Bifurcated Ethnicities: Identity Perception among Young Uzbeks in Osh[1]

Abstract

After the demise of the Soviet Union, the mainstream of ethnic conflicts sprang out of people's perception of dissolution by political borders as a principal hazard to their cultural unity and ethnic identity. This study illuminates how the detached ethnicities determine, formulate and transform their collective identities, drawing on the case of young Uzbeks in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. The case is unique because all of the separatism elements of the conflict; the region did not experience strong self-determination statements by the Uzbeks in Osh and irredentism policy by Uzbekistan. Qualitative method – semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed as a research tool. Interviews enclosed twenty Uzbek people living in Osh city. Paper reveals that divided ethnic minorities could not be an integral part of the nation-building process due to reciprocal threat perception of state and ethnic minority, uprising religious identity, the state's antagonistic policy approach towards ethno-symbolic elements and political participation.

Keywords: Uzbeks, Osh, Kyrgyz, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, identity, irredentism

Introduction

The Fergana Valley is the most densely populated, ethnically diverse and culturally complex region of Central Asia. This region presents a unique case regarding research where the Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks live under harsh economic conditions, suffering from scarce water and land resources, political and institutional disorder, in addition to excessive ethnic and religious identity clashes, extremism, and border insecurities.

Following the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the landscape of this massive empire saw an abrupt rise in ethnic conflicts, which mainly stemmed from people's perception of the separation by political borders and resilient will of irredentism, like Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh had passed through. The case of Osh is ominously peculiar as, despite the existence of all the momentous triggers of secessionism in this tumultuous region, Uzbeks did not purposefully seek independence or attempted to unite with Uzbekistan through distinct acts in territorializing the Uzbek identity.

By the early 1960s, Osh had already become one of the newly industrialized cities in the region, and to uphold this progress, many young Kyrgyzs were being encouraged to relocate from rural areas to the urban setting of this city in order to provide for the much-needed labor capital for manufacturing[2]. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the production chain disrupted, and this inadvertently caused a major economic recession in industrial centers of this country, Osh not being an exception. The unemployment rate soared in the region, which resulted in a harsh competition between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs that quickly transformed into an ethnic-based confrontation[3]. The limited land and economic resources of Osh city were not enough for both sides, which unwittingly left the young (for 79% of protestors were young), homeless and unemployed Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz amid of this heightened tension[4]. Hence, when the very first protests erupted with the declaration of the Kyrgyz language as the official language of the state, the rift between the peoples (Kyrgyz and Uzbeks) of the region that was already under a massive pressure

[1] This article was written in the framework of the collective project launched by the George Washington University's Central Asia Program, Nazarbayev University and National Analytical Center on National Identity and Youth in Central Asia.

[2] Olzak, Susan. "Does Globalization Breed Ethnic Discontent", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no 1 (2011): 7-9.

[3] Razakov, Talant. *Osh Koogalani (*Osh Conflict*)*, (Bishkek: Neo Print, 2011): 12.

[4] Tishkov, Valery. "Don't kill me, I'm a Kyrgyz", *Journal of Peace Research* 32, no. 2(1995): 133-49

and the widespread ideas of local nationalism, the right to self-determination of minorities had finally reached the breaking point[5]. One of the voiced demands that the Uzbek communities addressed with the Kyrgyz government was the state regulation about the ethnic composition of officials in city administration and public service.

On the other hand, the Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan were not only petitioning for official recognition of Uzbek language as a state language, but also a greater autonomy status in Uzbek-inhabited regions[6]. The first incidents in Osh based on economic motives rather than any cases of cultural or ethnic segregation against the Uzbek population. This situation, however, did not persist once the newly established Uzbek and Kyrgyz political organizations (Adolat and Osh Aimagi) managed to successfully shift the scope of the conflict from an economic landscape to an ethnic platform. The involvement of Kyrgyz President Akayev, whose egalitarian slogan - "Kyrgyzstan is our shared home" was a trendy gimmick in the elections and was successful in terms of pacifying the tension in Kyrgyzstan; however, years after he vacated the office, Osh once again became the crux of ethnic-based tensions between Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz following the coup of President Bakiyev. The incidents in Osh in 2010 were particularly notable concerning the forefront involvement of young Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz once again in the protests that ended in numerous deaths on both sides and thousands of Uzbek refugees fleeing to Uzbekistan[7].

In brief, by considering all the issues discussed above, this paper aims to study identity perception among the young Uzbeks in the Osh region in order to analyze the identity formation and its presented impediments to nation-building in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The quest of national identity formation is problematic in Kyrgyz case because ethnic, national and religious identity perceptions significantly contradict the Kyrgyz framework, which, in turn, shapes the society, as well as the domestic policy of this country.

Literature Review and Definitions of Theoretical Pillars

In examining the ethnic identity composition in Central Asia, there is academic solidarity that many of those identities constructed during the early Soviet period[8]. Given literature underscores the fact that modern Uzbek ethnicity ponderously based on the sedentary Persian "Sart" and nomadic Turkic identity. Morgan's research stresses on "mahalla" idiomatic concept in the realization of Uzbek identity in Osh, not as an ethnic term, but concerning a moral community, territory, Soviet and post-Soviet existence, and Islamic discourse[9]. Nick Megoran's focus group discussions reveal that for the residents of Osh, "Uzbekness" embraces kinship networks that meaningfully associate Uzbeks in Osh and Uzbekistan[10]. However, it does not mean that "Uzbekness" for residents of Osh only accomplice with the ethnic kinship. Fumagalli argues that Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan rejects

[5] Knyazev Aleksandr. *Vektori I Paradigmi Kirgizskoi Nezavisimosti (*Vectors and Paradigms of Kyrgyz Independence*),* (Bishkek: Printhouse, 2012): 7-25.

[6] Yaman, Ali, "*Fergana Vadisi: Orta Asyanın Jeopolitik ve Stratejik Merkezi* (Fergana Valley: Geopolitic and Strategic Center)", *Dunya Chalishmalari 1*, (2010): 59

[7] Razakov, Osh Conflict, 12

[8] Barth, Frederick. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969): 14, Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. (London: New Left Books, 1983): 44, Handler, Richard, Nationalism and Politics of Culture in Quebec. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988): 21, Tishkov, "Don't kill me, I'm a Kyrgyz*", 133-49*

[9] Morgan, Liu, "*Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh"*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012): 105-25

[10] Megoran, Nick, *"The Borders of Eternal Friendship? The Politics and Pain of Nationalism and Identity along the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary, 1999–2000".* (PhD diss., Sussex: Sussex College, Cambridge, 2002): 253-277

"diasporic" identity and contemplates that they are indigenous dwellers of the region and being Uzbek also means being an original resident of Osh[11].

Furthermore, Olcott underlines "regionalism" as a defining point in Uzbek identity in southern Kyrgyzstan. However, in all circumstances, the Kyrgyz government treated Uzbek identity as an impediment to their nation-building strategy[12]. McDowell's observation found out that the first and the second Osh riots significantly caused "de-ethicizing" of Uzbeks in Osh through the elimination of symbolic elements of "Uzbekness," like language teaching in Uzbek, or university entrance exams in that language, etc[13].

In studying ethnicity issues and nation-building politics in the Post-Soviet region, particularly, in Kyrgyzstan, it should be considered that these two concepts significantly contradict and a single explanatory theory could not rationalize it in a given case. Hale claims that ethnicity is a way of uncertainty reduction, but ethnic politics is mainly about interests[14]. Therefore, understanding top-down - nation-building politics in Kyrgyzstan from the Kyrgyz centric "ethnocratic" interests and reviewing the ethnic identity perception and measures, a bottom-up approach, of young Uzbeks in Osh entails two or more different theoretical approaches.

Brubaker's "Nationalizing States" theory expressively rationalizes the issues in the Post Soviet region. As Brubaker states, there are three types of states in the world: 'civic states,' 'bi-national states' and 'nationalizing states'[15]. In our case study, Kyrgyzstan is considered to be within the third group. Brubaker argues that: "these are the states that are conceived by their dominant elites as nation-states, as the states of and for particular nations, yet as 'incomplete' or 'unrealized' nation-states, as insufficiently 'national' in a variety of senses"[16]. Brubaker examines nationalism from the four analytical magnitudes: "ethno-political demography, language selection, institutional framework, and economic factors[17]. He states that nationalization empowers the titular nation and its authority, where ethno-national boundaries are firm and quasi-racial[18]. The nationalization policy in Kyrgyzstan meets with these features, where the system-formal and informal public institutions focus on endowing the core Kyrgyz ethnicity. Hence, examining nationalism in the context of Kyrgyzstan, in reality, reflects an ethnic dominance and empowerment of Kyrgyz ethnic group and civic nationalism may not be the case that rationalizes the Kyrgyz paradigm. As Brubaker claims, nationality was principally intended for ethnic identity, and not citizenship in the context of the Post-Soviet region. As the polity, ethnopolitical demography and economic factors in Kyrgyzstan concentrate on the consolidation of power under Kyrgyz ethnic group, and this theoretically and practically limits the political participation of ethnic Uzbeks in the central (presidency, a cabinet, and senior posts in the administration) authority[19]. As Andreas Wimmer, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Brian Min argue, "an ethnic category is politically relevant and being part of the national identity if at least one significant political actor (institution) claims to represent the interests of that group in the national political arena"[20]. Taking this into account, I hypothesize #1 that:

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[11]Fumagalli, Matteo, Framing Ethnic Minority Mobilization in Central Asia: The Cases of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, *Europe-Asia Studies 59, no. 4 (2007): 567-590*

[12]Olcott, Martha, National Consolidation: Ethnic, Regional, and Historical Challenges, *Harvard International Review 22*, no. 1 (2000): 50-54,

[13]McDowell, Christopher. Death to Sarts: A Complex Central Asian Insult. *Anthropology Today,* 28, no 6 (2012), 22-24.

[14]Hale, Henry, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World, (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 3

[15]Brubaker, Rogers. "Nationalizing states in the old 'New Europe' – and the new", *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 19, no 2(1996)*: 411.

[16]Ibid., 411

[17]Brubaker, Rogers. Nationalizing states revisited: projects and processes of nationalization in post-Soviet states, *Ethnic and Racial Studies 34, no 11*, (2011) DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2011.579137

[18] Ibid., DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2011.579137

[19] Ibid., DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2011.579137

[20]Andreas Wimmer, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Brian Min, "Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict. A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Dataset", *American Sociological Review 74, no 2,* (2009): 316–337.

> "Limited political participation of the Uzbek minority in the central government discourages young Uzbeks from being part of the nation-building process in Kyrgyzstan."

There are various rationalizations in defining ethnicity and ethnic identity. Carment argues that six indicators could be used to define ethnic identity: race, kinship, religion, language, shared customs, regionalism[21]. However, Kruger emphasizes the role of culture as a foremost measure on defining the ethnic identity[22]. Barth states that the straightforward classifications of ethnicity are the borders and self-definition that distinguishes one group of people from others[23]. For Barth, ethnic boundaries are psychological and based on mutual perceptions, rather than objective cultural distinctiveness.

According to Anthony Smith, there are four main paradigms explaining nationalism and ethnicity: primordialism, perennials, modernism, and ethno-symbolism[24]. Ethno-symbolism appears as a theoretical model that best fits Uzbek's case in Osh, which significantly underlines the importance of an ethnic past (myths, symbols, memories, values, and traditions) by focusing on ethnicity as a constructible concept. Smith argues that contemporary phase of ethnicity did not very far remove from "emergence of the complex social and ethnic formations of an earlier epoch, and the different kinds of ethnie, which modern forces transform, but never obliterate"[25]. Smith described ethnie as 'a named community of shared origin myths, memories and one or more element(s) of common culture, including an association with a specific territory.' Ethno-symbolists argue that modern nations ought to contextualize because they cannot be perceived without considering their ethnic forebears. Ethno-symbolism focuses on symbolic ambitions, like education in a specific language, having media and broadcasting in particular language and protection of historically significant places. This theory significantly explains the ethnicity from the perspectives of the emotional dominance of collective memories. John A. Armstrong, in his explanation of ethno-symbolism, highlighted the importance of "la longue durée" – historicity of ethnic consciousness[26]. He defined the following factors as symbolic boundary mechanisms: "ways of life (the nomadic and the sedentary), religion, city, polity, and language." Taking several factors, such as the linguistic, cultural and kinship similarities of Uzbek and their informal social and economic links with the titular nation of Uzbekistan and dissimilarities between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs, into account, it could be hypothesized #2 that:

> "Ethnic sense of identity would be superior to civic identity among Uzbeks that were divided by political borders."

In truth, Uzbeks in Osh hold somewhat different ways of life, language, ethnic, historical formation, and collective memories than Kyrgyz people do. However, there are some other symbolic factors, like the level of religiosity and narratives that somehow detach Uzbeks in Osh and Uzbekistan. As Morgan's anthropological findings underline, Uzbeks

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[21]Carment, David. "The International Dimensions of Internal Conflicts", *Journal of Peace Research 30, no 2* (1993): 12.

[22]Kruger, Peter. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Case Studies in Their Intrinsic Tension and Political Dynamics*, (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1993): 12.

[23]Barth, Frederick. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969): 14.

[24]Smith, Anthony. "*Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: a Cultural approach"*. (London: Routledge, 2009): 3-21

[25]Smith, Anthony. "*Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era".* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013): 59-60

[26]Armstrong, John*. "Nations before Nationalism"*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982): 6–7.

in Osh treated as "doubly disqualified by the two nation-states that they have relatively more moral values and economic ties".[27]

Methodology and Data Collection

The current study will employ qualitative research methodology using semi-structured interviews with roughly 18 questions (*Appendix 1*) in order to recognize the factors contributing to Uzbek identity perception. The one drawback of the interview method is its subjective approach towards issues of both the interviewee and interviewer. As Lohfeld and Sale claim, the findings of qualitative research should refer to an individual's attitude and perceptions[28]. Moreover, Cohen et al. also argue that a semi-structured interview method is a tool that provides a whole side of facts and thoughts that associated with ethnicity perceptions from normative and descriptive stands[29]. In the case of Uzbek community, their perception, experiences, and narratives regarding their identity, supposedly, will not significantly differ from one another in Osh and its vicinities, due to the ethnic, religious and historical distinctiveness of the Uzbek people. In order to test the hypothesis, I employed semi-structured interviews (the usual duration being 60 minutes) with Uzbeks in Osh. On the onset of research, twenty interviews conducted with Uzbek residents to assess the issues ranging with the identity topic.

Twenty Uzbeks (*Appendix 2*) interviewed between the 9th and 20th of May and the 7th and 14th of September 2018 with the help of a young Uzbek man, as a translator who lives in Osh. Fifteen out of twenty were young Uzbeks between 18-29 years with different educational background and marital status, and the rest (5) were from older generations who witnessed the first Osh incidents and were themselves a part of the younger generation in those years. All interviewees were connected and directed through a convenience sampling method with a small introduction about the aim of research and its confidentiality principles. In fact, random selection and a broader number of sampling put researchers and interviewees into the risky episodes as the Uzbek people enormously feared of secret service and police. The interviews were employed in both, private and public places, with the personal preference of the interviewees.

Ethnic Consciousness and Nation Building or Nationalizing the State

After the extended border delimitation of Central Asia from 1924 until 1936, the many Uzbek inhabited regions, such as Osh, Jalal Abad, and its vicinities, under various pretenses were given to the newly established Kyrgyz SSR instead of the Uzbek SSR. Nick Megoran argues that the motive behind Moscow preferring this particular plan of action was because of its divide-and-rule policy, which, in this case, aimed to discredit the nationalist Uzbeks in the region[30]. Rahimov and Urazaeva believe that the Soviet's intention in drawing borders between Central Asian countries was fundamentally grounded, surprisingly, not in ethnic or nationalistic factors, but economic factors[31]. Morrison claims that leaving Osh city under Kyrgyz rule aimed to develop the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan where ethnic Kyrgyz led a nomadic life as opposed to well-urbanized Uzbeks

[27]Morgan, Liu, "*Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh"*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012): 3

[28]Sale, Joanna, and et. al. "Revisiting the Quantitative-Qualitative Debate: Implications for Mixed-Methods" *Research in Quality and Quantity 36, no 1*, (1957): 43-53.

[29]Cohen, Louis, and et. al. "Research Methods in Education", *London: Routledge, (2011*):267.

[30]Megoran, Nick. *"The Borders of Eternal Friendship? The Politics and Pain of Nationalism and Identity along the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary, 1999–2000"*. (PhD diss., Sidney Sussex Sussex College, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2002): 35-38

[31]Rahimov Mirzohid, Urazaeva Galina. "Central Asia Nations and Border issues", *Central Asia Series*. UK. 05, no 10 (2011): 26.

and their sedentary lifestyle[32]. In fact, various ethnicities (sedentary Sarts, speaking a mix of Persian and Turkic speaking nonhomogeneous pastoral-nomadic groups who registered as Uzbek during the Soviet period) under Uzbek identity, and Jaghatay (Tashkent) dialect were enforced on the majority of the population by the Soviet regime[33]. In 1924, the Soviet authorities restricted the official use of "Sart" as a name of ethnicity, and many Turkic and Persian-speaking people (Tajiks) registered under Uzbek identity [34]. According to interviews with Uzbeks, in the street level, Kyrgyz people abusing Uzbeks with an epithet – "Sart," which in that occasion denotes, "yellow dog" – derogatory term with vile ethnic implications. Kyrgyz's negative Uzbek-Sart perception infers Uzbek's Persian-Tajik roots (linguistic base split-up between Turkic Kyrgyzs and non-Turkic ethnicities), and this title alone has a profound historical background.

Considering its historical-ethnic basis, the specific narratives that encourage conflict between Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks (Sarts) have several economic and social triggers that gave the room for the clash between two ethnicities. Towards the end of the 1980s, decreasing living standards, scarce economic and land resources, political inactivity and ineffectiveness in Soviet Kyrgyzstan all contributed to the full-blown interethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs. The earliest cracks in the relationship between Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnicities started over inadequate housing and land resources. Moreover, Kyrgyzs as the dominant and titular ethnic group managed to capture the central administrative positions in government, in addition to the local government and police services in the Osh region during 1980-1990's.

When the nationalist organization - "Osh Aimagy" was established and started demonstrations in Frunze as the main supporter of housing and land rights for the Kyrgyz people in "Uzbek's regions", in response Uzbeks founded the "Adolat" organization that challenged the Kyrgyz nationalists by claiming several cultural privileges and autonomy for the Uzbek minority [35]. In 1990, a group of Uzbek "aksakals" from the South region appealed to the leadership of the USSR demanding to create autonomy, granting the highest status for the Uzbek language, establishing a cultural center for Uzbeks, Uzbek studies under Osh Pedagogical University and changing the Kyrgyz mayor of the Osh city. The first incidents between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs commenced as socio-economic concerns of both ethnicities but ended up with the requests of social and cultural rights and equity for Uzbeks. The Kyrgyz government's incompatible nationalistic policy affected the situation and caused a failure of the Kyrgyz government in Osh that resulted from people's growing distrust of the leaders.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many former Soviet republics faced with a significant dilemma: they either had to acknowledge the multiethnic structure of their newly-independent country and the diverse languages that were spoken in it, as well as giving rights to those ethnicities; or emphasize their dominant titular nation, as Kyrgyzstan did, and disregard the rest. From practice, this is known to open the ground for intense interethnic conflicts (case and point, again, Kyrgyzstan). As a result of this kind of conservative policy outlook, the central government of Kyrgyzstan had lost the chance to build on the civic nationalism in the country and establish Kyrgyzstan as a country with unity and integrity all around.

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[32]Morrison, Alexander. "Stalin's Giant Pencil: Debunking a Myth About Central Asia's Borders", February 13, 2017. Available at: https://eurasianet.org/s/stalins-giant-pencil-debunking-a-myth-about-central-asias-borders.

[33]Abazov, Rafis, "*Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics", (London:* Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007): 15

[34]Rezvani, Babak. *Ethno-territorial conflict and coexistence in the Caucasus*, Central Asia and Fereydan, (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2013): 158.

[35]Husky, Eugene. "*Kyrgyzstan: The Politics of Demographic and Economic Frustration",* (ed.) Ian. Bremmer and Ray. Taras *in "New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations"*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 655–680.

After Akayev's election as the president of the new Republic, he realized the two-sided nationalism policy. On the one hand, Akayev was adamant about retaining the ethnic symbolic factors while promoting the Kyrgyz national epic – Manas. Akaev propositioned Manas as a "companion for our life today" and the main spiritual guide for Kyrgyz identity[36]. On the other hand, Akayev was showing a decisive stance about more inclusive policy - civic nationalism - "Kyrgyzstan - Our Common Home" in order to balance the situation with minorities. In his book, Akayev argued[37]:

> *"The national idea "Kyrgyzstan – our common home," which I proposed in 1993, summarized all of my reflections at that time. The idea was a true revelation for me. It gave me a clear vision as of how I should play my part in forming the new structure of the Kyrgyz government …"*

The reality, however, was slightly different from what Akayev expressed in his slogans. In 1993, just after the declaration of "Kyrgyzstan – our common home" motto, the government changed the electoral system in favour of ethnic Kyrgyzs, while limiting the political participation of Uzbeks in parliament. The government established larger voting districts, where areas with compact Uzbek demographic now intermingled with ethnic Kyrgyz regions. Ethnic Uzbeks, who consisted 13 percent of the overall population in 1995, occupied only 6 percent of seats in a new National Assembly[38]. As a long term result of this "small" change, elected party lists to the Supreme Council included 3.6 percent of ethnic Uzbeks in 2010[39] and nearly the same situation (12 percent of seat allocated to minorities, including Uzbeks) observed in 2015's election[40].

In 2010, ethnic tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs in the South of the country relapsed with the expulsion of the president Bakiyev. Bakiyev refused to implement sensitive ethnic policy and in many cases disregarded minorities including Uzbeks. In January 2010, representatives of Uzbek Cultural Center addressed the Bakiyev government, requesting anticorruption plan and defining his position towards Uzbeks and against the discrimination they faced. However, Uzbeks were left disappointed with Bakiyev's lack of national policy and clan oriented approach to the governance. The interim government was the next hope for Uzbeks in building equality and equity, but the Kyrgyz in the south continued to support Bakiyev because he represented South Kyrgyz clan in central government. The political crash in the south briskly turned into the ethnic conflict in Osh and Jalal-Abad. Economic inequality, social unfairness, political and social discrimination against Uzbeks were again the core causes in the second conflict that resulted in a death toll of 470, as well as 400,000 more IDPs and refugees. Kyrgyz government and security organizations tried to link the riots in Osh and Jalal-Abad to the Islamic movements intending to avoid ethnic motivation of the conflict.

The majority of interviewed Uzbeks think that the second Osh incidents were more of an elite struggle and lack of political representation in central government that limited protection of Uzbek rights, which only later escalated into an ethnic conflict. A 29-year old Uzbek man (the codified name being 1) with secondary education says:

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[36]David Gullette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and Tribalism,* (Kent: Global Oriental, 2010): 48.

[37]Akayev, Askar. *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos "Manas"*, (New-York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2003): 221

[38]Husky, Eugene. *"Kyrgyzstan: The Fate of Political Liberalization,"* (ed). Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott *in Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 259-263

[39]OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report, *"Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Elections*", (2010): 17, Available at: https://www.osce.org/odihr/74649?download=true, Last accessed:26.07.2018

[40]OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report, *"Kyrgyz Republic Parliamentary Elections*", (2016): 17-18, Available at: https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/374740?download=true, Last accessed: 26.07.2018

"It was a struggle of politicians; the grassroots were included only as an instrument…Uzbeks were not responsible for any problem from their side; they just dragged into this conflict, and nobody sheltered Uzbek rights in Bishkek."

Viewing the situation in this light, as Wimmer argues that ethnicities that participate in the central government significantly adhere to the national ideology and citizenship or vice versa. It might be argued that ethnic Uzbeks have a minimal contribution to the civic nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, due to institutional impediments, and the Kyrgyz government's skeptic policy outlook, Uzbeks had a very narrow-scoped political participation in the parliament, public service, as well as in government positions. Uzbeks complain that Kyrgyz nationals occupied almost all local administrative positions, including police and law enforcement organizations. In interviews, a 25-year old Uzbek woman (coded under 2) argues that:

"The police system has become mono-ethnic…. and Kyrgyz police are not afraid of showing a deliberate preference in protecting the Kyrgyz people over us, and they can be very biased."

Uzbeks ominously complain in a street-level bureaucracy in Kyrgyzstan, but they do not care about political participation in the central government. Many of them believe that one strong political leader may solve their problems rather than one group of ethnic Uzbeks in parliament or anywhere in Bishkek. The interviewee 11 (27 years old Uzbek woman with higher education) very clearly generalize Uzbeks' attitude towards political participation by stating that:

"My opinion is, Kyrgyzstan must have a strong leader, who can unify the state and people and act equally towards any citizen without paying attention to ethnicity. Moreover, according to Islam, the people also have to obey the leader of the nation. Before that, we should elect the appropriate leader, who deserve obeying."

Another young Uzbek man with secondary education (29 years old, coded 1) highlights that:

"No political party does take care about the ordinary people in Kyrgyzstan. I think, it is important to have a more effective leader, who will work for the sake of people. The politicians, no matter ethnicity, only think about themselves, not a high rate of unemployment or hard life of people."

As, I hypothesized (1) referring to Wimmer, for Uzbeks (in Osh) political participation is not as a principal component of national identity as it is expected. People trust the role of political leader (in that case Presidency Institute) and his political will, rather than members of parliament, a political party or any other senior level bureaucrat. Akayev's promising pacifist slogan and Uzbek's positive response to that and Bakiyev's ignorance of minority rights is a noteworthy disproof of my hypothesis and Wimmer's concept in a given case.

Doubly De-Ethicizing Uzbeks: Religion and the State

Notwithstanding discrimination and inequality towards Uzbeks, there was not a robust separatist inclination among this ethnicity. Even though 1990's saw some attempts at unification of Uzbeks living all across Kyrgyzstan with Uzbekistan, but the current research

shows that, for the most part, these claims were mainly a reaction to the Kyrgyz nationalism rather than the expression of a strong will for self-determination that meant to unite Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan also did not seek such irredentist policies by their side in those years. In testing the importance of the unification idea for Uzbeks, interviewees were asked to identify what they saw as a positive and a negative during the Soviet rule in order to test the importance of Uzbek unity while under the unique state. It might be argued that by maintaining the Soviet Union, Uzbek people might be living in better ethnic unison than presently. Studying Uzbeks' perception of Soviet rule revealed that the core factor for the Uzbeks appreciating the Soviet period was influenced more by economic and social factors separately rather than their ethnic amalgamation. A 57-year old Uzbek woman (the codified name being 9) clearly states her perception of the Soviet era by stating that:

> *"In the Soviet period, people were equal - no significant difference between the rich and the poor. People had equal rights and no deficit in goods. Now in a market economy, the prices are high, but the incomes are low."*

However, none of the interviewees mentioned the ethnic separation as one of the repercussions for the demise of the Soviet Union, which means, Uzbeks presently do not consider this particular element as a threat to maintaining their ethnic identity. Although certain ethnic-symbolic elements – like language, narratives, and myths expressively influenced the provocation of both sides, economic and social elements displayed as an underlying cause of the conflict in the region.

It is surprising that, at any point, Uzbeks in Osh do not feel very strongly about their relation and ethnic ties with Uzbeks of Uzbekistan. However, this is not to say that Uzbeks of Osh now consider themselves as an equal part of the Kyrgyz society. A 26-year old Uzbek woman (coded under 8) with higher education elaborates on the current situation by this statement:

> *"As long as we live here in Kyrgyzstan, this is our common home. However, Uzbeks here are orphans in a sense. Kyrgyz people have long hands in society and privileges that we cannot even dream about. Even though more than 40% of the population of Osh ethnically made of Uzbeks, it does not have an Uzbek in a key administrative position in Osh, including the law-enforcement…"*

One particular point was engaging in a given discussion. Why did this female interviewee define Uzbeks as an "orphan"? While trying to understand her motives, she remembered 1999's strict border policy of Uzbekistan toward Kyrgyz citizens without any waivers on ethnic belonging. This event seems to have significantly affected Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks' perception toward Uzbekistan. In fact, Uzbekistan's President Karimov aimed to prevent Islamic propaganda and extremism flow into the country through the Kyrgyzstani border. The government of Uzbekistan discerned this territory of the Valley as a headache of the region due to active religiousness of the people in that region.

In reality, religion is also one of the fundamentals of young Uzbek identity. In these interviews, 16 out of 20 (the rest did not assume religious identity) interviewed Uzbeks identified themselves as Muslim. While interviewing Uzbeks in Osh, two very interesting parables were noted: in one of them it says that "While passerby Uzbeks meet prayers by a Kyrgyz or Turkman with them spitting in their wake" while the other put it like: "if you want to make a Slav from an Uzbek, you'll have to create a Kazak first." According to mentioned proverbs, Uzbeks in Osh believe that they are more devoted to Islam and their ethnic identity than any other Central Asian ethnic group. On the other hand, the rest of

Central Asian people see Uzbeks and Tajiks as radical Islamists who are more inclined to accept the non-traditional (Salafism) sects than traditional Sufi aqidah and Hanafi fiqh[41].

Uzbek youth in Kyrgyzstan are more attached to their religious identity than their ethnic identity. In order to identify their priority, the interviewees asked about their preferences in the process of marriage concerning religion and ethnicity. A vast majority of interviewees highlighted religion as a principal element of their choice. For instance, a 28-year old Uzbek man (the codified name being 10) with higher education puts it like this:

> *"While choosing a spouse, people are usually looking into some qualities more so than others, like age, education, religion, ethnicity. My priority is religion. I would personally never marry a girl who is not practicing Islam even if I loved her".*

A 54-year old Uzbek man (the codified name being 13) with secondary education has a clear idea on how Uzbek society has changed their perception and how they view religious and ethnic identity following the collapse of Soviet Union.

> *"My marriage was during the Soviet time. In those periods, religion was not a priority for the people. That is why men usually chose to marry based on ethnicity…"*

People educated under a Soviet anti-religious curriculum hold a very reserved attitude towards religiosity (Islam). A 53-year old Uzbek man (codified under 20) with secondary education comments on this as such:

> *"Twenty-five years ago, people did not think concerning religion when they lived their lives, perhaps except the religious ceremony of Nikah that was as old as the hills. I am not against religion, but everything should have its limits. We are not an Islamic state; we are a secular country".*

The attitude of the interviewees seems publicly tolerant; however, the question of religion is a bit controversial as the discrepancy ranged from the hesitancy of the old generation to very positive support from the Uzbek youth in Osh. Despite the contradiction over religion that spans over generations, Islam is still one of the building pillars of Uzbek identity in Osh.

Taking Uzbeks' devotedness to Islam and the government of Uzbekistan's negative attitude (which is perceived as undemocratic by the Uzbeks in Osh) toward religion, the other component emerges as an encouraging factor between Kyrgyzstan and ethnic Uzbeks. In fact, Uzbek government's discriminatory attitude significantly discourages Uzbeks (Osh) from the current societal culture of Uzbekistan. A 22-year old Uzbek man (coded under 14) with secondary education comments on this as such:

> *"We have relatives in Uzbekistan, and I have even recently visited Uzbekistan with my family. People in Uzbekistan do not like us-Osh's Uzbek and blaming ours being so religious. Perhaps it is the former regime's discriminatory approach to religiosity."*

It seems that the reason why Uzbeks in Osh feel happy under Kyrgyzstan is the level of democracy in that country and people in Osh also benefit. A 29-year old Uzbek man with higher education (coded under 16) claims that:

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[41]Demirtepe, Turgut. *Orta Asiyada siyaset ve toplum: demokrasi, etnisite ve kimlik(Politics and society in Central Asia:democracy, ethnicity and identity)*, (Ankara: USAK, 2012): 74.

"The political freedom is essential to us because it is important to realize freedom of faith and express one's opinion. No reason to move to Uzbekistan when we have relative freedom here…"

Resentfulness of Uzbeks to Uzbekistan does not give the room to argue that they will be comprehensive part of the Kyrgyz national identity. There are substantial obstructions that prevent this miracle to happen. The one is religion, which Kyrgyz national identity significantly ignores this factor that plays an essential role for ethnic Uzbeks and the second is the Uzbek language, which Kyrgyz government holds the antagonistic approach to that.

According to the ethno-symbolism theory, language is one of the core elements of ethnicity. It is also very crucial to see the full picture of how the young Uzbeks understand their ethnicity from the perspective of language. Among the interviewed groups, the majority of young people focused on the language and physical similarities as the primary determinant of one's *Uzbek-ness*. A 30-year old Uzbek man (coded under 7) explains this the best with:

"To be considered Uzbek, it is important to know the language, which also means the preservation of culture."

The Uzbek language is the still the symbol of Uzbek pride, which, in turn, also refers to the Uzbek culture by extension. On the contrary, the Kyrgyz authorities refused to acknowledge the Uzbek language as one of the official languages of the state since its independence. Even though there are still some local media organizations, cultural events, and schools that continue serving the public in the Uzbek language, and the Kyrgyz government put significant pressure on learning the Kyrgyz (or Russian) languages. Furthermore, public announcements, the names of Uzbek settlements, official documentation, and university entrance exams (till 2013 held in the Uzbek language) are still required to be written either in Kyrgyz or Russian. It is the underlying barrier of the language that discourages Uzbek people from integrating into the Kyrgyz society. People refuse to comply with the Kyrgyz language, which only contributes to the limitations of their political participation in central, municipal authorities, and law enforcement organizations, like police and juridical bodies. The National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic also argues that 48,9% of the adult Uzbek population speak Kyrgyz, which means more than half of the Uzbeks cannot communicate with Kyrgyz people[42]. In that circumstance, half of Uzbek people cannot be part of Kyrgyzstan's national identity even if they wish it.

In addition to this, during the Soviet period, Uzbekistan was responsible for providing the textbooks for Uzbeks in Kyrgyz provinces. However, after independence, Uzbekistan shifted to the Latin alphabet while Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan continued to write in the Cyrillic alphabet, the most common way of correspondence in the country. This confusing situation resulted in a termination of textbook donations from Uzbekistan, which indirectly caused a growth in illiteracy among the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, a 28-year old Uzbek man (coded under 10) with higher education claims that:

"The only thing that frustrates me is the decreasing number of Uzbek schools, and their replacement with Kyrgyz or Russian ones."

[42]National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, Ethnic composition of the population 1999-2013, (2014), Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20131113151445/http://www.stat.kg/stat.files/din.files/census/5010003.pdf, Last accessed: 25 July 2018

The National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan highlights that in 2002, there were 141 Uzbek-language schools with 106,577 students studying in them[43]. However, the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic claims that the number of Uzbeks has dramatically increased from 665 thousand in 1999 to 796 thousand in 2012[44]. The number of Uzbeks in Osh also increased from 363 thousand to 394 thousand between 1991 and 2004 (OSCE, 2004). In reality, a decade later, the number of schools plummeted to 91 with 40,833 children in 2012. The vast majority of the Uzbek schools transferred to Russian schools whose number experienced an upward move from 143 to 203 in 2012[45].

In my second hypothesis, I argued that divided ethnic groups could not be an inclusive element of the national identity and it could have various explanations, like prevailing religious identity that modern secular nation-building approach significantly ignores, reciprocal threat perceptions of states-irredentist policy possibility, ethnic, historical narratives and the state's failed policies towards ethnic-symbolic elements, as it happened in Kyrgyzstani case.

Conclusion

In summary, several points can confidently be inferred from this paper. People perceive a strong leader-President as guarantor of their stability and ethnic, social and cultural rights. Political participation in the central government is not a defining point for national unity in Uzbek (Osh) political culture. Loyalty to Kyrgyzstan based significantly on the President's policy approach and the democratic atmosphere of the Kyrgyz Republic. Young Uzbek generation deliberate the importance of democracy from the perspective of religion – freedom of faith, which is for this specific cohort. Young Uzbeks feel more independent in practicing their religion under the Kyrgyz government rather than Uzbekistan. According to interviews, religion plays one of the significant roles that not only isolates young Uzbeks from the Kyrgyz people but also hinders their chances of unison with the Uzbeks in Uzbekistan. However, the existence of Uzbekistan in the neighborhood creates a political risk towards Kyrgyz governments and limits their nation-building politics. Ethnic Uzbeks also fall the same trap and appear as an impediment for the nation-building process in Kyrgyzstan.

Furthermore, as Islam significantly refuses the concept of ethnicity, it could be argued that future problems in the Valley will enormously be based on religious factors rather than ethnic as expected. However, religion, solely, does not entirely refuse ethnic sentiment and negative perceptions of these Central Asian ethnicities.

Uzbeks face a very rigid selection process in admission to government positions, which function to disqualify them successfully. Due to the absence of economic and financial links between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyzstan, and the looming notion of discrimination creates a physiological chasm between the civilians in the minority and the state. Uzbeks' unsatisfactory academic qualifications and the limited use of Kyrgyz language not only contribute to the discontinuation of the goodwill between these two ethnic groups but also jeopardizes Uzbeks from taking public and law enforcement positions in administration, which is among the posts that require very intense interaction with the members of the public. The Kyrgyz government also removes itself from taking any firm stance in building a language and education policy for Uzbeks. In reality, language is the critical issue for Uzbeks that defines their identity. The oppressive language policy of Kyrgyzstan negatively affects the emergence of civic nationalism in the country and

[43] Ibid.,
[44] Ibid.,
[45] Ibid.,

fostered by this sentiment, a superior ethnic sense of identity emerges to shadow the civic identity among Uzbeks, who are divided by political borders.

Appendix 1. Fieldwork questions on ethnic identity perception among Uzbeks living in Osh city

- Please tell me about your background: your age, citizenship, region where you were born and where you currently live, ethnic and religious identity and education level.
- What do you think about the collapse of the Soviet Union? Is it bad or good? Why?
- Which one is important to be considered Uzbek: language, kinship, culture, or physical similarities?
- Which one is much more important for you: your religious identity or ethnic one? Why?
- Is it essential for you to be under one state's rule as an Uzbek rather than splitting between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan or living with your neighbours is not a problem at all?
- Would you like to pay attention to ethnicity or religiosity while making your marriage choice?
- Do you have relatives living the other side of the border in Uzbekistan? How is it vital for you to maintain your relationships with them? Is there any impediment to this relationship?
- Would you like to have many political leaders holding a position in the central government of Kyrgyzstan? Why is it important?
- What makes you feel proud as a citizen of Kyrgyzstan?
- What have you ever heard about the events happened in the late 1980s between Uzbek and Kyrgyz people from your parents or friends?
- What do you think about the first and the second Osh incidents? What problems stay unchanged after the first Osh incidents? Moreover, what about the second – which problems still challenges the Uzbek people in Osh?
- Do you think that the 1990 fighting was between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz? Do you think that ethnicity is still an important and sensitive political factor in the Osh region? Do you think that there could be further violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the future?
- What do you think about the list of the official language of Kyrgyzstan? How would you change it?
- Do you think that you would live better and realize your culture under Uzbekistan? Or do you believe that Kyrgyzstan is your shared home?
- Do you feel any discrimination as a young Uzbek in Kyrgyzstan?
- Is there any story that makes you aggressive against the local Kyrgyz people? What did grandpa or granny say about Kyrgyzs?
- Which one is important to you? Being Uzbek or being the citizen of Kyrgyzstan? Which one would you state in your passport? And Why?
- How is political freedom important to you? Is that the factor makes you stay in Kyrgyzstan rather than to move to Uzbekistan?

Appendix 2. Demographic overview of interviewees and their answers to some significant questions

Interviewee code	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Education
1	Male	29	married	secondary
2	Female	25	married	higher
3	Male	29	married	secondary
4	Female	25	not-married	higher
5	Male	28	married	higher
6	Female	45	married	higher
7	Female	29	married	higher
8	Female	26	married	higher
9	Female	57	married	secondary
10	Male	28	not-married	higher
11	Female	27	married	higher
12	Male	53	married	secondary
13	Male	50	married	secondary
14	Male	22	not-married	secondary
15	Male	27	married	secondary
16	Male	29	not-married	higher
17	Female	21	not-married	secondary
18	Male	24	not-married	higher
19	Female	23	married	secondary
20	Male	53	married	secondary