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**Reflections on Post-Soviet Development in Central Asia:**

**A Multi-disciplinary Perspective**

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**Introduction**

Newly gained sovereignty, uneven penetration of neo-liberal ideals, and the growth of disparate capitalist markets have elicited varied responses in Central Asia. The discourse of transition from communism to a free market economy and democracy has long disappeared from policy circles and has been replaced by a growing anxiety about the future of insular economies such as Uzbekistan and the fragility of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The region is increasingly buffeted between the fickle interests of China and Russia, and security-conscious Western policy objectives. Deepening instability and radicalisation in Pakistan and Afghanistan threaten even the modest achievements of post-Soviet states with the looming danger of Middle Eastern influences on regional politics with social fragmentation and the spread of radical jihadist movements.

The current literature does not fully capture the post-transition economic and social realities and development prospects of the region. What does development mean for the political class and for ordinary citizens? What are the effects of new capitalist institutions and markets? What impact did western development blueprints and external donor engagement leave in the region? Not only are these vast and difficult research problems they also present multiple challenges. Institutional interests of donors, corporations and security agencies skew priority research areas and funding. The region’s governments and ruling elite are hostile to academic scholarship that challenges their position and control. The cognitive distance between Western observers and Central Asians remains large and only major disasters and violent conflicts attract significant attention.

This special issue illuminates diverse realities of post-Soviet development in Central Asia through a multi-disciplinary prism[[1]](#footnote-1). The contributing articles are grounded in a range of social science disciplines including architecture, anthropology and geography, as well as drawing from mainstream social sciences. The analyses demonstrate how a synthesis of specialist knowledge from area studies and individual disciplinary methodologies can provide well-grounded critical positions on development. This sort of pluralistic, and somewhat eclectic, scholarship can best contribute to new perspectives on development philosophy and practice (Sen 1999; Nederveen 2010). Such an approach benefits, on the one hand, from dealing with features of contemporary capitalist processes and, on the other, from opening up new avenues of understanding and empowerment (Arsel and Dasgupta 2015).

The contributors to this volume present a wealth of positions and evidence. First, several papers illustrate how authoritarian regimes have diverted national resources towards the advancement of personalised power structures. This trajectory has emerged through highly opaque wealth allocation processes using disparate forms of market liberalisation taking advantage of newly acquired sovereignty. The choices and the interests of ruling elites and their legitimacy concerns have opportunistically shaped diverging forms of capitalism and governance structures in the region. Second, the uneven but steady penetration of foreign interests and external agencies reconfigures development rhetoric whilst they substitute the once Moscow-driven Soviet mega structure of re-allocation and distribution regimes. These external interventions bring about contestations over local power positions and development agendas. Finally, the issue highlights the complexities of everyday routines of dispossession and coping strategies in the face of natural and manmade disasters. These experiences create deep moral anxieties under the debilitating effects of monetisation and marketisation of ordinary livelihoods, social ties and environmental resources.

**Development trajectories: adaptations, interventions and experience**

Development trajectories in the region are contextualised broadly in relation to capitalist adaptations, foreign interventions and the everyday struggle to hold on to livelihoods and subsistence.

1. *Capitalist adaptations*: Several essays show how capitalist development in Central Asia can be seen through the lens of the spread of neo-liberal morals and its institutionalisation through policy templates by multi-lateral organisations, aid agencies and the global interdependencies of financial capital. Contrary to misleading perceptions of its economic isolation, Central Asia is not insulated from international capital movements. On the contrary, as the recent special issue of *Central Asian Survey* on “Offshore Central Asia” illustrates (Heathershaw and Cooley 2015), the region’s economic assets and natural resources are increasingly integrated into global value networks. Offshore accounts and money transactions show a complex interplay among multiple actors involving the region’s ruling elites, new business classes and western financial and legal institutions across multiple geographical domains.

Central Asia’s ruling elites attempt to legitimise their market dominance through political processes that lead to diverging outcomes. While Kazakhstan prefers a steady but controlled integration into world markets by allowing a degree of market participation through foreign direct investment in its rich energy reserves, Uzbekistan pursues an archaic model of import substitution and self-sufficiency to maintain narrow elite interests in the economy. These inter-linkages are not unique to Central Asia and the essays presented here fit into a broader puzzle around developing economies. Rather than a uniform orderly process, evidence points to many customised neo-liberal modes emerging with a range of paradoxes under diverse political ideologies (Özcan and Gündüz 2016). Contradictions of these adaptations are lucidly illustrated in a recent special issue of the *International Review of Political Economy* on the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) (Ban and Blyt, 2013). Analyses show, for example, how the Chinese Communist Party pursues market liberalisation and de facto privatisation while legitimising its stance by appealing to communist principles. Central Asia’s ruling elites try to chart their own course in a piecemeal manner while taking advantage of market capitalism and private ownership, albeit on the basis of weak state formations (Hale, 2014). The essays refer to such juxtapositions with evidence from urban aesthetics, industrial policies and features of local economies. One emerging form is the deepening authoritarianism with patrimonial leadership in countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan; the other is the hazardous dismantling of the state apparatus in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by partisan interests. As shown by Kudaibergenova President Nazarbayev’s ideological strategy in “Kazakhstan 2030” is primarily an exercise of control over regional economic and political elites and aims to guarantee legitimacy for the regime. The defensive position of Uzbekistan demonstrates the limits of protective policies in the context of trade liberalisation (see Teles Fazendeiro in this volume).

1. *Foreign interventions*: There is a multiplicity of competing international agendas in Central Asia for the penetration of global actors through trade, civilian and military aid, and diplomatic cooperation. The relative retreat of direct Russian involvement is increasingly substituted with new political and military cooperation and a customs union under Russia’s leadership. However, the region is no longer part of a tightly networked and self-sufficient realm as it was during the Soviet era. Nevertheless, the ruling elites’ economic interests in key industries have shaped their external relations and their receptivity to aid (Junusbai 2010). China’s steady penetration in energy markets and infrastructure investments, combined with the will of the EU and US to remain influential, lead to a messy brawl for influence through special deals and grants. China has also been pushing for alternative institutions as a means of extending its growing economic power (Pirani 2011). Some evidence from Chinese involvement in Africa points to a new form of influence on a grand scale (Tan-Mullins Mohan and Power 2010; Brautigam 2011).

Evidence points out that many aid programmes come at the expense of long-term sustained economic development because they have short-term horizons and create conflict with local initiatives. Yet, while Russia’s influence lacks economic vision, the achievement of Western assistance over the years has also been meagre. As identified by Babajanian and Ancker and Rechel in this volume, international aid has failed to enable state institutions and to create good governance for long-term sustainability. Kyrgyzstan is the case in point: while the country’s political elite manipulated their image to appear progressive to secure access to donor resources, international actors wilfully ignored the most debilitating aspects of their state institutions, corruption and poor accountability. This led to false pretensions about the achievements by both parties. This is no surprise to many scholars who have long emphasised that aid is a mechanism for power building in global politics (Sinha, 1974; Hattori 2001; Woods 2008).

iii) *Everyday* *experience*: Development outcomes are essentially about human experience and cognition. The essays here illustrate the complexity of everyday experience and the debilitating nature of fragmentation that inhibits the emergence of new social forces to shape better future prospects and visions for communities. At the micro-level, poor developmental outcomes lead to a diversity of coping strategies through everyday responses for survival (see the contributions of Botoeva and Ibañez-Tirado in this volume). These responses generate their own institutional forms that breed new patterns of inertia in the long run. Growing forms of illicit trade, the normalisation of corruption, and divided lives across borders through seasonal migration leave millions to their own devices in isolated geographies. Norms evolve to accept fuzzy morals while cynicism and loss of confidence in collective action bring about further hazards. Fading hope among the population for some form of equitable and just economic order is arguably the biggest hindrance to future development prospects for the region. This fragmentation leads to a tolerance of morally dubious positions. In Uzbekistan, due to limited political participation, market players have no voice or power beyond the superficial consultation rounds managed by top-down state organs. The regime maintains control of markets through its coercive bureaucracy and affiliated oligarchic groups eager to eliminate their business competitors (Özcan 2010). Uzbekistan’s economic management is best described by falsifications. Ordinary citizens are indoctrinated daily by an engineered history, official mottos and image making in a fashion similar to Soviet practices in generating a façade of uniformity and order. Paskaleva’s analysis on the architectural representation of history illustrates the spatial reflection of this overbearing state.

Although the emphasis of this volume is on the post-Soviet experience with the region’s diverse experiments in capitalism, legacy effects are persistent and interwoven within new institutional forms. Post-Soviet market development and new property ownership has been a function of Soviet era endowments and institutional structures (Gleason 2003; Özcan 2010). Central Asia’s transformation and transitional status presents similarities with other parts of the globe where earlier post-colonial experiments with national development and more recently neo-liberal policy templates brought about other forms of dependence at the expense of sovereignty. Therefore, the investigative frameworks and theoretical positions in this volume can usefully be applied to other sorts of local conditions elsewhere in the post-command economy (Kandiyoti 1996) and post-colonial world where the spread of neo-liberal economic opportunism has shifted the boundaries of markets and states to a new level of uncertainty with deepening control of multi-national enterprises. The key findings point out how development agendas and tools have been captured by powerful external agents and local power position holders, especially as far as organising economic activities are concerned. This resonates with the cycles of power and repositioning of local rulers from the Tsarist Russian Empire to the Soviet Union (Sabol 2003; Cummings and Hinnebusch 2011). The latter is significant not just as an example of modernising affirmative empire (Martin 2001) but more so an imposing institutional hubris far beyond the reach of Central Asia’s influence and resolve (Payne 2001; Khalid 2007; Cummings 2012). However, the fine line between newly gained post-Soviet sovereignty and market liberalism offers possibilities of choice for local actors in modifying allocation regimes and economic opportunities to opt for broader versus narrower participation. Thus, emerging differences between inclusive versus exclusive institutions for economic development, as shown by historical experiences around the world, generate starkly different outcomes (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). If Kazakhstan manages to achieve this broader participation by widening economic opportunities to larger segments of societal actors on an equal footing, it may indeed become a development success story in the region for others to emulate.

**Between pretence and reality**

The collection starts with Elena Paskaleva’s analysis of the evolving relationship between aesthetics and politics in post-Soviet urban development in Uzbekistan. In addition to the commercialisation of the historical past, the study shows how, throughout the two decades of Uzbek independence, key Timurid monuments have been considerably rebuilt to emphasise the symbolic legitimation of power maintenance (Cummings 2012). Restoration and the landscape manipulation of leading monuments frequently distort historical artefacts for the sake of a political ideology. Often these provide the public with messages about authoritarianism, as once the Soviets did for their own ideological advancement. Paskaleva contributes to critical heritage studies and urban development as a narrative of power making and relational space (Harvey 2009).

The following three articles tackle the state of development practice and prospects at the national level. Diana Kudaibergenova questions the ideology of development and legitimation in Kazakhstan’s “2030 vision” while the analysis of Marzhan Thomas examines the legacy effects of the social, environmental and economic sustainability of Kazakhstan. According to the thesis of Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro, Uzbekistan’s self-reliance shapes its relations with Russia and the future of its key industries built during the Soviet Union. Kudaibergenova’s textual analysis of the strategy document of “Kazakhstan 2030” and its origins points out how its seven tautological priorities form a substitution of ideology under the leadership of its long term president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Its nationalising mission seeks a popular legitimisation while its critical support base rests on regional elites and interest based clans for the creation of a stable socio-political and economic foundation. Regional alliances as well as the clashes stem from the vested interests in exploitation of Kazakhstan’s rich mineral and energy resources. This extractive industry and commodity-focused development trajectory leads to a path dependent continuity under state sponsored capitalism with a new concentration of private wealth.

The study by Thomas puts prosperity into a historical perspective while providing a first comprehensive attempt to analyse sustainability in Kazakhstan through a longitudinal analysis. She shows how most regions but especially northern ones faced rapid environmental degradation and exploitation during the Soviet Union. One of the most striking figures shows the forty-year (1917 to 1957) population depletion, mostly due to famine, war and forced migration. Her study points out that, despite improvements in income and prosperity, the transition to a market economy did not significantly diminish economic dependency on natural resources and regional inequalities in the country. However, in her final note Thomas provides some optimism for future growth potential as the Kazakh economy has more room for manoeuvre than its highly constrained Central Asian neighbours such as Uzbekistan and surprisingly might even do better than Russia in the long run. However, this all depends on the sustainability of political institutions and management of resources.

Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro’s analysis, based on a narrative developed through a “logic of appropriateness”, reveals how the Uzbek government under the authoritarian leadership of Islam Karimov followed a different trajectory from Kazakhstan’s steady but cautious integration into the world economy. In managing their key economic assets and enterprises, Uzbek governments pursued self-reliance characterised by the rules of control and stability, self-sufficiency, and the promotion of manufacturing and pursuing economic growth via mercantilism. However, the strict adherence to these rules has produced economically damaging outcomes for the country as it narrowed the scope of business opportunities and enterprise development. Self-reliance shaped the negotiations between Tashkent and Moscow for the survival of the only aircraft production facility, which was located in Uzbekistan but connected to a range of suppliers in Russia. Uzbekistan did not compromise with its obsession with self-reliance while Moscow held the major assets and research expertise; they found self-reliance incompatible with a bilateral collaboration. Uzbeks had to relinquish their aircraft production in the end.

The next line of contributions question the efficacy and the impact of international aid on the region’s development trajectories. Babken Babajanian provides a compelling assessment of the World Bank’s Village Investment Projects (VIP) while Svetlana Ancker and Bernd Rechel examine the role of western actors in HIV/AIDS policy in Kyrgyzstan. These essays highlight the ways in which Central Asia’s small nations (such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) are vulnerable and the region’s elites are dependent on major external donors to maintain a degree of economic and social provision. Babajanian’s paper, based on in-depth interviews and group discussions in 16 poor rural communities in Chuy, Naryn, Issyk-Kyl and Osh regions, examines the extent to which VIP enabled people to influence decision-making about micro-project priorities and to exact accountability from their leaders. The evidence presented here sheds light on the limits of community participation and provides a contextual understanding of the barriers to empowerment and deepening intra-communal mistrust in the use of funds. These findings challenge managerial and performance indicators of the bank, which do not allow inference about how micro-projects affect social relations, power dynamics and institutional structures in local communities. The bottom-up development model was not sufficient to enable people to exercise power in the absence of effective horizontal accountability institutions within the state.

The analysis of Ancker and Rechel is equally critical of the managerial superficialities of global operations of international aid organisations. Despite significant transfers of know-how and funding in tackling HIV/AIDS, the interactions between donors and local recipient organisations have not been easy. Using “soft” and “hard” power through ideational influence and financial support, donors have been exerting pressure to adopt certain international policies and guidelines. They also focus on programmatic priorities and funding requirements, often at the expense of the local stakeholders’ authority and the country’s real needs. High levels of international aid, coupled with the lack of transparency and accountability, created free riders disguised in glossy project templates and reporting systems. This leads to “virtual realities” through which vested interest are maintained. These grim findings on the outcomes of Western development assistance should be compared to and contrasted with the growing and highly opaque presence of China in Central Asia.

Moving away from this big picture to tangible consequences, the issue closes with two gripping studies of local realities and individual experiences from everyday life. Gulzat Botoevashows how neo-liberal ideas about individual freedoms penetrated Kyrgyz society with the view that each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. The shock economic therapy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund created uneven but strong market economy effects that modified and commoditised the moral economy. Botoeva shows that money from hashish growing plays an important role in sustaining reciprocal relationships between families and is intertwined with gift giving practices, conditional relationships between well-off and poor families, and the monetisation of social ties. These findings indicate that capitalist relations fundamentally alter individuals’ social standing, moral values and the formation of social networks. The amount of money one can splash out in social ceremonies and gift-giving exchanges determines the size and strength of social ties. Those who cannot afford these simply get left out and end up with poorer networks of their like. The paper’s findings contribute to the theories of moral economy (Booth 1994; Browne and Milgram 2008) while also elaborating on how monetisation of gift giving transforms social networks into more layered and stratified dependencies.

Finally, Diana Ibañez-Tirado’s sobering account of the everyday life of ordinary people explores their harrowing experiences in a Tajik town, Kulob. Her analysis seeks to advance the notion of “everyday disasters” to explain the imprecise boundaries between catastrophic events and daily lives as experienced by her informants and referred to by them as everlasting, yet “normal” disasters; and secondly, these events’ negative effects encompass the course of daily lives. Ibañez-Tirado demonstrates the importance that Kulob residents pay to joking and cunning as a means of enduring and circumnavigating disastrous events towards everydayness. They avoid presenting themselves straightforwardly as amoral cheaters, pitiful victims of floods or of structural violence, or passive objects of economic crises that are beyond the scope of their agency. Through these acts of accommodation, individuals attempt to establish themselves as moral subjects, rather than simple victims (Anderson 2013). Yet, while this coping strategy allows a dignified survival, it is also interwoven with a deepening cognitive stance that normalises victimhood and helplessness.

**Postscript**

Central Asia continues to pose many challenges for fieldwork-based research. Not only are Soviet era statistics and official categories of very limited use, meanings and experiences are in constant flux. The contributors to this volume mostly rely on first-hand data. Fazendeiro and Thomas make good use of secondary material in different domains that can widen the scope of macro-level analysis in areas where there is little or no academic coverage. Thomas’s work on long-term sustainability indicators, in particular, highlights the further possibilities of using national statistics, which enable longitudinal analyses to contextualise post-Soviet development trajectories with the Soviet past.

Most contributors’ engagement with their research topics and methodologies are novel and essentially qualitative in nature, sometimes supported with available statistics. They involve risks and personal sacrifices that those of us who work and travel in the region know well. Their accounts are vivid and compelling. Babajanian’s work captures the implementation of community driven projects in the context of local power relations, which pervaded the micro-project processes and contributed to distrust and misunderstanding, in contrast to the metrics used by donors to show successful project completions. Ibañez-Tirado’s persuasive account of the normalisation of everyday disasters and the lack of development illustrates the double edged sword of normality that takes us to the ordinary lives and her own experience of a devastating flood. Mingling among hashish farmers as a guest, Botoeva recounts how hashish money emerges as a justified moral means of survival. Her analysis is in an especially high-risk area that many scholars and institutions would choose to avoid. The years of conservation work and the encounters of Paskaleva in Uzbekistan provide a wealth of evidence about the changing meanings of space and architecture under redesigned power.

However, qualitative methodological perspectives have their own limits as well. The local context and the nature of access shape the contours of research encounters. Some information is collected through publically available sources while most others are gathered through snowballing techniques and personal encounters throughout long periods of personal dedication and time commitments. The skill of the researcher, the level of receptivity of local communities, and local conditions circumscribe the boundaries of interaction and knowledge building.

Nevertheless, the empirical insights presented here are immensely valuable for a region where fieldwork access presents risks and is subject to suspicion and scrutiny. State officials hold non-technical social science in contempt. Even if they are persuaded, officials find it hard to appreciate the need for and utility of scholarly research. The combination of suspicion and lack of exposure to diverse research techniques may lead to awkward encounters. When I was carrying out a small business questionnaire to identify entrepreneurial development paths with the firms that benefitted from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)-run micro-credit lending, I had to go through a money laundering and fraud check with a Kazakh bank official. At the end of a thorough interview, I also had to sign several dubious forms. The situation is most challenging in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It is, therefore, no coincidence that, despite our efforts and calls in diverse scholarly forums, we have not been able to secure a contribution on Turkmenistan. Ordinary people are also weary of being questioned on issues that at the end do not contribute to their well-being. With some sympathy one can understand their frustration with unaccountable power games, poor economic outcomes and the growing sense of uncertainty of post-Soviet trajectories.

Authorities sometimes see researchers as outside agents with suspicious intentions[[2]](#footnote-2). There is also another worrying trend in the realm of creeping bureaucratisation and regulation of scholarship in UK universities. The growing number of procedural barriers in the form of approval forms, ethical panels and layers of other research control mechanisms dissuade imaginative and risk-taking approaches by aiming to formalise every iota of intellectual inquiry in a risk averse manner. While funding for open call fieldwork driven research is diminishing, politicisation of grant giving priorities and selective judgments about the “value for money” narrow the scope of possibilities. Area studies seem to be suffering most from these trends.

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1. The second Eurasian Studies Society Doctoral Workshop in January 2014, which I organised along with Diana Kudaibergenova and Sevket Akyildiz at Senate House in London, focused on the theme of “Social and Economic Development in Central Asia: Theory and Practice” prepared the ground for this collaborative project. All contributing articles here originate from recently completed doctoral theses or post-doctoral research projects. Since we began working on the issue, several contributing authors have successfully completed their PhD studies. Each article went through two cycles of paper development stages. During the first stage the authors read and discussed each other’s work. Later article submissions went through the external review process of Central Asian Survey. This production method enhanced the cross-disciplinary character and the originality of the volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The scholarly community was shocked by the news of a Tajik doctoral student’s arrest in 2014. He was carrying out interviews for an academic study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK and held several weeks in captivity by Tajik security forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)