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THE PROSPECTS FOR UZBEK NATIONAL IDENTITY

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SUMMARY:

Following the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan is facing the problem of defining its identity. In this continued age of nationalism, many nations are attempting to establish their identities by interweaving the idea of state identity with the perceived identity of their population. The Uzbek government is attempting to ensure its stature as a great nation by encouraging the continued growth of a large populace which strongly identifies itself as Uzbek. However, despite Soviet efforts to create a homogenous Uzbek identity, many rich non-national identities have survived. In Uzbekistan there is such great cultural diversity that any attempt to provide a clear-cut homogenous national identity inevitably alienates a substantial portion of the population, unless they suppress their own culture in favor of the national one. Amidst this great variety, there is a battle to be fought in defining the character of the Uzbek national culture. A more realistic basis for establishing national identity in Central Asia would be to use a model based on pluralism.

The current Uzbek policy of promoting national identity risks both the continuation of the Soviet-era reflex of eradicating diversity, and also encouraging the illusion that homogeneity exists where it does not. While many of the varied groups have been induced to accept an official Uzbek national identity, that identity largely does not reflect either their self perception or their perception of their own culture. Independence has brought a new era to the people of Uzbekistan. With their new-found freedom the question of the cultural identity of the Uzbek population is one which must be addressed to provide a stable basis for the state.

Some analysts argue that the government of Uzbekistan must seek to strengthen Uzbek national identity and that “sub-national” groups pose a threat to the integrity of the state. Such an approach to the cultural diversity of Uzbekistan would produce the opposite effect. History demonstrates that demagogues flourish in an environment where tensions are heightened by economic stress combined with feelings of discrimination and persecution. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that many peoples and cultures make up the republic’s population and that they must all have equal rights and protections. Unity in diversity often becomes a casualty when a state attempts to define the identity of its people rather than listening to how they define themselves. This paper examines the diversity of identities in Uzbekistan, focusing on several examples of non-national identities, and considers the role of diversity in Uzbekistan’s future.

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The Problem: The Identity of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is facing the problem of defining its identity. On independence, Uzbekistan became a broken fragment of the defunct Soviet state -- a state which had become seriously devoid of legitimacy. For this new state to stand on its own feet independently, the Government of Uzbekistan is obliged to give it an identity, and to make this identity compelling both to its own population and to the world at large.

In the age of nationalism, which we are still enduring, the most common way of establishing a state's identity is through asserting that the identity of the state represents the identity of its population, and this is usually defined in terms of a national culture. On the world scene, and before their domestic audience, new states are also keen promote themselves as having a deep history and an important presence in the world.

The Government of Uzbekistan seems to partake of the notion that Uzbekistan can achieve the stature of a great nation if the number of Uzbeks is large and if they have a strong sense of their identity. The drive to greatness through numbers perhaps partly accounts for the country's reluctance to confront one of its most socially explosive problems: a population growth rate which exceeds 2% annually and results in children dominating the population -- 40% under age 14\(^2\) -- which is likely to lead to severe social and economic problems in the near future.

Another approach to ensuring that Uzbeks are numerous is to encourage as much of the population of Uzbekistan as possible to adopt an unequivocally Uzbek identity. The Uzbekistan government has taken some steps to encourage a pervasive and self-assured Uzbek national identity, built on an image of great historical antiquity and importance. Such notions of historical sweep and mission are commonplaces in the politics of nation-building, and for some it may be hard to imagine how a new nation could survive without them.

What, then, are the prospects for Uzbek national identity? What is this nation-building project up against? What might its social costs be? And how bad off would Uzbekistan be if it never succeeded in establishing a homogeneous Uzbek national identity?

It is commonly asserted that the failure to build a national identity leads to the breakdown of the state. In order to resist fragmentation, according to this argument, states must aspire to the nation-state model which has dominated the European political imagination since the break-up of the European empires. Only in this way can the separate pieces of the Soviet empire make themselves whole. Some have gone so far as to explain the Civil War in Tajikistan as resulting from the failure of nation-building there. It is easier to justify the nastier aspects of nation-building if one can point to an example where nation-building is supposed to have failed with dire consequences, as in

\(^2\) These figures, from the CIA Factbook, are estimates for July 1995. The estimated population of Uzbekistan is 23,089,261.
Tajikistan, where as many as 50,000 died and somewhere near one million were displaced in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Nation-building almost inevitably has its nasty aspects. It usually entails a special status for one national group within the state, which leads almost invariably to discrimination and unequal privileges. To the extent that it entails an effort to strengthen one homogeneous identity, this leads to the suppression of others. The logical conclusion of this may be seen in the terrible events of recent years in the former Yugoslavia. The appreciation of the diversity of traditionally held identities may seem like romanticism or sentimentality, but the assault on identity has real consequences for individuals and communities.

In Uzbekistan, there is such tremendous cultural diversity that any attempt to promote a clear-cut, homogenous national identity would inevitably make outsiders of a substantial part of the population unless they suppress their own culture in favor of the national one. I would like to challenge this notion of the nation-building imperative, and suggest that with all its rich diversity, Central Asia would do better to seek its models in pluralism.

**History of the Uzbek Concept**

Uzbekistan was created in 1924, when the Soviet government undertook to divide Central Asia along national lines. In contrast to most instances of nation-state formation, this did not result from an Uzbek national movement striving to create an Uzbek state. It was the Bolsheviks who decided which groups would be counted as nations, and then divided Central Asia accordingly. The very small group of Central Asian nationalists who had been active in the early part of this century were much more interested in the idea of mobilizing together with fellow Turks and fellow Muslims against Russian domination than in establishing separate national republics under the Russian Federation.

Some scholars have asserted that there was no Uzbek national identity prior to the establishment of Soviet Uzbekistan. The greatest historian of Central Asia, Vasilii Vladimirovich Bartol’d, in his “The Turks: An historical-ethnographic survey,” does not mention the Uzbeks until the 20th century. Meanwhile, it has recently become fashionable in Uzbekistan to argue that the Uzbek nation extends back to the 1st millennium BC and even earlier. What is the meaning of this disparity? When did the Uzbek nation in fact appear on the historical scene?

Although this is a question which evokes great passion amongst those who promote or oppose Uzbek nationalist claims, the debate is built more on emotion than on history. It is incontestable that the first time a group associated with the name “Uzbek” established a permanent presence in Central Asia was with the Shaybanid conquest in the 16th century. Meanwhile, a substantial segment of the historical population which has contributed to gene pool now called “Uzbek” was in Central Asia very close to the beginning of history. This included Turkic language speakers, some of whom
entered Central Asia more than a millennium before the Shaybanid “Uzbek” conquest. Just as importantly, the contemporary Uzbeks also have genetic roots in the region’s primordial population which was originally Iranian-speaking, but who, over many centuries prior to the Shaybanid conquest, had increasingly adopted Turkic language. On the other hand, it can be argued that even to this day the Uzbeks have not consolidated as a nation. In what follows, I will describe some aspects of contemporary identities in Uzbekistan that could be used to support this assertion.

It is not my purpose to adjudicate the question of the antiquity of Uzbek nation. In my view, the people of Uzbekistan are entitled to a sense of self-worth and pride in Central Asia’s history without any regard to this question. However, in order to explain the current state of Uzbek identity, it will be useful to describe briefly where the concept “Uzbek” came from and how it came to be attached to the modern state.

As I mentioned, the name “Uzbek” entered Central Asia with the Shaybanid conquest in the 16th century. The name was thus associated with the several dynasties descended from the Shaybanids which ruled the Khanates until they lost their independence to Russia. This concept of “Uzbek” was not what we think of nowadays as a nationality. It applied to the ruling elites, and by extension, to their subjects. In addition to the ruling elites, there were also many ordinary people who reckoned their descent from members of the Uzbek tribal confederation -- those who had been the common soldiers in the conquering army that also inhabited Central Asia following the conquest.

Meanwhile, alongside these relative newcomers who reckoned themselves to be of Uzbek descent, there were a great many other groups, including many who later became officially classified as Uzbeks, whose descent-based identity did not connect them with Uzbek lineages. Such people identified themselves as Uzbeks only in the sense of being subjects of Uzbek dynasties. These people included speakers of a great variety of Turkic dialects as well as of Tajik. They included people who were nomads with a strong sense of tribal identity, as well as settled people who had long since lost their Turkic tribal identity, or indeed, who had never had Turkic tribal identities since they were of Iranian descent and had simply adopted Turkic language. For most purposes in their daily life, what mattered was that they were members of tribal or other lineage categories, or that they were inhabitants of a particular locality.

Therefore, when Uzbekistan was established in 1924, for most of those who were officially assigned to the Uzbek nationality -- even for those who counted themselves as Uzbeks by descent -- this did not represent the realization of some deeply felt national aspiration. Moreover, throughout the Soviet period, Uzbekistan remained a peculiar case of a national state inasmuch as the Soviet authorities were very much in doubt whether they wanted a strong national identity in Uzbekistan which could supersede loyalty to the Soviet state.
The Creation of Uzbekistan

Thus, the year 1924 introduced dramatically new dynamics in Uzbekistan in the realm of identity. There was a spectacular explosion of the number of people officially counted as Uzbeks. By a conservative count, from the time of the revolution until 1924, the count of Uzbeks in the Soviet Central Asian territories nearly doubled. Prior to 1917, the number of Uzbeks in Russian Turkistan, and the protectorates of Khiva and Bukhara was estimated at about two million.3 The count of 1924 which accompanied the division of Central Asia into national republics put the number of Uzbeks at 3.8 million.4 This spectacular growth cannot, of course, be attributed to high rates of fertility. In fact, during this period the natural increase of the population was substantially diminished by the effects of war and famine. The explanation becomes apparent when we note that at the same time, a number of other categories -- in some cases, quite sizable ones -- disappeared from the count altogether.

The most important such category was the Sarts. Prior to the introduction of the national principle of rule in Central Asia, the most important broad criterion for defining identity in the region was the distinction between pastoral nomads and sedentary oasis dwellers. The name Sart was used to refer to the sedentary population, which was characterized by a common culture with regional variations, though some Sarts spoke Turkic language while others spoke Tajik. The linguistic criterion, considered so essential to the definition of national categories, was not of particular significance to the Central Asians. In many areas, bilingualism was the rule.

When Uzbekistan was established, the category Sart was declared defunct. All Turkic speaking Sarts were to be considered Uzbeks, while all Iranian speaking Sarts were classified as Tajiks. As a result, the category which had once unified the population based on cultural similarities was replaced with a linguistically based category which brought together under the name Uzbek a diverse population with much weaker cultural commonalities. The craftsmen, traders, literate urban elite, and tillers of soil were classified together with people whose lives revolved around horses and large herds of sheep. I do not mean to say that this new classification is incorrect, but it was certainly imposed on the broad population, and it is understandable that people might not catch on as quickly as they were supposed to do. The approximately 1.7 million Sarts of Central Asia could not just disappear over night.

The Soviet government justified the elimination of the “Sart” category on the grounds that it was pejorative. They based this assertion on the fact that the nomadic people viewed the Sarts with a certain disdain, and therefore, in their eyes, to call someone a Sart was not a compliment. They

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3 P. P. Semenov-Tian-Shanski, Turkestanskii krai, Sankt-Peterburg, 1913. The number of Uzbeks who lived on the territory of what was to become Uzbekistan was of course somewhat smaller, even, but such figures are not available since the prerevolutionary territorial units are not comparable.

further asserted that Russians had used the term indiscriminately to refer to Central Asians without regard to whether they called themselves this or not. Both these assertions were true. However, the fact that other people used the term indiscriminately or with disdain does not mean that Sarts did not use the term in relation to themselves in a perfectly normal way. Furthermore, the nomads did not always use this term with disdain, nor did all Russians use it indiscriminately. I will below describe how, in spite of a seventy year campaign to eradicate the concept, it is still alive and well in some places.

Nor was Sart the only category which the Soviet government sought to eliminate. While in the earlier Soviet censuses, such categories as Qipchaq and Turk were still recognized, eventually only a few officially recognized national categories such as Qazaq, Turkmen and Qaraqalpaq were allowed to remain alongside the Uzbeks. All of the smaller Turkic groups, such as Laqays, Qarluqs, and Chaghatays were defined out of existence, and shuffled into the Uzbek category. This category came to include a tremendous amount of cultural and dialectical variety. In a sense, it was a very odd category -- a negative category -- in that it was to include all the Turkic speakers who did not fit into other official Central Asian nationalities. Needless to say, there was a considerable battle to be fought in defining what the character of the official national culture of the Uzbeks would be amidst all this variety.

The Picture on the Ground

Until this point I have discussed this question in general terms. It is difficult to conceive of how it is possible to turn some 3.8 million people of diverse identity categories into a single nation over a few decades. And it is open to question whether this was in fact achieved. Quite aside from the question of whether people change their identities so easily when under pressure to do so, the Soviet government’s commitment to this goal was ambivalent and some of the main institutions of state nationalism were weak or lacking. For example, the role of language in defining the nation was severely undermined by the dominance of Russian in many official contexts. The Soviet state was much more keen that Uzbek school children read Pushkin than Nava’i, or that they know of Peter the Great’s statesmanship rather than Timur’s. Nevertheless, identity under Soviet rule underwent radical transformations.

Qipchaqs

One group that was meant to disappear amidst the Uzbeks was the Qipchaqs. Yet, in my research in the northern part of the Farghana Valley, I found that to this day Qipchaqs constitute a distinct group and a substantial part of the regions inhabitants.

In early Soviet times, there was some debate about whether the Qipchaqs should be recognized as a distinct people. Writing in 1926, I. Magidovich wrote, “In Farghana, [the Qipchaqs] are
sufficiently distinct from the Uzbeks and Qirghizes that they are considered a separate people [narodnost'], numbering 42,500 people." In the report of the 1917 Agricultural Census, which was published in 1924 as part of the effort to establish how Central Asia should be divided into national republics, it was written:

Qipchaqs are included as part of almost all of the Turkic peoples [narodnosti] of European Russia and Turkistan. However, only in the Farghana the settled Qipchaqs still set themselves off against other peoples [narody], denying their identity with the Uzbeks or Qirghiz.6

In an official pamphlet published by the Commission on the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of Russia and entitled “The list of peoples of the Turkistan Territory,” Zarubin wrote, “Apparently, [the Qipchaqs] feel a stronger attraction to the Qazaqs and Qirghizes, opposing themselves to the Uzbeks and Sarts: at least according to A. N. Samoilovich, they—or some of them—expressed the desire that they be separated, along with the Qirghiz and Qazaqs, into a special autonomous unit.”7

The official ambivalence toward Qipchaqs as a separate people actually began in pre-Soviet times. One count in 1880 put the number of Qipchaqs in the Farghana Valley at 70,107.8 Meanwhile, the 1897 census counted only 7,584 in Farghana Province.9 This is due to the fact that this census counted peoples by the criterion of language -- foreshadowing the importance that later would be attached to language in Stalinist definitions of nationality. The great majority of the population of Farghana Province were counted as Sarts (788,989) and Uzbeks (153,780). Apparently a minority of census-takers came to the conclusion that Qipchak was a language unto itself.

Following the 1917 census, the Qipchaqs passed fairly quickly off the official scene altogether. In the 1926 census, the number of Qipchaqs reported in the Farghana Valley had dropped by 24% to 32,288 (compared to 42,500 in 1917).10 By 1927, it was clear that no matter what the Qipchaqs themselves thought, they would no longer be recognized as a separate group, but merely a backward

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6 Materialy Vserossiiskikh perepisei: Perepis' naseleniia v Turkestanskoi Respublike: vyp. 4: Sel'skoe naselenie Ferganskoi oblasti po materialam perepisi 1917 g., p. 54, Tashkent 1924. It is noteworthy that this publication points out that a part of the number 42,500 which is cited for the Qipchaqs at this time are in fact associated with the Qirghiz rather than the Uzbeks, and even call themselves "Qirghiz Qipchaq" or simply "Qirghiz". Later sources, such as K. Shaniiazov writing in 1974, treat this number as having unequivocally been a part of the Uzbeks (K etnicheskoi istorii Uzbekskogo naroda: Istoriko-etnograficheskoe issledovanie na materialakh Kipchakskogo komponenta, p. 12, Tashkent 1974).
9 Pervaja vseobshchaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiiskoi Imperii, 1897 g., vol. 89: Ferganskaia oblast', Sankt-Peterburg 1904.
tribal carry-over amongst the Uzbeks. Zarubin remarked that members of some of the subdivisions of the Uzbeks “have a strongly developed tribal consciousness (to the detriment of common national consciousness), including especially the Farghana Qipchaqs....”11 In the instructions that census-counters received during later censuses, they were told that in cases when the respondent had claimed Qipchaq nationality, they should automatically be registered as Uzbek.12 Soviet ethnographers commonly cited the resulting census figures as an indication that groups such as the Qipchaqs willingly abandoned their identity in favor of being Uzbek:

The drawing together [sblizhenie] and blending [sliianie] ethnically of many small nationalities [narodnosti] and ethnographic groups, taking place under the conditions of the socialist system, with full the equality of all groups of the population, naturally and voluntarily without any kind of pressure from outside, can be illustrated with a multitude of examples. ... The censuses of 1920 and 1926 counted separately ... Turks, Qipchaqs, Kuramas and others which considered themselves separate, distinct nationalities, and when answering the question of nationality in their passports, indicated Qipchaq, Turk, Kurama ... In the 1959 census ... only 100 people counted themselves as Qipchaqs. ... The rest ... blended once and for all with the Uzbek people.13 Soviet ethnographers assisted in the preparation of the guidelines instructing census-counters to falsify the results, so such interpretations of the resulting figures must undoubtedly be understood as dissimulation.

The most comprehensive work ever written on the ethnography of Central Asia, produced by Soviet ethnographers in 1962, mentions Qipchaqs only as a group that existed in pre-Soviet times. The closest they come to recognizing the existence of alternative identities amongst the Uzbeks is to say, “Meanwhile, alongside the development of the increasingly substantive characteristics of an [Uzbek] ethnic unity, ethnographic groups of this people [narodnost'] continued to exist ... sometimes right up to the late 19th and early 20th centuries....”14 Likewise, Sh. I. Inogamov affirms:

In the process of cultural and economic growth, together with the consolidation and formation of the Uzbek socialist nation, a series of Uzbek tribes, such as Qipchaqs ... which had during the years of the formation of the Uzbek SSR still continued to maintain their tribal and ethnic self-designations, gradually abandoned these self-designations and began to call themselves only Uzbeks.15

12 For example, Slovari natsional'nostei i iazykov dlia shifrovki otvetov na 7 i 8 voprosy perepisnykh listov (o natsional'nosti, rodnom i drugom iazyke narodov SSSR) Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1970 g., p. 9, Moskva 1969.
15 Sh. I. Inogamov, Etnicheeskii sostav naseleniia i etnograficheskaia karta Ferganskoi doliny v granitsakh Uzbekskoi SSR, p. 18, Tashkent 1955.
However, the united front of Soviet ethnographers was broken by Karim Shaniiazov in the most comprehensive work written on the Qipchaqs of this region, in which he describes having worked among existing Qipchaq communities in the 1960s, and even discovered that the censuses of 1917 and 1926 had failed to register many communities inhabited by Qipchaqs.¹⁶

Even more recently, in my own fieldwork in the Farghana Valley, I found in most historically Qipchaq communities where I worked that people are still vividly conscious of their being Qipchaq. They generally avoid intermarriage with non-Qipchaqs, and many even prefer to marry Qirghizes or Qazaqs than to marry the non-Qipchaq Uzbeks, from whom, according to the official story, they no longer distinguish themselves. The view among Qipchaqs which Samoilovich described in the early 1920s that they are closer to Qirghizes and Qazaqs is still quite common in spite of 70 years of being told they are nothing other than Uzbeks.

Interestingly, in areas where there are many Qipchaqs, the Sart identity has often also sustained itself — no doubt partly because the Qipchaqs commonly refer to non-Qipchaq Uzbeks as "Sarts", thus reinforcing the Sart identity which has been undermined in other areas.

The Qipchaqs' sense of their distinctiveness is predicated on a number of cultural characteristics. Qipchaqs typically have a much stronger affinity for animal husbandry than their Sart neighbors. They can usually be distinguished quite readily by their speech, which has much in common with Qirghiz, such as the use of the ‘j’ sound where standard Uzbek uses ‘y’ -- for example, ‘jok’ instead of ‘yok’ [meaning "no"]'). Many other cultural traits also distinguish them, such as the custom of slaughtering an animal within a day of the death of a family member, which is something a Sart would typically abhor. The practice of exchanging animals as part of a marriage agreement is also typical of the Qipchaqs but not of the Sarts.

I do not wish to suggest that the Qipchaqs present a challenge to the Uzbekistan state, or that their official classification as Uzbeks is a serious infringement of their rights. However, the claim that Qipchaq identity no longer matters is simply false. What is more, I believe there is no good reason why Qipchaq identity should be lost. The current policy in Uzbekistan of promoting national identity is at risk both of continuing the Soviet-era impulse to eradicate diversity, and also of encouraging the pretense that homogeneity exists where it does not.

Khojas

Another example of an identity that was unsuccessfully suppressed is that of the Khojas. The Khojas present an anomaly in the framework of the usual criteria for defining nations. Among the Khojas, there are speakers of each of Central Asia's major languages. Thus, by the linguistic criteria which usually dictate official identities, the Khojas belong to a variety of nationalities. Yet the

¹⁶ K. Shaniiazov, K etnicheskoi istorii Uzbekskogo naroda, p. 112.
Khojas think of themselves as a people unto themselves, having more in common with one another regardless of their official nationality than with non-Khojas with whom they share a common nationality.

Khojas define their identity primarily in terms of descent from important religious figures. Sometimes they point to figures in relatively recent Central Asian history, such as Sufi figures from two or three centuries back. Sometimes they refer -- vaguely or specifically -- to descent from important Arab figures from the early history of Islam. In addition, members of Khoja lineages have played an important role in the Islamic clergy on all levels. Both as a group defined in religious terms and as a group which corresponds very poorly to the official national categories, the Soviet government was keen to see the disappearance of the category Khoja.

One particular line of attack on the Khojas made use of the fact that a demonstrably pure genealogy was considered to be crucial to Khoja identity. A Khoja must be able to show his links with a prominent Khoja historical figure, or his status was suspect. To demonstrate a pure genealogy, Khoja families invariably kept a document called a shajara [genealogy] which traced their links to the key Khoja progenitors. Since Khojas were exempt from certain taxes during pre-revolutionary times, these documents not only affirmed status but had a legal significance as well, and were registered with the seal of the tsarist officials. During Soviet times, the authorities sought to erase Khoja identity by confiscating shajaras. This practice continued right up until recent times, and I found that nowadays many Khoja became nervous and evasive when I inquired about their shajara -- apparently fearing that any shajara they might have retained all these years could be confiscated if its existence were revealed.

Though the confiscation of so many shajaras has made their use as credentials problematic, genealogical purity is still considered of paramount importance in the Khoja communities where I have worked. In order to preserve this, Khojas rarely seek marriage outside of their group. While there is some leeway for men to marry non-Khoja brides, since their children will nevertheless be counted as Khoja based on their father's status, few Khoja would countenance giving away their daughter to an outsider no matter what his merits might be. However, the prohibition against exogamy does not prevent a Tajik Khoja from marrying an Uzbek or Turkmen Khoja, as long as their claim to Khoja descent is considered to be authentic. The fact that so many shajaras were confiscated has probably led the Khojas to practice endogamy within a tighter group of known relatives, since members of more distant groups are considered dubious without the document to prove their identity.

Aside from strict endogamy, Khojas occupy a distinct position in Central Asian society by a number of other criteria. Perhaps the most striking -- and that which the Soviet government had the most difficulty countenancing -- is the practice of according special status and showing respect to the Khojas. For example, in Central Asian languages, as a rule, the familiar pronoun and verb forms are
used when addressing someone who is the speaker's junior in status or age. By contrast, everyone -- whether senior or junior, Khoja or non-Khoja -- traditionally addressed Khojas with the formal forms. This means of marking group status, needless-to-say, ran counter to the Soviet ideology that all members of society are equal. Central Asians were told that this practice represented a feudal survival and was inconsistent with socialism. Nevertheless, I found most often that both Khoja and non-Khoja considered this practice to be natural, though they understood that it was officially unacceptable.

Thus, Khoja, like Qipchaq, has persisted as a salient category. In fact, in spite of the negative value assigned to such categories under Soviet rule, there is a sense in which they have even flourished. In the context of a bureaucratic system where people negotiate the system with the help of patron-client and old-boy network relationships, such identity categories serve a useful function of defining constituencies. It is very analogous, in fact, to the way that Rhodes scholars networks helped to define who would flourish in the bureaucracy when Bill Clinton assumed the presidency. Similarly, in some parts of Uzbekistan, members of Khoja lineages have done very well for themselves in the bureaucracy, dominating the law enforcement organs in some towns, and occupying a prominent position amongst the Tashkent elite generally. It should be emphasized that “clanism” and patronage were condemned in Soviet times and are often hypocritically counted as a trait of backward societies by Western experts, but that any Kennedy who desires a career in politics can have one is considered quite natural and harmless.

Tajik-Speakers in Samarkand

The official desire for homogeneity is illustrated even more starkly by the example of the population of Samarkand. In 1872, shortly after the conquest of Samarkand, Russian sources reported the population of the city at 35,326, of whom 33,622, or 95%, were Tajiks (nearly all of the rest were Jews, with a total of only 4 Uzbeks in the city). The picture portrayed by the 1959 census could scarcely be more different: Though the Soviet censuses typically did not publish detailed nationality information for specific cities, the 1959 census cites a figure of 11,166 for the number of Tajiks in all the cities of Samarkand Province. Thus, in 1959 the Tajiks from all of Samarkand Province amounted to only 5.7% of Samarkand city’s population of 196,484. We don’t know how many of the urban Tajiks counted here lived in other parts of Samarkand Province, but even assuming that all these Tajiks did live in Samarkand itself, the figure would represent a 67% decline in the absolute number of Tajiks from 1872 to 1959, in spite of an overall increase of 556% in the city’s population. If one supposes that this drop in the percentage of Tajiks from 95% to 5.7% took

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17 Materialy dlia statistiki Turkestanskogo kraia, vol. 4, Sankt-Peterburg 1876.
place over nearly 100 years, it is possible to attribute it to major movements of population, but a look at the numbers for a narrower time frame reveals with certainty that it was not the people but the categories that were moving: In 1915, Samarqand’s Tajik population was 59,901 (62%) while Uzbeks together with Sarts were 879 (1%); in 1920, Tajiks were 44,758 (54%) and Uzbeks 3,311 (4%); in 1926, Tajiks were 10,716 (10%) and Uzbeks were 43,304 (41%). In a mere eleven years, Tajiks had decreased by 82% and Uzbeks had increased by nearly 5,000%!

In spite of this, when one walks along the street in Samarqand nowadays, one is much more likely to overhear people speaking Tajik than Uzbek. Among these Tajik-speakers, the vast majority are listed in their passports as Uzbeks. These facts, combined with the extraordinary shifts in numbers of Tajiks counted in Samarqand, might lead one to conclude that the population is really Tajik and is falsely represented as being Uzbek. However, the situation is not as simple as that. If you ask many of these Tajik-speakers what their nationality is, they will tell you “Uzbek”, and the fact that their first language is Tajik does not present a contradiction to them. The notion that one’s nationality is determined by one’s language, and the consciousness that Tajik and Uzbek are utterly different, unrelated languages is not part of how they think about their national identity. When unselfconsciously referring to their customs, dress, and even language, they commonly refer to them as “Uzbek”.

Who is to say that they are not Uzbeks? In their case, the category “Uzbek” is extremely accommodating of diversity. The people of Samarqand are aware of differences of culture and language between them and other Uzbeks. It is true that they were coerced into accepting Uzbek identity. Yet, being Uzbek is sufficiently flexible an identity that they generally do not feel that their adoption of Uzbek national identity does violence to their own culture. When glasnost’ provided the opportunity for a Tajik cultural revivalist movement to develop, and this movement pressured local authorities into allowing people to change their passports from indicating “Uzbek” to “Tajik”, very few people saw their official identity as sufficiently important to warrant making this change.

A New Role for Uzbek Nationality

From the point of view of diversity, what I have presented is largely a positive picture. Despite Soviet efforts to create a homogenous Uzbek identity, many rich non-national identities have persisted. This may be counted as a small triumph of the people in their retention of their own culture in the face of a state that sought to impose culture upon them in so many ways. The struggle was not without its negative consequences. The population always felt it was at odds with the state in a struggle over culture, and the state often sought to further its goals by dividing communities

against themselves. This often pitted the young against the old, in violation of the traditional Central Asian respect for elders. Groups like the Khojas were targeted as feudal carry-overs, and non-Khoja were expected to participate in this assault. In communities where there was a mixture of groups, the state often made an alliance with the traditionally weaker group to work against the stronger. Privileges were allocated to those who complied with the state's ambition of cultural homogeneity and denied those who did not.

With independence, Uzbekistan is entering a new era, with many questions to be resolved. There is an opportunity to move away from the practices of the Soviet era and call off the struggle against traditional Central Asian identities. And there is an opportunity to give new freedom to cultural self-expression, and to allow the fabric of society to be re-woven where it was torn in so many places. One thing works against this: the notion that a homogeneous national identity is more urgently needed now than ever. Some may wish to foster an enthusiasm for a state-based national identity as a way to distract the population from the serious problems now facing Uzbekistan. Others may be genuinely fearful that diversity leads to divisiveness.

In this vein, political analysts frequently cite Samarqand as one of Central Asia's biggest ethnic powder kegs. It is assumed that Samarqand Tajiks feel aggrieved that they did not end up in Tajikistan when the land was divided up in 1924. Some Tajik voices in Tajikistan itself did voice aspirations of "recovering" Samarqand, especially before Tajikistan was sobered by civil war. However, over the many years I have worked among Samarqandi Tajiks, I have almost never heard talk of such aspirations. On the contrary, the great majority of Tajik-speakers in Samarqand are apparently quite accepting of their position in Uzbekistan and have even come to adopt a kind of superficial Uzbek identity, as I have described. The notion that Tajik identity in Samarqand is inherently destabilizing for Uzbekistan is an assumption which is not borne out by experience. Though it cannot be ruled out that some demagogue might seek to raise the banner of Tajik reunification, there will be no popular following as long as Samarqandi Tajiks are content with their current position. In fact, when there were troubles in the Farghana Valley in 1989, I was told that some people tried to rouse discontent in Samarqand as well, without any success.

Meanwhile, one might reasonably predict that discontent would increase if there were an intensified campaign to suppress Tajik identity. During Soviet times, though Tajik identity was not fostered and indeed it was discouraged in some ways, there was little in the way of a concerted campaign to suppress Tajik identity comparable to that waged against the Kurds in Turkey, for example. Schooling in Tajik declined, not because the authorities didn't allow it, but mainly because parents saw better prospects for their children with a strong knowledge of Uzbek.

While the Soviet government had a mixed record on promoting pluralism, it offers a better model than many of the new states that have been infected with nationalist enthusiasm. Western observers most often criticized the Soviet policy of promoting "internationalism" as being
superficial, but the Soviet successor states could do much worse than to adopt a similar policy of internationalism. Some analyst argue that the government of Uzbekistan must seek to strengthen Uzbek national identity and that "sub-national" identities pose a threat to the integrity of the state. Presumably, this would be achieved by the implementation of more effective measures against Tajik, Khoja and Qipchaq identities in Uzbekistan than were employed in Soviet times -- perhaps in a manner more akin to the Greek Government's suppression of the Macedonians, the Bulgarian Government's suppression of the Turks, or the Iraqi Government's suppression of the Kurds.

On the contrary, I believe that such an approach to Uzbekistan's cultural diversity would more likely provoke the opposite effect. Demagogues flourish in an environment where tensions are heightened by economic stress combined with feelings of discrimination or persecution. The post-Soviet Government of Uzbekistan has generally been keen to stress its commitment to "internationalism," emphasizing that many different peoples and cultures make up the republic's population and they all have equal rights. However, counter trends may also be observed. There has been an intensified effort to define Uzbekistan's national culture in order to foster patriotism and to affirm the legitimacy of the new state as the protector of the culture that often suffered under Soviet rule. The notion of unity in diversity can become a casualty when the state gets into the business of defining what the people's identity should be rather than listening to how they define themselves.