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Ethno-cultural associations in Kazakhstan: The Soviet footprint and resources for civil society

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Abstract

This study examines ethno-cultural associations—public institutions representing interests of minority groups—and discusses their role in the development of civil society in ethnically rich Kazakhstan. Minority associations developed in Soviet times inherited Soviet-era property and certain charitable and social practices. The Soviet footprint translates into hierarchy and state subordination. Based on interviews with representatives of associations and their visitors in Almaty, the study focuses on their quotidian activities and attempts to explain why these associations are providers of various resources for civil society development. The findings show evidence of the state being a part of the institutional synergy in the civil sphere. As part of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and being “government-organised NGOs,” ethno-cultural associations add their voice on “togetherness” and “unification” of diverse nationalities and to the official rhetoric of the new patriotic act. Despite transparent loyalty to the authorities and lacking a formal political agenda, cultural and social activities of these associations remain relatively autonomous. The study concludes that their real non-decorative functions deal with creating unionism, providing opportunities for social capital development, and fostering an understanding and appreciation of ethnic diversity. These associations have a potential to bridge the gap between communities while providing platforms for civic exchanges and being intermediaries between the public, the state and their kin states.

Introduction

When it comes to define civil society conditions in modern Central Asia, relevant issues lead to questions whether there is a place for vibrant civil society in contemporary socio-political realities, how the Soviet, historical traditions, and the state can define the public sphere, and whether the existing set of institutions and social networks can be seen as civil society. Central Asia’s past is known for the Soviet control of public life and social organisations, the absence of traditions of civil society as understood in the West, and the shaping of the public sphere by state authorities in the past two decades. Such previous experiences and conditions of social life in Central Asia make it unlikely to find a vibrant civil society in this region.

This study is part of the discourse on the Central Asian experience of civil society that asserts a broader definition of civil society, alternative from the narrow liberal construct. In this sense, a classical normative definition of civil society, which sees it mainly in terms of non-governmental organisations advocating the virtues of electoral democracy, has a limited application to the region. The determination of what should be viewed as authentic “civil society” remains open and constantly evolving depending on local conditions. The contemporary Central Asian realities, with blurred boundaries between the state and society, necessitate re-conceptualisation of civil society. “Central Asian civil society” should refer to the Central Asian regionalism with its common Soviet

history, post-Soviet challenges these societies faced, as well as social and cultural values and differences.

I contend that overlooking a variety of informal practices within local communities would distort our understanding of the nature of civil society in the region in question. Accordingly, from a broader perspective, civil society is seen as a sphere of human association between the individual and the state, where people can engage in self-organising and *relatively* autonomous activities such as articulating values, creating associations and solidarities, building trust, encouraging reciprocity, and exchanging views.¹ This approach allows to recognise local traditions of associational life that can be counted as conforming since they shape social life and promote solidarity and mobilisation. We will be looking at those sets of relationships between citizens and the state, where individuals and groups can be *autonomous enough* to form associations and create and exercise social good.

At first glance, civil society in both countries may seem as state-enabled, which is an oxymoron. With a closer look, associational institutions may have a more cooperative rather than confrontational character towards the state. A number of authors accept that civil society in Central Asia cannot be fully autonomous from the state as the latter provides the framework within which the former functions. Since the state is not exclusively coercive, civil society is not wholly non-coercive as freedom is not and cannot be without constraints.² This brings us to the paradox that “Central Asian populations would like more state, not less state. The state is seen as the embodiment of a pacified national identity and of international recognition of the nation, as a guarantee of economic prosperity, and as a potential symbol of good governance.”³ However, it is critical to underline the supporting character of the state rather than impeding and strictly dominating civil society and their activities. It is important to remember that different models of national identity and levels of political freedoms in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can reflect different dynamics of associational life in these countries.

To illustrate the workings of bridging the gap between the state and society, I focus on ethno-cultural centres or friendship organisations⁴—public institutions representing ethnic⁵ interests of non-titular groups.⁶ I argue that these social actors, often neglected in the literature, are able to provide resources for civil society development, and activities of these institutions correlate with our broader definition of civil society.

Although this study primarily focuses on Kazakhstan, some parallels will be drawn with cultural centres in Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, and the indigenous Uzbek *mahalla* (neighbourhood communities) where the organisation of social life creates conditions for activities similar to those of ethno-cultural centres.

Within the ecosystem of civil society, diasporas—the dispersion of people living outside their own homeland⁷—and ethnic minority groups have become fully fledged members of political, economic,

1 Sabine Freizer, “Central Asian fragmented civil society. Communal and neoliberal forms in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan,” in *Exploring Civil Society: Political and Cultural Context*, ed. Marlies Glasius, David Lewis and Hakan Seckinelgin (London: Routledge, 2004), 115–124; Michael Walzer, “The idea of civil society: A path to social reconstruction,” in *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America*, ed. Eugene Joseph Dionne Jr (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 123–124; Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation—Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

2 Raj Pruthi, *NGOs in the new millennium* (Delhi: Saad Publications, 2006); Charles Ziegler, “Civil society, political stability, and state power in Central Asia: Cooperation and contestation,” *Democratization*, 17 (5): 795–825, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2010.501172>.

3 Marlene Laruelle, “Negotiating social activism: National minority associations in Kazakhstan, or the other face of ‘civil society’,” in *Civil Society and Politics in Central Asia*, ed. Charles Ziegler (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 113.

4 The term “friendship organisation” originates from a Soviet understanding of comradeship and friendship.

5 Here the term “ethnic” relates to the Russian term *natsional'nyi* (national). I use “ethnic” instead of “national” to avoid the translation misuse—nationalism in English is different from its Russian equivalent *natsionalizm*. In English, nationalism refers to the desire of an ethnic group to form a state, whereas in Russian the term connotes with a feeling of ethnic superiority.

6 Meaning Russians, Kalmyk, Uighur, Koreans, and others.

7 Valeriy Tishkov, *Etnologiya i Politika* (Moskva: Nauka, 2001).

and sociocultural processes. Not every ethnicity has diasporas but those which do are represented by ethno-cultural centres. Preservation and development of spiritual values, language, traditions and customs of ethnic minority groups are some of their key activities. As public actors, their mission also includes enrichment of national cultures, strengthening of interethnic relations and cooperation between ethnic minorities, indigenous people,⁸ and representatives of other nationalities. The ability to have a voice as a diaspora, self-organisation of diasporas into local ethno-cultural centres in the ongoing process of national identity formation make these institutions an attractive case for researchers.

Among other post-socialist societies, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are some of the most ethnically diverse. The composition of ethnic minorities can be divided into three major groups: minorities without a titular state such as Kurds, Dungans and Uighurs and socially weak nationalities (Kalmyks, Chechens, Buryats); large minority groups supported by their kin states (Koreans, Germans, Poles, Ukrainians and Greeks); and the ethnic Russian group that cannot be classified either as titular ethnicity or as a minority in Kazakhstan (except in Uzbekistan where Russians are in minority).⁹ Further, the classification of the Central Asian multi-ethnic tapestry takes three different forms: relations between Slavs and non-Slavs; between ethnic groups with different religious backgrounds, e.g., Kazakhs and Russians; and relations between ethnic groups sharing the same religious background, e.g., Uzbeks and Tajiks in Uzbekistan.¹⁰

At present, the issue of peaceful interethnic relations remains important in both countries. Though it may seem more pronounced in Kazakhstan with more than 140 ethnic groups represented by 1,338 registered ethno-cultural centres.¹¹ Some authors hold that despite providing institutional representation for ethnic minorities, opportunities for their collective action are restricted in both countries.¹² In their performance, ethno-cultural centres lack political influence and the ability to articulate minority claims. The major problem with the organisations in question is their weak position in defining a political platform due to their co-optation into the state. They demonstrate loyalty to state authorities, support official ethno-cultural policies, and possess symbolic power. Keeping this in mind, this study attempts to answer the following questions: What are the forms of their autonomous activities? And how their actual non-decorative functions, besides providing the sense of belonging and ethnic identity, can contribute to the development of wider civil society?

To understand the continuity of some of the functions from Soviet times, the analysis begins with a review of friendship and cultural activities contextualised in the concept of Soviet “proletarian internationalism.” I then discuss daily practices and challenges in the work of ethno-cultural centres in Almaty, Kazakhstan. While I accept that ethno-cultural organisations are weak public actors, one should not forget that they function under the conditions of the political systems emphasising the consolidation of all ethnic groups around the main titular ethnos. Understandably, the position that minority associations hold today is the result of state coordination to ensure the avoidance of extremes of political instability. I agree that despite their limited ability to self-organise, they remain, de facto, oxymoronically “government-sponsored NGOs.” Through their folkloric, cultural and educational activities, ethno-cultural organisations are able to consolidate

8 The term “indigenous people” in the context of a post-Soviet state refers to titular nationalities and non-settlers population.

9 Contrary to Uzbekistan, where Russians are a significant minority, in Kazakhstan, they have never been categorised as such. Russians only outnumbered the Kazakh population in Soviet times. For classification of ethnic composition, see Sebastien Peyrouse, “Nationhood and the minority question in Central Asia. The Russians in Kazakhstan,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2007, 59 (3): 483, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130701239930>.

10 Dilip Hiro, *Inside Central Asia: A political and cultural history of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Iran* (New York and London: Overlook Duckworth, Peter Mayer Publishers, 2009), 398.

11 Отчет Президенту Республики Казахстан Н.А.Назарбаеву—Год Ассамблеи Народа Казахстана [Report to the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A.Nazarbaev—The Year of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan], http://assembly.kz/sites/default/files/ank_otchet_2016_new_izmenennii_m.pdf.

12 Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth, *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Bhanva Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007); Mariya Omelicheva, “Islam in Kazakhstan: A survey of contemporary trends and sources of securitization,” *Central Asian Survey*, 2011, 30 (2): 243–256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2011.567069>; Peyrouse, “Nationhood and the Minority,” 481–501.

their minority communities around certain issues such as culture, citizenship, and self-awareness as an ethnic group with their own history. Echoing Soviet-era interest-based clubs, they can provide a space for individuals from any ethnic background to socialise and build network ties. While promoting and supporting the idea of the Kazakhstani nation and the “revival of Uzbek cultural identity,” ethno-cultural organisations can bridge the gap between the multi-cultural society and the state. In other words, they are part of the “dialogue” with the nation and are open to the broader citizenship.

Soviet views on the friendship of peoples and national policy

Although it is beyond the remit of this article to analyse ethnic transformation in Central Asia, it is worth mentioning the reasons of dissimilarity in the ethnic diversity and proportions of titular nationalities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is argued that Kazakhstan and Middle Asia were colonised by the Russian Empire in the 18th–19th centuries and as nations were artificially constructed¹³ by the Soviets in the 1920s.¹⁴ The policies of indigenisation and acculturating were part of Soviet nation-building.¹⁵ The Marxist-Leninist doctrine prescribed proletarian internationalism where the worker had no country. Lenin viewed national sentiments as a threat to redefine the political agenda; therefore, he dwelled more on the issue of national integration. Yet Soviet officials related critically to the idea of the national-cultural autonomy in Central Asia (then Turkistan) due to potential threats of pan-Turkism, a movement for the cultural and political integration of the Turkic people.¹⁶ The famine in Kazakhstan in 1919–1921, migration processes of the 1930s, forced industrialisation, agricultural collectivisation and concomitant famine in 1932–1933 altered the ethnic fabric of Kazakhstan and Middle Asia.

The subsequent national policies—deportations into Central Asia and Siberia and elimination of “backwardness” in order to allow the ethnic nationalities to catch up with Russia, Khrushchev’s fusion of nations, Brezhnev’s rapprochement of nations, and Andropov’s assimilation of nations—were all stages of the project for interregional solidarity aimed at complete Soviet unity as a nation state.¹⁷ Kazakhstan, the biggest territory after Russia, was turned into a destination for exile and the development of virgin lands in 1955–1965. The targeted blurring of the ethnic homogeneity brought a massive influx of Russians, Tatars, Chechens, Ukrainians, Koreans, and Germans. Many of the deported individuals, as well as voluntary migrants, were intellectuals, highly skilled, educated and talented people who undoubtedly altered human capital and enriched the ethnic composition. Such an immigration stream formed the picture of multi-cultural Kazakhstan and the only society in the Soviet space where the titular population was a minority throughout 1930–1970s—a major period of the consolidation of the Soviet power.¹⁸

13 See Grigol Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building in Central Asia: The Making of the Kazakh and Uzbek Nations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 21. Contrary to the claim of artificialness of nations, the author stresses that nation-making and delineation of Central Asian borders were first ‘imagined’ and projected in Moscow and only then implemented by local elites.

14 Tatiana Zhdanko, “Историко-этнографический атлас Средней Азии и Казахстана” [Historical and ethnographical atlas of Middle Asia and Kazakhstan], *Sovetskaya Etnografiya*, 1971, 4: 31–42; Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Central Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

15 This implies an invention of traditional, for example, Kazakh and Uzbek cultures with the introduction and promotion of Russian/Western “high cultures.” For a discussion of indigenisation and acculturation issues, see Sally Cummings, “Kazakhstan: An uneasy relationship – power and authority in the Nazarbaev regime,” in *Power and Change in Central Asia*, ed. Sally Cummings (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 59–73; Robert Suny, “The contradictions of identity: Being Soviet and national in the USSR and after,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, ed. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17–36; and Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building*, 230.

16 Will Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

17 See Charles Furtado Jr. and Michael Hecher, “The emergence of nationalist politics in the USSR: A comparison of Estonia and the Ukraine,” in *Thinking Theoretically About Soviet Nationalities*, ed. Alexander Motyl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 169–204; Myer, *Islam and Colonialism*; Robert Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Gregory Gleason, “Leninist nationality policy: Its source and style,” in *Soviet Nationality Policies: Ruling Ethnic Groups in the USSR*, ed. Henry Huttenbach (London: Mansell, 1990), 9–23; Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building*.

18 Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Dave, *Kazakhstan*; Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Looking at the origins of the notion of friendship of Soviet peoples, the Great Patriotic War stands as the defining period in the history of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) when the concept of “friendship of the Soviet people” came into currency.¹⁹ The War drew new orientations for the Soviet national ideology. Interethnic friendship was a vision of the Communist Party’s targeted campaign to promote a form of patriotism based on the Soviet portrait of protectors of the *Rodina* (Motherland), “with Russian military exploits as a leading element.”²⁰ Further state- and nation-building in post-war USSR required a serious review of national figures in the history of non-Russian population. Soviet history was revisited and “truthfully reconstructed” to highlight the indestructible friendship of the multi-ethnic Soviet people and their leading historical figures. New historical works extolled the “internationalist” role of the Communist Party and were careful not to idealise non-Russian historical figures.²¹

The Sovietisation project with its European-Russian acculturation aimed at complete socio-political unity of Soviet peoples. Sovietisation not only promoted friendship of the peoples and “fraternal help” but also included concomitant erosion of language and cultural boundaries. The studies of Aviel Roshwald and Michael Roulad illuminate on so-called Soviet “cultural banalisation” which made it challenging to present distinct traditional customs and practices of multi-ethnic Soviet peoples. The “proper presentation” of authentic folk traditions, ethnic customs, and cultural differences was stripped from their philosophical and political grounds, leaving folklorisation of national identities as a permitted form of cultural pluralism filtered through carefully constructed Soviet messages.²² For Brezhnev, this was not equal to the disappearance of ethnic differences.²³ The academic literature of the Soviet period is a good example of how Sovietisation was analysed. For example, Furmanov et al.²⁴ praised a united society of non-antagonistic “friendly classes and social strata,” which is “beneficial to the [Soviet] work[ing class]” which international imperials aim to break. However, such social engineering did not result in total homogenisation of the population. Soviet statehood and the *pyataya grafa*²⁵ created conflicting expectations of belonging for Soviet individuals.²⁶ The Soviet state, in figurative terms, gained attributes of a *kommunalka*—a typical socialist communal housing—and its member states compared to separate rooms of the communal apartment.

19 See, for example, Vasilii Nemyatiy, *Боевое братство народов СССР. Дружба и массовый героизм народов СССР в боях за Советскую Украину в Великой Отечественной войне. Документы и материалы* [Combat Brotherhood of the Peoples of the USSR. Friendship and mass heroism of the peoples of the USSR in the battles for Soviet Ukraine in the Great Patriotic War. Documents and materials] (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1984).

20 See Lowell Tillet, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969). The author discusses related perplexities of such strategy. For example, military figures whose reputation rested on the pre-Soviet conquest of non-Russians were rehabilitated during WWII to instill a new pride in a military heritage, and unite the Soviet Union members.

21 However, some authors such as Ermukhan Bekmakhanov, the native Kazakh historian (1915–1966), faced severe criticism. The main thesis of his ill-fated work *Kazakhstan In the 1920-40s of 19th Century*, published in 1948, was that Kenesary Kassymov was a representative of the “steppe aristocracy,” the last Kazakh Khan, and the leader of national liberation movement. Kenesary was a “talented reformer” whose liberation movement in the 19th century “was progressive” yet the annexation of the Kazakhs to Russia was of greater progressive significance. The author was deprived of all awards, accused of “bourgeois ultra-nationalism” and sentenced for 25 years of labour camps. He was released in 1954 and rehabilitated. For more details, see Ermukhan Bekmakhanov, *Kazakhstan v 20-40-e gody 19 veka* (Moskva, 1948) and Tillet, *The Great Friendship*, 110–129.

22 For examination of this issue, see Aviel Roshwald, “Between Balkanization and Banalization: Dilemmas of ethno-cultural diversity,” *Ethnopolitics*, 2007, 6 (3): 365–378, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449050701487371>; Michael Roulad, “Creating a cultural nation: Aleksandr Zataevich in Kazakhstan,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 2005, 25 (3): 533–553. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-25-3-533>.

23 Leonid Brezhnev, *Наш курс – мирное созидание* [Our course – peaceful creation] (Moskva, Progress, 1981).

24 Grigorii Furmanov, Anisiya Sertsova and Sergei Ilyin, *Dialektika Pererastaniya Razvitoogo Sotsialisticheskogo Obshchestva v Kommunisticheskoe* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1980).

25 Literally, the fifth section—a figurative expression referring to “nationality” indicated in official documents.

26 The expression “Soviet individual” implied an individual who had basic qualities of the Soviet citizen such as allegiance to communism, socialist patriotism, and intolerance towards racial prejudice. On the discussion of belonging in the USSR and the interplay between Soviet Russians and non-Russians, see Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Eurasia: An institutional account,” *Theory and Society*, 1994, 23 (1): 47–78, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993673>.

Soviet experience in friendship activities

Soviet citizens were not deprived of autonomous forms of social life. Socialist internationalism prescribed that communism was to spread everywhere; therefore, the idea of the conventional nation-state would eventually be redundant. Under communism, there is no need for a state—people live by self-established rules. In the prelude to this happening, the state is there to guide people in the right direction and defend against foreign powers. To exercise the Soviet “friendship of people” and internationalism, various establishments performed functions different from political institutions. Often, they were set around socialisation, communication, and cultural activities. One of the prominent institutions was the All-Union Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries or Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul'turnoi Sviazi s zagranitsei (VOKS) established in 1925 to promote international communication and organise exchange delegations between cultural workers and athletes of the USSR with those in foreign countries.²⁷ In reality, VOKS was a state institution of the kind Joseph Nye regards a “soft power”²⁸ and an ideological effort in showcasing to foreigners “friendship of the people” and a positive image of the Soviet people composed of diverse ethnic groups. In 1958, VOKS was restructured and renamed into the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. In civil society terms, the Union was a massive voluntary association of Soviet social organisations aimed at strengthening friendship and cultural cooperation between the Soviet peoples and foreign countries. The period of the Khrushchev’s Thaw in the 1950–1960s was notable for international events introducing foreign culture to Soviet citizens. Moscow hosted the Sixth World International Festival of Youth and Students in 1957, which caused euphoria among the Muscovites who could meet foreigners and freely exchange opinions with them.²⁹ The period of the Cold War also saw another example of the Soviet friendship project in the founding of Patrice Lumumba University of Peoples’ Friendship in 1960 in Moscow, which offered free education to students from Africa and other post-colonial nations.

The high level of Soviet politisation of the public sphere instigated the growth of loose alliances—private, informal networks, and interest-based groups. One of the prominent forms of Soviet voluntary associations were clubs of international friendship (Klub Internatsional’noi Druzhby or KID), which existed for an extended period in the Soviet history. KIDs functioned at a majority of Soviet educational institutions and extra-curriculum youth centres known as Young Pioneers Palaces. Their major activities ranged from mutual correspondence with pupils and students within the Soviet Union and abroad. Thus, secondary schools’ classes with advanced studies of foreign languages allowed a student, under the guidance of language teachers, to exchange letters with foreign KIDs and schoolchildren from socialist republics of Cuba, former Czechoslovakia and others. Some active members of KIDs could also participate in exchanges between student delegations at international youth festivals.³⁰ Admittedly, KIDs voluntary activities were far from being autonomous from the Communist Party. To borrow Tyler’s classification,³¹ original (families, clans), vocational (friends), and local (neighbourhood) communities exemplify the spheres of information exchange and opinion formation relatively³² independent of state control. One of my respondents recalls KID activities in the 1960s:

27 Louis Nemzer, “The Soviet friendship societies,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1949, 13 (2): 265–284, <https://doi.org/10.1086/266072>; R. Saakov, “Союз советских обществ дружбы и культурной связи с заграницей” [The Union of Soviet friendship and cultural relations with foreign countries], *Большая Советская Энциклопедия* [Big Soviet Encyclopaedia] (Moskva: BES, 1978).

28 Joseph Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, 1990, 80: 153–171.

29 Alena Dvinina, “Deti Festivalya,” *Kareliya*, April, 2005, 42, <http://www.gov.karelia.ru/Karelia/1320/19.html>.

30 Liliya Kus, “Клубы интернациональной дружбы как центры воспитания в опыте российской школы” [Clubs of international friendship as centers of education in the experience of the Russian school], *Академический вестник Института образования взрослых Российской Академии Образования* [Academic Bulletin of the Institute of Adult Education of the Russian Academy of Education], 2010, 2: 58–62.

31 Richard Tyler, “Comprehending community,” in *Returning to Communities: Theory, Culture, and Political Culture of the Communal*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Michael Higgins (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), 21–29.

32 I regard totalitarianism as an extent of state power: while secondary institutions were under control by the Soviet state, primary institutions – families and private networks – were exceptionally difficult to control.

As KID members, we were called “friends of the world,” “patriots,” and “internationalists.” While at Artek,³³ I befriended many foreign children and got their contacts. We exchanged letters, small souvenirs, flags, postcards, and other memorabilia. Of course, all correspondence went through Moscow [...] At KID, we wrote letters to *Pionerskaya Pravda* [All-Union Youth newspaper], arranged school exhibitions to showcase received letters and souvenirs from our foreign friends. Besides keeping in touch with Artek children, we showed respect and support for Dean Reed,³⁴ participated in campaigns to free Angela Davis, and celebrated the Africa Day on the 25th of May.³⁵

In the late 1980s, with the opening up of borders by the time of the fall of socialism, most KIDs ceased their activities, while some turned into hobby and interest clubs. Contact meetings, foreign exchange delegations, youth festivals, and conferences on social and cultural themes became frequent practices.

The Soviet international friendship policy, promoted among school students and children, also featured the Soviet myth of a child hero in the ideologised struggle for peace.³⁶ So-called child diplomacy involved the participation of children as “goodwill ambassadors” in cultural projects of international peace, friendship and patriotic education. The story of Samantha Smith, an American pupil who in 1982 wrote a letter to the Soviet General Secretary, Andropov, inquiring whether a nuclear war was possible, became a popular case in the Soviet propaganda for the need of international friendship. The visit of a real American girl to the USSR on Andropov’s invitation was a diplomatic propaganda and a cultural phenomenon itself, which made her a young peacemaking ambassador.³⁷ After her death, the United States reciprocated by inviting a Soviet pupil Katya Lycheva to meet the US President Ronald Reagan in 1986.

The discussion of Soviet ethno-culture and cultural production would not be complete without acknowledging the authentic Soviet institution of the House of Culture (Dom Kul’tury or DK). Located in almost every major city, towns, villages, neighbourhoods, and being linked with local enterprises, houses of culture were venues for public performances and festivals as well as social spaces that offered extra-curriculum classes for children and adults. Like other ideological formations such as “red yurts,” “red tea houses” (*choikhona*), and reading huts, the primary aims of houses of culture were cultivating personality through a collective development of Soviet culture and community and the struggle against old pre-Soviet lifestyles.³⁸ Soviet leaders attempted to implement to various degrees the Marxist-Leninist national policy of integration into a single Soviet nation.³⁹ Yet the striking feature of houses of culture of the late Soviet period was their shift towards forming ethno-cultural collectives in the 1990s.⁴⁰

The era of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, championed by Gorbachev in the late 1980s, brought about the emergence of nationalist politics and a growing attention towards issues of nationalism.

33 The All-Union Soviet International Young Pioneer Camp on the Black Sea in the town of Gurzuf in the Crimea. For children from the USSR and other communist republics, vacationing at Artek was considered a rare privilege. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the prestige of the camp has declined, yet it still functions.

34 An American popular singer (1938–1986) who openly supported Soviet politics, lived in East Germany, and died in suspicious circumstances.

35 Interview with a former club leader, Kazakh, female, 63, Almaty, 30 January 2015.

36 Linor Goralic, “From plus to minus: How the last generation of Soviet children perceived America,” *Russian Social Science Review*, 2010, 51 (5): 78–94.

37 Andrei Kozovoi, “Childhood in service of the Cold War: Samantha Smith’s journey to the USSR,” *Vingtieme Siecle: Revue d’Histoire*, 2007, 96 (4): 195–207, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ving.096.0195>.

38 Said Mirkhasilov, “Культурное развитие узбекского кишлака Ниязбаши” [Cultural development of the Uzbek village of Niyazbashi], *Советская Этнография* [Soviet Ethnography], 1962, 1, 8–24; Ali Igmen, “The emergence of Soviet houses of culture in Kyrgyzstan,” in *Reconstructing the House of Culture: Community, Self, and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond*, ed. Brian Donahoe and Joachim Otto Habeck (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 164–188.

39 Edward Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks from the Fourteenth Century to the Present: A Cultural History* (Stanford: California, 1990); Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building*.

40 Joachim Otto Habeck, “Introduction: Cultivation, collective, and the self,” in *Reconstructing the House of Culture: Community, Self, and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond*, ed. Brian Donahoe and Joachim Otto Habeck (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1–28.

Concerning Central Asia, local ethnic unrest in late socialism did not present a serious systemic challenge to the Soviet system which would trigger a call for independence; thus, they received little attention. Although later around 77% of voters (except Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and the Baltic states) supported keeping the USSR “in which the rights and freedoms of any individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed.”⁴¹ The notion of USSR as a homogenous community finally turned into a utopian idea. The complexity of multiple sub-national (clans and tribes), national (ethno-nationality of Soviet titular republic), and supra-national (global Islamic community) Soviet identities was accepted in this period. Although it is still arguable whether the Soviet Union was a modern colonial empire,⁴² post-Soviet societies faced with building their national identities and struggled with decolonisation⁴³ and the Russian supremacy. Because of the heterogeneity, Moscow imposed the Russian language on all nationalities for easier communication and dialogue and economic reasons. Kazakhstan, like other former Soviet states, faced the challenge of maintaining interethnic peace, used the colonisation and imperialism dialogue, and forged its national identity in antithesis to the Russian-Soviet one, while pushing sovereignty after 1991.

How does the Soviet ethnic representation institutionalised via VOKS, KID and DK inform and resonate in ethno-cultural production in present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan? As we can see, the Soviet experience in the institutionalisation and organisation of friendship practices illustrate some opportunities for building intercultural understanding. The characteristics of civil society here can be traced through citizen-led friendship and interaction, which was promoted in specific ways. The major point to be made is that such an experience in providing institutionalised and organised activities that besides their functions—promoting friendship and culture—also contributed to the public socialisation and formation of intercultural communication.

As I discuss later in this study, this continuity and accumulated experience of the friendship practices formed a base for daily activities of modern ethno-cultural organisations in Kazakhstan with an unmistakable Soviet footprint. Public events and celebrations of different scales, organised by ethno-cultural associations, bear remarkable similarity with events and performances of Soviet houses of culture. The remaining houses of culture in both countries, built in Soviet times, are now club institutions and centres for cultural and educational work. For example, these range from the House of Schoolchildren and students’ palaces to the House of Culture of the Society of Blind People and industry-based houses of culture such as railway workers and miners. Recent studies show how houses of culture adjust themselves to the demands of local communities. They become places where elderly people, whose active social life has passed under the Soviet collectivist culture, “try to recreate and reconstruct old social networks and unions.”⁴⁴ In a similar way, modern ethno-cultural centres are still mostly run by the active people who possess the memory of the Soviet communitarianism and collectivist organisation. Although both minority associations and houses of culture are comparable in their cultural production mission and the provision of social space, the mission of ethno-cultural centres is wider with a focus on the maintenance of ethnic identity with concurrent promotion of the state national policy. I now turn to review key differences in the state organisation of ethno-cultural policies in the countries in question.

41 “Постановление Верховного Совета СССР от 16 января 1991 г. № 1910–1 “Об организации и мерах по обеспечению проведения референдума СССР по вопросу о сохранении Союза Советских Социалистических Республик” [Resolution of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 16 January 1991 No. 1910–1 “On the organization and measures to ensure the holding of the referendum of the USSR on the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics], *Ведомости ЦНД и ВС СССР [Vedomosti SND & VS SSSR]*, 1991.

42 See discussion on Soviet colonialism by Olaf Caroe, “Soviet colonialism in Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1953, 32 (1): 135–144, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031013>; Wladyslaw Kulski, “Soviet colonialism and anti-colonialism,” *The Russian Review*, 1959, 18 (2): 113–125, <https://doi.org/10.2307/126807>; Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism,” *Slavic Review*, 1994, 53 (2): 414–452, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2501300>.

43 Alexandr Etkind, *Internal Colonisation: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

44 Joachim Otto Habeck, “‘Thank you for your being’: Neighbourhood, ethno-culture, and social recognition in the house of culture,” in *Reconstructing the House of Culture*, ed. Brian Donahoe and Joachim Otto Habeck (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 63.

State rhetoric and practice

Kazakhstan

A key organisation in Kazakhstan that oversees and shapes ethno-cultural activities is the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan (APK) created in 1995 and renamed into the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan in 2007 to emphasise the “unity in diversity” of the people of Kazakhstan. The Assembly’s objectives include implementation of the state national⁴⁵ policy and preservation of interethnic harmony.⁴⁶ The APK remains an umbrella institution organised and led by President Nazarbayev who also in practice selects its 394 members. By signing the law “On the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan” and APK Regulations in 2008 and by granting APK a status of a full-fledged constitutional body of the political system, President Nazarbayev aimed at having an equal voice for all diasporas. The special feature of the APK is the representation of nine deputies from ethnic groups to the Majilis, the Lower Chamber of the Parliament.

Structurally, the APK is represented widely across the country. Smaller assemblies were set in 33 Friendship Houses (*Dom Druzhyby*) in regions with a multi-ethnic composition of the population.⁴⁷ In Almaty, the site of my fieldwork, ethnic organisations are housed in both Friendship House and Democracy House. Almaty Friendship House takes a special place in the history of modern Kazakhstan. Built in 1972, it is an architectural monument and historical venue of the Almaty Declaration, signed on 21 December 1991, which laid out the principles of the newly formed Commonwealth of Independent States. After gaining independence, Friendship House was functioning as the headquarters of the APK.

The issue of interethnic relations is regulated according to a set of presidential decrees and official documents such as the strategic programmes Kazakhstan 2030⁴⁸ and Kazakhstan 2050.⁴⁹ Presented as official addresses of the President to the people of Kazakhstan, these documents are developmental strategies that come to replace Soviet five-year state plans. Besides multiple goals, Kazakhstan 2030 envisions the eventual elimination of causes for ethnic differences and the installation of equal rights for all ethnic groups achieved with an adequate role of the state. Kazakhstan 2050 highlights the equality of rights of all citizens that provides a basis for patriotism.

Among the recent developments in strengthening the Kazakhstan’s identity are the Doctrine of the National Unity and the National Plan—100 Concrete Steps to Implement the Five Institutional Reforms, which introduced the large-scale project of the APK “The Big Country—Big Family” and the patriotic act *Mangilik El* (The Eternal Nation) to promote virtues of “Kazakhstan’s path,” one of which is “common history, culture, and language.”⁵⁰ These and other state programmes are also regulated by the Concept on Strengthening and Developing Kazakhstan’s Identity and Unity, signed by the President in 2015, where the Kazakh nation is to play an integrating role.

45 Meaning ethnic—there are two different ways to translate—as “national” in the Western sense, and “ethnic” in the Russian language terms.

46 See “Закон Республики Казахстан «Об Ассамблее Народа Казахстана»” [Law On the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan], 2008. <http://almaty.assembly.kz/ru/docs/zakon-respubliki-kazahstan-ob-assamblee-naroda-kazahstana>; “Доктрина национального единства” [National Unity Doctrine], 2004. https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30501158.

47 Отчет Президенту Республики Казахстан Н.А.Назарбаеву—Год Ассамблеи Народа Казахстана [Report to the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A.Nazarbaev—The Year of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan], http://assembly.kz/sites/default/files/ank_otchet_2016_new_izmenennii_m.pdf.

48 Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Kazakhstan 2030: Prosperity, Security, and Ever Growing Welfare of All the Kazakhstanis. Message of the President of the country to the People of Kazakhstan* (Astana, 1997).

49 Nursultan Nazarbayev, *Kazakhstan 2050: New Political Course of the Established State. Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation* (Astana, 2012).

50 “План нации – 100 конкретных шагов. Современное государство для всех” [The Plan of the Nation – 100 Concrete Steps. A modern state for all], 2015, <http://www.inform.kz/kaz/article/2777943>.

This rhetoric of strengthening intra-Kazakh unity is based on the ideology of Eurasianism, whose agenda projects Kazakhstan as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nation, a regional leader, and a bridge between the East and the West⁵¹ extending through a variety of verbal, visual, and ceremonial representations. According to Edward Schatz,⁵² a set of state-formation practices in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan (and the creation of *Homo Kazakhstanicus*) is somewhat similar to Soviet internationalism (*Homo Sovieticus*). This is evident from the use of ambiguous cultural ideas such as Eurasianism and the restoration of the Silk Route; representation of ethnic diversity through the set of institutions—APK and ethno-cultural centres; and projecting an image of modern, secular, and civic statehood intended for the external world. It is clear that long-term strategies and related official documents, not to mention written works by President Nazarbayev, equally resonate national unity in their key messages, giving no preference to any ethnic group, and the universal rights and liberties of all Kazakhstanis. As they outline long-term priorities to achieve economic and material progress, they also draw a nation-building agenda and legitimate the regime and actions of the presidential elite.⁵³ The leading role of the President and his personification as the Leader of the Nation is also a highlight of these strategic documents to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan.

How does the official rhetoric on the civic concept of multi-cultural Kazakhstan work out in practice? The early 1990s have cemented the strong presidential leadership and threats of ethnic cleavage, and the national divide legitimated the formation of the semi-authoritarian political regime.⁵⁴ The establishment of the APK was not the only practical step to shape interethnic relations. In building new nations, elites orchestrated national symbolism and iconography, such as new national holidays, monuments, and the currency, with the use of predominantly Kazakh ethnic and traditional symbols, which do not actually reflect “multi-ethnic Kazakhstan.” The radical transfer of the capital from Almaty to Astana, located in the north-central region, in 1997 was also a strategic move on the ethno-political map of Kazakhstan to integrate the north of the republic to its political centre driven by concerns of the elites over the dominance of ethnic Slavs in the north and their potential for separatism.⁵⁵ As Edward Shils⁵⁶ puts it, only integration of the centre and the periphery—unity in diversity—can be conducive to intercultural relations between society and its ethnic components rather than any degrees of isolation between the political centre and the periphery.

Growing discrepancies between state rhetoric and reality have given a way to a discourse of “ethnic subordination” in cases of unequal distribution of state funds.⁵⁷ A “silent Kazakhification” is exemplified by discrimination in power redistribution (power is monopolised in the hands of the titular nation⁵⁸) as well as the shortage of quotas for universities and the administration for national minorities.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, there is empirical evidence of the high level of tolerance

51 Catherine Alexander and Victor Buchli, “Introduction,” in *Urban life in post-Soviet Asia*, ed. Catherine Alexander, Victor Buchli and Caroline Humphrey (London: UCL Press, 2007), 1–39; Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

52 Edward Schatz, “Framing strategies and non-conflict in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2000, 6 (2): 71–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110008428596>.

53 Schatz, “Framing strategies”; Sally Cummings, “Legitimation and identification in Kazakhstan,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2006, 12 (2): 177–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110600734547>; Anna Matveeva, “Legitimising Central Asian authoritarianism: Political manipulation and symbolic power,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2009, 61 (7): 1095–1121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130903068624>.

54 Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: the Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

55 Schatz, “Framing strategies.”

56 Edward Shils, “Общество и общества: микросоциологический подход” [Society and societies: a microsociological approach], in *Американская социология: перспективы, проблема, методы* [*American Sociology: Perspectives, Problem, Methods*], ed. Gennadiy Osipov (Moskva, 1972).

57 Alexander Danzer, “Battlefields of ethnic symbols. Public space and post-Soviet identity formation from a minority perspective,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61 (9): 1568, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130903209137>.

58 Cummings, “Legitimation and identification”; Alexander Danzer, “Battlefields of ethnic symbols”; Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, “Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ethno-nationalist state-building,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 2013, 19 (2): 337–356, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12022>.

59 Marlene Laruelle, “Negotiating social activism: National minority associations in Kazakhstan, or the other face of ‘civil society,’” in *Civil society and politics in Central Asia*, ed. Charles Ziegler (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 111–136.

towards actions of the elites in their state-building project as interviews with minorities in Kazakhstan demonstrate.⁶⁰ To reduce risks of ethnic exclusion and even potential resistance, there need to be more efforts towards ethnic diversity than construction of national symbols. There is still a long way to achieve this. With such a background, ethno-cultural associations remain factually public organisations not real actors in the political life.

Evidently, the overall responsibility of APK was to bring together ethnic groups and form them into officially sponsored civil society institutions. In the initial stages of post-socialist independence, the development of minority associations was an essential and logical way to support the revival of national traditions and cultures. Such organisations were cultural centres set up to represent and maintain ethnic cultural symbols and national⁶¹ heritage. Most centres were formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a specific agenda as in the case of the Wiedergeburt Association of Germans in Kazakhstan:

If in the USSR, our activities were prohibited, in Gorbachev's period, there was raised self-organisation of Germans seeking moral justice due to the established public negative attitude towards us formed in Soviet times. Germans were associated with Nazi Germany. Our original objective as an ethnic centre was to get rid of such an image [...] Deported to Soviet Kazakhstan, Germans expected that the Soviet government in later years would say, yes, you suffered, we are ready to bring forgiveness, you can return to the place from which you were deported. That did not happen [...] As a result and because of lack of hope for the future, there was high emigration from Kazakhstan to Germany in the 1990s. The remaining German minority in Kazakhstan is focusing now on changing Kazakh-German relations through new humanitarian cooperation.⁶²

With further development came the necessity to consolidate the efforts of all ethnic groups to work together. The fact that the formation of the APK as a consultative and advisory board with a key position in national policy was needed in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is justified by the lack of a single hegemonic ethnic group.⁶³

Organisationally, cultural associations are similar in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Since 2007, Almaty Friendship House has been operating as the centre for interethnic relations housing 19 ethno-cultural centres that occupy several halls or rooms in the well-preserved Soviet-style interior: one of which is a library, a study room, a meeting room, and even a small concert and conference hall. Some cultural organisations such as the Turkmen and Kalmyk organisations in Almaty only have small offices in Friendship House not used for community events.⁶⁴ In Astana, ethno-cultural associations are placed in the Palace of Peace and Accord,⁶⁵ which also hosts annual sessions of APK and the Congresses of World and Traditional Religions.

In civil society terms, the APK is officially promoted as the vanguard of civil society development. To further raise awareness and bolster its position as one of the chief actors of forging Kazakhstani civic identity, the year of 2015 was officially titled The Year of the APK. As part of the promotion of Kazakhstan's model of ethnic cohesion and unity abroad, the APK was presented to OSCE member states.⁶⁶ One might question to what extent the APK matches the mainstream (liberal) model of

60 Danzer, "Battlefields of ethnic symbols."

61 I use "nation" as an entity made up of different ethnic groups.

62 Interview with Alexander Dederer, chairperson of the Wiedergeburt Association of social organisations Germans of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 28 February 2014.

63 For more information and detailed profiles of ethno-cultural centres, see "Справочник о деятельности этнокультурных объединения Казахстана – Менін Қазақстаным" [Handbook on the activities of ethno-cultural associations of Kazakhstan - Menin Kazakstanym] (Astana: Kogamdyk Kelisim, 2015).

64 For example, due to the absence of physical centres, interviews with representatives of these centres were conducted at the respondent's apartment and at a university where the director of the Turkmen centre works part-time as an adjunct lecturer.

65 Also known as The Pyramid, designed by the British architect Norman Foster.

66 Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Об утверждении Концепции развития Ассамблеи Народа Казахстана до 2025 года" [On approval of the Concept of the Development of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan until 2025], 2015, <http://assembly.kz/ru/ob-utverzhenii-koncepcii-razvitiya-assamblei-naroda-kazahstana-do-2025-goda>.

civil society that promotes democracy. As this study shows, state-sponsored narrative of the nation-building appears instrumental in maintaining interethnic peace that also adds value to the external image of Kazakhstan. The APK shapes minority associations to “strengthen democracy,” which corresponds with the liberal model of civil society. However, the dynamics of daily life of minority associations offers more than the promotion of state ethno-policy and possesses degrees of autonomy and elements of the alternative model of communal civil society that can benefit people.

Uzbekistan

The model of APK has no similar counterpart institution in other Central Asian states. In Uzbekistan, ethno-cultural centres are subordinate to the Governmental Committee for National Minorities. The Republican International Cultural Centre in Uzbekistan, a special coordinating body created in 1992, provides assistance to state bodies and public organisations in the implementation of the national policy. It is apparent that there is no demand in a similar institution in Uzbekistan for its less diverse population. Some associations exist without premises or offices. In Tashkent, the Bukharian Jews cultural organisation is a registered organisation, yet it functions as a community whose members meet on public holidays or in official and private events in communal spaces but not in a specific office.⁶⁷

One of the slippages of the state’s handling of diversity in the nation-building process is that the state defines the people’s identity rather than listening to how they define themselves.⁶⁸ The case of Uzbekistan explains this point. It is worth bringing into discussion the issue of the Tajik people living in Uzbekistan to illustrate the official policy of the Uzbek authorities in the promotion of the “unity in oneness” (not diversity).

In Uzbekistan, the size of the Tajik population remains a matter of debate. Historically, with the creation of Uzbek SSR in 1924, Tajiks, living in the territories of present-day Uzbekistan, re-identified themselves as Uzbeks in the census in a pragmatic and the most advantageous way.⁶⁹ During the Soviet period, Tajiks in Uzbekistan were de facto “minorities within the minority,” that is the coexistence and acceptance by Tajiks and other minority groups (e.g., Karakalpaks, Dungsans) of the local Uzbek identity in a larger Soviet Union framework.⁷⁰ As this research shows, the present-day Uzbekistani regime pursues assimilatory policies and officially rejects the existence of the Tajik language and ethnicity in the south, areas of the Ferghana Valley and Jizzakh province. This reluctance to accept Tajik and acknowledge the Persian heritage is explained by continuity of the Soviet way of turning traditionally Tajik-speaking regions of Samarkand and Bukhara into Uzbek-speaking (also Russian-speaking in Soviet times). Despite the lack of Tajik publications and reduction of Tajik schools, Tajik is still widely spoken.⁷¹

The pioneer movements formed during *perestroika* to pursue the Tajik cause were the Social and Cultural Association “Sayqal” and the National Cultural Centre of Tajiks and Tajik-speaking Peoples, later merged into a coalition “Samarqand.” The Tajik Cultural Society from Samarkand also demanded the issue of official identity cards for all ethnic Tajiks marked as Tajiks not Uzbeks. Yet with Uzbekistan’s official strict policy and a history of repressive acts against pro-Tajik activists, these organisations are limited in their oppositional power.⁷²

67 Interview with a member of the Bukharian Jews Cultural Centre, Tashkent, 15 March 2014.

68 John Shoerberleain-Engel, “The prospects for Uzbek national identity,” *The National Council for Soviet and East European Research. Title VII Program*, 1997, 1–14.

69 Richard Foltz, “The Tajiks of Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey*, 1996, 15 (2): 213–216; Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building*.

70 Francesc Serra Massansalvador, “The process of nation-building in Central Asia and its relationship to Russia’s regional influence,” *Jean Monnet/Robert Schuman Paper Series*, 2010, 10 (5): 2–13.

71 Murat Sadykov, “Uzbekistan: Tajik language is under pressure in ancient Samarkand,” 5 November 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67724>; Foltz, “The Tajiks of Uzbekistan.”

72 Tom Everett-Heath, “Instability and identity in a post-Soviet world: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan,” in *Central Asia: Aspects of transition*, ed. Tom Everett-Heath (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 181–204; Dariush Rajabian, “Tajiks of Uzbekistan,” *Tajikam*, 2007, http://tajikam.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=68.

Resources and activities

The activities of minority organisations are related to public holidays. Uzbekistan holidays mirror those in Kazakhstan—the New Year, Constitution and Independence Days, International Women’s Day 8 March, Nauryz (the spring equinox), and the WWII Victory Day known for Uzbeks as Memorial and Honours Day. In Kazakhstan, besides the official holidays of Kurban Bayram and the Orthodox Christmas of the two major ethnic groups—Kazakhs and Russians—the 1st of May or *Pervomay* marks the unity in diversity. This former Soviet celebration of labourers and workers is the official Day of Unity of the People of Kazakhstan and the key public event for ethno-cultural centres where they play a major role. In the autumn, ethno-cultural centres engage in roundtable discussions to reflect on the annual presidential address to the people of Kazakhstan. Springtime is the period of the Nauryz⁷³ celebration and a variety of festivals and public competitions that mark the Peoples’ Unity Day. For ethnic centres, most publicity and increased media attention is generated in these periods of the year. In other time, their daily activities resemble those of interest-based clubs.

The size of diaspora and the availability of resources define the range of cultural activities for a minority centre. Unlike Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan is an ethnically bifurcated society, and we still see this after more than 26 years of independence. To illustrate the difference in ethnic diversity in these countries: in June 2017, Kazakhstan reached the population mark of 18 million people. Its two major groups—indigenous Kazakhs and ethnic Russians—make up 66.9% and 20.2%, respectively, while the rest of the population is made up of various other ethnic groups.⁷⁴ Uzbekistan’s ethnic composition has little similarity to the case of Kazakhstan. By 2017, the Uzbekistan’s population is almost twice the size of Kazakhstan—32.1 million people. Despite the majority of ethnic Uzbeks (83.8%) and, for comparison, Russian minority population (2.3%),⁷⁵ the country cannot be regarded homogenous or an ethnically Uzbek nation. It remains culturally and ethnically less diverse than Kazakhstan. Contrary to Uzbekistan where Russians are a significant minority, in Kazakhstan, they have never been categorised as such.⁷⁶

Relatively large diaspora groups of Russians, Germans (1.01%), and Koreans (0.6%) in Kazakhstan have several cultural centres housed in smaller assemblies of people across the country. Micro-diasporas such as Chechen (0.18%), Dungan (0.38%), Polish (0.18%), Bashkir (0.09%)⁷⁷ and others formed in the 1990s following requests from active community members or recommendations from officials. Representing only a tiny fraction of the population, their agenda lacks strong messages and claims, focusing mostly on cohesion of their ethnic group members, mutual support, and integration into nation-building processes.

Diasporas without external homeland: The Kalmyk experience

To illustrate activities of a micro-diaspora, I have selected the Kalmyk ethno-cultural centre in Almaty. Kalmyks in Kazakhstan encompass only 0.1% of the population. To promote their ethnic culture, the Kalmyk centre in Almaty creates and participates in events linked with the preservation of their literature, legacy, and traditional life-cycle customs. Having an office in the Friendship House allows the centre to be closely related to other ethno-cultural organisations and participate in joint events. The Kalmyk diaspora in Almaty is so small—taking only 0.04% of the

73 Also known as Navruz in Uzbekistan—spring equinox marked on 21 March.

74 “Численность населения по отдельным этносам 2017” [Population by ethnic groups 2017], <http://stat.gov.kz/getImg?id=ESTAT242525>.

75 “Демографическая ситуация в Республике Узбекистан. Информация о национальном составе постоянного населения Республики Узбекистан на начало 2017 года” [Demographic situation in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Information on the national composition of the resident population of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the beginning of 2017], <https://stat.uz/ru/433-analiticheskie-materialy-ru/2055-demograficheskaya-situatsiya-v-respublike-uzbekistan>.

76 Russians were the majority only in Soviet times.

77 “Численность населения по отдельным этносам 2017.”

population of the city,⁷⁸ with around 500 active members—that its director personally knows almost every member. The centre is also known to active Kalmyks from neighbouring Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, who are aware of the activities and reputation of the association.

We don't have membership fees because the most active members are retired people and pensioners—those families who were deported in December 1943 and since then settled here in Almaty. Everything is based on enthusiasm here. Why do they come to the centre? One new member says he wants to speak the Kalmyk language, asked a lot about *khurul* [Buddhist shrine]. He wants to know and remember his roots. Some join us to learn who their grandparents were. Some ask details about national traditions of engagement, wedding, funeral or birth, and many simply seek new connections and *nuzhnye lyudi* [important people] among other Kalmyks. Two emigrant Kalmyk families from Germany and Canada even visited us here to find out about their ancestors.⁷⁹

Organisation of cultural events is a challenge for such a small community. Special occasions of Zul (Kalmyk lunar New year), jubilees, and Buddhist celebrations are the reasons for meeting up. Often, these events are self-financed and occasionally sponsored by the Akimat's (Mayor's Office) limited grants. The Kalmyk centre's partnership with the city officials has secured state grants and scholarships to support poor families and even provide partial academic support for talented young people of the Kalmyk community. Unlike big-scale associations of Koreans or Germans whose cultural programmes feature full-time language classes, members of the Kalmyk centre usually organise practical ad hoc language lessons during their meet-ups. The knowledge of Kalmyk opens some opportunities—thus five members managed to organise cultural trips to Mongolian and Buddhist centres in China and attend the meeting with the Dalai Lama in New York City organised by the American Kalmyk diaspora in 2012. The rest of the activities are linked with folk and cultural events initiated by the APK or Almaty Mayor's Office. As Raisa Mamoshina summarises: “We are just a small community of motivated individuals and a particle of Kazakhstani society which contributes to sociocultural cohesion.”⁸⁰

Public events

Active participation of citizens of different ethnic origins in major events in public life is one of the chief tasks of the cultural centres to organise and implement. An ethno-cultural centre does not develop or suggest a programme of public activities. This is the prerogative of the APK in Kazakhstan, which drafts an annual programme of activities and only then calls friendship organisations for proposals. One of the more popular activities is the aforementioned Peoples' Unity Day in Kazakhstan on the 1st of May. It is marked with mass celebrations, festivals, national exhibitions to demonstrate peace, friendship, and unity of representatives of all nationalities. In comparison with the Soviet May Day (the Day of International Labour Solidarity), which had obvious political overtones and connotations with the victory in WWII and the revival of labour traditions,⁸¹ 1st of May celebrations in modern Kazakhstan are similar only in terms of aesthetics, cultural demonstrations, and festivals. Posters for the Unity Day serve as visual tools to promote friendship and brotherhood between ethnic groups. Mostly, these are images of diverse groups of multi-ethnic representatives in their traditional dress with slogans like “Uzbekistan is Our House,” “Kazakhstan is the Place of Unity and Peace” and the like.

Anniversary of historical events and public figures are also part of the cultural programme for minority groups. Despite their less visible role in the events of a religious character, Russian centres, for example, participated in the anniversary of the Russian Orthodox Church. Ethnic

78 “Доля отдельных этносов в общей численности Республики Казахстан на начало 2016 года” [The share of individual ethnic groups in the total number of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2016], <http://stat.gov.kz>.

79 Interview with Raisa Mamoshina, head of the Kalmyk national and cultural centre, Almaty, 21 January 2014.

80 Interview with Raisa Mamoshina.

81 Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy*, 207.

centres are also active in the organisation of memorial days to celebrate national heroes and notable figures like Abai, Goete, Chopin, Navoi, Pushkin, Makhtumkuli, Shevchenko, Tamerlane, Auevov, Aitmatov, Vysotskii and others. Special days such as diaspora memorials are yet other reasons to get together. For the Kalmyk centre, for example, 28th of December brings diaspora members together to mark the day of deportation and commemorate those who suffered in Soviet times.⁸²

Looking beyond the façade of cultural events celebrated on various scales, it is obvious that these are instruments for social coherence and civil society building. Acting as centres of social life, ethno-cultural associations nurture a sense of community and develop opportunities for socialisation. Being involved into and even witnessing and observing ethno-cultural events, one is “reminded” of the nation as a multi-ethnic community. This contributes towards building tolerance and developing intercultural appreciation, which is essential for living in a diverse society.

Language classes are part of daily activities for ethno-cultural centres. Usually free of charge, they are organised on a daily basis and open for all interested. They operate on the similar principle in neighbouring Uzbekistan. A member of the Korean centre in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, reflects on her personal experience of studying the language at the centre:

Koreans as a diaspora lost their native language in Soviet times. Our grandparents, born on the Korean Peninsula and deported here in Soviet times, speak mostly Korean with a splattering of Russian words. Our parents are the first generation born here in Uzbekistan. They speak Russian mixed with a few Korean words. Only rural Koreans in Uzbekistan can understand Korean at the present time. My generation who were born in the 1980s speak only Russian. Some may think that free language courses may lack quality but I have found them useful.⁸³

Further, getting access to information is one of the motivating factors to be involved in ethno-cultural centres. For some members, this is the easiest way to gain information—be it recent news of the community, education- or job-related information, or family and daily-life issues. What we can see in Kazakhstan are some parallels with the Uzbek *mahalla*, where one can build social capital and receive benefits from being a member of a community. A member of the Korean community in Kazakhstan pointed out:

Our life often relies on personal contacts. Where else can Koreans meet other Korean fellows, seek job opportunities or even find a future spouse? Nobody comes to “visit” us—people come to us with a reason. We are able to solve problems that are far from the state’s concerns as it cannot penetrate into intimate matters of our community life [...] We exist for this. As long as a person doesn’t speak, one cannot know what she is thinking. Our centre is a platform for exchanging opinions. Here, one can learn or improve their Korean and discuss peculiar issues inherent only to our diaspora.⁸⁴

In Kazakhstan, languages of 22 ethnic groups are taught as an independent subject in 108 schools, and in 88 schools, instruction is conducted in Uzbek, Tajik, Uighur and Ukrainian languages. Yet the official trilingual policy focuses mostly on the promotion of Kazakh and English languages in addition to Russian, which means that there might be fewer opportunities to learn languages of ethnic minorities such as German, Dungan, or Chechens. In this sense, ethno-cultural centres fill this gap.

If in 1999, there were 550 thousand secondary school students learning German, today, this number has fallen to only around 30 thousand. We are having this sharp decline because of the trilingual policy and popularity of English. At our centres, one can sign up for open

⁸² Interview with Raisa Mamoshina.

⁸³ Interview with a member of the Korean Cultural Centre, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 19 March 2014.

⁸⁴ Interview with Georgiy Kan, deputy director of the Almaty Association of Koreans of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 30 January 2014.

German classes and enjoy other perks such as socialisation with other students and community support.⁸⁵

Comprehensive availability of Kazakh and English courses is an important requirement of the trilingual policy. Free Kazakh and English classes, in addition to the diaspora language, are also part of the services of cultural centres. Practically, anyone interested in studying Kazakh, for instance, can sign up for free lessons at any ethno-cultural centre. In other words, a friendship organisation has no restrictions on the membership based on either national or linguistic bases.

When I was drafting the charter of our cultural centre, I wrote that the membership at the centre is open to citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan. My lawyer from the Mayor's Office advised to add a line "as well as to foreign citizens and individuals without citizenship." That is, any citizen of the world can be a member at our centre! Why? When you decide to add more nationalities or write a comment in the charter in the future, you will have to redo all the documentation. But I will not have such headache in this case.⁸⁶

The accessibility of ethno-cultural activities under the principle of being "open for all" is not limited with language classes and open social spaces for meeting people. Clearly, the promotion of the official state language together with the culture of the diaspora is the activity that adds to mutual cultural enrichment. Ethno-cultural associations are not exclusive clubs for ethnic minorities but representatives of their culture and traditions to a wider audience. In this sense, when these associations participate in public events and celebrations, this can be regarded as a reconstruction and maintenance of a national identity and "imagining" a community based on a variety of ethnic cultures. One can recognise similar processes on a micro-level. Despite having the titular ethnicity in the majority of its populations, Uzbekistan is not regarded as a mono-ethnic nation. Looking at the institution of *mahalla*, we can see that people of diverse (multi-ethnic neighbourhoods and communities) and mixed (interethnic families) ethnicities usually populate present-day *mahallas*. Although non-Uzbeks are small in number (Kazakhs and Russians, for example, compose 2.5% and 2.3% in 2017, respectively),⁸⁷ it is customarily to come together to celebrate *mahalla* events and official public holidays. A few of my non-Uzbek respondents from Tashkent and Samarkand reflect on their *mahalla* experiences and getting involved into communal life "out of curiosity." For example, Koreans, Russians, Ukrainians and Uzbeks lived in one *mahalla* and shared public spaces. For Navruz, Uzbek and Slav women cooked traditional Navruz dish (*sumalyak*) together.⁸⁸ Another Uzbek respondent pointed out:

For non-Uzbeks, it is easy to get involved into the *mahalla*. What is the culture of the Uzbeks? It is doing a lot of events: when a child is born, we need to do 3 events during the first year, when the child grows, another events, then weddings (7 different events), funeral (5 different events). So to speak, the whole Uzbek life is devoted to events. You cannot organise them alone—only with the effort of your family and the *mahalla*. You need to be part of the *mahalla* otherwise you will be ashamed if you only attend your neighbours' events [...] My *mahalla* is diverse: the *aksaka*⁸⁹ is Uzbek, his deputy is a Jew, his another deputy is Tatar, and the neighbourhood watcher is Russian. Non-Uzbeks are quite engaged because they can delegate part of their own burden to their neighbours—it is convenient.⁹⁰

By performing national traditions and customs such as joint *plov* cooking and Nauryz, *mahalla* members, despite their various ethnic backgrounds, share the same Uzbek "national" (meaning

85 Interview with Alexander Dederer, chairperson of the Wiedergeburt Association of social organisations Germans of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 28 February 2014.

86 Interview with Gulnar Annakulieva, director of the Turkmen Social and Cultural Centre, Almaty, 31 January 2014.

87 The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan in statistics. Available from: www.stat.uz. Accessed 30 August 2017.

88 Interviews with *mahalla* residents. Russian and Korean, females. March 2014, Tashkent and Samarkand.

89 Honorary elder people in the community (Literal meaning "white beard").

90 Interview with Dr Jamshed Safarov, Counsellor of the Embassy of Uzbekistan in the United Kingdom. Cambridge Central Asia Forum Seminar Series, Cambridge, UK, 3 August 2017.

“state”) culture. Therefore, it would be a mistake to overlook inner intricacies of the *mahalla* social life and make generalised assumptions, as Smith et al.⁹¹ do, that “Slavs and other linguistically Russified groups tend to remain outside these closely knit community structures [*mahalla*] and consequently do not receive the social benefits that accompany membership.” A lot depends on the ethnic diversity, period of presence of non-titular representatives in a given *mahalla*, as well as their desire to participate in national Uzbek customs. The challenge of determining the exact number of participating non-Uzbek people and the regularity of these communal events makes it impossible to make generalised statements.

Another range of activities of ethno-cultural organisations beyond the promotion of culture is related with advisory and support for diaspora members in need. People can ask for advice from informal institutions like *aksakals*, seek answers on personal matters such as specifics of traditional life-cycle events, and request support in case of trouble. Members of a diaspora are often able to give a helping hand to children, the elderly, the lonely, and the disabled or solve personal issues.

I often receive requests for help. During meetings with state officials, I raise issues to solve pressing problems of the diaspora. I remember how in Zarechny [a village in the Almaty region] a group of Turkmens, former prisoners of the Soviet Union, showed me a stack of letters to *Turkmenbashi* [president of Turkmenistan] asking help to let them return to Turkmenistan, to their relatives. I met many Kazakh officials here and wrote many letters, so finally they reunited with their families in Turkmenistan [...] Once in Ashgabat, we signed an agreement on cultural ties and organised exchange visits of children. We also petitioned to change Turkmen visa payments from US dollars to Turkmen *manats* when applying for the visa to travel to Turkmenistan. At last, natives of Kazakhstan can pay the Turkmen visa in *manats*.⁹²

One matter that merits our attention is that a significant part of cultural activities are implemented in partnership with state officials, embassies, and other cultural centres. Unlike in Uzbekistan where minority associations operate on state financing, ethno-cultural organisations in Kazakhstan rely on direct support from their kin states, local grant support and individual sponsorship from minority representatives who have established businesses in Kazakhstan. The money goes to cover maintenance of centres, organisation of conferences and school Olympiads, small material support of veterans and those in need, and various cultural events. While some friendship organisations apply an entrepreneurship approach to tackle financial gaps by, for example, selling tickets to the public for annual celebrations such as the Lunar New Year, others often do not even have a bank account to receive grants, and thus, they have to rely on membership donations and local embassies. Those left without grant support operate on enthusiasm and commitment of its members who volunteer their free time and available resources. For example, in the recent study of Kazakhstani cultural associations, Marlene Laruelle points at the ability of these associations to act as social activists in creating business and economic niches. In rare occasions, they are able to finance their own initiatives to support members of their communities as it was in the case of the Turkish cultural centre whose president invested into the construction of houses for homeless members, or the president of the Dungan centre financing modernisation of Dungan farms. Bigger and well-established ethno-cultural centres are also acting as economic mediators in providing support for their members on setting trade opportunities between Kazakhstan and their kin states. In this sense, minority associations can be seen as creators of an interface between business, the public and the state.⁹³

Such an established intermediary position between the state, society, local businesses, and their kin states allows ethno-cultural associations to enjoy their degrees of autonomy. This translates

91 Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth, *Nation-Building*.

92 Interview with Gulnar Annakulieva, director of the Turkmen Social and Cultural Centre, Almaty, 31 January 2014.

93 Laruelle, “Negotiating Social Activism,” 124, 127.

into their ability to fill in the gaps where state support is not possible; engage in a variety of charitable activities; support members of their ethnic communities in educational, career, and emigration issues; and mediate in business relations. As Marlene Laruelle argues, such a dual orientation on culture-based and business-related activities has created the twin identity of ethno-cultural centres.

Voices of communities

Partnership and cooperation with the state can also extend into activities when ethno-cultural centres become an authorised voice for their ethnic communities in delivering and further extending official public messages of state concerns. For example, in June 2016, a terrorist attack, “ordered from abroad and organised by supporters of radical pseudo-religious movements,” took place in the city of Aktobe, Kazakhstan, on the eve of Ramadan. It left 7 victims dead and 37 casualties among civilians and the military. 9th of June 2016 was then declared a day of national mourning.⁹⁴ The reaction of *Dom Druzhby* in Almaty and ethno-cultural centres across the country was immediate—there were numerous rallies and memorial services, which included Parliamentary and APK attendees. It can be seen that the key message in the public address to their ethnic communities was focused on the unity of representatives of civil society, including all ethno-cultural organisations, against the antihuman actions of terrorism.

According to my respondents, it is in this unity of civil society actors and deeper involvement into the civic sphere where ethno-cultural centres envision themselves. As Alexander Dederer from the German Association of Kazakhstan told me, there are two approaches for more active integration into wider civil society—either struggling with the inner egoism of their own ethnic group by accepting interests of other actors or getting involved in civil society development using the knowledge and experience of the community articulated by their representatives. It is obvious that the latter conveys a more pro-active approach and shows the potential of bringing up mutual positive externalities. To make it feasible, a number of key problems and related challenges need to be addressed such as the lack of volunteers, financial constraints, and passivity of some members. Although respondents from ethno-cultural centres in Kazakhstan call their organisations self-sufficient and independent, this mostly refers to their ability to generate ideas to promote their own cultures and provide diplomatic support to their diaspora members. The number of volunteers of the same ethnicity, which the cultural centre represents, is extremely low as it corresponds with the size of an ethnic community. For example, the year of 2013 saw only “around 20” volunteers involved in the German cultural activities in Almaty:

In such shortage, we are very much interested in welcoming more volunteers from our kin state Germany. Recently, we had a few young people, descendants of Soviet Germans, who helped a lot. In 2012, only one young woman helped us a lot. She was born in Germany, can speak Russian, knows the history of Kazakhstan, and understands behavioural norms of the local Kazakh environment. But such cases are indeed extremely rare.⁹⁵

Financial provisions, good governance, and assistance in problem solving are the forms of support that ethno-cultural organisations expect from the state. Informal face-to-face meetings with ministers and other state officials can foster decision-making and overcome bureaucracy obstacles. In response to the shortage of volunteers and seeking business opportunities, my respondents turn to the necessity of strengthening ties with compatriots who reside abroad, organising more interregional meetings, and fostering contacts with regional elites.

94 “Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s Statement,” 2016. *Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. 8 June 2016, http://www.akorda.kz/en/events/akorda_news/kazakhstan-president-nursultan-nazarbayevs-statement.

95 Interview with Alexander Dederer, chairperson of the Wiedergeburt Association of social organisations Germans of Kazakhstan, Almaty, 28 February 2014.

Conclusion

This study explored the activities of ethno-cultural associations and analysed their potential as civil society institutions. Despite the predominantly Muslim populations, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are multi-confessional and multi-ethnic societies that have moulded their national identities using ethnic diversity and secularism as the main ingredients. I have demonstrated that there is continuity with Soviet times in terms of the hierarchy, state co-optation, and the use of policies and practices. In the USSR, the development of the Soviet state was implemented through the ideology of the friendship of people, various soft power mechanisms, and official institutions of socio-cultural nature such as VOKS, DK, and KID. The Soviet government put into place institutions aimed at socialisation and bringing together people in the context of the Soviet people.

In present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, diasporas are represented by ethno-cultural centres subordinate to the APK and the Republican International Cultural Centre in Uzbekistan, respectively. I have drawn special attention to the APK in Kazakhstan because of its special status as a constitutional body. Operating through the network of *doma družby*, which houses ethno-cultural centres, the APK provides a form of participation and, at the same time, applies similar controlling mechanisms as they were in Soviet times. The subordination of ethno-cultural organisations under state institutions created opportunities to overcome the autonomy of ethnic groups and their institutional isolation in both states. Research findings illustrate that numerous social activities are provided to attract people towards civic participation of an ethno-cultural nature. We still, however, are unable to say how salient and effective they are in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Quotidian activities, however, exemplify cases when minority associations use their *limited autonomy* in cultural and business relations. Ethno-cultural centres are able to generate opportunities for self-development and expansion of social ties. Comparable to Soviet interest-based clubs, they create spaces for individuals to interact and consolidate social capital. Minority associations add their voice to the official rhetoric on “togetherness” and “unification” of diverse nationalities by popularising the culture of ethnic diversity, intercultural understanding, accord and interdependency. This “togetherness” remains a central motif of the national policies which portray Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as nations of the ancient Silk Road situated in the heart of Eurasia and thus historically rich and culturally diversified. In Uzbekistan, the co-existence of various ethnic traditions can be seen through the daily life of the *mahalla*, which is put forward as one of the symbols of the Uzbek identity, supposedly, to unite the Uzbek nation.

The reason I refer to friendship and ethno-cultural institutions as “resources of civil society” is that they are providers of various resources and activities. They offer opportunities to create and sustain social capital, build up personal social networks, and develop an understanding and appreciation of the diversity and ethno-cultural richness of civil society. A modernising potential of the educated middle class can be promising in the development of ethno-cultural institutions in the long run. Until then, the functionality of ethno-cultural centres as civic actors is limited by constitutional and legal frameworks, possibilities of state support, and levels of self-organisation of citizens. We may conclude that it is less likely to expect pressing political demands or stipulations for greater cultural autonomy from ethno-cultural organisations.

In its present form, these associations are bridging the gap between communities while providing platforms of civic exchanges and acting as a link between the public, the state, and other diaspora groups. Ethno-cultural centres remain one of the pillars in the construction of national identities and should be recognised as a form of domestic civil society actors able to exercise their limited autonomy in cross-sector relations.

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