The Political Economy of Society and Education in Central Asia
A Scoping Literature Review

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Introduction: A Comparative Regional Overview

This desk-based paper offers a regional overview of four Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (officially the Kyrgyz Republic), Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, applying the political economy lens, with a particular focus on education. The purpose of the review is to support prospective research teams in Central Asia in identifying potential topics for developing research proposals in response to the PEER Network Call for Commissioned Research[1]. Turkmenistan, while part of Central Asia, has not been included in the review because the PEER Network is not funding research in Turkmenistan because of researchers' safety concerns.

The bulk of the identified literature deals with conflict drivers in society. However, the literature focusing on the role of education in peacebuilding and conflict in Central Asia is scarce. Research on the political economy of education (PEA) is particularly pertinent in the current global COVID-19 pandemic, which is expected to exacerbate existing inequalities, grievances and risks facing communities and countries, putting long struggles for peace and development gains at risk. The forthcoming commissioned PEA research in Central Asia will thus make significant contributions to the political economy analysis of education in the region.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan attained statehood in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The fall of socialist ideologies systematically oriented the newly independent Central nations to transition from centralised governance and economy to building electoral democracy and neoliberal economy. However, to disconnect from the Soviet ideologies and build new nations, a resurgence of top-down nationalism is visible in all countries. Education systems have a critical role in developing cohesive national identities and

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[1] Because of 70% reduction in the UK/RI budget for the financial year 2021-2022, the PEER Network, like other projects funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund, has had its budget reduced due to which the scheduled commissioning of empirical research in Central Asia has been postponed.

fostering peace and regional stability (Johnson, 2004). Given their collective history and commonalities in post-independence trajectories regarding political and economic development, the countries share similar concerns for conflicts and challenges for peacebuilding. The authoritarian neoliberal context of the four post-Soviet Central Asian countries offers comparative insights for studying the relationship between education and sustainable peacebuilding.

Figure 1

The Map of Central Asia

Note. British Chamber of Commerce in China *(n.d.). UK Ambassadors to Central Asia Roundtable and Lunch.* https://www.britishchamber.cn/en/events/uk-ambassadors-to-central-asia-roundtable-lunch/

The countries share deep historical, cultural and linguistic roots, as well as geographical proximity in a landlocked region (Figure 1). All four countries are avowedly secular but have a dominant Muslim citizenry, although how Islam is practised vary across and within countries. All states have engaged in the management of religion for governing the thought, practice and identities of their citizens (Jones, 2017). All countries are multiethnic states, but each has a

titular ethnic group reflected in each country's name (Table 1). Kazakhstan is the region's most prosperous country, while Tajikistan is the poorest (Table 1). Russian is one of the official languages in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and the medium of inter-ethnic communication in Tajikistan.

The Central Asian states have successively improved their levels of stability over the years, with Kazakhstan currently being the most stable on the Fragile State Index (ranked 117th/178), followed by Uzbekistan (ranked 74th), Kyrgyzstan (ranked 73rd) and Tajikistan (ranked 66th) (Table 1) (The Fund for Peace, 2020). Nevertheless, disputes are still frequent in Central Asia, and much remains to be resolved for regional political stability. The southern part of Central Asia has been particularly vulnerable to conflicts over the last few decades, as indicated by the civil war in Tajikistan in the first decade following independence, the Kyrgyzstani revolutions in 2005 and 2010, and unresolved conflicts along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan borders. Importantly, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan share a border with Afghanistan which is ranked 9th on the fragility index (Fund for Peace 2020). Both countries are thus vulnerable to the effects of conflict in Afghanistan. The participation of a high proportion of Central Asian youth fighters in the Iraqi and Syrian war (Tucker, 2018) has raised youth radicalisation as a policy concern in all four countries.

The Central Asian states inherited a widely accessible education system from the Soviet Union, with nearly 100% literacy rates. Under the Soviet Union, education became a strategic state instrument, supporting the construction of the ideal Soviet citizen loyal to communist ideologies (Johnson, 2004). Although the political situation is distinct in each country today, the Central Asian countries are commonly striving to replace the former Soviet educational doctrines by inventing new values and construct their national identity to consolidate nation building. Once united as multiethnic societies under the shared Communist vision, the newly independent states required the re-appropriation and re-interpretation of histories established

and circulated during the Soviet times. The ruling elites, like elsewhere, turned to school for "instilling new forms of national consciousness" (MGIEP United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017, p.170) and constructing new national imaginaries. The national sovereignty at stake, interethnic differences, regionalism, religion, and language have abruptly emerged as significant educational issues in the region. Thus, the primary concern of education policymakers in Central Asia became the effective use of education in fostering social harmony and unity through the construction of new national identities (Silova et al., 2007). The scant existing literature on the relationship between education and peacebuilding in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan suggests the deployment of ethnocentric national identity construction with implications for social cohesion and inclusion (Asanova, 2007; Blakkisrud & Nozimova, 2010).

While enrolments rates declined in the transition period following independence, particularly for girls (Magno & Silova, 2007), all Central Asian states have consolidated access to schooling, with nearly 100% of adolescents accessing lower secondary school (UNESCO WIDE, undated). In higher education, disparities are at the expense of men in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and women in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2020). The post-Soviet economic and political transition has necessitated the initiation of large-scale educational reforms in all four states, which has often been undertaken with the support of international agencies or institutions (Chapman et al., 2005). Educational reforms have included revising the curriculum, textbooks and teaching-learning materials, reforming the assessment system, school management, teacher education and governance and introducing language in education policies. Curriculum reforms have sought the dual aims of 'nationalising' the curriculum, delinking it from Russia, and 'internationalising' it to prepare globally competitive graduates (Chapman et al., 2005).

Table 1

Comparative analysis of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyz Republic	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Population[1]	18, 776,707	6,524,195	9,537,645	33,469,203
Territory[2]	2,724,842 km²	199,945 km²	142,600 km²	447,400 km²
GDP[3]	$181.665 billion	$8.455 billion	$8.117 billion	$57.921 billion
HDI[4] (Human Development Index)	0.825	0.697	0.668	0.720
GNI[4] (per 4capita)	22.857	4.864	3.954	7.142
Ethnic composition[5]	Kazakh 68%, Russian 19.3%, Uzbek 3.2%, Ukrainian 1.5%, Uighur 1.5%, Tatar 1.1%, German 1%, other 4.4%	Kyrgyz 73.5%, Uzbek 14.7%, Russian 5.5%, Dungan 1.1%, other 5.2%	Tajik 84.3 % Uzbek 13.8 % other 2 %	Uzbek 83.8 % Tajik 4.8 % Kazakh 2.5 % Russian 2.3 % Karakalpak 2.2 % Tatar 1.5 % other 4.4 %
Religion composition[5]	Muslim 70.2 % Christian 26.2 % other 0.2 % Atheist 2.8 % not specified 0.5 %	Muslim 90 % (mostly Sunni) Christian 7 % other 3 %	Muslim 98% (Sunni 95%, Shia 3%) other 2%	Muslim 88% (mostly Sunni), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3%
Fragile State Index 2020[6] Score (Rank/178th)	59.8 (117th)	73.1 (73rd)	73.9 (74th)	75.5 (66th)
GDI[4]	0.980	0.957	0.823	0.939
HDI[4] 2019 value and (rank/ 189 countries)	0.825 (51)	0.697 (120)	0.668 (125)	0.720 (106)
Gender Gap Index Ranking[7]	72	93	137	Not given
GPI Primary & Secondary (Gross) – 2019[8]	1.01	0.99	0.93	0.99
Tertiary education/ Gross enrollment ratio[9]	Female 77.6% Male 64.1% (2020)	Female 47.4% Male 37.4 % (2019)	Female 26.9% Male 35.5.% (2017)	Female 11.4 % Male 13.7% (2019)

Note.

[1.] Worldometer. (2021). *Asian countries by population.*
https://www.worldometers.info/population/countries-in-asia-by-population/

[2.] Encyclopedia Britannica. (2021). *Central Asia.* https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia

[3.] World Bank (WB). (2019). *Countries and Economies.* https://data.worldbank.org/country

[4.] United Nation Development Program (UNDP). (2020a). *Human Developments Report. Global Human Developments Indicator.* http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries

[5.] Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America (CIA). (2021). *Central Asia.* The World Factbook. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/central-asia/

[6.] The Fund for Peace. (2020). *Fragile State Index 2020. https://fragilestatesindex.org/data/*

[7.] World Economic Forum. (2019). *Global Gender Gap Report 2020.* Switzerland.
http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

[8.] The World Bank. (2020a). *School Enrollment, tertiary (% gross).*
https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.TERT.FM.ZS?locations=7E

[9.] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Institute for Statistics (IS). (2020). *Data for sustainable development goals.* http://uis.unesco.org/en/home#tabs-0-uis_home_top_menus-3

However, gender equity has received little attention in educational reforms (Magno & Silova, 2007). On the contrary, the resurgence of nationalism in all countries can be seen as reasserting values of traditional association between women and domesticity (Kandiyoti, 2007), with negative implications for women's empowerment and their political and economic participation (Magno & Silova, 2007). There is little rigorous research available on the impact of educational reforms in Central Asia in general and specifically from a political economy perspective. Existing evidence indicates inequities in education quality as measured by learning outcomes, teacher quality and infrastructure are based on rural and urban location, household wealth and ethnolinguistic backgrounds.

Despite similarities, post-independence, Central Asian countries have followed different trajectories and have different experiences and challenges of conflict. These differences would need to be considered in developing a country-specific PEA research agenda. The next four sections synthesise conflict drivers in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively.

KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan has succeeded in avoiding major ethnic clashes compared to other neighbouring countries. Kazakhstan is now the most politically stable of all Central Asian states, improving its ranking from 88th in 2006 to 117th in 2020 on the Fragile State Index (The Fund for Peace, 2020). However, its multicultural and multiconfessional character, heavy corruption and pockets of economic inequality make it vulnerable to low-scale conflicts. The main drivers of conflicts in Kazakhstan have been analysed below.

ETHNIC CONFLICT

Interethnic tension remains rather low in Kazakhstan compared to its neighbours, and the country has largely avoided instability on ethnic basis (Kamrava, 2020). The country's relative stability is observable among its citizens, as highlighted by a survey of Kazakhstanis in 2014, which reported only 6.3% of the participants feared the possibility of interethnic conflicts in the near future (Kappassova, 2018). Post-independence, the ruling elites selected the concept of "Kazakhstani" people, as opposed to "Kazakh" in national identity narratives, to avoid ethnic tensions and promote political stability. The creation of a common civic identity based on the Doctrine of National Unity underpins governmental policy initiatives despite some weak resistance from ethnic Kazakhs (Daminov, 2020). Even when nationalising policies such as the promotion of Kazakh language, culture and historiography result in "unofficial discrimination against non-titular groups" (Kamrava, 2020. p. 9), the use of the discourse of multiculturalism by the government secures the support of ethnic minorities (Daminov, 2020).

Multiethnicity nevertheless remains a potential source of conflicts in Kazakhstan, as illustrated by several inter-ethnic conflicts over the last three decades as outlined below:

1. 1992, Kazakh-Chechen conflict: Ust-Kamenogorsk
2. 2006, anti-Caucasian demonstrations in Aktau
3. 2006, Kazakh-Uyghur conflict in Shelek
4. 2006, Turkish-Kazakh conflict at Tengiz Oil field
5. 2007, Kazakh-Chechen conflict in Almaty region
6. 2007, anti-Kurdish conflict in Mayatas
7. 2015, Kazakh-Tajik ethnic clash in Bostandyk
8. 2016, Kazakh-Turk conflict in Jambyl region
9. 2018/2019, Kazakh-Armenian tension in Karaganda
10. 2020, Kazakh-Dungan conflict

It is worth highlighting that almost all of these conflicts took place in rural areas. They all involved the titular ethnic group (Kazakhs) against ethnic minorities. None of the above clashes took place between ethnic minorities. Interestingly, conflicts never seem to include the second-largest minority, Russians.

MARGINALISED ORALMANS

By the end of the Soviet regime, the number of Kazakhs and Russians were equal, both accounting for about 40% each (Fierman, 2006). Therefore, Kazakhstan actively encouraged the return of ethnic Kazakhs (Oralman) through its repatriation policy as a part of the nation-building process. Between 1991 to 2020, 1,069,500 ethnic Kazakhs have returned to Kazakhstan (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020). After independence, Kazakhstan gradually became a centre of the regional migratory flows due to its geographical location and fairly dynamic economic growth. However,

several studies have reported that many returnees struggle to develop a sense of belonging to Kazakhstan and experience challenges in housing and employment, mainly due to linguistic constraints (Kassenova & Zhanguttin, 2016; Dalelkhan et al., 2018), highlighting a strong need for education interventions targeting the returnees (Dukenova, 2019). Nevertheless, despite their disadvantaged and somewhat marginalised position with urgent needs for socio-economic inclusion, Oralman's grievances have been contained. The country has not experienced any consequent social upheavals in this regard to this date.

RADICALISM IN KAZAKHSTAN

Although religion never completely disappeared under the Soviet regime, the fall of Communism was marked by a steady but moderate religious revival in Central Asian states (Thibault, 2021), and radicalisation became one of the common political concerns (Heathershaw & Montgomery, 2014). Despite its fairly dynamic economic development and political stability, Kazakhstan has witnessed several acts of terrorism. According to government figures, between 2014 and 2017, around 30 terrorist attacks were prevented by law enforcement agencies (Qazaq Times, 2018). Similarly, there is increasing evidence of the involvement of Kazakh citizens in terrorist organisations abroad (Gussarova, 2020). Terrorism jumped to the top of the Kazakhstani political agenda in 2011 following a terrorist attack in Aktobe region. Aktobe experienced a second attack in 2016, leaving 12 terrorists and six civilians dead (Orazgaliyeva, 2016). Kazakhstani authorities recognise income inequality and unemployment, lack of quality religious education and social isolation as primary drivers of radicalisation (Beissembayev, 2016). Kazakhstan counted 3,600 imams in 2016, and among whom, only 15% attended higher education, 22% secondary education, and 63% short-term religious preparatory courses (Islam in Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], 2016). Therefore, the religious education of clergy and religiously oriented people became a political concern to be urgently addressed by

the Kazakhstani authorities (Gussarova, 2020). In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's first President, announced the creation of a Ministry of Religious Affairs, which was dissolved into the Ministry of Social development in 2018. A new law imposing restrictions on the registration of religious associations and the pursuit of religious education abroad was adopted in 2018 (Thibault 2019, p. 171-172).

LANGUAGE CONFLICT

The ethnic composition and linguistic pattern of Kazakhstan are not in complete accord due to its Soviet heritage. Despite the increased number of Kazakhs and the de-Russification of the ethnic demographics in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the dominant vernacular language remains Russian. In contemporary Kazakhstan, around 83% of the population speak Kazakh, while more than 90% speak Russian, and 22.3% are trilingual (Kazakh, Russian and English) (Egemen Qazaqstan, 2018). However, the language policies in Kazakhstan have gradually promoted linguistic Kazakhisation starting from the first constitution of Kazakhstan in 1993, which established Kazakh as the state language of Kazakhstan and Russian as the language of interethnic communication. This established the position of Kazakhs as the core nationality in the independent nation.

Despite the attempt for linguistic Kazakhisation, the rights to education in Kazakh, Russian and other languages are guaranteed in the current Kazakh legislatures. In 2017, among pupils enrolled in Grades 1-11 in Kazakhstan, 1,323,300 were enrolled in Kazakh medium schools, 378,614 in Russian medium schools, 12,539 in mixed (Kazakh and Russian) medium schools (IAC, 2018, as cited in Gimranova et al., 2021). There were also 13 Uzbek-medium, 12 Uighur-medium and two Tajik-medium schools. In 27 schools, there were classes with instruction in the native language of other ethnic groups, namely Chechen, Azerbaijani, Dungan, Polish, Kurdish, Turkish, among others (IAC, 2018, as cited in Gimranova et al., 2021). Nevertheless, establishing the Kazakh language as the state language, which is mainly used by

Kazakhs, sanctions non-Kazakh speakers and hinders their economic integration and social mobility. This implies the potential predominance of Kazakhs in the political economy of Kazakhstan, which will further reinforce institutionalised Kazakhisation.

GENDER

Kazakhstan is a signatory to international policies and conventions relating to gender equality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). Throughout its thirty years of independence, Kazakhstan has shown sustained commitment to improving its indicators of gender equality (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2021). The Gender Policy-2030, decreed by Nazarbayev in 2016, intends to reduce gender gaps in labour force participation and work-family balance (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2021) and includes strategic action for reduction in gender stereotypes in education and combating violence against women (OECD, 2017). Kazakhstan has achieved gender parity in schooling, and the number of females enrolled in higher education outnumber males (Table 1). Gender-segregated international assessment data indicate that Kazakhstani girls outperform boys in science (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2016, as cited in Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020) and reading, while their performance in mathematics is on par with boys (UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, female tertiary graduates are underrepresented in ICT (30%) and Engineering (28%) (UNESCO, 2020, p. 68), indicating some barriers prevent them from studying disciplines associated with high-status professions.

Despite achieving gender parity in schooling and a greater proportion of women than men accessing higher education, on average, Kazakhstani women's salaries are 33% lower than men (OECD, 2017). This is partly linked to women's concentration in feminised sectors with low wages such as education and health. Furthermore, opportunities for Kazakhstani women lie predominantly in the informal sector or self-employment (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2013). Gender pay gaps are the widest in western Kazakhstan where oil production is

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concentrated that predominantly employ men. Furthermore, with one out of every three women experiencing some form of physical, sexual or another form of violence, gender-based violence continues to pose significant obstacles to women's socio-economic outcomes in the country (OECD, 2017). Violence against women and children is on the rise in Kazakhstan, which has increased by 90% in the last five years (Kursiv, 2019). Despite the law enforcement response to this phenomenon, around 400 women are believed to succumb to domestic violence every year (Union of Crisis Centers, 2018). In contemporary Kazakhstan, the resurgence of nationalism has strengthened patriarchal and re-traditionalised discourses of gendered roles and positions (Kandiyoti, 2007) and has made women vulnerable to gender-based violence (Kudaibergenova, 2018).

Post-independence, neoliberalism has dominated social and economic reforms in Kazakhstan, which pushes women to assume an active role in the economic sphere but does nothing to disrupt gender power imbalances (LoBue, 2007). The nationalist narrative, by contrast, constructs paid work for mothers as "unnatural" and "oppressive", giving the illusion that women could choose to return to the domestic sphere even whilst this remains beyond the reach of a vast majority of women (Palandjian et al., 2018). In 2020, the number of women holding ministerial positions was 2 out of 16; the female representatives in the Kazakhstani Parliament were less than 30% (the Senate and the Mazhilis); only one woman held the position of *akim* [regional governor]; and there were only 25 female rectors out of 116 universities (Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Bureau of National Statistics, 2020).

Questions pertinent to gender equality relate to how educational discourses and practices might support or challenge the gender norms that exist in the country. The relationship between gendered norms and education, for example, textbooks and teacher practices, is underexplored in the Kazakhstani context. Among the limited literature, the analysis of early

literacy textbooks by Palandjian et al. (2018) revealed that men are depicted as nation-builders, "engaged in protecting the motherland/fatherland or intellectually in top leadership positions within public spaces" (p.174). By contrast, women are represented as reproducers of the nation and national and cultural traditions. In another analysis of Kazakhstani secondary education textbooks in languages and algebra, women and girls were revealed to be under-represented and portrayed in subordinated positions in ways that entrench the existing gender order in Kazakhstan (Durrani, 2020).

Teacher pedagogy and practice strongly shape students' gender identities and attitudes. Female STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) undergraduates participating in Almukhambetova and Kuzhabekova's (2020) study indicated that both female and male teachers in school discouraged them from choosing a STEM speciality on the grounds that STEM careers are not suitable for women and that a STEM career might jeopardise their marriage prospects. A study in a Kazakh secondary school indicated that teachers largely attributed gender equality issues in the country to an immutable 'culture' whose 'legitimacy' preempted any thought of intervention and action on their part (Durrani et al., 2021).

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Existing educational literature covering Central Asia has seldom utilised a PEA lens. Nevertheless, the educational context in each of the four Central Asian countries points to issues that would benefit from empirical research using a PEA lens. Following the unexpected dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the inadequately prepared political leaders of Central Asian nations, who for long operated under the Soviet ideologies, were suddenly urged to take political and ideological shifts. This inevitably affected education, for which now the post-Soviet nations needed to establish their autonomous policies and systems while maintaining the high standards which the Soviet regime had vigorously sustained. The diminution of Russian

influence induced the Central Asian political leaders to join the global community and adopt global trends such as decentralisation and privatisation, even if rhetorically (Silova, 2005).

Focusing on Kazakhstan, the country has experimented with large scale educational reforms to "modernise" its education system. These reforms simultaneously seek to depart from its Soviet legacy and move closer to Western education systems (Karabassova, 2021). These reforms have included establishing highly resourced schools for the gifted, the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS). Established in 2008, NIS enjoys full autonomy and receives considerably higher funding than mainstream schools (state schools, governed by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES). In 2011, NIS was mandated to lead the renewal of the school curriculum, the new system of criterion-based assessment, testing the multilingual education model and a cascade teacher training system in Kazakhstan (Karabassova, 2021). In 2007, the former president of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, issued a degree on trilingual education, which stipulates that all schools teach three languages, Kazakh, Russian and English. With the trilingual policy now being rolled out in mainstream schools, English would emerge as a marker of disadvantage over the long term as schools' capacity to implement the policy effectively differs immensely.

Significant regional inequalities in terms of the quality of education have been observed in Kazakhstan. PISA 2018 results indicated that students' performance gaps between high and low scoring regions were equivalent to four years of learning. In the low performing regions, poor scores were observed across urban and rural schools. By contrast, significant inequalities in learning outcomes were observed between urban and rural schools in the high-performing areas (Marteau, 2020). These regional inequalities, particularly the urban-rural gaps, are largely rooted in the students' family background as rural residents in "Kazakhstan experience significantly higher levels of poverty, lower levels of income and wealth, and higher levels of overall socio-economic deprivation than their urban peers" (Chankseliani et al., 2020, p. 1005).

The practice of shadow education is increasing in Central Asia. A recent study investigating private tuition reported that 60% (86 out of 144 respondents) of students in a highly selective university in Kazakhstan had received private tuition to maximise their likelihood of securing a place at that university, the vast majority of whom were urban residents (Hajar & Abenova, 2021). Rural families have less access to private tutoring due to their limited financial status. The poor teaching quality and infrastructure of rural schools also disadvantage students. The inequitable access to quality education at the school level is associated with access and opportunities in higher education (Chankseliani et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded existing disparities in education in the context of digital inequality (Durrani et al., 2021).

Finally, the political imperative to use education as a nation-building instrument have resulted in a strong focus on the construction of nationalism, patriotism and national identities across Central Asian nations, which can trigger interethnic tensions (MGIEP UNESCO, 2017). In Kazakhstan, the National Academy of Education provides school teachers comprehensive recommendations and instructions annually regarding building patriotism, nurturing inter-ethnic tolerance, peace and respect for historical heritage or supporting multilingual education (MGIEP UNESCO, 2017). Nevertheless, several studies reported the Kazakhisation of national identity in textbooks. An analysis of early literacy textbooks identified that textbooks "are increasingly Kazakhified and focus primarily on Kazakh ethnicity" (Mun, 2014, p.1). This observation has also been reported by Kissaane (2005) and Asanova (2007). The ethnicised curriculum is potentially conflicting with the multicultural society of Kazakhstan and can negatively impact the social cohesion and inter-ethnic peace and harmony in the country.

KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

Among the post-Soviet Central Asian nations, Kyrgyzstan was the first country to embark on political democratisation by organising a direct election and becoming a parliamentary republic in 2010 (Engvall, 2016). Despite the liberalisation attempt at the early stage of its independence, Kyrgyzstan, however, continues to suffer from interethnic conflicts, economic crises, and political instability. The socio-economic unrest of the country is rooted mainly in the corrupt and authoritative government causing unequal resource distribution among citizens, particularly among ethnic groups. The citizens' distrust and discontent with the government led to two revolutions in the past, in 2005 and 2010, which resulted in the overthrow of the presidents. In late 2020, protests erupted in the capital city, Bishkek, following the parliamentary election. The underpinning reasons for social unrests in Kyrgyzstan are public distrust in government and foreign firms, gender inequalities, poor political-economic and health structures, and lack of democracy, among many others (Sairinen et al., 2012).

BORDER ISSUES AND ETHNIC CONFLICT

In post-colonial regions, border delimitations often become negative colonial legacies elevating interethnic tensions since they were in many cases arbitrarily drawn by the former colonial powers without considering the local contexts. Likewise, the Soviet Union drew artificial boundaries among Central Asian states, disregarding prevalent ethnic, geographical, or economic conditions. This legacy is linked to enduring border tensions in the region (Reeves, 2005). The Ferghana Valley, a fragmented region across Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, is a conflict sensitive region. This multiethnic valley, situated in the western part of Kyrgyzstan, has a high population density, reliance on an agricultural economy, and poor lifeline infrastructure. It constantly struggles to supply water and food to its population, which results in

fuelling conflicts over limited recourses (Baizakova, 2017). Cases such as one ethnic group obstructing water access to other ethnic groups are frequently reported (Baizakova, 2017). Acknowledging the political stakes of the interethnic peace in the Ferghana Valley for Central Asia, international organisations have been promoting conflict prevention programmes in the valley over the last three decades (Toktomushev, 2018). Despite the international efforts, the interethnic tensions continue in the region and constantly threaten regional peace.

KYRGYZ-UZBEK TENSIONS

The socio-economic status of the citizens in Kyrgyzstan differs based on ethnicity, especially between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. During the Soviet era, in the region constituting contemporary Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz held the most important positions as the titular ethnic group, while Uzbeks were the dominant figures in the agricultural and service sectors. Today, Kyrgyz make up the majority of the political and business elites of the country, as well as the majority of the poor and unemployed, whereas Uzbeks represent a "middle niche of economic activity" (Megoran, 2013, p.899). These two ethnic groups occupy different social stratum and have a long history of conflict, dating back to Soviet times. In 1990, the local authorities allocated 32 hectares of an Uzbek-dominated collective farm for the housing of Kyrgyz (Rezvani, 2013). This triggered unrest among Uzbeks leading to violent clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh, the second-largest city of Kyrgyzstan, situated in the Ferghana Valley (Rezvani, 2013). The interethnic discontents and tensions have since remained in the region, and two decades later in 2010, clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks reoccurred, leaving 350 dead and displacing more than 100,000 people (McGlinchey, 2011).

KYRGYZ-TAJIK TENSIONS

Ethnic conflicts happened not only between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks but also between Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Between 2011 and 2013, a total of 63 Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflicts occurred that involved lapidation, arson, and hostages (Toktomushev, 2018). In 2016, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Country Offices in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, funded under the UK Government Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), launched a joint cross-border project, "Empowered Youth and Adolescents for Peaceful and Fair Communities in Central Asia" in the Ferghana Valley to address issues of inequalities in the conflict-torn region and create enabling environment and capacity among children and adolescent girls and boys to become active agents of peace, resilience, and civic life (UNICEF Tajikistan, 2020).

Despite international efforts to promote peace in the region, the latest conflict between Kyrgyz and Tajiks along the Ferghana region border erupted in late April 2021, which was triggered by a surveillance camera installed at a water station by Tajiks. Kyrgyz accused Tajiks of intruding on Kyrgyz territory, which the Tajik regional authority denied. The hostilities initially started with verbal insults and lapidation between the two ethnic groups, which soon escalated into armed conflict. The final toll was heavy on each side. The clash resulted in the deaths of 36 Kyrgyz and 18 Tajiks, whereas more than 200 individuals were injured (Pannier, 2021).

REVOLUTIONS

Kyrgyzstan's civil society has been particularly vibrant since independence, and the country was often portrayed as an "island of democracy" in Central Asia (International Partnership for Human Rights [IPHR], 2021). Nevertheless, the country has endured political instability since its independence. Three presidents were overthrown: Akayev during the Tulip revolution in 2005, Bakiyev during the April revolution in 2010 and Jeenbekov during the

revolution in October 2020 (Schmitz, 2021). The unrest in 2005 resulted from public dissatisfaction with the Kyrgyz political leaders and the country's corrupt economy. The second Kyrgyz Revolution in 2010, which was set off by protestors near the White House (the presidential office building in the capital city of Bishkek), emerged from an extensive resentment against inflation. The police used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the protesters, leaving at least 40 people dead (Putz, 2015). Nevertheless, this revolution could not lead to political reforms since it only reallocated power between the president, the prime minister, and the parliament. After a few months, the ensuing chaos of the 2010 revolution was amplified with the Kyrgyz-Uzbeks bloodshed in southern Kyrgyzstan (McGlinchey, 2011).

Moreover, the most recent protests in October 2020 gathered over 4,000 protesters who demanded to annul the results of unfair parliamentary elections (Eurasianet, 2020). Vote buying and rigged distribution of seats in the parliament to relatives and close supporters of Jeenbekov (the overthrown president) triggered the protests (Observer Research Foundation, 2020). The peaceful demonstrations quickly degenerated, and parliamentary buildings were stormed, which led to the release of imprisoned Sadyr Japarov, who was later appointed as the interim president and later President through anticipated elections (Schmitz, 2021). The protest left 600 injured and one dead (Observer Research Foundation, 2020).

ISLAMIC RADICALISM

Due to its multiethnicity, ongoing social unrest, and the revival of Islamism since the fall of Communism, the Ferghana Valley is regarded as a potential nest of terrorism (Baizakova, 2017; Nixey, 2010). Uzbek and Tajik youth are believed to be particularly vulnerable to radicalisation considering the historical influence of Islam in the territories constituting Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which survived Communism (Borthakur, 2017). The dissolution of the Soviet Union further segmented the regional clergies and governments, which act as a push

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factor of radicalisation (Borthakur, 2017). A number of foreign and local Islamic actors are currently actively proselytising in Kyrgyzstan (Doolotkeldieva, 2020).

GENDER

Analysing scholarly literature towards the end of the first post-independence decade, Megoran (2013) argued that the gendered dimensions of Central Asian nation-building are largely underexplored. Additionally, the term "gender" employed in the regional studies generally refers to one sex only and leaves out masculinity (Blakkisrud & Abdykapar, 2017). Official narratives of national identity in Central Asia, however, heavily focus on male heroes or strong men (Blakkisrud & Abdykapar, 2017). Despite this masculine underpinning of national identity, few have examined how national identity formation reproduces the hegemonic gender order. While women's social and political involvement is essential for fostering social cohesion and peacebuilding, Kyrgyzstan has a low women's labour participation ratio, which accounts for 48.2%, compared with 75.7% for men (ADB, 2019). The percentage of women in the parliament is significantly lower than men, as they occupied 16% of the seats in 2018 (ADB, 2019).

In the post-independence Kyrgyz society, gender-based violence is widespread, including bride kidnapping, early marriages, and virginity ceremonies (Kim, 2020). As observed in other post-Soviet Central Asian nations, the construction of Kyrgyz nationalism significantly draws upon the re-traditionalisation of national values, which places women as the symbol and defender of national culture, tradition and honour (Kim, 2020). The promotion of gendered norms entails social control over women's bodies, behaviour and morality. Virginity, chastity and domesticity are socially recognised as the main features of an "ideal" Kyrgyz woman (Kim, 2020). In the face of globalisation, the preservation of "Kyrgyz femininity" is considered a patriotic duty, constraining women's freedom and making them further subjected to violence (Ibraeva et al., 2014).

Bride kidnapping, *ala kuchuu,* involving the abduction of girls and women for forced marriage, is associated with ecological, economic transformations (Kim & Karioris, 2020) and insufficient imposition of civil laws (Werner et al., 2018). Although bride kidnapping is widely believed to a pre-Soviet Kyrgyz tradition, several studies argued that this practice appeared in Kyrgyzstan after independence (Werner et al., 2018; Kleinbach et al., 2005). In Kyrgyzstan, which historically has nomadic traditions, pastoralism and associated masculinity have regained their national importance since 1991 due to political efforts to construct nationalism around the invocation of Kyrgyz culture, history and traditions (Cleuziou & Direnberger, 2016). However, pastures today are significantly degraded due to the Soviet-led sedentarism and collective farming (Levine et al., 2017). The deteriorated ecosystem affects today's rural livelihoods, particularly young men whose masculinity largely depends on their pastoral life (Kim & Karioris, 2020). Men are culturally expected to marry after a certain age and pay the bride price; in the stagnant economy, under social and family pressure, they often turn to bride kidnapping (Kim & Karioris, 2020). Though the law has toughened penalties for bride kidnapping since 2013, there has not been a decline in numbers.

Physical and psychological violence are generally employed during the abduction, and rape is frequently used as a strategy to keep the "brides" since the loss of virginity marks a woman as unmarriageable (Kim, 2020). The newlywed brides are accepted as "good wives" only after they succeeded to prove their purity and modesty with their blood on the sheet. After the "successful" consummation of marriage, the sheet is publicly exposed and celebrated by the relatives (Kudaibergenova, 2018). The glorification of female virginity is thus ritualised in Kyrgystan. The desexualisation of women and their socially accepted subordination are contributing to gendered-based violence. According to the latest available data of UNICEF (2018) on bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, 13.8% of women under 24 married through physical pressure. In 2019, 2,701 domestic violence cases were reported from January to March,

although the reality is expected to be much higher considering the unreported cases (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2019). Under these circumstances, The United Nations in Kyrgyzstan signed agreements with the Kyrgyz Government to help in abolishing this practice by 2022 (UNICEF, 2018).

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

At independence, Kyrgyzstan had nearly 100% literacy rates. Contrary to some other post-Soviet states, Kyrgyz authorities succeeded in maintaining the same level of public expenditures on education as before independence (Falkingham, 2000; Mogilevsky, 2011). This prevented school closures and a decline in enrollment, except in early childhood education. The expenditures, however, were mainly allocated to teacher salaries, whereas school infrastructures, textbooks, and teacher training were poorly funded (Mertaugh, 2004). The inadequately financed basic education system and teacher shortage in certain subjects aggravate the country's education quality (Mustajoki et al., 2008; Shamatov, 2012). The poor performance of Kyrgyz students in PISA 2006 prompted the government to initiate the development of a competency-based curriculum with the technical support of the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan (MGIEP UNESCO, 2017). Despite the lowering quality, the enrollment rates in Kyrgyz higher education have been on the rise over the last decades due to the decentralised higher education, which led to the expansion of the private sector (Brück & Esenaliev, 2013). The new dynamism in the tertiary education sector has generated new immigratory flow in the country by attracting students from rural areas to the cities. This may widen the urban-rural inequalities in education (Brück & Esenaliev, 2013).

Like Kazakhstan, education is seen as pivotal to the construction of national identity. Palandjian et al.'s (2018) analysis of early literacy textbooks revealed an explicit gender ideology. While the history curriculum of grades 7-9 seeks to develop "pride in the national

identity and cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan", references to "multiculturalism", "gender equality", "tolerance and the rule of law" are also made (MGIEP UNESCO, 2017, p. 191). Nevertheless, analysis of textbooks indicates that females are portrayed as serving food to the family while boys and men are rarely shown doing feminine tasks such as cooking or feeding a child (Palandjian et al., 2018). In addition to teaching literacy, young children also learn that their nation was "founded by and fought for by male heroes" (Palandjian et al., 2018, p.186).

The government's ability and commitment to ease the country's North-South divide are pivotal to achieve peacebuilding. The Kyrgyz authorities have introduced a multilingual education programme since 2012 to promote interethnic peace. The number of pilot universities offering such programmes has significantly increased over the last decade from 10 to over 70. An increase is also observed in the number of pilot schools that introduced multilingual education programme, which reached 20 in 2018 (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting [CABAR], 2019). Although challenges remain in teacher education to prepare teachers' linguistic proficiency and pedagogy, multilingual education is expected to enhance multicultural understanding among the youngsters who play a pivotal role in the national and regional peace.

TAJIKISTAN

CIVIL WAR

As the poorest Socialist Republic under the Soviet Union, the country's economic struggles date to the Soviet time (Olcott, 2012). In 1991, 46% of Tajikistan's public expenditures were supported by Moscow, and the disintegration of the USSR plunged the country into political and socio-economic uncertainty (Allouche, 2016). The independence added to the economic struggles and triggered power competition among newly formed political parties. The first presidential election held shortly after independence in 1991 opposed the Communist party's President and the Islamic Revival party's candidate, and sparked tensions among the citizens (Thibault, 2018b). This political clash engulfed Tajikistan in a five-year civil war in which 20,000 people lost lives and 500,000 to 1.2 million people were displaced (Lemon, 2019). The root cause of the war was citizens' long-term general discontent resulting from poverty, unemployment, unequal distribution of resources and corruption widely practised in government institutions (Schoeberlein-Engel, 1994). The lack of cohesion among the Tajik citizens also indicated the government's failure in the construction of a unified national identity (Lynch, 2001).

Tajikistan's economy, devastated by the civil war, rose to its pre-independence level only by 2006 (Lemon, 2019). Although President Emomali Rahmon promised a 10-year post-conflict recovery programme in 2006 (Korostelina, 2007), Tajikistan's economy remains weak and poverty and unemployment are endemic. Labour migration, a practice largely observed in Central Asia, represents the most significant income source for Tajikistan (Lemon, 2019). In 2014, migrants' remittance constituted 42.7% of Tajikistan's GDP, making Tajikistan one of the most remittance-dependent nations around the globe (World Bank, 2015a).

RADICALISM

Although Islam became an integral part of the nation-building agenda in post-socialist Central Asia, the political concern for Islamic radicalism has simultaneously increased (Heathershaw & Montgomery, 2014). Tajikistan's aspiration to dissociate itself from the Soviet ideologies has moulded the new national values and identities around Islam. However, the Tajik authorities have conflated social Islamisation with Islamic extremism, and the religious practices have been under strict political control (Lemon & Thibault, 2018). For example, in Tajikistan, the decision on the number of mosques and imams, contents of religious literature and Friday sermons, and even the permission to organise private Islamic studies fall under the governmental jurisdiction (Epkenhans, 2009, 2011; Lemon & Thibault, 2018). The peculiarity of Tajik political secularism involves distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Islam: the former is "Tajik Islam" associated with Tajik culture and traditions, while the latter is "Islam imported from abroad", such as the Middle East (Lemon & Thibault, 2018). The secularism in Tajikistan has a biopolitical nature since the state-approved "good" Islam is associated with national values. Citizens' behaviour and appearances are therefore subjected to Tajik state surveillance. Beards and the Islamic headscarf, *hijab*, particularly attract the authorities' attention. Despite the religious freedom guaranteed in the Tajik constitution, it is common for police to arrest bearded men and forcibly shave them as a response to extremism (Lemon & Thibault, 2018). In 2005, the state banned the *hijab* in secondary schools and access to mosques for those under 18 (Roter, 2005, as cited in Laruelle, 2018).

Although terrorist attacks have been relatively contained in Tajikistan, a few attacks occurred: the most recent ones include a knife attack on foreign cyclists in 2018 and the 2019 prison riot, which resulted in dozens of death for which Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility (World Bank, 2020b). The number of Tajiks joining ISIS in Syria as foreign fighters has been overwhelmingly high (Sakiev, 2020). The most common vulnerable groups for radicalisation include youth, returning migrants and abandoned wives (wives of labour migrants

and prisoners), divorced women and widows (World Bank, 2020b). While the reasons to become radicalised differ for each individual and are multidimensional, piety is not believed to be the biggest one, but rather the "escapism" (Sakiev, 2020, p.193). For socially and economically struggling or marginalised people, joining extremist groups, especially foreign wars, represents financial opportunities and a new life purpose with a sense of usefulness (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015). Tajik people are particularly welcomed as fighters due to the Soviet heritage, such as the high literacy rate, conscription and their experiences in the civil war (Sakiev, 2020). The oppressive political surveillance on Islam then exacerbates the sense of exclusion and grievances, which further push people already in "fragile conditions" to radicalisation (Sakiev, 2020). Therefore, the authoritarian secularism based on the oversimplified linkage between piety and radicalism may lead to extremism rather than eradicating it (Heathershaw & Montgomery, 2014). Although ISIS continues its attacks, since it was ousted from its last territory in 2019, fighters are likely to return from Syria to Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan. The return of extremists raises concerns among Central Asian authorities since they may spread Islamic radicalism in the region (Thibault, 2019).

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Tajikistan has the lowest Gender Development Index 0.823 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020b) among Central Asian countries and has been struggling to promote female public participation and rights to education (DeYoung, 2012). Although gender-based violence has gradually attracted national attention in recent years, and crisis centres offering counselling services to women have been established throughout the country (Falkingham, 2000), women's social status in Tajikistan remains low and precarious.

The post-war peacebuilding, however, failed to include women since not only many experienced gender-based sexual violence during the war, which remain unrecognised in the country to this date, but also women are increasingly subjected to violence and denied basic

human rights (Roche, 2017). The resurgence of patriarchal practices has been observed in post-war Tajikistan, where job opportunities for women are scarce, female presence in the government is low (Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017), and early marriages, polygamy and domestic violence are on the rise (Thibault, 2018a). According to a study in 2002, family financial struggles and increased education fee were indicated as the main causes of girls' withdrawal from schools (Silova & Magno, 2004). In contemporary Tajikistan, women's primary expected tasks are reduced to house chores and childbearing (Gatskova et al., 2017).

Despite the illegality of polygamous marriage in Tajikistan, polygamy is widespread in the country, contributing to women's subjugation. As a result of the large scale Tajik male labour migration, mainly to Russia, the number of women accepting polygamous marriage is increasing (Thibault, 2018a). Simultaneously, the number of divorcees and abandoned wives are spiking (United Nations Women, 2020). Although this theoretically could lead to women's empowerment, considering their limited access to the labour market, women are likely to be driven into further predicaments (Thibault, 2018b).

The control over female bodies, behaviour, dress codes and morality became an integral part of the post-independence nationalising project. Although men are also subjected to state surveillance which promotes "good Islamic citizens", women have been particularly integrated into national secular discourses. As "good citizens" and "good Muslims", Tajik women have the duty to protect the national culture and values. Hence, they are expected to wear traditional Tajik clothes that do not extensively expose their skin or excessively cover their bodies; otherwise, they will be regarded as immoral or extremist (Lemon & Thibault, 2018). However, despite the secular political narratives, Tajik women are increasingly wearing the *hijab* which for many are used as a tool to protect their and their families' honour from the patriarchal social gendered-norms which expect female modesty and domesticity, rather than as the affirmation of their religious faith (Nozimova & Epkenhans, 2013).

In the name of secularism, the authoritative Tajik biopolitics further stepped forward and introduced a law that requires soon-to-be-married couples to take a health check to reduce children with disabilities. However, the tests are believed to have been used as a "virginity-check" (Sarkorova, 2014, as cited in Lemon & Thibault, 2018) so that women are verified whether they are "good Tajiks".

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

In the last 25 years, as observed in all Central Asian countries, as a result of the establishment of new national values, ideologies and culture, education in Tajikistan has undergone postsocialist transformation (Kataeva, 2021). The importance accorded to education by the Tajik authorities is noticeable in the government's expenditure on education, which has increased from 3.5% of GPD in 2005 to 5.2% in 2015 (World Bank, 2021, as cited in Trading Economics, 2021). Nevertheless, according to a 2018 report, 3% of 15–24-year-olds, including both sexes, did not complete primary education in Tajikistan (Education Policy and Data Centre, 2018). Moreover, in a country where gender-based discrimination is a serious issue and females' rights are constantly at risk, girls' access to education remains low. The highest gender disparity can be seen in secondary education out-of-school rates, with 18% for females, while 8% for males (Education Policy and Data Centre, 2018). The households depending on the remittances of the family members working abroad, are more likely to marry girls off at a young age, hindering their opportunities to pursue education (Gatskova et al., 2017). Meanwhile, reflecting the government's investment in education, Tajikistan has witnessed a boom in higher education provision in recent years. The number of universities in Tajikistan for both public and private sectors has tripled since the independence, from 13 with 69,300 enrolments in 1991 to 39 with 186,900 enrolments in 2019 (Jonbekova, 2020). However, access to education is becoming further difficult for children regardless of their sex if they come from financially

vulnerable families, concentrated mainly in rural areas since higher education is costly (Nessipbayeva & Dalayeva, 2013).

To foster social cohesion through the integration of ethnic minorities in education, Tajikistan guarantees several languages of instruction, including Tajiki, Russian, Uzbek and Kyrgyz (Liddicoat & Kirkpatrick, 2020). On the other hand, the expansion of education revealed some existential challenges faced by the politically and economically weak Tajik government in providing quality education. While the country's education constantly suffers from a shortage of qualified teachers, the national curriculum and teaching-learning materials are outdated (Niyozov & Bahry, 2006; Jonbekova, 2015).

Several international organisations have been providing assistance to address the persistent struggles of Tajik education and the country's unsolved social unrest, including interethnic tensions in the Ferghana Valley. Notably, considering the contributions of early childhood education to human capital development and thus to peacebuilding and social cohesion, UNICEF, for instance, has actively supported early childhood development in Tajikistan with emphasis on marginalised children and children from the rural areas (UNICEF Tajikistan, 2020).

UZBEKISTAN

Since its independence in 1991, the country was governed by its first president, Islam Karimov, until his death in 2016. During his reign, Uzbekistan had gone through insular politics, and those opposing his political ethos were falsely labelled as Islamic extremists or terrorists and faced detention and torture (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The death of Islam Karimov marked a decisive turning point for the country, which is now considered to have entered an era of openness under his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Starr, 2018). According to the democracy index, although still ranked 155th in the world, Uzbekistan has increased its index from 1.95% in 2016 to 2.12% in 2020 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021).

ENCLAVES AND BORDER CONFLICTS

As observed in other Central Asian countries, border regions in Uzbekistan, particularly the Ferghana Valley, are prone to conflicts mainly due to the national delimitation arbitrarily introduced by the Soviet regime, which instilled an ethnic awareness in Central Asia, although it remained invisible during the Soviet era under the unified socialist ideologies (Baizakova, 2017). At the time of delimitation, enclaves were intentionally created in the Ferghana Valley as a part of the Soviet political strategy to prevent the rise of local nationalism in the region (Baizakova, 2017). There are currently eight enclaves in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in which around 100,000 people live (Table 2). As the Soviet Union collapsed, Central Asian nations established statehood, and the hitherto invisible ethnic awareness emerged across the region. The Soviet heritage did not reflect the multiethnic reality of the Fergana Valley, and in the context of nationalising states, ethnicity was at the centre of inter-state tensions.

Table 2

Enclaves of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

No	Enclave	Country	Location	Population	Ethnic composition
1	Barak	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	600	100% Kyrgyz
2	Chonkara	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	0	Land used for pastures
3	Dzhangail	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	0	Land used for pastures
4	Sarvak	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	400-2,500	99% Uzbek, 1% Tajik
5	Shakhimardan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	5,000	91% Uzbek, 9% Kyrgyz
6	Sokh	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	25,00-70,000	99% Tajik, 1% Kyrgyz
7	Vorukh	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	10,000-30,000	95% Tajik, 5% Kyrgyz
8	Kayragach	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	150	100% Tajik

Note. www.enclaves.webs.com/centralasia.htm, www.geosite.jankrogh.com/uzbekistan.htm , www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav060603.shtml#, cited in OCHA, (2013).

Among eight enclaves, the biggest ones are Darvak and Vorukh, which are recognised as Tajik territory and Shakhimardan and Sokh as Uzbek territory. Cross-border disputes mainly occur over access to water and grazing lands among Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uzbeks (Reeves, 2005). During the Soviet time, people in the valley could freely flow over borders as unified Soviet citizens, which became challenging post-independence. When conflicts erupt and borders close in the region, access to lifeline services such as medical care and food markets become scarce and employment and family relations are disturbed (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2013).

AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC OF KARAKALPAKSTAN

Situated in the south of the Aral Sea, Karakalpakstan is an autonomous republic incorporated in Uzbekistan (Figure 2). Karakalpakstan constitutes one-third of the Uzbek territory, while its residents account for only about 5% of the total population in Uzbekistan. Although Karakalpaks have inhabited the region since the 18th century, their national consciousness was introduced through the national delimitation policy of the Soviet Union, as observed across Central Asia (Olmos, 2020). Karakalpakstan was initially an integral part of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic as an autonomous region in the 1920s but was

later incorporated in the Uzbek Socialist Soviet Republic in the 1930s. This region once

flourished due to the rich biodiversity of the Aral Sea basin, but Karakalpakstan now suffers

from severe unemployment and ecological problems mainly due to the desalination of the Aral

Sea caused by the Soviet-led intensive irrigation of Uzbek cotton fields (Ahmed & Pawlowski,

2013).

Figure 2

Map of Karakalpakstan

Note. World Bank. (2015b). *Uzbekistan Partnership: Country Programme Snapshot*
https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Uzbekistan-Snapshot.pdf

As an autonomous Republic, Karakalpakstan possesses its own judicial system, national

symbols such as flag and anthem, and Constitution, which guarantees its right to education in

Karakalpak language and independence from Uzbekistan upon a national referendum in

Karakalpakstan (Olmos, 2020). Despite the Constitution, any separatist movements advocating

Karakalpakstan's independence seem to have been oppressed by the Uzbek authorities,

especially under President Karimov. The detention of several activists has been reported

(Horak, 2014). Although Karakalpakstan is still largely under-researched and the visibility on the

regional situations remains obscured, some literature on the region indicates the rise of

discent among Karakalpaks due to the poor socio-economic situation in Karakalpakstan and the stagnant Uzbek economy (Horak, 2014). Currently 300, 000 Karakalpaks are believed to have migrated to Kazakhstan, where they find better economic opportunities (Savin, 2018). It is also important to note that although Karakalpaks, Uzbeks and Kazakhs belong to the same Turkicethnic group, Karakalpaks' language belongs to the Kipchak sub-group together with the Kazakh language. In contrast, the Uzbek language falls into the Karluk sub-group (Olmos, 2020). The persisting socio-economic issues in Karakalpakstan can potentially fuel nationalist sentiments and thus a struggle for independence.

ISLAMIC RADICALISM

As observed in other Central Asian countries, the Uzbek authorities' concern over the Islamic radicalisation of its citizens has been on the rise since the disintegration of the Soviet Union which led to the re-emergence of religious practices coupled with economic deterioration against the backdrop of instability in neighbouring Afghanistan. The former President of Uzbekistan, Karimov, took draconian measures during his reign to contain extremism in the country although they often served to strengthen his autocratic power and legitimacy.

TASHKENT BOMBINGS

Almost a decade after independence, in early 1999, six cars exploded in the capital city, Tashkent, which left thirteen dead and over a hundred injured. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) claimed the attack, which targeted Karimov himself (Sadibekov, 2014). Following the bombings, hundreds of people were arrested as suspects without evidence by the Uzbek authorities who are believed to have tortured detainees to obtain confessions and testimony or falsified evidence (Polat & Butkevich, 2000). In early 2000, several detainees were executed, although the legitimacy of the execution remains uncertain to this date since their trials were not disclosed even to their family members (Polat & Butkevich, 2000). In the summer

of the same year, the IMU declared a holy war against the Uzbek authorities to overthrow Karimov and seize the government. In summer 2000, the IMU and Uzbek forces later engaged in combat both in Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, causing several dozens of deaths (Polat & Butkevich, 2000). As a result of heavy repression, the IMU first fled to neighbouring Tajikistan and then further to the Afghan-Pakistani border in the mid-2000s. The movement no longer seems to be concerned or involved with Uzbekistan (Thibault 2021, p. 143).

ANDIJAN MASSACRE

In 2005, Islam Karimov's autocracy and his so-called war against Islamic fundamentalism attracted international attention. In May 2005, amidst increasing citizens' grievances against poor economic conditions and Karimov's autocracy, a group of people raided a prison in Andijan situated in the Ferghana Valley to free 23 imprisoned local businessmen accused of Islamic extremism (HRW, 2006). The imprisonment of political opponents under the label of "extremists" was common under Karimov (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Following the prison assault, thousands of peaceful and unarmed protesters, including women and children, gathered in the centre of Andijan to express their discontent against the Karimov government (Amnesty International, 2015). As a response, the government forces arrived on the site, surrounded the protesters, and started shooting to disperse people. According to some reports, the government forces remained on the site after the carnage and executed wounded victims to ensure no witnesses survived (HRW, 2006; Amnesty International, 2015). Karimov refused international interference and independent investigation and justified the massacre as an intervention to suppress Islamic extremism (International Crisis Group, 2005). The death toll is believed to be between a few hundred and one thousand (Amnesty International, 2015). Among the survivors, approximately 500 fled to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, where some of them were kidnapped by Uzbek secret services (Amnesty International, 2015). Fifteen years later, the Andijan massacre is still a politically sensitive topic in Uzbekistan.

Although there are slight positive changes in the official discourses on the issue, Karimov's successor, President Mirziyoyev, remains evasive on the topic (Eurasianet, 2020).

FORCED LABOR IN COTTON HARVEST

Uzbekistan has been struggling to transform its economy and generate growth (Gammer, 2000). During Soviet times, the regime established an "economic and financial spiderweb to which the Central Asian republics were tied…by thousands of threads" (Gammer, 2000, p.130). The Uzbek contribution to the Soviet economy was mainly through cotton production, which the contemporary Uzbek's economy continues to rely on. The Uzbek government is actively involved in cotton production and state-organised forced labour in the cotton harvest has been reported. Every year, the state imposes cotton production quotas on regions across the country. Many citizens are taken to the cotton field during the harvest against their will, mainly due to shortages of the labour force (Uzbek Forum For Human Rights, 2019; HRW, 2020). An active political commitment to eradicate forced labour has been observed since Mirziyoyev came into office, mainly due to the increasing international pressure on Uzbekistan (Uzbek Forum For Human Rights, 2019). Although children are now exempted from labour since Mirziyoyev has taken office, forced labour is far from eradicated in Uzbekistan. According to the global slavery index, 160,000 people were forced to harvest cotton in 2018 (WALK FREE Foundation). Among those, school employees, including kindergartens, and college students, especially those in Karakalpakstan, were mobilised during the harvest from September to November (Uzbek Forum For Human Rights, 2019). The quota system is the root cause of forced labour since the regional representatives, *hokims*, under pressure to meet the quota, force the citizens to participate in the harvest (Uzbek Forum For Human Rights, 2019). However, despite several international organisations' reports on forced labour, the International Labour Organisation reported in 2018 that forced labour in the Uzbek cotton sector has been mostly eradicated and that most citizens' participation was now voluntary. The World Bank has

been accused of supporting forced labour in Uzbekistan through its projects in the Uzbek agricultural sector (HRW & Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights, 2017).

GENDER GAP

Women's status in Uzbekistan has changed through pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Since independence in 1991, women's economic and social conditions have declined (ADB, 2018). Under the USSR, Moscow aimed to establish a socialist nation and thus transformed Central Asian society by actively promoting women's participation in the labour force along with access to education for boys and girls (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2020). After the fall of Communism, the Uzbek government promoted patriarchal narratives to construct a nation detached from Soviet ideology. Karimov's regime encouraged the revival of pre-Soviet values and traditions, promoting the primary roles of women as mothers and caregivers (ADB, 2014). President Karimov, through his anti-terrorism political agenda, circulated patriarchal securitising discourses, constructing men as strong and active protectors and women as fragile and passive (Koch, 2011). Today, conscription in Uzbekistan exempts women. It is compulsory only for men aged between 18 and 27. Those who have completed the obligatory one-year term are given preferential treatment in admission to higher education and employment (Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America [CIA] Uzbekistan, 2020).

Uzbekistan's Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 2019 ranked 62nd out of 162 countries (UNDP, 2020c). Despite the governmental objective to have 30% of female representatives in the Uzbek parliament, females accounted for only 16% in 2017 (ADB, 2018). In Uzbekistan, gender patterns in the fields of education and employment have been observed. Women are predominantly concentrated in low-wage social sectors such as education and health, while men dominate income-generating engineering and business sectors such as industry and communication (ADB, 2018). Since education and job markets are interrelated and together

reinforce the gender stereotypes, the same patterns are observed in the choice of study fields among males and females.

Regarding gender parity in access to education in Uzbekistan, the rates in primary and secondary education, and professional colleges, are approximately equal for males and females (ADB, 2018). However, gender inequality is significant in higher education as female enrolment rate (38.2%) is about half of the male enrolment rate (61.8%) (ADB, 2018).

EDUCATION REFORMS

Under President Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan has, for many years, adopted isolationist and conservative policies which prevented the country from engaging in political and socio-economic transformations. Since his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, came into office in December 2016, numerous reforms have been introduced in a wide range of sectors, including education, to update and develop the country (World Bank, 2018). Considering the nation's increasing working-age population and long-term economic stagnation, the economic transformation was placed at the centre of the national reforms. Political efforts were therefore made to shift the economy from a Soviet-style centralised model to a market-oriented one (World Bank, 2018). Because education directly impacts job markets and vice-versa, the economic reform included education reforms and the "Strategy of Actions for Five Priority Development Directions in 2017-2021" was introduced. Reflecting the political efforts to transform the national economy, the government's focus was given to the higher education sector to establish neoliberal market-driven education values. As a part of the national development strategy, the internationalisation of Uzbek higher education, therefore, became a political priority (Uralov, 2020). In 2019, a presidential decree, "Concept of Development of Higher Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan until 2030", was introduced. Within the next ten years, at least ten Uzbek universities must appear in international ranking lists. However, in

contrast with the government's vision to thrive through higher education, the enrolment rate of Uzbek youth (of both sexes) in higher education was only 12.6% in 2019, which was considerably low compared to Kazakhstan (61.8%), Tajikistan (31.3% in 2017) and Kyrgyzstan (42.3%) (UNESCO, 2019). One of the main causes of these significantly low enrolment rates is the state admission quota which is currently 9% and students are allowed to apply for only one institution and one department (World Bank, 2018). In this competitive and limited admission process, youth from rural areas are further disadvantaged since half of the existing 85 higher education institutions are situated in the capital city, and the rest are mostly in other urban areas (UNESCO, 2020). Because 49% of the total population lives in rural settlements, the inaccessibility of higher education contributes to urban-rural disparities (UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, parents in rural areas are reluctant to enrol their daughters in higher education in urban areas due to geographical distance from home (ADB, 2018).

Even though 90% of the population is Muslim, access to Islamic education is limited in Uzbekistan (Khalid, 2014). After the bombings in Tashkent in 1999, President Karimov advanced secularisation. The religious practice became increasingly state-controlled for fear of drift towards radicalism and decline in his political legitimacy. As a result, only a few madrassas (religious schools) and three Islamic universities are currently providing Islamic education in Uzbekistan, and they are all state-supervised. Although Islam was re-established as the national religion in Uzbekistan after its independence, it is integrated into the state school curriculum along with other religions such as Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism with a strong connotation to history and national values rather than religion (Peyrouse, 2018). However, most citizens in Uzbekistan see Islam as a marker of national identity through the perspective of values and traditions rather than as religious identity per se (Ro'i & Wainer, 2018). Yet, 54% wished public schools would offer Islamic studies (World Values Survey, 2011). Taking into account the smouldering potential rise of Islamic radicalisation in the region besides the persistent

interethnic border conflicts and stagnated economy in the country, the oppressive political

approach to Islam might generate discontent among the citizens, particularly youth who are

vulnerable to radicalisation (Tucker, 2018), and have negative repercussions on peacebuilding.

As the only country which shares its borders with all other Central Asian countries and

Afghanistan, Uzbekistan's social cohesion is essential to the promotion of regional peace.

Conclusion

This desk-based paper examined the existing literature on education and conflict in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The review indicated a range of potential areas of inquiry for political economy analysis in the region for further research. All four countries are connected as they share historical and cultural similarities, nation-building processes and linked in terms of conflict potentials because of their geopolitical position. They also share similar experiences regarding political, economic, and educational development since the fall of the Soviet Union, but with specific issues in each context. The former Soviet Union brought full literacy and more emancipation for women in all regions. Still, Soviet legacies of border delimitation policies are linked to conflicts in Central Asia. The most commonly cited cause of conflict includes aspects of ethnic diversity and nationalism. The latter has gendered implications.

As the least fragile and most economically developed among all Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan succeeded in maintaining stability, though minor ethnic, political, radical and socio-economic conflicts have been experienced. The other three nations – Kyrgyzs, Tajiks and Uzbeks who co-exist in the Ferghana Valley have encountered several deadly ethnic clashes. Kyrgyzstan as a more liberal country, carried out deeper economic reforms, while Tajikistan underwent a civil war which worsened the country's economy to the lowest level compared to other Central Asian countries. Uzbekistan's authoritarian regime attempted to eliminate religious radicalism through violent methods, which resulted in the deaths and unjust imprisonment of hundreds of people. However, Islamic revival remains a very sensitive issue throughout the region. The review also highlighted the promotion of so-called 'traditional' pre-Soviet values in order to move away from the Soviet past. This tends to have a negative impact on women's

social position because it promotes hegemonic conservative gender norms for both men and women.

In general, the relationship between gender, education and conflict remains under-researched in Central Asia. Despite all four countries' attempts to shift from the Soviet education system to a more modern, inclusive one, the Gender Development Index (GDI) highly varies in each country. For example, because of their nomadic histories, some gender-based indicators appear to be more favourable for women in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan compared to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In addition, each country's diverse political and economic situations also had a contrasting influence on Central Asian women. Therefore, further research will need to examine gender equality issues in educational reforms within each context.

Research on curriculum would benefit from exploring the role of language in education in promoting social cohesion in multi-ethnic contexts. The poor implementation of educational reforms in rural areas, where most of the conflicts occur, leads to significant gaps between urban and rural areas. Considering education is at the crossroads of nation-building policies in Central Asian countries, the contribution of education to conflict mitigation and peacebuilding process can be initiated through the PEA lens. The PEA can be a key analytical tool in educational debates and the reform agenda. Another vital consideration for future research is the shortage of literature produced by local researchers in the regional languages such as Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek, whilst the region is widely being explored by Western scholars and practitioners (Chankseliani, 2017). This suggests an urgent need for bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives that reflect local needs and concerns alongside local researchers using endogenous PEA approaches in undertaking political economy analysis of education systems in their own contexts.

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