normative (i.e., enduring, legitimate) political order depends on the interpenetration of political action orientations and communal commitment in a society. Münch's reconstruction produces a differentiated and comprehensive account of the emergence of modernity, i.e., of the Western societal order (Münch 1992, 1993). That order is linked to the notions of the rule of law and the constitutional state, which Weber referred to as "ruling organization" based on "legal authority" (*legale Herrschaft*), and which represent the backbone of Western democracies. Münch explains the emergence of Western societies by studying non-European civilizations in order to identify specific factors that preconditioned Western development.

It is expected that there is more to be said, if interpenetration theory is applied to non-European civilizations for its own sake. There are other types of normative political order besides the successful

² The theoretical impasse in the academic field of the Sociology of Development is mainly linked to the fact that it intermingles normative political discourse on ends and causal explanations of social relations. The former is the concern of political philosophers, whereas the latter can only be used within the limited framework of a nominalistic social science. For this reason essentialist concepts and teleological theorems are widespread in this field.

Western nation-state order, which is favored as the only legitimate form of government by transitologists and Western theorists of democracy. The historical political orders of the Pharaonic kingdom, the Athenian polis, the Roman Republic, and the Byzantine Empire reveal the ethnocentricity of this claim. Even if it is harder to find an enduring political order among contemporary non-European societies, this does not necessarily imply that they have not established such orders. Industrialization in Japan is a remarkable case of a new normative order that emerged from the interpenetration of traditional communal orientations and new political-economic orientations. It did not result in a Western-style liberal democracy with a highly regulated constitutional state. Instead it transformed into a highly personalized and clientelistic political system with institutionalized informal rules and particularistic demands. Therefore, the different forms of political community structure and their distinguishing features are not properly understood if conceptualized as merely deficient versions of a Western standard (Geiss forthcoming[a]).

Applying the interpenetration theory to explain political change in Central Asian societies, I developed a typology of political order and identified various types of authority relations. Here Weber's concept of authority is a useful starting point. On omitting Weber's third type of "charismatic authority," which does not yet represent an enduring political order, one encounters a wide range of authority relations which Weber systematically describes as various forms of "traditional authority." This type of authority is based on political obedience which is "owed not to enacted rules but to the person who occupied a position of authority by tradition" (Weber 1978, 227). It refers to forms of personalized political community structure in contrast to impersonal authority relations in Western states based on the rule of law. Differentiating between state- and tribal-based political orders, and between political orders that established authority relations and those that did not, I conceptualized a typology of political orders and political community structures based on four different types of political commitment:

1) *Acephalous* tribal political order: political community structures are based on the political equality of tribesmen.

2) *Cephalous* tribal political order: political community structures are based on patriarchal authority and tribal following.

3) *Personalized* type of state order: political community structures are based on patrimonial authority and the subservience of subjects.

4) *Impersonal* type of state order: political community structures are based on legal authority and citizenship.³

According to interpenetration theory the structure of the political community cannot be altered by mere economic and/or political means, since these are rooted in the society's community system. This explains the failure of Gorbachev's perestroika, which was designed to establish new political community structures via political reforms. Instead it destroyed the state's integrity by overlooking the established rules of authority. However, communal commitment is negotiated and rooted in the cultural orientations of a society. These cultural orientations are less dynamic and more resistant to change. Therefore, a successful establishment of democracy based on the rule of law requires radical cultural change, and that is not very likely to happen soon.

Having applied this approach to communal and political change in pre-tsarist and tsarist Central Asia, it was possible to assert empirically some of the theoretical expectations: on dealing with Central Asian tribal societies and explaining tribal political order as a result of the interpenetration of communal and political action orientation, I could verify empirically that acephalous Turkmen tribal political orders differed from cephalous Kyrgyz, Kazakh or Uzbek tribalism in their communal commitment structures (Geiss forthcoming[c]). Whereas Turkmen political equality among tribesmen resulted from egalitarian relations between male Turkmen family members (Geiss 1999), did Kazakhs or Kyrgyz obey family patriarchs (*aqsaqals*) who disposed of the extended family's property, and whose "word became law to the rest"?

The applied typology also helps in analyzing the problem of political integration in the emirate of Bukhara and the khanates of Khiva and Kokand, whose ruling dynasties sought to strengthen patrimonial state structures by creating a standing army and appointing non-Uzbeks as state officials. They also promoted Shari'a norms at the expense of tribal customary law as the legal basis of the state

³ We do not need to say that this is an analytical typology which heuristically better helps to understand particular empirical political orders, the more they resemble one of these pure types.

apparatus. This extension of state structures partially corresponded to the de-tribalization of Uzbek and other tribesmen who became Sart. They started to live in wards (*mahallas*), representing communities of religious brotherhood based on residential communal commitment (Geiss 2001). More enduring forms of political order emerged after khans and emirs were acknowledged as Muslim rulers who respected Shari'a. Nevertheless, in contrast to more durable forms of tribal political order, patrimonial state orders remained weak and could not overcome the increasing rift between local communities and the state, whose patrimonially recruited officials tried harder to please their superiors than the population subjected to their orders (Geiss forthcoming[d]). That rift continues to exist today in Central Asia.

The Russian conquest and its civil-military administration destroyed the tribal political order and economy. Tribesmen were no longer able to secure their own political integration. They became dependent on the tsarist officials and military commanders who controlled resources. Politics was no longer rooted in the normative political order shared by all, as the military commander took full charge of managing conflicts between Sart, tribal, Cossack, rural and urban European populations. The alliance of the indigenous patrimonial states of Bukhara and Khiva with the "infidel" tsar undermined authority based on the Islamic precepts of government. Thus, tsarist conquest rendered a weak normative political order even more fragile. According to the theoretical assumptions, the change from tribal to patrimonial authority relations also coincided with considerable cultural change, which both strengthened orthodox precepts of Islam and diffused Russian culture (Geiss forthcoming [b]).

On applying this approach to Soviet and independent Central Asia various questions need to be clarified. If we assume that communal structures are important in explaining social change, we have to conduct comparative analyses of the cultural and economic impacts of sovietization on local communities and communal commitment structures. Did sovietization erase the differences in the pre-Soviet communal commitment structures of Turkmen, Uzbeks and Kazaks? Are there still differences between the informal conflict management and state involvement in local affairs? How did this relation change after independence? What are the implications of Soviet cultural policy on the reconstruction and transformation of cultural orientation?

The second complex of questions is related to the changes in the political system, administrative control, and elite recruitment after the dissolution of the USSR: how can one describe the establishment of the Soviet political system according to the logic of patrimonial politics? Is there a move towards a less patrimonial form of personalized political order to be noticed? Has the political logic changed since independence? How have political regionalism and the participation of regional elites changed since independence? What are the changes in the bargaining power of central and regional elites?

Following these questions I expect to identify factors that promote the establishment of a normative political order, as well as those factors that prevent political integration in Central Asia.⁴ The study of the strained relationship between local and centrally shaped Soviet cultures might not only deliver new theoretical insights into the possibilities and limits of cultural change, but also elucidate the reasons for the failure of Soviet universalistic culture to change the particularism of patrimonial politics in European and non-European parts of the former Soviet Union.

Depending on the state of Central Asian studies some of the questions will be more easily researched within the framework of this study, whereas others with a smaller empirical base will be left open for further research. As the field of Central Asian studies is growing, the results of the project are only preliminary. The merit of this approach is that it seeks to provide a cultural reference point for the evaluation and conceptualization of sociopolitical reforms in Central Asia. Such a reference point will not fully converge with the political imperatives of Western foreign offices, but it can help to evaluate and design reform agendas which might better empower Central Asian governments to safeguard the interests of their people.

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Security Perception in Central Asia

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For the past three years I have been engaged in a project on the changing security environment in Central Asia. One of the main issues in my research has been that of the relative stability in the region (with the exception of Tajikistan). The other has been the role of the military in the post-Soviet polity in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Unlike many Third World countries, the military establishment in these republics kept a low public profile (at least until the militant incursion into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 from Tajikistan). My assumptions were that a) there were institutions in place that allowed the negotiating and settling of political differences between the republics and b) the governments perceived that there was a low level of external threat to the security of these republics and this kept the military from entering politics. With these assumptions in mind I designed my research and divided it into three stages. First, I completed background research and a historical review of military and security developments. Second, I conducted a series of interviews and survey studies. Third, I attempted to verify the findings of my research by comparing them with mainstream Western thought about politics in the region.

The first stage was relatively easy, but time consuming. There was a rich body of literature published during the last nine years on security issues in Central Asia, although many of the recent publications are of a prescriptive nature and ignore primary sources and data from these republics. After the disintegration of the USSR Kazakhstan emerged as a true superpower, possessing a nuclear weapons arsenal which easily matched those of France and England combined. However, the combined pressure from the US, other major Western powers and Russia, as well as the inability of the Kazakh national army and national security agencies to

protect the nuclear weapons, forced President Nazarbayev to give up the country's nuclear arsenal. A significant part of the Kazakhstani elite vigorously resisted this move, fearing the rise in power of the hard-line Russian nationalists who openly questioned the legitimacy of the existing borders between Russia and Kazakhstan and who demanded the cession of a large part of Kazakhstan to Russia. Yet President Nazarbayev decided to "trade in" the nuclear arsenal in exchange for the US-Kazakhstan treaty on Strategic Partnership, which guaranteed that Washington would "take seriously" any external threats to the territorial integrity and security of the country.

Meanwhile, all the Central Asian leaders had consistently supported the establishment of a multiple-level security system with as many international players involved in the region as possible, unanimously joining the Central Asian Forum, the CIS, the CIS Security Treaty, the OSCE, the NATO Partnership for Peace, etc. Initially, Uzbekistan emerged as a true regional superpower. As it had 25 million people, half the population of the region, it was able to build a strong army of over one hundred thousand, the largest in Central Asia. Uzbekistan managed both to avoid a steep transitional recession and to preserve its industrial base and military industrial enterprises. Moreover, the republic became self-sufficient in oil and gas as well as in refinery capacity. Meanwhile, it took nearly a decade for Kazakhstan to reform its national army and border guard troops, as its defense forces were chronically under-funded and its officer corps was plagued by accusations of corruption (an attempt to sell MIG-21s to North Korea is a case in point). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the government initially planned to get away with a small defense force of 4,000 to 6,000.