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“[T]he bureaucracy seeks ways to enrich itself in the manner of one big state corporation, and everyone else finds themselves in positions of vulnerability or dependency.”

Russia’s Incoherent State

JEREMY MORRIS

Western journalists routinely fall into the trap of presenting Russia as a tightly controlled society with a hands-on leader dictating from the center. In reality, however, the governance provided by the Russian state is incoherent, and Russian society is increasingly shaped by centrifugal processes driving apart the haves and the have-nots. The past twenty years have seen a retreat from the legacy of the Soviet Union, specifically the idea of a “social state” responsible for the welfare of all Russians. This has led to a bifurcation of society into a corrupt “bureaucratic” class dependent on the ruling elite, and the rest of the population.

**Ways of
Governing**

Second in a series

Political analysts typically also take their cue from an image of authoritarian manual control of the Russian state’s workings. This gives the misleading impression of a relatively effective translation of command into execution. Even when things go wrong, the people supposedly take solace in believing in the “good tsar” who has their interests at heart. This assumption is often cited to explain why surveys show that Russians remain more or less tolerant of the status quo. Although it is true that President Vladimir Putin has been able to keep up the appearance of being above everyday politics, the state is increasingly viewed as disconnected from ordinary people, arbitrarily punitive, and incompetent.

My argument is informed by the scholarly debate about the nature of the late Soviet system and its failings. The increasingly authoritarian turn of

governance in Russia should not cause us to repeat the mistakes of Sovietology—overestimating the robustness, flexibility, and managerial effectiveness of what only appears to be a comprehensively bureaucratic, Western-style state machine. In this mistaken view, while it is acknowledged that corruption renders Russia hardly a model of efficient governance, somehow the vertical hierarchy of decision making is assumed to result in effective transmission of orders from the center. This presumed efficiency is credited with enabling the completion of prestige projects like the building of a bridge over the Kerch Strait to Crimea after its annexation, or the successful hosting of the 2018 World Cup, despite the lack of transparent economic forces.

However, even at the everyday level, ordinary people encounter an incoherent state at every turn. Consider a few examples from provincial Russia (most of them from my fieldwork in the region of Kaluga, near Moscow):

- The federal Emergencies Ministry parades its high-tech rescue vehicles bought at vast expense, yet it is unable to assist drivers trapped in a snowstorm. The tender for the vehicles entailed juicy kickbacks and markups.
- A town plagued by blackouts and crumbling central heating infrastructure proudly opens a generously funded public bathhouse for which there is no demand. Meanwhile, the town goes without hot water for weeks in winter. The municipal government blames the private heating company to which it just tendered a lucrative contract. The company blames a lack of administrative capacity to enforce overdue bills, which has led to the accumulation of a huge debt to the wholesale supplier.
- The previous mayor sits in prison for taking bribes to allow an unsanctioned trash dump on

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the city limits, while his predecessor finishes a jail term for building himself a garage with funds from the city budget and taking out a “loan” for a car. These are not the main thieves, though—merely the hapless ones.

- Dutiful local citizens trying to obey the law and correctly install and register water meters in their country cottages are quietly told to unscrew the devices and “lose” them, since the local administration has no capacity to collect or process the readings.

Behind the absurdity of these true stories lies the reality of the incoherent state: competing bureaucratic groups, far from working to improve their performance and the well-being of citizens, seek to extract as many resources as possible through the overlap of business and rule-making, particularly via tendering, outsourcing, or downright thievery. In the meantime, people put up with creaking infrastructure and contradictory policies. Their plight is softened by their own small acts of resistance (the smart ones had ignored the rule to install water meters) or the sometimes sympathetic lower-level officials who help them work around the system.

Four parallel processes make the state incoherent. First, while a rhetoric of responsibility and care for the good of the people is an unavoidable part of Russian politics, the state is increasingly withdrawing from its role as social protector, particularly for the needy, of whom there are many in this supposedly middle-income European country.

Second, this abdication of what was the norm in Soviet times—state paternalism—is compounded by a two-decade binge of corrupt self-enrichment by the connected bureaucratic class, which has led to a bifurcation of society. Those with access to the state bureaucracy’s capacity to extract economic rents (whether “legally,” through control of extractive resources, or illicitly, through extortion and skimming) increasingly see themselves as a worthy, superior class above the *hoi polloi*. The sociologist Alena Ledeneva has called this political-economic complex the *sistema*.

Third, when oil prices fell and the global financial crisis hit Russia after 2010, the connected class turned to ordinary people as a resource to be exploited. “People are Russia’s replacement oil” became a social media meme in 2018.

Fourth, given the absence of democratic means to effect change, and the harsh response to protesters, people resort to what the anthropologist

and political scientist James C. Scott has called “infrapolitics”—a kind of hidden form of resistance. This results in ever-greater distancing between rulers and ruled, in a centrifugal process that accelerates the state’s incoherence.

PATERNAL NEGLECT

The first process—the withdrawal of the state from its traditional social role—has been ongoing since the breakup of the Soviet Union, but accelerated after 2000 under Putin’s various governments. From the outside (and especially in the eyes of liberal economists), this looks like a normal process of what academics call “neoliberal governmentality”—the state hollows out some of its responsibilities and delegates power to individuals and markets. Risk and responsibility should be less socialized and more about personal responsibility, argue advocates of this shift.

An example of this in Russia was the so-called benefits monetization program, introduced in 2005, which converted free-at-point-of-use benefits to cash payments, usually significantly lower in value. Among the formerly free or discounted services that this reform restricted were public transport, utilities, and medicines. This led to widespread protests against the symbolic affront to the dignity of what were perceived as socially deserving groups: not just pensioners but war veterans, the disabled, former political prisoners, and people who were involved in the cleanup of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident.

Scholars such as Laura Henry and Julie Hement have pointed out that welfare reforms in the late 2000s took place against the backdrop of a general assumption, supported by official rhetoric, that economic growth would continue to allow living standards to increase, and that “technocratic competence” would help solve Russia’s demographic problems of an aging, sick population and low fertility. However, such reforms have continued in the present decade even as living standards have fallen. The raising of the pension eligibility age in 2018 (to 65 for men and 60 for women, by 2028—an increase of 5 years) is a particularly despised reform; in many regions of European Russia, the majority of men will die before or shortly after retiring. The state pension is barely adequate for subsistence in most regions.

Behind the current episode of state withdrawal lies a long-standing argument for how to diagnose the ills of the Soviet project and its legacy in today’s Russia. We can call this argument the “de-

pendency” or “infantile” thesis: the idea that the overbearing and overwhelming role of the state in every aspect of life created a dependent, passive population lacking dynamism. Making people take responsibility for their own well-being is seen as essential to building citizens capable of competing in a globalized world.

This argument originates in a prevalent view of the entire Soviet period, blaming current ills on its creation of a particular kind of socially stunted individual, ill-equipped to fend for himself: *Homo Sovieticus*. Party functionaries with a monopoly on power operated a highly centralized command economy using scientific principles of planning, based on the idea of quantifiable needs and measurable inputs and outputs. This left people shut out of politics and civil society organizations feeble after communism, even as many Russians continued to view the state as the automatic and natural provider of employment, social goods, and so on.

This “paternalism-as-disease” reading of history sees Russians today as similar to “boomerang” children in their twenties, refusing to leave home and continuing to unrealistically see the state as the deep-pocketed head of a family. Instead of developing their own skills and resources, Russians expect the state to maintain the byzantine system of social benefits and privileges accrued in the Soviet period. And current social protection measures echo Soviet paternalism in certain areas—subsidized mortgages and food vouchers for families with many children, and free public transportation for Muscovite pensioners, just to name a few.

There is a sliver of truth in this argument, but it has more to do with the experience of extreme and widespread socioeconomic trauma in the 1990s. Memories of that time lead Russians to cling to whatever support they can find. Despite the government’s reforms, benefits linked to employment (whether in the public or private sector) are still very important to people, whatever their equivalent monetary value.

For example, when one of my research participants moved from a factory job in an enterprise little changed from Soviet times to a foreign-owned and -operated automobile plant in 2010, his salary increased by nearly 100 percent, but you wouldn’t have guessed his good fortune. Most of his talk revolved around the non-monetary benefits: Would

he have to buy and wash his own overalls? Was the morning coffee free? How many lunch courses did the canteen serve? Was the corporate bus clean and comfortable?

One reading of the multiple causes of the end of the Soviet project is that it collapsed due to its internal contradictions in social policy. The state had implemented universal education, medical coverage, and social security by the 1970s, and people expected living standards to keep rising. The political scientist Linda Cook defined the Soviet social contract as “an implicit exchange between the regime and the populace: citizens remained quiescent and the regime provided them with secure jobs, social services, subsidized housing, and consumer goods.”

However, economic productivity declined, and the social contract failed. In place of universal coverage by social welfare schemes, people increasingly had to rely on their immediate employers for things like decent food in canteens, subsidized housing, and so on. Thirty years later, these perspectives are still relevant. In Russia, economic history tends to rhyme.

Having to depend for survival on informal networks of associates, particularly employment connections, came as a shock to many Russians.

This is well documented in the work of scholars such as Richard Rose, who memorably wrote that to live in Russia in 1994 was to “get by without government.” Similar themes are found in the work of Michael Burawoy, who wrote in 2000 on “household involution”—a retreat to a primitive domestic economy in the face of the collapse of industry and agriculture—and of Melissa Caldwell and Olga Shevchenko, who charted the downward spiral of social mobility experienced even by the Moscow middle class.

The era of economic crises that lasted from the 1980s into the 1990s could be seen as a period in which state incoherence increased. But that doesn’t mean that strong expectations of a social and universalist protector-state went away. On the contrary, the narrative of the 1990s in today’s government propaganda blames the weakened state for the loss of national prestige and stability in that era. According to the official rhetoric, only a strong state can guarantee social rights. Indeed, many people desperately cling to the very modest echoes of that past system.

*Even the most marginalized
and apparently weak people
are not as passive as they seem.*

Two more examples from my research illustrate this:

- A village smallholder whose only child has earned good grades in school does halting research on a borrowed smartphone to look into the few remaining free higher-education courses at the local community college.

- A young couple calculates whether it is worthwhile to have a second child by considering the “maternal capital” grant they will get—the equivalent of a few thousand dollars. Will they qualify for a subsidized mortgage rate and be able to move from a one-room apartment in a run-down dormitory block for migrants to a “two-room” in the nicer block across town?

The problem with the myth that unenterprising and dependent Russians are used to the state picking up the tab is that it ignores reality, both past and present. The Soviet “social contract” was very basic and uneven. People had to make do with their own resources and put up with often terrible conditions in the “universal-coverage” hospitals, schools, and care homes for the elderly and disabled. Moreover, the myth of the “handout Russian” is a distraction from the other, much more meaningful processes at work since 2000.

BUREAUCRACY VS. THE PEOPLE

One such process is the rise of the bureaucratic self-enriching elite class, preventing a more rational and equitable distribution of resources that would allow more targeted social protection. Another is the current punitive and extractive turn due to Russia’s partial disengagement from the global economy, which has led the government to renege on its commitment to basic social rights to compensate for the lack of political rights (another historical rhyme).

The punitively extractive state seeks to milk the population as much as possible with new taxes and fines. It announces loudly that the social state is over already: Forget what the constitution says (that Russia is as much a social state as a capitalist one), the state never asked you to be born or to give birth.

Astonishingly, over the past year, a number of politicians have repeated the latter phrase almost word for word. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s words to Crimean pensioners in 2016 are also indicative: “There’s no money, but hang in there.” Since then, the Russian state has aped austerity policies from Western Europe, cutting social, education, and other budgets while pursuing prestige

projects, military spending, and narrow investment in extracting natural gas and exporting it to countries that are unlikely to be long-term customers since they are already reducing their hydrocarbon use.

The sociologist Simon Kordonsky has proposed a model of what he calls the “estates” structure of Russia, echoing the feudal division of society. Any genuine market-economy activity or class formation is overshadowed or stunted by the logic of a resource-based economy organized into a system of estates, or social groups based on hierarchical position. The extractive resources feed the top estate (state functionaries and their connections); everyone else must make do with what is left over or what little the state deems they deserve.

Crucially, service to the state, not labor, determines compensation in this system. Therefore, classes cannot fully emerge. Some 72 million public-sector workers and pensioners, as well as 17 million middle-class professionals and independent entrepreneurs, are seen as being outside the “productive” part of the state. As the economy stagnates, the government and “security” services (around eight million people) siphon off more and more economic rents through webs of corruption.

An even more vampiric system has emerged since 2014, when oil prices fell precipitously and sanctions were imposed on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea. Hydrocarbon rents no longer satisfy the greedy appetite of the already wealthy bureaucratic estate. A terrifying symptom is the increasingly common raiding of private businesses—armed men in balaclavas turn up at some small- or medium-scale enterprise and change its ownership overnight, installing bureaucrats or proxies of the security services.

These trends are producing a bifurcated society, where the bureaucracy seeks ways to enrich itself in the manner of one big state corporation, and everyone else finds themselves in positions of vulnerability or dependency. Political scientists call this kind of system patron-clientelism: personal ties dominate and dictate access to resources and power, while formal rules and institutions have weak purchase.

The Russian scholar Ilya Matveev argues that there is a dualism at the heart of governance: the state has effectively renationalized some key industries since 2004, while continuing with neoliberal reforms for the proverbial 99 percent of the population. Overall, this has led to even more incoherence in the state—poor institutional design,

spiraling costs, and lack of focus and coordination between agencies. Nor has it checked the problem of elite enrichment. For example, the oligarch Roman Abramovich sold his oil company back to the state in 2005 for 130 times the purchase costs.

Incoherence affects not only ordinary people who are subject to falling living standards, but also the bureaucracy itself, which can easily overreach or engage in infighting for resources. Yuri Bykov's daring 2014 film *The Fool* illustrates this tendency. A lowly municipal plumber tries to warn of the impending collapse of a decrepit housing block. Funds for maintenance have been systematically stolen for years. So deep and wide runs the institutionalized system of kickbacks, markups, and other graft that the city's financial controller has the police chief (also part of the system of "collective responsibility") murder the hapless plumber (the "fool" of the title) and her own associates—the city planner and the fire chief. The unfortunate occupants of the decaying building (a metaphor for ordinary Russians) are consigned to their fate.

In the diffuse, corrupt, dysfunctional, and contradictory world of the rule and unrule of law in Russia, words like extortion, bribery, and racketeering lose their meaning. If state actors take assets from you in a way you experience as illegitimate, it is by virtue of their superior command of legal and administrative resources. They have the ability to pass off apparent criminal actions as ordinary accumulation according to the logic of proximity to other, more powerful, state actors.

In *The Fool*, the regional governor requires the mayor to extract a cut from the city budget in order to "pay up" his share. This system, known as *otkat*, is in reality widespread throughout state organizations, from the police to the health service. Connected businessmen can harness their nearness to power and even use law enforcement to violently coerce rivals. No wonder "law" and "enforcement" are wholly incoherent concepts in Russia.

THE NEW OIL

In the past few years, the bureaucracy's appetite for self-enrichment has intensified, symbolized by the phrase "people are the new oil." It is worth putting the current moment in historical context. In feudal Russia, loyal servants of the state were granted the right to "feed" on particular localities,

industries, or trades. In return for managing the extraction and delivery of revenues, they had permission to extract a portion for themselves.

This was different from feudalism as it was experienced in the rest of Europe. In Muscovy, there was no sense of a contractual relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Instead, state expansion and even survival were dictated by a relationship of economic exploitation that bound all in service to the state as sovereign.

Historians have long argued that this situation led to a corporative organization of social strata, similar to the estates system outlined by Kordon-sky. This inhibited the development of an idea of political receptiveness and responsibility, especially since a large part of the population comprised state serfs—people who were the personal property of landowners, or in this case the tsar, without rights. Corporatism also led to a kind of firewalling of different estates: serfs were bound to their villages but self-governing; above them was a tiny, Europeanized, French-speaking elite.

Russia remains a state-nation, not a nation-state. Like those imperial-era elites, the new estate of bureaucrats has grown used to feeding on economic rents—nowadays from hydrocarbon sales—and is addicted to a standard of living

that many North Americans or Western Europeans can only envy. Rather than tighten their belts, they have used their position within the state apparatus to set a punitive course and extract wealth from a population already coping with a decade of stagnant incomes.

At the same time, ordinary people have witnessed a deterioration in public services—health and education, and the entitlements connected to them, were the top concerns of Russians polled in 2018. While the increase in the pension age has caused great discontent, there are more pressing issues, like the price of gasoline, which many believe should be subsidized domestically, given that Russia has 80 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and is the second-largest exporter in the world.

Persistent inflation, likely understated by a factor of three in official statistics, is partly due to sanctions and low oil prices devaluing the ruble. There have also been increases in an array of taxes. Indirect taxes hit the poorest hardest: a value-added tax is levied on utility bills, which already consume around half the income of the poor.

The state is increasingly withdrawing from its role as social protector.

A new target is the largely untaxed income from self-employment, which is usually unregistered. A government declaration of “war on the nannies” was a recent headline. Most people see these informal incomes as necessary to top up their meager primary incomes, and interpret the state’s renewed interest in personal taxation as profoundly unjust.

On top of all this has come a general ratcheting up of fines for minor legal violations. Russian roads are densely covered by enforcement cameras by comparison with most European countries. The Moscow region alone quadrupled its count in 2018 to 1,300 cameras (as many as in the whole of Britain), garnering \$150 million in fines for speeding and other infractions.

Given these mounting burdens, it should come as no surprise that a recent poll showed that around half of Russians cannot financially plan even for the immediate future. Yet in response to muted discontent, those in power find it convenient to wheel out the rhetoric of “self-help,” and explain any misfortune by invoking the myth of the paternalism-addicted masses. Putin recently expressed concern about the tax burden for ordinary people, but this was just his way of playing the paternal leader while his underlings carried out a punitive policy.

EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

Russians are not really so different from any other educated and informed European population. While they might not protest very actively because they know the punitive power of the state, and most see no point in contesting elections rigged to give the ruling elite a monopoly on power at all levels, there are forms of everyday resistance.

Russian resilience and resourcefulness have long compensated for the incoherence of the state. It is even tempting to say that the state is partially exaggerating its own incoherence (and indifference), since it believes that Russians are capable of putting up with pretty much anything and fending for themselves. This is something that no other European state would risk.

In my own research, I have found that in the face of a state abdicating responsibility, people do more than just “make do” by falling back on tried and tested resources, like garden plots and close-

knit networks of mutual aid. They will, given time, not only adapt to dysfunctional systems, but start to inhabit the nooks and crannies—making a virtue of that dysfunction and incoherence. Even the most marginalized and apparently weak people are not as passive as they seem. Over the past three decades, people have gotten used to the incoherent way Russia is governed.

The political scientist and Russia expert Samuel Greene argues that once people are forced to adapt to informal political and economic relations, they actually resist the very institution building and formal bureaucratic ways of states that function in a more “normal” manner. James C. Scott long ago coined the term “infrapolitics” to describe the many aspects of people’s ordinary and unnoticed resistance to the status quo, particularly in colonial contexts or during the era of slavery. But his insights have purchase in contemporary states too. An example from my research is the ubiquity of unregistered and untaxed work in the Russian shadow economy—plumbers, taxi drivers, nannies, and builders all engage in it.

Infrapolitics, Scott says, are nurtured by “hidden transcripts.” The more the “public transcript” (the official narrative) is seen as hypocritical, the more it is likely to generate a rich and “hidden” alternative. When Russians hear cynical official talk about the importance of the development of human capital and productivity while at the same time their leaders tell them that the state owes them nothing, it spurs the creation of counter-discourses against such indignities and injustices.

A wave of memes criticizing the pension reforms was shared via WhatsApp and other encrypted messaging services. A parody of Putin’s 2018 New Year’s address is another example: “Friends, we have had a difficult year, like many before it. And the problem here is of course not the Western sanctions . . . not the ‘lazy people’. . . but the shameless and deceitful authorities.”

One possible state response is to try to shut down the most reliable motor of such infrapolitical speech—the Internet. But as with other authoritarian technological fixes, there will always be hacks, and it’s not even clear whether Chinese-style firewalling is feasible in Russia, since it is too integrated in global information highways. It would be prohibitively expensive and technically

The punitively extractive state seeks to milk the population as much as possible with new taxes and fines.

very difficult to pull off—a bit like rebuilding your house's foundations while still living in it.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze described the “minor warfare” people wage against the state as “nomadism,” which could well apply to the mobile tactics many ordinary Russians employ. The only option for many is to keep moving and work a hack here and there—siphoning off company fuel for private use, filching some stationery from work, or taking up that oldest form of nomadism—the informal taxi-driving that supports nearly a million families in Russia. Even if technological fixes fill the informational holes through which millions of people disappear into informal economic spaces, new niches and hacks will emerge.

For example, while the Russian state cannot yet link up the database of insured drivers to its impressive network of road cameras, at some point this technical issue will be solved. However, there are already nomadic hacks available to every driver: covering one's license plate with transparent shoe polish, which ensures that a thick layer of dust will immediately adhere to it, or citing the inefficiencies of the Russian postal system to challenge the legality of a fine, claiming that the correspondence was lost. Or another very Russian phe-

nomenon: it's not uncommon for officials tasked with enforcing the state's authority to simultaneously advise ordinary people on how to avoid penalties, out of compassion or solidarity.

The point is not that there is some inflection point where rage converts to rebellion, but rather that such “hidden transcripts” reinforce the logic of nomadic, state-distancing moments—like refusing to register as self-employed, evading a traffic fine, or just having the courage to openly discuss politics for the first time with acquaintances. Each element gives traction to the next. Even though nomadism and infrapolitics work insidiously, they have political significance because they continuously prod at the limits of the publicly sayable and build courage for small personal acts.

The idea of the state as incoherent and uncaring is ingrained in Russian society—a paradox, given the deeply rooted expectation of paternalism. Since Russians are increasingly realistic about the nature of the state, most will continue to rely on the tactics of everyday invisible resistance. By contrast, the recent Moscow protests are a drop in the ocean; only when comfortably-off metropolitans' political interests coalesce with the desire for socioeconomic justice in the broader population will everyday resistance translate into something more. ■

“Some of the state’s recent initiatives have sought to reappropriate ethno-cultural and pre-Soviet history and tradition, shaping a new politics of identity.”

Belarus’s Winding Path to a Post-Soviet Identity

NELLY BEKUS

This year marks a quarter-century in power for the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko. He came to power at a crucial moment, when Belarus was facing difficult choices about the direction of its future development after the collapse of the Soviet system. His rule quickly turned out to be autocratic, and the country acquired the image of the last dictatorship in Europe, caught in the grip of a retrograde Soviet-style ideology. However, a closer look reveals a complex process of building a new national identity both in tension and in sympathy with the Soviet legacy.

On its way to becoming a nation-state, Belarus faced challenges similar to those experienced by other post-Soviet countries, but in many respects it became an exception to the dominant scripts for both exiting socialism and constituting a new nationhood. Postsocialist transformation typically entailed political liberalization and the transition to a market economy. It also involved creating new social fabrics to form nation-states out of the former Soviet people. These conversions offered favorable political settings for the rise of ethno-linguistic nationalism. They also tended to enhance the power of the state, now understood as a genuine “national” actor, to reshape public life along nationalist lines.

In their search for the means to build a new collective identity, post-Soviet nations often launched programs that can be described as aiming at the postcolonial “othering” of the Soviet and socialist past. In political science, the phenomenon of othering is traditionally analyzed as a way in which nations define themselves in contrast to others. Post-communist elites sought to define their nations’ independent status in contrast to the Soviet past.

Post-Soviet othering is now a common way for a nation to consolidate its collective identity by distancing itself from the Soviet legacy. Becoming a nation, in this context, means becoming anti-Soviet. The forced liquidation of what are perceived as vestiges of the Soviet system is considered an essential part of nation-state building. Various programs of decommunization and criminalization of the Soviet past have been central to the new politics in the Baltic states, Georgia, and, most recently, Ukraine.

In its initial phase of independence, Belarus followed a similar path. But since then, it has headed in a very different direction.

VICTIMHOOD AND NATIONALISM

The country’s first anticommunist opposition movement, started in 1988, was the Belarusian People’s Front (BPF). Although it remained a minority in the Supreme Soviet of Belarus after the first competitive elections were held in 1990, the BPF, led by Zianon Pazniak, gained the support of the Democratic Bloc, a group of opposition politicians who emerged from various nongovernmental organizations. The BPF became the leading political force in defining a nationalizing strategy.

To undertake the strategic othering of the Soviet past, the BPF launched several projects intended to reimagine the nation. The party emphasized a new language policy and a new version of Belarusian historical memory. The former aimed to recast the national linguistic design in accordance with the “one-nation, one language” model, which entailed erasing Russian from public use. The latter involved rewriting national history from a non-Soviet perspective in order to prove that Belarus belonged culturally and politically to Europe, rather than to Russian or Soviet civilization.

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In many countries, including Belarus, memory politics took on a major role in advancing a radical othering of the Soviet legacy. Ethnonationalist narratives commemorating the victims of communist repression transformed the issue of Soviet crimes into stories of national suffering. This type of remembrance became a template that eventually gained acceptance as the main, if not the only, genuine expression of postcolonialism in most post-Soviet countries.

Between 1990 and 1994, on the initiative of the BPF and its supporters, the Belarusian parliament adopted 24 pieces of legislation to address the memory of the victims of political repression, the rehabilitation of their status, property restitution, and other compensation. Pazniak, one of the architects of these policies, believed that the victims should be key actors in Belarusian nation-building. Under the new ideology, they would be symbolically revived to help bring about a national awakening through the act of remembering. In one of his articles, Pazniak wrote:

We can never escape from our history. Living and dead, we are all one. We are the nation. And although we cannot help the dead, the dead can help us. They can illuminate our path, bless our souls with their sufferings, and stir up our minds, hearts, and spirits, provided that we wish it.

*The city became a
homogeneous embodiment
of Soviet urban patterns.*

In this narrative, the process of nation-formation is not exclusively carried out by the living, but becomes a collaborative project that is also shaped and even instigated by the dead. Yet its major ambition is not prosecution and justice, for which “testifying corpses” are usually key proxies, as the American anthropologist Zoe Crossland has said. The victims of the Stalinist regime were called on to “emancipate” the people from the spell of a positive perception of the Soviet past that was characteristic of Belarusian society in the late Soviet Union and in the immediate aftermath of its collapse.

ENTER LUKASHENKO

The election of Alexander Lukashenko as president in 1994, when the first democratic vote in the history of independent Belarus took place (it was also effectively the last, given the lack of free and fair elections since then), terminated this project. In contrast to the ethnonationalist politicians who sought to employ all possible means to alienate Belarusians from the Soviet experience, Luka-

shenko promoted an idea of the nation-state that in many respects became a continuation of the Soviet development model. Behind this façade of loyal adherence to that legacy, however, he launched a project of nationalizing the Soviet past. It aimed to reappropriate that past in order to position the Belarusian nation, rather than its victims, as the genuine subject of its twentieth-century history.

Lukashenko set out to negate the logic of ethno-linguistic nationalism. He often claims that “blatant nationalism” is alien to international-minded Belarusians, and that this internationalist spirit is one of the assets of the Belarusian mentality. He replaced communist ideology with praise of national tradition; but instead of othering the Soviet past, he sought to thoroughly reappropriate it.

Since 1996, Independence Day has been celebrated in Belarus neither on July 27—the day the Declaration of Sovereignty was signed in 1991—nor on March 25, the day the Belarusian People’s Republic was proclaimed in 1918, which the opposition celebrates as “Freedom Day.” Instead, it

is observed on July 3, the day of Belarus’s liberation from Nazi occupation in 1944. The main reason for not observing Independence Day on July 27, according to the official explanation, is that for most people, the Declaration of Sovereignty is

associated with the end of the Soviet Union, which should not arouse positive feelings.

In this nationalized interpretation of the Soviet historical narrative, glorification of the victory in the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is known) was recast to create an image of Belarusian national triumph. Rather than comparing the Soviet Red Army to the German Wehrmacht, as is commonplace in the historical narratives of the Baltic states and in Ukraine since its 2014 Maidan revolution, official memory portrays Belarusians’ contribution to the Soviet victory over the Nazis as a high point of national heroism. Whereas Ukraine’s 2015 decommunization law bans the ribbon of Saint George, associated with a Soviet military decoration, Belarusian authorities reappropriated the symbol, promoting their own version of the ribbon in the colors of the nation’s flag.

MONUMENTAL MEMORY

A more monumental promotion of the reframed memory of World War II is manifested in several

recently built memorial complexes in Minsk, such as one called Partisan Belarus, erected in 2004 to commemorate Belarusian fighters' active resistance during the Nazi occupation; another known as Broken Hearth, built in 2008 at the site of the Minsk ghetto in memory of the victims of Nazism; and a memorial on the site of a Nazi extermination camp in Maly Trostenets, outside Minsk, completed in 2015. Some older monuments have also been reconstructed, enhancing their visibility.

A nationalized version of the Soviet narrative was echoed in the new venue of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, which opened in Minsk in 2015. The old museum building was demolished in 2014, despite having been listed as a potential UNESCO World Heritage site. The official explanation construed the demolition of the museum not as a loss but part of an upgrade—an adjustment to befit the twenty-first-century context.

The design of the new museum, by the architect Viktor Kramarenko, emphasizes the centrality of World War II in the memorial landscape of independent Belarus. The building is far more prominent than its predecessor, which dated from 1962. Located on the central Avenue of the Victors, the museum forms a monumental composition with the 45-meter-high Hero City of Minsk obelisk (itself designed by Kramarenko in 1984), which stands across from the main entrance.

The museum reinterprets the Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War—and of the partisan movement as a specific Belarusian contribution to the common victory—from a national perspective. The glass dome over the new museum building features golden sculptural reliefs inscribed with names of wartime Soviet heroes. Belarusians are listed at the top, separated from the others.

From a platform atop the dome, visitors can view the surrounding skyline of Minsk, which thus becomes an integral part of the museum exhibition, retrospectively connecting the present-day city with the triumphant end of the war in 1945. This symbolizes the idea behind the new museum: a reinvention of the Soviet historical narrative with an emphasis on the Belarusian experience of the war.

STREET POLITICS

A policy designed to entrench the Soviet legacy as a part of national identity can also be observed in changes to place names in Minsk. On the eve of independence, less than 20 percent of street names referred to Belarusian history, Soviet or pre-Soviet.

The overwhelming majority of them commemorated the Great Patriotic War.

During the early years of independence, when the Soviet legacy was hotly contested, several important thoroughfares in the city center were renamed, suggesting a general shift toward nationalizing the capital. Lenin Avenue was renamed after the leading Renaissance scholar Francysk Skaryna, Lenin Square became Independence Square, and Gorki Street, named after the celebrated Russian author, became Bagdanovich Street, in honor of a Belarusian poet.

Lukashenko reversed some of these changes. In 2004, he personally made a decision to rename two important thoroughfares, Skaryna Avenue and Prasppekt Masherava, as Independence Avenue and Avenue of the Victors. His aim was clearly to bolster the significance of the Great Patriotic War in the master memory narrative of the Belarusian state.

Gradually, however, the number of national Belarusian toponyms in Minsk has increased. In new microdistricts on the outskirts of the city, streets are usually named after prominent personalities from pre-Soviet Belarusian culture and history. Often they are drawn from the heyday of the Great Duchy of Lithuania in the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. In this way, figures and events from Belarus's non-Soviet history have been given a place but relegated to the margins, while the center of Minsk, known as perhaps the best-preserved example of Soviet-era architecture in any country, continues to be dominated by toponyms associated with Soviet history and culture.

CITY OF THE SUN

In 2004, the Belarusian authorities added Minsk's central boulevard, Independence Avenue, built in the 1950s and 1960s, to the country's tentative list of nominees for UNESCO World Heritage status. This move displayed the symbolic resonance of the Soviet material legacy for Belarusian identity politics. It would have hardly been possible in any other post-Soviet state. Heritagemaking, as the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall once noted, is never pursued simply for the sake of preserving and safeguarding historical relics; it reflects the way in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory. The reassessment of the value of Minsk's architecture illustrates how the Soviet past and its legacy have been placed within the framework of the Belarusian nation's cultural patrimony.

By the 1980s, Minsk was perceived as an authentically socialist urban phenomenon. Due to the vast destruction of its urban fabric during World War II, when 80 percent of the city's infrastructure and 70 percent of the prewar housing stock were wiped out, the cityscape was rebuilt basically from scratch in the second half of the twentieth century. As a result of this postwar process, the city became a homogeneous embodiment of Soviet urban patterns.

The city center consists of large administrative and public edifices and residential buildings. Independence Avenue is a unified ensemble designed in the neoclassical style characteristic of the Stalinist era. In the late 1950s, when the more pragmatic period of socialist architecture began at the behest of Nikita Khrushchev, the center of Minsk was ringed by a new cordon of simplified buildings made of prefabricated concrete. Later came *mikrorayons*—microdistricts, the primary units of the socialist urban fabric, each comprising a residential complex and public services infrastructure. These were characteristic of the Brezhnev era.

Essentially, Minsk was built as a series of ensembles united by a common plan. The degree of top-down rationality inscribed into the city plan made Minsk a striking example of Soviet urban development. The British urban critic Owen Hatherley has called it “arguably the greatest neoclassical European city” of the twentieth century, “resplendent with colonnades, baroque archways, and romantic skylines of spires, obelisks, and heroic sculptures.” Reflecting on the role of socialist ideology in the development of the capital, the Belarusian artist Artur Klinau, an architect by training, called Minsk the “City of the Sun”: it was meant to embody “the glorious communist future,” but became a monument to unfulfilled promises of universal happiness, social harmony, and justice.

On the eve of independence in the early 1990s, the meaning of the Soviet architectural legacy in Minsk became contentious. For those who condemned the Soviet period of Belarusian history as a colonial interlude, the appropriate strategy for urban development was de-Sovietization: in other words, bringing to the fore non-Soviet aspects of the city, and downplaying its Soviet architectural imprint. This implied a total rethinking of the national tradition and a return to an indigenous

Belarusian cultural patrimony, excluding the Soviet past. In practical terms, it would mean reconstructing religious buildings that were destroyed or rebuilt and repurposed during the Soviet era, and revitalizing preserved fragments of the old prerevolutionary city.

In the official historical discourse under Lukashenko, on the contrary, Soviet-era Minsk is hailed as a symbol of postwar reconstruction and one of the highest points of Belarus's modern development. In 1997, Independence Avenue was registered as a significant example of national cultural and historical patrimony. The subsequent push to nominate it as a World Heritage site signified more than a bid for recognition of the avenue's aesthetic and architectural value. Within the new national context, it was meant as a tribute to the epic efforts of the Belarusian people during the era of postwar reconstruction, when the new city emerged from the ruins.

That era, as the historian David Marples notes, has come to be perceived as a “golden age” and a key turning point in history—one that most Belarusians see as having major symbolic, and positive, value. Belarus not only recouped its losses during that period, but also attained more advanced levels of industrial development and the highest standard of living among the Soviet republics.

The Sovietness of Minsk's city center, in this view, is the material embodiment of these achievements, reflecting the spirit of the nation. Thus it deserves to be praised and preserved. The affirmation of the Soviet past in this process of heritage-making became a crucial component of Lukashenko's official identity narrative. Rather than portraying the Soviet project as a hostile ideological venture imposed on Belarusians by external forces, this narrative retells the epic story of Soviet modernization as an experience of their own making.

THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

The difference between the two readings of the Soviet past in Belarus—viewing it through the lens of either collective suffering or the nation's achievements—involves more than just negative or positive portrayals of the Soviet Union and its legacy. What is at stake here is the role played by the Belarusian nation in the whole course of its

The state's approach to national identity lately has grown more complex and nuanced.

twentieth-century development. By reappropriating elements of the socialist transformation as a part of Belarusian nation building, the official narrative under Lukashenko asserts that Belarusians had agency in the Soviet ideological project; they were not its passive victims.

The whole complex experience of building a socialist state, defending the country from Nazi Germany, and starting a new life in the postwar decades is incorporated in the story of how Belarusians became a nation. The narrative endorsed by ethnonationalist activists, on the contrary, denies that the Belarusian people had any agency in the Soviet project, and depicts their experience through the lens of victimhood.

The stance of victimhood became one of the characteristic features of post-Soviet discourses. In various countries across the former USSR, new national elites have portrayed their nations as deprived of agency to resist or escape a Soviet regime that was imposed on them through colonization. However, the agency of the Belarusian nation, in the official ideological interpretation, does not derive from the memory of victims of Soviet crimes. Instead, it honors those who played active roles in numerous Soviet undertakings.

The dominance of such historiographical triumphalism, focused on heroic warriors and creators rather than on victims, can partly be explained by the ideological contours of the Belarusian authoritarian system. The legitimacy of the power system built by Lukashenko is based on promises of economic development and prosperity.

The official discourse is thus preoccupied with shaping an image of Belarus as a modern, active, and dynamic society. A narrative revolving around the experience of powerless victimhood and shared calamity in the Soviet Union would hardly be usable for this purpose. Instead, the state version features those who fought in the Great Patriotic War or played prominent roles in postwar rebuilding.

SYMBOLIC SHIFTS

In contrast to the polarization over national identity in the early 1990s, when there was a rigid division between pro-Soviet elites interested in integration with Russia and the ethno-cultural nationalist opposition calling for a one-nation, one-language model, the state's approach to national

identity lately has grown more complex and nuanced. After 28 years of independent development, the Belarusian state now functions as a melting pot in which previously conflicting national ideologies engage in a process of reciprocal fusion.

In the early 1990s, the nationalist intelligentsia aspired to call into being a new national community of Belarusians by promoting a certain set of historical interpretations, cultural values, and political ideologies. Their ultimate goals have never been achieved. Belarus remains the only post-Soviet country with two state languages. The memory of the victims of political repression, which was meant to assist in othering Sovietness, lingers on the margins of public life.

Yet their efforts to summon a common ethno-cultural spirit in Belarusian society have not perished in vain. They brought to the forefront of disputes over national identity the symbolic capital of the pre-Soviet European past and an emphasis on ethno-linguistic distinctiveness. Their work ironically supplied Lukashenko's official ideology with

cultural and historical resources for further advancement of his nation-building project. Some of the state's recent initiatives have sought to reappropriate ethno-cultural and pre-Soviet history and tradition, shaping a new politics of identity.

The renewal of pre-Soviet urban heritage became the first indicator of this revisionist project. In July 2004, Lukashenko signed a decree "On the Development of the Historical Center of Minsk," ordering a complex program of conservation and reconstruction. This was presented as part of a revival of Belarus's cultural and historical values.

The decree was followed by the reconstruction of some destroyed fragments of prerevolutionary Minsk, such as the nineteenth-century city hall, the Hotel Europa (the largest edifice in the pre-revolutionary period), and other buildings in the historical district known as Upper Town. A memorial installed in Upper Town in 2014 is dedicated to the Magdeburg Rights, a set of privileges of self-governance granted to Minsk by Grand Duke Alexander of Lithuania in 1499. This conveys the message that the European legacy is respected and valued by the state. In a similar vein, a monument to Grand Duke Olgerd, inaugurated in Vitebsk in 2014, can be read as an official endorsement of the Grand Duchy's important role in the history of the Belarusian nation.

Lukashenko launched a project of nationalizing the Soviet past.

More recently, senior officials, including the president, have expressed occasional support for the Belarusian language. They claim it as a native language that distinguishes Belarusians among other nations, and affirm that the state should do more to encourage the use of Belarusian in various spheres of daily life. Despite this rhetoric, state officials, including Lukashenko, continue to mostly use Russian in public.

Following a revival of interest in traditional embroidery in Ukraine, where it became one of the symbols of the 2014 Maidan revolution, the Belarusian government organized a Day of National Embroidery on July 2, 2016. This celebration, backed by the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Organization, became one more example of the state's incorporation of markers of ethno-cultural nationalism. The political potential of this kind of nationalism as an alternative to the state ideology has been undermined by such co-optation of its symbols.

The course of events in post-Maidan Ukraine has prompted the Lukashenko regime to rethink not only its handling of ethnonationalism but also the importance of a clear boundary between Belarusians and Russians. Markers of identity formerly claimed by the opposition are now used to reinforce the official ideology in view of the potential threat that Russia poses to Belarusian sovereignty.

One of the authorities' most striking symbolic moves, in 2018, was the construction of a monument to victims of Stalinist repression at the Kurapaty burial site, just outside Minsk. This site, where as many as 300,000 people (according to the BPF) were executed from 1937 to 1941—or as few as 7,000, according to the state—has long been the major point of reference in the political struggle over Soviet history in Belarus. In 1989, following an investigation of Stalinist crimes, the government of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic issued a decree that called for the construction of a monument on the site.

Since then, the political opposition and groups of activists have worked to keep alive the memory of the victims, while the government upheld a policy of neglect. In 2001, a planned widening of the Minsk Ring Road endangered the site, but activists from BPF and its youth branch organized a tent camp to protect it, and the road was ultimately diverted. Over the past several years, activists have protested the construction of entertainment and business centers next to the site.

These stories of attempted encroachments on the memorial site have shaped the perception that

the memory of political repression in Belarus is endangered. The official policy of neglect translated into disregard for Kurapaty's physical integrity. Lukashenko's sudden move in 2018 to finally build a monument provides yet another example of how the official ideological discourse appropriates elements of historical memory long associated with its political opponents.

In the struggle over nation-building strategy, Lukashenko's state ideology and the BPF's ethnonationalism remain the major alternatives. In the 1990s, the range of political parties and views was much wider: there were supporters of mono- or bilingual policy, and advocates of integrating with Russia, joining the EU, or becoming a neutral state—a sort of Eastern European Switzerland. Lukashenko's quarter-century of populist authoritarian rule has demonstrated his ability not only to adjust to changing geopolitical and economic conditions, but also to effectively dominate the identity discourse. Only the BPF's most active supporters still mount a challenge.

Beyond this rigidly polarized identity battle, Belarusian civil society shifted the focus of its activities to smaller but no less important issues, ranging from gender initiatives and ecological movements to defending the rights of tenants and people with disabilities. Without openly opposing the state and its ideology, these multiple initiatives demonstrate the potential of individuals and small groups to solve real-life problems. Implicitly, they also show the limitations of a state that considers itself the sole actor in improving social conditions.

STAYING AFLOAT?

The Belarusian path of exiting state socialism and becoming a post-Soviet nation has diverged from the prevalent scripts of postsocialist transformation in the economic sphere as well as in ideology. It has avoided the route of joining ethnonationalism with a liberal market economy and democracy, instead becoming an authoritarian state that insists on a centralized system of power and promises to preserve the welfare state.

Lukashenko's economic model took shape as a hybrid system relying on large state-owned industrial enterprises that learned to operate in a liberalized economy. Under his rule, Belarus experienced several economic crises, but recovered and continued to grow thanks to a combination of Russian support, Western loans, and Chinese investment. It has sought to overcome its dependency

on indirect subsidies from Russia by developing assets inherited from the Soviet era, including the machinery, chemical, and agriculture sectors. The information technology industry has also flourished over the past decade. The country currently ranks 13th in the world in IT outsourcing. In 2017, Belarus liberalized the sector to attract cryptocurrency trading.

While the Lukashenko regime is often criticized for its unsustainable welfare spending, many Belarusians see the money as well spent on honoring promises to preserve a socially oriented state with free education and health care. In practice, however, the number of free places at Belarusian universities is diminishing; students increasingly need to pay for higher education. And while a Bloomberg ranking credits the Belarusian health-care system with being almost as efficient as Belgium's, better-off Belarusians often resort to private providers or use the paid services of state-run hospitals rather than those provided for free.

The principle of delivering free social services remains an important part of the Belarusian state's self-image as an inheritor of the Soviet social legacy. The sustainability of this image, however, appears increasingly problematic. In 2015, seeking to cut spending on welfare, the government tried to introduce a "social parasite tax" on the unemployed. This sparked a series of mass protests in major cities across the country. According to Lukashenko, the tax was designed to "stimulate citizens to engage in labor activity and fulfill their

constitutional obligation to participate in financing state expenditures." The law was ultimately suspended and redrafted, but the episode revealed critical tensions over the state's inability to deliver on its promises and citizens' dissatisfaction with its performance.

Unlike many other post-Soviet nations that have dismissed their socialist past, the Belarusian official discourse asserts the active agency of Belarusians in Soviet achievements, which it recognizes as milestones on the route to becoming a nation. But Lukashenko's national project and the appeal of his identity discourse depend on keeping the economy afloat.

In 2018, a survey of the values of Belarusian society conducted by the IPM research center revealed that over 85 percent of citizens strongly identify with the nation-state and feel proud of their country and its achievements. More than 50 percent of Belarusians back the official economic model and the idea of a paternalist state. Yet the number of liberal-market supporters has grown from 36 percent in 2008 to 47 percent in 2018, and is even higher among those younger than 45.

Younger Belarusians clearly are not immune to the impact of globalization, and most see their country's future in market liberalism. The question is whether the state model crafted by Lukashenko will be able to accommodate the demand for liberalization—now heard not only from outsiders but also from ordinary Belarusians—without undermining its core ideological claims. ■

“The consequences of this missed opportunity are serious and will be felt in the not-so-distant future when the oil deposits have drained away.”

Azerbaijan’s Missed Opportunities

FARID GULIYEV

During its recent oil boom, Azerbaijan experienced more than a decade of fast economic growth. Between 2001 and 2011, gross domestic product grew tenfold, then peaked at \$75 billion in 2014. Predictably, though, the bubble burst: in mid-2014, plunging global commodity prices sent the economy into a deep recession. The government increased borrowing and twice devalued the currency, the manat, reducing its value by half relative to the US dollar. GDP fell to \$38 billion in 2016, down by half from its 2014 peak. By 2018, it had inched back up to nearly \$47 billion.

Azerbaijan’s oil-based growth model is lopsidedly dependent on a sector that has very few linkages to the rest of the economy. Petroleum dependency undermines export-oriented manufacturing and agriculture. Moreover, growth is not development, and not all development is inclusive or environmentally sustainable. Oil-led growth not only incurs considerable costs in terms of environmental degradation, it is also temporary, superficial, and unsustainable in the long run. Oil prices are notoriously volatile, and what may look like a boom can turn into a bust literally overnight.

However, the choices that political leaders make matter a great deal, too. Petrostates—countries that depend heavily on oil for government revenue—are more likely than others to be ruled by authoritarian regimes, and tend to pursue short-sighted macroeconomic policies that benefit the interests of their elites.

Just as it was under Russian and Soviet imperial rule, Azerbaijan’s economy has remained heavily dependent on oil and gas for export revenue. Crude oil still accounts for more than 90 percent of total exports, akin to other petrostates like Angola, Nigeria, Iraq, and Libya. Azerbaijan has missed the

chance to diversify into more sustainable industries. As with other petrostates, its recent oil boom followed the familiar pattern of cosmetic growth leading to an abrupt collapse. And oil wealth has benefited elites’ business interests more than the public at large.

Oil wealth is finite. Azerbaijan is projected to run out of oil in about a quarter-century, and more than 70 percent of total oil revenue has already been spent or consumed rather than set aside for future generations or invested in other renewable assets. The consequences of such an inefficient oil-revenue management strategy will be felt in years to come. By prioritizing construction of physical infrastructure—often accompanied by corruption, patronage, and rent-seeking—the government neglected the improvement of human capital through education and research. Human capital is the ultimate source of success in an innovation- and knowledge-driven economic model.

In the 1990s, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the war with Armenia over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh (which has remained under Armenian control since 1994) shattered Azerbaijan’s economy. The population endured a prolonged period of social and economic distress, with large-scale job losses and shortfalls in salaries and pensions. The centrifugal forces of ethnic minority separatism and an intra-elite struggle for power raised the specter of state collapse.

Heydar Aliyev, who had been the Soviet-era first secretary of Azerbaijan’s Communist Party from 1969 to 1982 after rising through the KGB, returned to power in 1993 and moved to restore order, signing a cease-fire agreement with Armenia and ethnic Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994. He installed a semi-autocratic form of rule in which nominally democratic procedures (elections, opposition parties, mass media) coexist with extreme degrees of arbitrary rule, nepotism, and coercion.

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In 1994, Aliyev closed a deal with international oil companies to develop the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli (ACG) deposit in the Caspian Sea. Multiple oil pipelines became operational beginning in the late 1990s. The biggest one came onstream in June 2006 with the launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, operated by British Petroleum.

Azerbaijan entered its second great oil boom. The previous one had begun in the second half of the nineteenth century and lasted into the early twentieth century, when Baku belonged to the Russian Empire. That was followed by ups and downs in oil production during the Soviet era.

Before Aliyev's death in 2003, the regime orchestrated a transition of presidential power to his son Ilham. The son continued down the autocratic path laid out by his father, combining the provision of patronage to regime cronies with the repression of opposition parties and a small but (at that time) still vibrant civil society. Ilham Aliyev remains in power today.

THE DUTCH AFFLICTION

Although natural resources, especially oil and gas, tend to be a curse, there are policies a government can adopt to avoid that fate, or at least to smooth out its negative symptoms. But Azerbaijan made all the typical mistakes that have plunged other oil-rich developing countries, like Venezuela and Nigeria, into crisis or even chaos.

Azerbaijan suffers from the most pernicious symptoms of the Dutch disease—the economic term used to describe an outsized expansion of nontradeable sectors, like services and construction, at the expense of agricultural crops and manufactured products that can be traded internationally. This happens due to the influx of foreign exchange (oil is traded internationally in dollars) and the appreciation of the local currency relative to the dollar.

Catering to greedy rent-seeking groups within the elite, Azerbaijan's government prioritized investment in physical infrastructure projects. Since the oil industry is capital- rather than labor-intensive, construction offered the additional advantage of generating new jobs that would provide some relief for social tensions. But once-flourishing industrial plants promoted by Soviet industrial policy, such as those producing petrochemicals in Sumgayit and household air-conditioners in Baku, were completely abandoned. Instead of leaping forward, the economy

fell backward and deindustrialized. Meanwhile, agriculture's share of GDP fell from 16 percent in 2000 to 6.2 percent in 2015, as currency appreciation dampened the competitiveness of exports.

Fiscal discipline is necessary to constrain the urge to spend oil revenue too quickly. Many oil-producing countries resort to extra-budgetary spending through national oil companies to avoid public scrutiny. There is a range of fiscal tools available to counter the insatiable appetite for rent-seeking, such as setting up a savings fund or instituting a rule as to what percentage of the annual surplus can be spent. In general, prudent fiscal policy needs to be countercyclical: setting aside a share of the surplus during a boom and drawing down this surplus during a bust. However, many commodity-dependent countries do the reverse and pursue a procyclical policy.

Azerbaijan is a good example. The government adopted a Norwegian-style state oil fund 20 years ago. The idea should have been to use it as a savings pool to stock up reserves for future generations, as the \$1 trillion Norwegian fund has done. In Norway, fiscal prudence dictates that only 4 percent of the fund's annual investment returns can be spent annually. However, Azerbaijan is not Norway, and fiscal discipline was of little concern for rent-seeking elites. No formal fiscal rule was adopted until 2019. The government went on a spending spree on large-scale infrastructure projects, which are especially vulnerable to exploitation by corrupt officials and bureaucrats. A construction boom ensued as the newly rich reinvested their profits in real-estate projects that sprang up all over Baku.

Out of a total of \$140 billion in revenue that had accrued in the state oil fund (SOFAZ) from the largest ACG deposit, the fund's reserves amounted to \$40 billion as of April 2019. Seventy percent of it—\$100 billion—had been spent in a decade, largely through transfers to the state budget to finance domestic consumption and inefficient investment.

NEGLECTED HUMAN CAPITAL

If a petrostate prioritizes investment in physical assets or consumes its oil wealth instead of investing it wisely in productive areas, future generations will suffer when the oil dries up. A better practice is to reinvest natural resources revenue into more sustainable (and renewable) forms of capital: human capital (improving the education and professional capabilities of its citizens), social capital (networks of civic engagement), and physi-

cal capital (infrastructure), in reasonably equal proportions—the so-called Hartwick rule.

Azerbaijan has allocated relatively little to education and research. The quality of schooling suffered during the postcommunist transition period and remains poor. The higher education system, in particular, is outdated and inadequate for training young people for the modern job market. Educational expenditures represent a small percentage of GDP (about 2.5 percent on average in recent years), on par with Georgia and Armenia, Azerbaijan's resource-poor neighbors, and below the regional average. The government sought to address growing concerns over declining schools by setting up a state-funded scholarship program to send students to universities abroad, mostly in Britain, Turkey, and Germany.

In health care, while the state preserved some social policies of the Soviet era, including pensions and certain medical benefits, these services remain undersupplied and rudimentary. Although the number of public and private health-care providers has increased, there is a lack of comprehensive health insurance and services at public clinics, which run on out-of-pocket payments. Most families continue to rely on informal safety nets such as borrowing from relatives and friends.

To its credit, the government has made great progress in reducing absolute levels of poverty through a targeted social-assistance program. Poverty fell from about 50 percent in 2001 to 6 percent in 2012. Regarding income inequality and wages, however, Azerbaijan's performance has been less impressive.

Income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient (where 0 signifies absolute equality and 1 stands for perfect inequality), almost doubled from its low Soviet-era level of 0.27 to 0.55 in 2002, then fell to around 0.33 in 2008, the most recent year for which data are available. These trends are similar to those in Armenia and Georgia. Given its resource advantage, Azerbaijan should have performed better at equitable distribution.

Incremental increases in real wages and pensions were offset by creeping inflation and the double currency devaluation. During the oil boom, the monthly minimum wage was raised twice, from a dismal 1.1 manat in 2000 to 105 manats in 2013. After the oil price decline, it was raised further, to 180 manats.

In June 2019, Aliyev ordered yet another minimum wage increase, to 250 manats (\$147), and a raise in the minimum monthly pension from 180 to 200 manats, beginning September 1. Other orders stipulated increases in the range of 20 to 40 percent in the wages of state sector employees, from the police and the bureaucracy to state university workers. But these apparently generous increases are deceptive.

To illustrate the fleeting nature of an oil-fueled economic "miracle," consider the following example. In 2014, before the currency devaluation took place, the average monthly salary was around 440 manats (\$564). After wages were raised, the average salary stood at the equivalent of \$309. In other words, despite nominal increases, salaries actually fell by nearly half in dollar-value terms and purchasing power.

Living standards ultimately improved very little during Azerbaijan's oil boom. Wages are now lower than in neighboring Georgia, where the average monthly salary was the equivalent of about \$396 in 2018.

CARROTS AND STICKS

When political decision makers are placed in a system without strong institutional constraints, they will tend to concentrate power as much as

possible. They may even go a step further by dismantling whatever institutions are in their way. For example, Azerbaijan amended the constitution in 2009 to remove the limit of two consecutive presidential terms, and extended the term from five to seven years in 2016.

The concentration of power in Baku occurred in two ways. The state expanded during good times with the bloating of ministries, government agencies, and quasi-state structures dependent on government subsidies. And high officials accumulated wealth via state-funded projects and turned into oligarchs, securing ownership of business empires and control of monopolies in various sectors of the economy.

Oil wealth enabled the ruling regime to strengthen its control over society with a combination of carrots, sticks, and marketing. The funds generated by the oil boom were injected into the patronage network to co-opt state-linked elites and their cronies. Large infrastructure projects were a key source of this patronage—the carrots—for elite groups.

*There are few jobs
for growing numbers
of young people.*

Oil money also reinforced the ruling regime as revenue poured into expanded budgets for the security services, which have made political opposition very difficult. Today's regime is supported by a formidable array of coercive structures—the sticks—ready to be deployed to suppress any dissent.

Much has also been spent on public relations campaigns within and outside the country. Over the past several years, Azerbaijan has hosted sports and entertainment events such as the European Games and Formula One auto racing to build public support and create the image of a successful, modern country.

At times, public relations veered into outright bribery. There is evidence that Azerbaijan resorted to “caviar diplomacy” by plying members of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly with payoffs and gifts to block a resolution critical of the government's human rights record. In 2018, the Council expelled 13 members over the affair.

TIGHTENING CIRCLE

The tycoons who made their fortunes during the oil boom include the families of Khamatdinov, Heydarov, Ziya Mammadov, and the family of the first lady, the Pashayevs, who operated businesses ranging from banking to real estate and construction. Toward the end of the boom, these oligarchic groupings were reshuffled, and some of them lost their fortunes.

As in other post-Soviet countries whose economic model can be described as state capitalism (which the consultant Ian Bremmer defines as “a system in which the state dominates markets primarily for political gain”), many businesses in Azerbaijan receive protection from senior officials or politicians against hostile takeovers. This protection is known across the region as *krysha* (the Russian word for “roof”). When the oil boom ended, several of Azerbaijan's oligarchs lost chunks of their business empires through takeovers. Their *krysha* had crumbled due to their political patrons' falling from grace.

The general belief is that businesses are now being increasingly concentrated under the umbrella of the Pashayevs' group. By squeezing the assets available, the oil crisis may have prompted Aliyev to terminate the generous sharing of rents with oligarchs who had grown too avaricious and unruly.

The president has sought to limit rent-sharing to a narrow circle of trusted family members.

Politically, this more regimented wealth dispersal has manifested itself in changes in the constitutional design and an overhaul of the executive branch. The government structure shifted away from the previous French model of semi-presidentialism, in which a prime minister coexists with the president, to an American-style executive presidency. A constitutional amendment adopted in 2016 introduced new vice presidential posts. Aliyev was quick to appoint his wife as the inaugural first vice president (who is second in the line of succession), making it clear that he has no intention of sharing power with potential rivals within or outside the regime.

In recent years, perhaps sensing the inadequacy of the old system to cope with post-oil challenges, Aliyev also appointed a number of younger, Western-educated cadres to ministerial and other senior positions. Some experts believe this signaled a transition from an oligarchic-based system to a more technocratic model, while preserving clientelistic relationships in the upper echelons of power.

NEW VOICES

In the political opposition, the older parties—the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AXCP) and *Müsavat*, both with roots in anti-Soviet dissidence and national independence movements—have been emasculated by the regime's targeted repression of their members, the co-optation of several key figures into regime structures, and internal bickering. These parties had a brief stint in power shortly after independence, from 1992 to 1993. Their rule was marked by ineffective leadership, economic decline, and military defeats that left the country near collapse.

Often characterized as fragmented, personality-driven, and old-fashioned, these traditional opposition parties lack ideological appeal to the broader electorate, especially young people. The personal appeal of AXCP leader Ali Karimli among the base supporters, who tend to be older and more conservative in values, keeps the party's brand alive. But even though these parties are small and marginalized, they are real in the sense that they have not been co-opted and keep resisting harsh repression. It is impossible for the regime to fully shut them down because of the pressure it would face from the international community. Previous crackdowns on the opposition and blatant hu-

Living standards ultimately improved very little during Azerbaijan's oil boom.

man rights violations drew Western criticism—most notably in the case of investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, who was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison in 2015, but was released in response to an international outcry after serving just a year and a half. (She is still on probation and banned from leaving the country.)

A new opposition group named REAL has risen to prominence in recent years, led by younger people who have been exposed to Western democratic and meritocratic values. It calls for democracy, the rule of law, and a competitive market economy. It has advocated a transition to a parliamentary form of government—both Georgia and Armenia switched to parliamentary systems in the past few years, and the model has a domestic precedent in the first Azerbaijan People's Republic in 1918–20. It has also demanded that Baku's mayor be elected rather than appointed by the president, and has argued for deregulation of the economy.

While such appeals are not new, hearing them articulated by fresh voices appeals to younger and more (Western) educated urbanites. Nearly half of the country's population is 29 or younger. According to the leader of REAL, Ilgar Mammadov, the party has about 100 candidates on its preliminary list for the next parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for 2020. Their average age is 36.

Mammadov, who is 49, is barred from running for office for the next six years. He was arrested in 2013 and convicted of organizing riots, though his real "crime" was standing for the civic values of democratic participation and clean governance. He spent five and a half years in prison. That only made him a more popular alternative to the current leadership, though his arrest disqualified him as a candidate for the October 2013 presidential election. (In 2018, Ilham Aliyev won a fourth term, which will last seven years thanks to the recent extension of the presidential term.)

YOUTH BULGE AHEAD

Azerbaijan's labor market is distorted: while oil and gas output accounts for the bulk of the country's GDP (40 percent), this sector employs very few people—about 1 percent of the labor force. The biggest employer is the agricultural sector, which accounts for 37 percent of the workforce, but contributes only about 5 percent of GDP. Services absorb half of the working population. However, there is strong evidence that a large portion of the workforce is employed informally, without

official contracts—26.5 percent, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), or nearly 40 percent by previous estimates—especially in construction, taxi-driving, restaurants and cafes, small-scale trading, and street shops.

According to ILO data, public sector employment fell from 33.1 percent in 2000 to 25.6 percent in 2014. But this does not include quasi-public state-owned enterprises, such as the giant national oil company SOCAR, which employed more than 50,000 workers in 2015.

Keeping people in the public sector provides jobs and allows centralized and top-down command of the wealth-distribution mechanism. Public sector employees are less likely to express dissent, since they would risk losing their jobs.

However, the looming youth bulge and the incapacity of the private sector to supply enough jobs to accommodate better-educated young people is a combination that portends trouble in the future, especially when oil stops providing enough income and social benefits for middle-class households. A youth bulge occurs when 20 percent or more of the population is in the 15–24 age group. When this cohort enters the labor market and finds limited job opportunities, the mismatch results in frustration that is often translated into political instability, as was illustrated by the youth-led Arab uprisings in 2011.

In Azerbaijan, young people from the ages of 15 to 29 constitute 23 percent of the 10 million-strong population, according to official statistics for 2019. The youth unemployment rate is officially 14 percent, but in reality it is certainly higher. Russia has provided jobs for up to 850,000 Azerbaijani labor migrants (circa 2012), or 9 percent of the total population, serving as a temporary safety valve to release some pressure on the domestic labor market. From 2016 to 2017, however, Russia enforced a more restricted policy that reduced the number of labor migrants from ex-Soviet countries. As of January 2018, the estimated number of Azerbaijani migrants living in Russia was down to about 500,000, though it subsequently rebounded somewhat. (It is difficult to estimate these numbers because some Azerbaijanis settle down and obtain Russian citizenship; others go there for temporary work.)

The Aliyev government has eased conditions for the registration of private-sector businesses in areas such as agriculture and tourism since the 2014 crisis. In 2018, the government cut taxes to encourage small businesses. But most sectors are

still under the protection of oligarchs, and such minor measures are not enough to diversify the economy. The elites understand that by encouraging more independent entrepreneurship, they risk losing control of economic assets, which in turn could jeopardize their grip on power. Confronted with this tradeoff, their preference still seems to be to retain oligarchic control, while allowing liberalization in only limited areas.

For Azerbaijan, the recent oil boom was, by and large, a missed opportunity. In the economic realm, politically connected oligarchs secured monopolies. In the political domain, oil wealth perpetuated the personalization of power and the continued dominance of the regime elites. Educa-

tion has been neglected and health care is poor, income inequality is persistent, and little progress has been made in improving social well-being for the majority of citizens. Given the minimal progress toward economic diversification so far, there are (and will be) very few jobs for growing numbers of young people—a dangerous time bomb that may explode at any time.

The consequences of this missed opportunity are serious and will be felt in the not-so-distant future when the oil deposits have drained away. High youth unemployment may lead to violent unrest, and prolonged economic stagnation could end in a societal collapse similar to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, another wayward petrostate. ■

“Despite all of its symbolic continuity, Kazakhstan is a society in transition.”

Social Change Unsettles Kazakhstan

ALIMA BISSENOVA

It is often noted that Kazakhstan was the last Soviet republic to declare its independence. Twenty-eight years later, it has become a very different society. To some extent, this has been missed by Western experts and media outlets, mainly because of their focus on the longevity of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's rule. This preoccupation with the workings of the regime has produced a kind of a freeze-frame image of Kazakhstan under unchanging and supposedly omnipotent leadership.

Beneath this seemingly still surface, tremendous changes have taken place, some of them brought about by the developmentalist policies of the state and others introduced by forces outside the regime's control. Most of these shifts can be grouped under four rubrics: migration, urbanization, Islamization, and globalization.

Even after his unexpected March 2019 announcement that he was resigning as president, Nazarbayev is still the elephant in the room, framing and influencing the country's path. He retains important positions as chair of the National Security Council and head of the ruling party Nur Otan; his status as “Leader of the Nation” is protected by legislation that gives him immunity from prosecution for life.

Nazarbayev's presence is also felt symbolically through the renaming of the capital, Astana, as Nur-Sultan, which was proclaimed soon after his resignation to honor one of the main achievements of his rule—building a new capital city to represent a new wave of Kazakh modernization. Prominent streets and sites, including the university where I work, are named in his honor as well.

Despite all of its symbolic continuity, Kazakhstan is a society in transition. First and foremost, it has changed demographically. Ethnic Kazakhs,

once a minority, now form an increasing majority of the growing population of 18.5 million. Twenty-one percent of the population comprises young people from the ages of 14 to 29. Most of them live in the cities and aspire to lead “modern” lives—with a good education, job, and housing—even if they embrace various and sometimes conflicting values and orientations.

STEPPE IN MOTION

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has experienced huge population movements. Although not directly comparable, these should be viewed against the backdrop of the catastrophes and population transfers that occurred in the same territory in the twentieth century. The disastrous impacts of collectivization and forced sedentarization—when the Soviets stopped people from practicing centuries-old forms of nomadic pastoralism and confiscated their livestock—led to a 1929–32 famine and the outmigration of Kazakhs to China, Mongolia, and neighboring Soviet republics. It was the greatest loss of life and culture in Kazakh memory.

In the post–World War II period, Kazakhstan was the only Soviet republic in which the “titular” ethnic group did not comprise a majority of the population. The demographic shift—the increase in ethnic Kazakhs and the parallel decrease in the European and Slavic populations—began in the late Soviet era, driven by a higher birth rate among Kazakhs and the Slavic people's greater disposition to migrate to other parts of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the USSR dramatically accelerated the process.

Some 3.4 million people, mainly of European and Slavic descent, have left Kazakhstan since the Soviet disintegration in 1991. Outmigration peaked in 1994, when nearly half a million people emigrated. The exodus continued until the middle of the 2000s, when more people were entering the coun-

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try (mainly ethnic Kazakhs from Mongolia, China, and the “near abroad” whose return to the homeland was subsidized by the state) than leaving, and higher birth rates guaranteed steady population growth. Due to these changes, the proportion of Russians in the population has dropped below 24 percent and continues to decrease, while the share of ethnic Kazakhs has reached 63 percent.

External migration is only half the story of demographic and territorial change in Kazakhstan. Another important factor is internal migration—from rural areas to regional cities, from small industrial towns and regional cities to the current and former capitals (Nur-Sultan and Almaty), and a general migration of the population from the south to the north. This northward movement was precipitated by the relocation of the capital to Astana in 1998. It has also been supported by programs that encourage people to move to the north from relatively overpopulated areas in the south. One such program subsidizes students from southern regions entering universities in the underpopulated northern regions and guarantees them employment after graduation.

As a result of these population movements, three big metropolitan areas have emerged—Almaty, with a population of about 1.9 million, followed by Astana (now Nur-Sultan) and Shymkent, both with over a million people. The state is also supporting the creation of metropolitan areas, or so-called agglomerations, in the western cities of Aktobe and Aktau.

POST-SOVIET CITIES

Kazakhstan’s post-Soviet urbanization is markedly different from its experience with Soviet-led development. Soviet urban planning aimed to create small and mid-level cities, clustered around industrial and sometimes military-industrial sites. Post-independence urbanization has been completely decoupled from industrialization.

Moreover, the continued expansion of Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and a few other regional centers—like Shymkent and oil-rich Atyrau and Aktau—has been occurring at the expense of decline in many other places that once thrived under the logic of Soviet industrial expansion. The effects of post-Soviet deindustrialization and restructuring have been particularly devastating in smaller urban centers, especially in towns that sprang up around steel and copper factories and mines, or were part of the Soviet military complex. Many of them are mired in economic depression.

Post-Soviet urbanization has been qualitatively different from the Soviet era in that most of the growth has been in larger cities. In 1989, only 17 percent of urban residents lived in cities with populations larger than 500,000. In 2019, 60 percent of the urban population resides in cities of that size (in descending order: Almaty, Shymkent, Nur-Sultan, Karaganda, and Aktobe).

The largely uncontrolled nature of this urbanization is another big difference from Soviet times. The Soviet authorities controlled the populations of the central cities through employment and registration requirements. One could not live in the capital of the republic, Alma-Ata (the Soviet name for Almaty), without being officially employed or registered as a student.

The less-regulated process of recent years has created urban tensions often described, stereotypically, as either ethnic or class-based cultural conflict between the newly urbanized rural migrants and longer-established urbanites. These trends have also been viewed as part of the “Kazakhification” of the cities. Formerly Russian-dominated cities like Almaty, Karaganda, and even Aktobe and Kostanai in the north have been largely “Kazakhified,” now that ethnic Kazakhs account for the majority of their populations.

Views on the effects of Kazakhification sharply diverge. According to some nationalist accounts, these cities have received a healthy injection of Kazakh traditionalism, rectifying the imbalance of Soviet times, when Slavic and other European people lived in the cities while the Kazakh populace lived in the countryside. Even though it was often proclaimed that Soviet rule brought urbanization to the steppes of Kazakhstan, these cities, by and large, were not built for Kazakhs—to live in a city, one had to leave Kazakh culture and language behind.

In other accounts, by both Kazakh and foreign writers, Kazakh traditionalism is often held responsible for all the problems ailing society—from corruption, including scandals at the highest levels of power, to quotidian forms of urban disorder such as trash in the streets and public urination. In many such accounts, whether it is blamed for these problems or seen as a problem in itself, Kazakhification is associated with the increasing visibility of what are perceived as rural and even “oriental” cultural practices in the cities. Kazakh traditions are disparaged as archaic elements that drag the country backward rather than helping it move forward on the path of modernization.

Voices decrying the rural and southern Kazakh-speaking migrants and their allegedly uncivilized habits have been particularly loud in Almaty, a former stronghold of the elitist Soviet intelligentsia. Municipal and civil society institutions are actively trying to inculcate “urbane” qualities among migrants through “urban pedagogy”—cultural programming and events in the neighborhoods seen as lacking in proper urban culture. Similar urban pedagogy initiatives have been rolled out in other major cities.

One of the proverbial horrors most often cited in laments over the perceived ruralization and orientalizing of Kazakhstan’s cities is the ritual of slaughtering sheep on Kurban Ait (Eid al-Adha), Islam’s annual Festival of the Sacrifice. Bloggers and journalists commonly disparage this tradition as unsuitable for city life. Every year, one or two eyewitness reports of sheep being slaughtered publicly in the courtyards of Almaty stir up more criticism of such “ancient” and “oriental” traditions. In a curious way, these views echo anti-Muslim attitudes in Europe and the largest Russian cities.

During the latest Kurban Ait, in August 2019, the municipality of Nur-Sultan and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (an independent body) designated seven places within and just outside the city as official sheep slaughtering sites. They assigned 50 butchers and 30 clerics to these sites to make sure that the slaughtering was conducted in an orderly fashion and in accordance with Islamic law. The Spiritual Administration organized such slaughtering sites throughout the country, providing sanitary facilities even if they did not do much to soothe the tensions between secular and religious communities.

HOUSE-PROUD

Oil is commonly portrayed as the main source of Kazakhstan’s wealth. However, in recent years the oil industry has accounted for no more than a quarter of gross domestic product, and that share has been decreasing since 2011—it is now down to 17 percent. Except for in the western part of the country, oil infrastructure is not particularly noticeable.

The industry that benefited most from the oil boom and has had a more visible impact throughout the country, creating jobs and leaving its im-

print on the cities and even the countryside, is construction. It is one of the fastest growing sectors in Kazakhstan, and in many ways has replaced former Soviet production sites in terms of its significance for the country. One could say that construction is responsible for changing not only the landscape but also people’s values—their aspirations and expectations for what normal, modern life should be like.

Among the most conspicuous changes introduced by new construction are expectations about comfortable housing and homeownership. More than two million people in Kazakhstan are now registered as owning detached family houses. Half of these houses have three or more bedrooms. Many more millions of Kazakhstanis own their apartments. This marks a notable shift from Soviet times, when most housing was assigned by the state through the workplace or distributed based on need.

With the rise of viable housing markets in booming cities, people are compelled to participate—to have their property appraised, put it on the market, and make decisions about investing, renovating, and taking out loans. When thinking about their housing options (to own or to rent, where, and how?), people constantly must make choices about their lifestyles and try to find their own balance between mobility and stability in changing economic conditions.

Many Kazakhstanis have eagerly taken to home improvement projects. In contemporary Russian, the word *remont* no longer means just “repair” or “renovation.” *Remont* is the finishing work, the decoration that is done to a house or an apartment to personalize it. Anyone with modest savings is keen to get started. The home has become a miniature but full-fledged building site, a reflection of the large-scale construction developments in Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Shymkent, and other cities—on a unit-by-unit, individual level.

HALAL CONSUMPTION

Two other processes are happening simultaneously in Kazakhstan’s cities: Islamization and the emergence of a new bourgeoisie. Both are characterized by a disciplined style of consumption, which they contrast with the reckless consumption associated with Kazakhs or Russians who have gotten rich quickly, and in the eyes of many,

Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the most globalized countries in Central Asia.

undeservingly. Muslim entrepreneurs have found a niche offering fellow Muslims the means to enjoy consumption with propriety—and avoid excess.

A notable example can be found among the fashionable coffeeshops that have proliferated in Nur-Sultan's glittering downtown. While there is a variety of international franchises—including Starbucks, of course—Café Rafe is the most successful locally owned chain. Its branches compete not just as coffeeshops but also as casual restaurants and upscale pizzerias.

There are six branches in the city, all in prime locations. The chain is owned by a family that is close to the Nazarbaevs and has long been part of the establishment. Unlike some other elites, this family has gained respectability through scrupulously legal business conduct—making sure that workers are legally employed, all taxes are paid, and all deals are transparent. They have also cultivated a reputation for responsible citizenship with charitable giving and social activism on behalf of children with disabilities from underprivileged backgrounds.

There is nothing explicitly Muslim about Café Rafe. The interior is decorated in a modern, minimalist style, with bookshelves featuring bestsellers in Russian and English. The menu consists mostly of Italian dishes and pizza, interspersed with a few other options like local chicken-noodle soup, Turkish lentil soup, and a Mongolian beef special. No alcohol is served, nor is pork on the menu.

All the branches of the café cater to a broad clientele ranging from high school students to families with children, young people and couples, and groups of men and women. Lunchtimes are always booked in advance; in the evening, it is hard to get a booth or a table near the window. The Café Rafe across from the central Keruen shopping mall downtown also houses on its second floor a women-only spa and salon that was initially established as a franchise of a salon in Dubai.

While outsiders might not notice the understated halal nature of the café until they order drinks, many Nur-Sultan citizens deliberately choose Café Rafe over other options as a “safe,” “ethical,” and inexpensive place for dining and socializing that suits their lifestyle. It projects an aura of ci-

vility, modernity, and cosmopolitanism without promoting “undesirable” habits like drinking and smoking.

Such activities are permitted in more “hipster”-style places—some upscale and others much less so—frequented by a different kind of clientele for whom casual drinking is a part of the lifestyle. For them, Nur-Sultan offers a wide variety of pubs and restaurants where alcohol is served, from nightclubs with outrageously expensive cocktails to Uzbek eateries offering cheaper vodka and beer.

These divisions between more observant Muslims and more Westernized circles in Kazakhstani society are now somewhat dimmed by the common bourgeois aspirations and consumerist lifestyles of a liberalized economy. But they still represent different visions of the role that religion should play in the public sphere and conflicting opinions on how Islamic beliefs and Kazakh traditions should manifest themselves.

In the past decade, Ramadan has again become ritually important for a significant part of the population. It is difficult to estimate even the approximate share of observant Muslims within the general, nominally Muslim population, since religious practices such as fasting and praying belong to the private domain. However,

judging by the crowds in the halal restaurants during Ramadan, more and more people have started fasting even if they do not observe other required practices of Islam, such as praying.

The growing Islamization of public places becomes particularly visible during Ramadan because of the commercialization of ritual consumption. This is one time of the year when the Muslimness of Café Rafe comes to the fore. Even many restaurants that ordinarily are not known for being halal cater to those breaking the fast every evening during Ramadan, drawn by popular demand to this segment of the market.

Previously, in the tradition of Central Asian hospitality, people who observed the fast as well as those who did not would take turns inviting friends and relatives to break the fast at their homes with the evening meal known as *auzashar*. Today, *auzashars* are often outsourced to restaurants. During Ramadan, they make up a major portion of restaurants' business. Even “not so Muslim” establishments like the Hilton and Marriot hotels try to tap into this market by offering *auzashar* buffets.

Even after his unexpected resignation, Nazarbayev is still the elephant in the room.

GLOBALIZATION FATIGUE

Toward the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the most globalized countries in Central Asia. According to UNESCO data, 89,505 students from Kazakhstan studied abroad in 2017. The state sponsors English-language education programs and many other initiatives that are meant to make Kazakhstan a part of the global knowledge economy.

Foreign investment has flowed into the country, and has been used with varying degrees of wisdom. The border and immigration regime remains relatively open to foreign specialists and migrants, which occasionally provokes local discontent.

The benefits of a globalized economy have not been equally distributed throughout the country. Globalization has met with resistance from more traditional quarters of society—such as teachers who don't like to teach in English, or parents who are weary of their children's constant mobility and wish to see them settled nearby rather than studying or working abroad. Many more people are also wary of foreign investment and resistant to the idea of working for foreigners, particularly the Chinese.

A wave of anti-Chinese protests swept the country in 2016 in response to rumors that Chinese investors might take over tracts of agricultural land. In September 2019, protests erupted against Chinese involvement in the oil sector. Despite widespread sinophobia, the country's inclusion in Chinese-led infrastructure projects has had some positive effects. A road project linking western China with Western Europe passes through Kazakhstan and has finally connected formerly isolated parts of the country, opening up vast territories for tourism and agriculture. The Chinese have also helped improve Kazakh oil-processing capacity.

Nonetheless, one could say that there is a degree of globalization fatigue in Kazakhstan, and growing conflict over different varieties of globalization—Islamic, Western, Eurasian, Chinese, and so on. So far, Kazakhstan's relative openness under a long-entrenched authoritarian regime has allowed its fast-changing society to maintain equilibrium in a fast-changing world. The question is whether the new post-Nazarbayev regime will be able to keep this balance among global forces and conflicting sectors of a more open society. ■

“[T]he entire Uighur population is now regarded as a problem in need of an aggressive solution.”

Repression and Quiet Resistance in Xinjiang

RACHEL HARRIS

A climate of terror prevails in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. This borderland is politically part of the People's Republic of China, yet culturally it is part of Central Asia. Today, its citizens face surveillance and mass detention on an unprecedented scale.

Xinjiang is home to some 12 million indigenous Turkic-speaking Muslims, primarily Uighurs but also smaller numbers of Kazakhs and others. The region has seen a rise in Islamic piety since the 1980s, very similar in form and closely related to the revival elsewhere in Central Asia, and more broadly part of a global Islamic revival.

Since 2001, Xinjiang has been in a downward spiral of government repression and violence, culminating in the 2014 declaration of a “People's War on Terror” and the introduction of punitive policies of securitization and control. These policies form part of Chinese President Xi Jinping's wider agenda to establish his personal authority—and to demonstrate absolute control over this key strategic region, in order to ensure the success of the flagship Belt and Road Initiative, China's global infrastructure investment push.

Over the course of 2017, news began to leak out revealing the construction of a huge, secretive network of detention camps, dubbed “transformation-through-education centers” or “counter-extremism training centers” in official Chinese sources. Overseas journalists and scholars began to piece together the evidence. By mid-2018, international organizations and foreign governments were raising concerns that more than a million Muslims, over 10 percent of the adult Muslim population of the region—mostly Uighurs but also Kazakhs and other ethnic groups—had been interned in the camps for indefinite periods of time without formal legal charges.

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Former detainees, teachers, and guards described a network of more than 100 newly built or greatly expanded detention facilities. Some of them are large enough to hold up to 100,000 inmates. These reports have been corroborated by careful investigation of government construction bids and satellite imagery.

INSIDE THE ZONE

Although international attention has focused on the unprecedented extent of the recent mass detentions, the camps are only the sharp end of a set of policies that have transformed the whole region into a militarized high-security zone. These new policies were introduced by Chen Quanguo, who was appointed Communist Party secretary in Xinjiang in August 2016. Chen was transferred to Xinjiang from Tibet, where he had previously developed a sophisticated network of surveillance and control in response to protests in 2008.

In Xinjiang, the same policies were applied with great speed and on a much larger scale, taking advantage of newly available surveillance technologies. Ubiquitous checkpoints at transportation hubs and at entrances to markets and shopping centers are equipped with metal detectors and facial-recognition or iris-scan machines.

One of the main mass surveillance systems used by the Xinjiang authorities is dubbed the Integrated Joint Operations Platform. This software collects massive amounts of personal information and flags residents for detention and reeducation, based on designated “signs of extremism” that extend to behavior such as “not socializing with neighbors” or “often avoids using the front door.” The system also flags the use of virtual private networks (VPNs), often used in China to access censored websites, and social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Viber.

When Uighurs and other Muslims pass through a security check (Han Chinese residents are per-

mitted to bypass them) after getting off a train or on the way to the bazaar, their faces and phones are scanned. If anything “suspicious” has been logged against them, an alarm is triggered, summoning extra police from a nearby station to interrogate and possibly detain them.

By the spring of 2018, the Uighur social media network Ündidar (WeChat) was awash with statements of passionate patriotism. Uighurs in Xinjiang replaced their former statements of piety with expressions of love for Xi and loyalty to the Communist Party. Uighur intellectuals and artists posted images of themselves against the background of the Chinese flag, alongside quotations from the Thought of Xi Jinping, freshly enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

But occasionally messages creep through the “walls of steel” surrounding Xinjiang (which Xi called for in a 2014 speech), suggesting that other sentiments lie beneath. In February 2018, one woman shared and then swiftly deleted a post lamenting, “These days many, many people I know are being taken away, every second, every minute, hour, or day, accused of all sorts of things.”

People are often detained directly in connection with their digital footprints. A foreign phone number in their contacts list, an audio recording of a Quranic recitation, or a religious image are now all counted as sufficient evidence of extremism to condemn individuals, without formal charge, to a bout of “reeducation” of unspecified length in the camps.

Surveillance techniques also include the low-tech but intrusive method of home stays. Under the “Becoming Family” policy, over a million Han Chinese government employees were mobilized to lodge uninvited with Uighur families and observe their enthusiasm for speaking in Chinese and singing patriotic songs. They also probed for suspicious activities, such as using the traditional Muslim greeting “*Assalamu alaikum*,” hiding a Quran in the home, or having friends or relatives in “sensitive” countries such as Turkey or Egypt. Other suspicious signs might include refusing a proffered cigarette or glass of beer, or hesitating to accept food that might not be halal.

By 2017, the so-called anti-religious extremism campaign had spread beyond the sphere of religion; no longer just branding everyday religious activity as terrorism, its scope had expanded still further to

target all signs of Uighur nationalist sentiment, foreign connections, or simply insufficient loyalty to the state. Official statements suggest that the entire Uighur population is now regarded as a problem in need of an aggressive solution. As one Xinjiang official commented in a speech in late 2017:

You can’t uproot all the weeds hidden among the crops in the field one by one—you need to spray chemicals to kill them all; reeducating these people is like spraying chemicals on the crops. . . .

Any kind of link with Uighurs in the diaspora, whether in Central Asia, Turkey, or the United States, is now regarded as evidence of anti-Chinese intent. Since 2017, families with relatives working or studying abroad have been warned against receiving their phone calls, which would bring a risk of detention in one of the camps. Many Uighurs living in Central Asia have been completely cut off from their relatives inside Xinjiang for over two years. Uighur students studying in North America have been detained when they return home to visit their parents. Some Uighurs in Turkey, separated

from their children, have seen them in Chinese propaganda videos shared on social media, shouting their love for the motherland in Chinese.

The campaign has been further broadened to target “two-faced” people, including

government officials, teachers, and businesspeople, who “appear to be fighting terrorism while actually sympathizing with it.” Also sucked into the detention camps have been hundreds of prominent Uighur intellectuals, writers, and artists, whose crimes—although they are not formally stated—seem to be that their work has in some way promoted Uighur language, culture, or history. Many of my own colleagues, long-term associates, and friends made over the 25 years I’ve conducted research in this region have been detained: the iconic and much-loved musicians Sanubar Tursun and Abdurehim Heyit, the popular author and scholar of Chagatay poetry Abdulqadir Jalaluddin, and my research partner Rahile Dawut, a professor of folklore at Xinjiang University—an internationally respected scholar who dedicated years of her life to documenting the rich culture of Uighur shrine pilgrimage.

Increasingly, the term “religious extremism” appears to serve as an official gloss for Uighur culture and identity, now regarded as a “virus” to be eradicated. Uighurs in exile and other commenta-

*Uighurs are required
to fully adopt Chinese
cultural identity.*

tors abroad have described the campaign as a form of cultural cleansing or erasure.

HUMAN REENGINEERING

In February 2018, Chinese media carried images of crowds of Uighur peasants waving flags to celebrate the Chinese New Year or standing next to traditional New Year's greetings they had pasted on their front doors. A year later, videos shared on social media showed that whole Uighur communities in Khotan had mobilized to celebrate the Chinese New Year by performing traditional Chinese dances in the streets.

Uighurs across Xinjiang are expected to regularly attend Chinese-language lessons, and officials suggest that speaking Uighur in public is a sign of disloyalty to the state. These new initiatives indicate that it is now no longer sufficient to reject Islam; Uighurs are required to fully adopt Chinese cultural identity. As the scholar Adrian Zenz put it, this is a project to “reengineer” Uighur society.

The children of detainees are taken to orphanages, where they are taught to regard the religion and identity of their parents as backward and dangerous. Men are detained in larger numbers than women, and the Xinjiang authorities have encouraged ethnic intermarriage, offering cash incentives to Han men willing to marry Uighur women.

By 2019, the reengineering project had extended to the innermost bodily aspects of Uighur identity by targeting halal eating practices. Radio Free Asia reported that detainees in the camps were being served pork and threatened with physical punishment and food deprivation if they refused to eat it. Chinese media reported that pork had been distributed to poor Uighur families as part of a poverty relief effort for the Chinese New Year. Such radical efforts to break down core aspects of faith and identity across the broad population are part of the regime of terror enforced by the camps.

Former detainees have provided detailed accounts of life inside the camps. Omir Bekali, a citizen of Kazakhstan, was imprisoned in 2016 while visiting his parents in Xinjiang. (He was released after seven months of detention, following Kazakh diplomatic intervention.) After being held in a detention center where he was tortured, Bekali was taken to a reeducation center that housed more than 1,000 detainees. According to his account,

There are many continuities with the Cultural Revolution era in the methods now being applied in Xinjiang.

they would wake before dawn to sing the national anthem and raise the Chinese flag. They gathered in large classrooms for history lessons in which they learned that the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang were backward and yoked in slavery under feudalism before they were liberated by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s. The detainees also studied the dangers of Islam. They were given frequent tests; those who failed were punished by being made to stand facing a wall for several hours at a time. Refusal to follow orders was punished by solitary confinement or food deprivation.

Gulbahar Jelil, another citizen of Kazakhstan who was incarcerated for over a year, gave a harrowing account of her experience in detention centers and a camp, where she lived on a starvation diet in overcrowded cells. She observed several suicides and the widespread use of psychiatric drugs to subdue inmates.

Mihrigul Tursun, a resident of Egypt, was detained while trying to visit her parents in Xinjiang.

In testimony to a US congressional committee, she said she had suffered torture and starvation, observed the deaths of several fellow inmates, and was separated from her young children, one of whom died under mysterious circumstances.

Experiences of being forced to repeat slogans and self-criticism are prominent in these accounts. Detainees are made to recite repeatedly, “We will oppose extremism, we will oppose separatism, we will oppose terrorism.” Before meals, they are required to demonstrate their gratitude to the Communist Party by chanting, “Thank the Party! Thank the Motherland! Thank President Xi!” In classes, they present self-criticisms of their own religious histories. They also criticize their fellow inmates and submit to the criticism of their peers. Learning to recite the Quran, traveling outside China (where they supposedly risked being exposed to extremist thought), wearing Muslim clothing, and praying are all treated as past transgressions. Those who confess to such actions must repeatedly recite, “We have done illegal things, but we now know better.”

The detainees who most vigorously criticize the people and things they love are rewarded, and those who refuse are punished with solitary confinement, beatings, and food deprivation. The journalist Gerry Shih observes that “the internment program aims to rewire the political think-

ing of detainees, erase their Islamic beliefs, and reshape their very identities.” Such policies are deeply rooted in the Chinese Communist Party. They were implemented on a massive scale during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.

OPPRESSIVE MUSIC

Musical performance plays a key role in the reeducation program. A leaked video clip circulated by Uighur exile networks in 2017 appears to show two rows of Uighur detainees kneeling in an empty room, holding plastic bowls, and singing the revolutionary song, “Without the Communist Party There Would Be No New China.” The Uighur intellectual Abduwali Ayup, who was assaulted and detained in 2013 in connection with his efforts to establish a Uighur-language school, explained in a Facebook post: “They are singing for [their] meal.” Such coercive practices may be described as the weaponization of music.

US forces in the Iraq war also used music in interrogations to help destroy an individual’s will, sense of self, and religious faith. In Xinjiang’s reeducation centers, although detainees are not blasted with 24-hour heavy metal, we can see an equivalent use of music to discipline and transform them—as in the coerced singing of revolutionary songs to break down the embodied habits of pious practice. These methods of coerced listening take advantage of music’s unique ability to serve simultaneously as sensory experience, site of cultural belief, and medium of cultural practice.

Musical performance featured in carefully choreographed visits to the camps organized in 2019 by the Chinese authorities for selected international media organizations. Staged in response to allegations of mass human rights abuses in Xinjiang, these visits were intended to reassure the international community that the camps were voluntary “vocational training centers” for people who had been led astray by “extremist thoughts.” Assembled inmates sang the English-language children’s song “If You’re Happy and You Know It” for the press crews. International observers highlighted the irony of this coerced display of happiness, but it was just the latest manifestation of a long-standing official practice of representing the contentment of China’s minority peoples through staged singing, dancing, and smiling.

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

As I sit in my study in London, I contemplate the fates of my Uighur friends, relatives, col-

leagues, and many interlocutors who may currently be detained in reeducation centers. (Since calling them from abroad might result in detention, I do not phone to find out if they are safe.) Are they singing praises of the party for their food? Are they chanting that they are traitors and terrorists? How long will they be subjected to this regime? Will the experience permanently change them—spiritually, mentally, and physically? Can I imagine a future for my friends in which these experiences will be overlaid by new impressions and memories, if not entirely forgotten?

In interviews, Uighurs in the diaspora have framed the experience of the mass campaign in terms of trauma. “The psychological pressure is enormous when you have to criticize yourself, denounce your thinking—your own ethnic group,” said Omir Bekali, who broke down in tears as he described the camp to Gerry Shih. “I still think about it every night, until the sun rises. I can’t sleep. The thoughts are with me all the time.”

Mihrigul Tursun reported suffering symptoms of debilitating post-traumatic stress, including nightmares and sudden bouts of anxiety. Accounts of conversations with Uighurs within China also hint at the extreme psychological pressure, pervasive fear, and depression that many people have experienced.

Uighurs in exile have reported anxiety and trauma as well, due to the difficulty of maintaining contact with loved ones, uncertainty as to their fate, feelings of guilt and personal responsibility for the detention of family members, and harassment by Chinese security forces if they choose to speak out about their experiences.

Uighur communities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are under acute pressure to stay silent. The Kyrgyz government condemned a demonstration against the Xinjiang camps as an outbreak of anti-Chinese racism, while Kazakhstan placed the human rights campaigner Serikzhan Bilal under house arrest for his attempts to publicize the detainees’ plight. Along with many other Muslim nations drawn into the Belt and Road Initiative, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have praised China’s approach to managing its Muslim minorities.

The field of trauma studies has produced psychological models for the catastrophic long-term effects of war, persecution, and violent social upheaval. Individual experiences of trauma may be transmitted within families to future generations and become part of the collective memories of

whole social groups. These are forms of cultural trauma caused by a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, or a tear in the social fabric.

Many commentators have noted the revival of the political and social techniques of China's Maoist period under Xi Jinping. The "anti-extremism campaign" in Xinjiang evokes many tropes of the Cultural Revolution, including spectacles of revolutionary fervor involving song and dance, coercive reeducation, and self-criticism. Given the continuities with the Cultural Revolution era in the methods now being applied in Xinjiang, it is worth considering the experiences of people who lived through that period and were subjected to similar coercive techniques.

The psychic damage of the Cultural Revolution was expressed in some measure in the "scar" literary movement of the 1980s, but because of the continuity of Communist rule in China—in contrast to Germany, for example, where the Holocaust legacy has been thoroughly studied and memorialized—the suffering and lasting psychological impact of the Maoist period on those who lived through it, and on subsequent generations, has been largely sidelined.

A rare collaborative project carried out in the 1990s by Chinese researchers working with German psychotherapists applied the methods developed in the field of trauma studies to a study of Cultural Revolution survivors and their children. A common source of trauma noted by interviewees was the habit of constant scrutiny of one's own thinking and actions for signs of political deviance, which had become a necessity for survival. The researchers argued that the psychological trauma of the first Cultural Revolution generation had affected the next, leading to the repetition of traumatizing behavior.

The Cultural Revolution also played out in Xinjiang, and Uighurs were subject to the extreme violence, social chaos, reeducation, and self-criticism of that period. The terror was unevenly distributed—for people in rural areas, memories of criticism sessions and violence may well be less prominent than recollections of food shortages and sickness. The Uighur Islamic revival that began as early as the 1980s was in many ways a response to the restrictions and trauma of the Maoist era. A renewal of faith and former practices served as a form of healing and transformation.

In the course of my research on the religious revival among Uighur communities in Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, I interviewed many people who had recently returned to their faith. It was often the case that childhood memories of early religious experience within the home, especially learning the forms of the daily prayer from an older relative, inspired their adoption of a pious lifestyle. Even forty years of social upheaval and secularization was not sufficient to erase these early memories and lessons in religious practice. There is little doubt that China's concerns about this Islamic revival have driven its so-called anti-extremism policies.

COLONIALIST THINKING

Both in terms of the measures being employed and the ideological justification of its actions, the Chinese state project to exert control over Xinjiang (the name means the New Dominions) and reengineer its Muslim peoples may be read as a colonial project. As the international relations scholar

Dibyesh Anand has argued of China's treatment of both Xinjiang and Tibet, the colonial mentality is about proprietorial control, dispossession, and difference; built into it is the assumption that the progressive Self has the duty and

the right to mold the violent and backward Other into its own image. Similarities abound in other colonial projects in world history.

In many cases, the imposition of colonial rule entailed an almost obsessive interest in the embodied, performative practices of subjugated peoples—rituals, songs, or dances. This suggests that colonists understood the importance of such practices for the expression and transmission of identity and memory. The Latin America scholar Diana Taylor argues that the colonizing project throughout the Americas sought to discredit autochthonous ways of preserving and communicating historical understanding. Just as Uighur religious and cultural practices are denounced as religious extremism and terrorism in China, so indigenous performance practices were condemned as devil worship under colonial rule in the Americas.

But Taylor's account also makes clear that the persistent attempts by the colonizers to erase these practices were matched by their obstinate resurgence. Such lessons from other colonial histories warn us against easy assumptions that the "anti-

Any kind of link with Uighurs in the diaspora is now regarded as evidence of anti-Chinese intent.

religious extremism campaign” in Xinjiang will succeed in permanently erasing the religious sensibilities and the cultural identity of its subjects and rewiring them as patriotic automatons.

SOUNDS OF RESISTANCE

In the crowded cell of the reeducation camp where Gulbahar Jelil was held, the detainees were under constant surveillance, and strict punishments were enforced against anyone seen performing the movements of prayer. Gulbahar recounts how women whispered to each other to “pray on the inside.” Even when inaudible, the Islamic soundscape may be reactivated—internally, repetitively—through simple acts of remembering ingrained bodily practices. Such small acts of resistance hint at the possibility of sustaining embodied memory even under the most extreme conditions of coercion and control, and foretell the inevitable failure of state projects of human reengineering.

If we imagine the Xinjiang soundscape as composed of layers of sonic memories that can be reanimated at any time, then arguably the task of the scholar is to listen through the layers—to perceive not only the dominant and immediately audible present of the soundscape, but also what has been submerged and overwritten, yet never fully erased. One scholar, Ildikó Bellér-Hann, describes the bulldozing of a Uighur graveyard in the eastern town of Qumul in 2008, part of the regional development policy of that period, and the construction of a new Muqam Heritage Center on the site. She observed the way that Uighur cultural officials entered the new building for the first time in 2009, offering a prayer to the displaced dead before they passed through the doors. The new building could not efface their memories of the former landscape; their whispered prayer served to reanimate that landscape, and perhaps to soften the memories of its violent erasure.

In 2017, as the police checks and intrusions into daily life became more intense and the penalties for possessing religious material more severe, stories circulated of streams clogged with religious books that had been hastily thrown away. People deleted apps and files containing religious material from their phones. But the new regulations, and even the new high-tech surveillance measures, could not completely erase the Islamic soundscape.

While retaining sonic memories, people also carefully hid many of their prized religious artifacts. Just as their parents or grandparents had

done during the Cultural Revolution, they buried books in their gardens, and hid their prayer mats and prayer beads in the larder or the sheep pen. In a contemporary twist, some people downloaded their digital libraries onto spare SIM cards, which they hid in dumplings and preserved in the freezer.

Far from internalizing the propaganda that depicts their culture and faith as an infectious disease that leads inexorably to terrorist violence, Uighurs are well accustomed to the periodic and transient nature of political campaigns, and they know how to attune themselves to the requirements of the present. “Five or six years ago we even dared to play Quranic recitation on the village loudspeakers. Now they say it is religious extremism,” one village woman told me in 2009.

Others respond to political persecution in ways that strengthen their religious faith. In Yantaq village, Büwi Nisakhan remembered when local government officials raided her family’s home in 2011 looking for “illegal religious books,” in an early phase of the anti-religious extremism campaign. They discovered her mother’s carefully preserved handwritten prayer book:

The government people looked at the book, and they said, “This is worse than reading the Quran. It is not acceptable because it says, if you don’t do your prayers, if you don’t follow the rules of Islam, you will die a bad death.” That’s why the administration banned it. It also says this kind of thing in the Quran, but it’s in Arabic so people can’t understand it.

Nisakhan took the officials’ assessment as a validation of the power of her religious practice. If they wanted to ban it, she reasoned, it must be worth doing. Her mother’s book was taken, but she hid her own copy and preserved the memory of ritual performance. Coercive political campaigns may temporarily silence her practice and overwrite the Islamic soundscape with new layers of sound, but they cannot fully erase it.

In this moment of crisis for the Uighur people, forms of cultural and faith-based activism in the diaspora have a crucial role to play. Uighur-language schools serving communities from Turkey to North America, new musical ensembles springing up in Europe and Australia, and initiatives in Kazakhstan to revitalize community structures through traditional gatherings—all of these serve not only as a response to collective trauma, but also as a means to preserve and strengthen collective memory and cultural identity. ■

Latvia's Russian Questions

KEVIN M. F. PLATT

Around 40 kilometers east of the Latvian city of Rēzekne, according to current maps, Europe ends and Russia begins. Nevertheless, ethnic Russians make up roughly half of Rēzekne's population of about 30,000. The Russian presence here, although it dates back centuries, is part of the lingering demographic afterimage of the Soviet era.

Russians comprise a quarter of Latvia's population; they are largely concentrated in Rēzekne, Daugavpils, and the capital city of Riga. About 12 percent of the population is made up of other non-Latvian ethnicities, many of whom speak Russian. Since Latvia gained independence in 1991, inter-ethnic relations have remained a critical social and political issue. Following the opportunistic Russian annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014, the implications of this situation snapped into focus in a new way.

At the 2014 ceremony in which he ratified the "accession" of Crimea to the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin explained that following the Soviet collapse, "the Russian people became one of the largest, if not the largest, divided peoples in the world." He also declared that "millions of Russian and Russophone people live in Ukraine, and Russia will always defend their interests by political, diplomatic, and legal means." (His list discreetly elided military means.)

Many in Latvian and European political and military circles began to ponder whether Putin's dedication to defending the interests of Russians—or, less generously formulated, to annexation of territories in which Russians reside—might extend to places like Daugavpils and Rēzekne, not to mention Riga. They also began to wonder whether Russians living along the border could be swept into civil unrest like that afflicting eastern Ukraine. Similar anxiety was felt in many other places around Russia's borders, from Latvia's neighbors Estonia and Belarus to Central Asia.

Although tensions have subsided since 2014, these questions remain open. So, too, do many

other questions relating to the Russian population of Latvia.

OF NATIONS AND NONCITIZENS

The official commemoration of the end of World War II in Latvia, designated "Europe Day," takes place on May 8—the date of similar holidays throughout Europe. On May 9 each year, large numbers of ethnic Russians gather in central Riga to celebrate the unofficial holiday of "Victory Day"—coinciding with the ever more grandiose official commemorations that take place across the border in Russia. (The distinction between these dates derives from the actual timing of the Nazi capitulation, late in the evening of May 8, 1945, hence after midnight in Moscow.)

Some bring Soviet flags to the events in Riga. Some sing the Soviet anthem (which, albeit with new words, remains that of the Russian Federation). It might seem strange that citizens of one country would sing the anthem of another. Yet many who gather to celebrate in Riga are not Latvian citizens. To be precise, they are Latvian "non-citizens," an official status that codifies their half-way belonging in this society.

During the years of Soviet occupation, large numbers of Russians and other Soviet ethnicities arrived in Latvia, radically shifting the composition of the population and contributing to a creeping process of Russification. By 1989, Latvians comprised only 52 percent of the population, having become nearly a minority in their own country. In a comprehensible yet clumsy response to this situation, in 1991 the newly independent republic granted citizenship only to those who could trace their ancestry to the interwar Latvian republic of the 1920s and 1930s, leaving some 700,000 people, or a quarter of the population, stateless.

In 1995, new legislation created the status of "noncitizen" for this group, affording them all the rights and privileges of citizenship—except for the right to vote and eligibility to serve in the military. The law on noncitizens also offered them a path to naturalization, requiring linguistic competence in Latvian, among other things. Yet large numbers,

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out of indifference or protest, declined to take that path.

At present, Latvia still includes some 200,000 noncitizens, the majority of whom are Russian, although there are many other ethnicities represented in this group as well. In the 1990s, their exclusion from political life was designed to ensure ethnic Latvian control of the state. It paved the way for policies that restored the dominance of the Latvian language and culture—for instance, in education.

None of this sat well with many local Russians. A large number of them emigrated, but many remained in Latvia, nursing a profound sense of their own victimhood. For some, perhaps, non-citizenship is a nonissue. But others—many of whom were born and raised in Latvia, and voted for Latvian independence in a landmark 1991 referendum—consider it a rankling affront and an instrument of official discrimination.

DOUBLE VISION

One reason Russians in Latvia can't forget their sense of grievance is that they are continually reminded of it on television—not Latvian TV, but Russian. As I was writing this essay on the veranda of a summerhouse I rent on the Latvian seashore, the property's Russian gardener paused to share his views on the loss of American influence in Turkey and the Middle East. In past summers, I have been subjected to lectures on American presidential campaigns, CIA meddling in Ukrainian politics, and anti-Russian discrimination in Latvia, all of them cribbed directly from Russian television. My gardener's views, and his media consumption, are typical for the majority of Latvia's Russian and Russophone population.

Since the 2016 US elections, there has been much anxiety in the United States about Russian infiltration of American media, both overt (Russia's English-language RT channel) and covert (Kremlin trolls and social media campaigns). Compare this situation with that of Latvia, where a third of the population tunes in regularly to Russian television, largely controlled by the Kremlin, as well as to Russian Internet news portals. Even Russian-language websites based in Latvia derive much of their information from Russian sources. Now that is a real cause for anxiety about foreign influence.

The situation is an outcome of both cultural politics and the economics of media. Engaging television programming is expensive to produce for any small country, and the Latvian media industry has focused on developing Latvian-language channels rather than Russian-language ones. For local Russians, the professionally produced entertainment and news of Russia's massive, well-financed television industry is irresistible. As for newspapers and news websites, in the post-Soviet era most media in Eastern Europe have come under the control of business groups that are more interested in profits and political influence than in objective reporting. Russian-language Latvian media are no exception, and many outlets are owned by entities based in Russia.

Since the annexation of Crimea, some Russian channels have been banned for brief periods, but free societies are limited in their ability to censure news. The frightening spectacle of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine also led to proposals to create new, publicly funded Russian-language media outlets, including television channels, in the Baltic region, in an effort to provide the Russian population with an alternative to Russia's pablum. Ultimately, only expansions of Russian-language radio came to pass, given the financial challenges of television.

In effect, as the gap between Russian and Western media has widened in the post-Crimea, post-truth era, Latvia's Russian speakers and Latvian speakers have come to live in separate worlds, recognizing utterly distinct sets of facts, conceptions of history, and cultural values.

A FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY

In a curious exception to this general situation, Latvia is home to one of the most robust independent Russian news sources: the Meduza Internet portal. Meduza was founded in 2014 by Galina Timchenko after she was fired from the post of editor in chief of the Russian portal Lenta, based in Moscow, as the Kremlin brought it to heel. Yet few local Russians read Meduza, which is in principle uninterested in Latvian news and primarily focused on Moscow and Muscovite readers, as Timchenko told me in a 2015 interview.

Yet Timchenko's presence is telling with regard to the complexity of local Russian society. While my gardener and the thousands who gather to

*With time,
assimilation could
heal the ethnic rift.*

The Price of Excluding the ‘Unworthy’

CATHERINE WANNER

We speak of the “deserving poor” as people who, through no fault of their own, have fallen on hard times and merit assistance to help them climb out of what surely is a temporary state. But is the same kind of generosity extended to addicts? Are they included among the deserving sick—those deemed worthy of treatment?

In *Narkomania*, anthropologist Jennifer J. Carroll explains why the plight of addiction rarely elicits the same compassion that poverty or other forms of illness do. When negative assumptions become entrenched—such as the notion that drug addicts have inflicted their suffering on themselves through insufficient self-control and discipline—this encourages equally negative suppositions about their deleterious effects on society. The belief that addicts threaten the common good through criminal and other forms of deviant behavior becomes the justification for denying them a meaningful role in society and refusing them medical treatment. They become neither the deserving poor nor the deserving sick.

But what is the price of excluding them, and who pays it? These questions are central to Carroll’s account of drug addiction, political upheaval, and citizenship in Ukraine.

The spread of HIV in Eastern Europe and Eurasia is strongly correlated with injectable drug use. One out of five drug users in Ukraine is living with HIV. Indeed, drug use is how the HIV/AIDS epidemic began in this part of the world.

At first, the epidemic mainly affected men. But it was only a matter of time before sex became the primary means of HIV transmission, now accounting for about three-quarters of all new cases. HIV infection rates among women now rival those of men. An unfortunate consequence of this is the fact that over 10 percent of all new infections occur among babies born to HIV-infected mothers.

Narkomania: Drugs, HIV, and Citizenship in Ukraine

Jennifer J. Carroll

Cornell University Press, 2019

While HIV infection rates stabilize in Western Europe and methods of treatment and prevention improve, the rates of HIV infection and death from AIDS continue to climb in Russia and Ukraine. These two countries account for about 75 percent of all infections and fatalities in Europe. The prevalence of HIV among people who use drugs in Ukraine is higher than in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This means that HIV/AIDS prevention programs in Ukraine must inevitably address drug addiction, and any harm-reduction intervention aiming to combat substance abuse must also confront the reality that many of its clients have contracted HIV.

When so much is known about the treatment of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS, why do rates continue to rise not only in Russia and Ukraine, but also in specific regions of these countries? Carroll tries to untangle these paradoxes and explain the underlying assumptions and conventions that block effective strategies to counter this epidemic among the “undeserving sick” in Ukraine.

IMAGINING ADDICTION

Another medical anthropologist, Adriana Petryna, who did fieldwork in Ukraine after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, coined the term “biological citizenship” to describe a phenomenon she observed among Ukrainians applying for medical assistance to mitigate the effects of exposure to radiation. As citizens of Ukraine, people were entitled to certain medical benefits. To collect these benefits, patients were inadvertently encouraged to see themselves as sick. Being sick became a means of access to services, subsidies, and privileges.

Petryna connected something that seems purely political—citizenship—to public health issues. Their citizenship marked these Ukrainians biologically as sick. And the diagnoses and treatments of their illnesses marked them as citizens of a particular country. Carroll makes a similar connection. However, she notes that in addition to marking citizenship on bodies, illness can also

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erase citizenship when biomedical conditions are interpreted in a certain way.

Based on her long-term ethnographic research in medication-assisted treatment clinics in Ukraine, Carroll concludes that responses to addiction go far beyond a medical diagnosis of substance-abuse disorder. Social and political norms frame attitudes and responses to addiction that become a complex she calls *narkomania*, with all the implications of an uncontrolled obsession that the term evokes. Narkomania, writes Carroll, reflects “so many social fears and anxieties that people who use drugs can be made scapegoats for just about anything. They are the prototypical example of outsiders . . . perpetual sources of weakness in the social fabric.”

Carroll argues that one of the biggest obstacles to an effective response to substance-abuse disorders and the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the prevalence of this “addiction imaginary” among so-called normal people. They assume that addiction takes away any sense of will, discipline, and autonomy.

Such responses to addiction can be highly counterproductive. The unquestioned belief that addicts lack self-control breeds yet another assumption: that all addicts lead lives of poverty and crime. Medical professionals use an intuitive assessment of whether an addict has the will to heal as a quasi-diagnostic tool to delineate those deserving of services from those who are not yet ready.

This projected lack of will becomes a justification for insisting on the need to protect “normal people” from addicts. The demand for separation leads to criminalization, prison, and forced hospitalization being widely viewed as appropriate responses to addiction. These expressions of *narkomania* make it permissible to strip addicts of their social worth and inclusion. This usually means a symbolic, if not formal, revocation of the rights and entitlements of citizenship.

After years spent working in internationally funded harm-reduction programs designed to address drug addiction, Carroll concludes that the key to replicating European success rates in a country such as Ukraine lies in healing the ill-founded misconceptions of the healthy. This proposition is both inspiring and sobering, given the possibilities it offers and how daunting the challenge is. The vicious cycle created by preconceived notions of who deserves assistance, and why addicts do not count among them, leads to a perpetuation of the marginalization and disenfranchisement that play a role in addiction to begin with. These miscon-

ceptions ultimately make effective assistance in any form much more elusive.

In my own research focused on the efforts of faith-based organizations in Ukraine to provide social services, I saw that when the provider was a nontraditional faith group, this produced hard and fast assumptions that its members were themselves likely former alcoholics and addicts. The common view was that only people without a sense of autonomy could be manipulated into conversion.

In other words, the “addiction imaginary” is not limited to an addiction to drugs but extends to other nonconforming behaviors. Converts who became “addicted to religion,” especially when it was a nontraditional religion, were accused of a similar inability to think and act independently—this was the explanation for their deviance. These moral constructs opened the door to broader social condemnation and exclusion, marginalizing minority faith groups and diminishing their members’ rights as citizens.

EXPLAINING MISFORTUNE

Social conventions that label groups of people as weak and toxic can have even more pernicious effects in times of political upheaval and violence. Carroll was in Ukraine during a series of momentous events that unfolded beginning in 2013. She illustrates how assumptions about addiction became a means to determine who was entitled to participate in political processes and a yardstick for explaining or justifying cataclysmic events.

For example, during the Maidan protests in 2013–14 against the pro-Russian policies of President Viktor Yanukovich, the demonstrators’ commitments to maintaining a nonviolent atmosphere conducive to citizen-based democratic change meant that addicts were explicitly made to feel unwelcome. People with a history of addiction were assumed to be not only criminals but also open to manipulation. They were seen as likely to be co-opted as agents provocateurs in service of the regime.

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, which followed the protests and the toppling of Yanukovich, was widely condemned by the residents of the peninsula. But Carroll observes that some locals applauded when the Russian authorities shut down internationally funded intervention programs. Death rates soared, but addicts and their clinics were no longer visible.

Finally, Carroll also notes that rumors as to why the war in eastern Ukraine started in particular

areas—and why certain cities, such as Sloviansk, featured prominently in the fighting—centered on the drug trade. Interpretations of the catastrophe and suffering afflicting the country inevitably attributed a role to drugs and to drug-addicted people. The tragedy is that the occupied regions in the east, over which a war has been fought for five years now, have some of Europe's highest rates of

drug addiction and HIV infection. They are just as high in Crimea.

Violence and war are inevitably entangled with public health crises. Jennifer Carroll's book vividly shows how those crises are made even worse when unfounded assumptions lead to the condemnation of certain groups, such as addicts, as being unworthy of assistance and inclusion. ■

August 2019

INTERNATIONAL

East Asia

Aug. 2—Japan says it is removing South Korea from a list of countries that receive preferential treatment on imports of strategic Japanese products. The move could hamper Korean technology manufacturing. Seoul vows to respond in kind, escalating tensions between 2 key US allies over unmet Korean demands for more restitution for forced labor and sexual slavery during Japan's occupation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945.

Aug. 22—South Korea says it will withdraw from a US-backed intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan. The pact, signed in 2016, facilitated exchanges of information on North Korea's nuclear weapons program, a threat to both nations.

Trade

Aug. 1—Dashing hopes for a quick end to an ongoing trade war he started, US President Donald Trump announces plans to impose a 10% tariff on \$300 billion worth of imports from China, starting Sept. 1, in addition to a 25% tariff he previously imposed on another \$250 billion in Chinese imports.

Aug. 5—China allows the value of its currency to fall below the symbolic level of 7 yuan to the US dollar, suggesting it may use a weaker currency to offset the US tariffs. The US formally accuses China of being a "currency manipulator," saying it will file a complaint with the International Monetary Fund.

Aug. 23—China announces retaliatory tariffs on \$75 billion in US goods. In response, Trump says on Twitter that he will raise the tariffs he has already imposed by 5 percentage points, and calls on US companies to stop doing business in China.

ARGENTINA

Aug. 11—President Mauricio Macri finishes 2nd in a primary election, behind left-wing Peronist challenger Alberto Fernández, who wins 48% of the vote to just 32% for the incumbent. Both candidates qualify for the final round in October, but Fernández's lead reflects the unpopularity of austerity policies implemented by Macri since he took office in 2015, and the appeal of populist promises to undo those reforms. Fernández's running mate is former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (he served as chief of staff under her predecessor and late husband, Néstor Kirchner); he denies being a vehicle for her return to power.

CHINA

Aug. 12—In an escalation of protests against Chinese threats to Hong Kong's autonomy, crowds of demonstrators shut down parts of the international airport, one of the world's largest. The protests in Hong Kong started in June over a proposed law that would have allowed the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China, but they have expanded to include demands for independence and free elections. An official in Beijing denounces the protests as "terrorism."

COLOMBIA

Aug. 29—A group of former leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the guerrilla group that signed a peace agreement with the government in 2016, releases a video announcing that they are taking up arms again. They say the state has failed to honor its promises of job training and rural development programs, and urge other disaffected former rebels

to join them. Many former guerrillas have returned to civilian life since the pact ended a civil war that lasted 5 decades and cost over 200,000 lives, but some have refused to disarm. FARC's former top leader, Rodrigo Londoño, rejects his ex-comrades' call to arms.

GUATEMALA

Aug. 11—Alejandro Giammattei, a conservative former chief of the national prison system, is elected president with 58% of the vote, defeating Sandra Torres, the wife of former President Álvaro Colom, as only 42% of eligible voters turn out. Giammattei has vowed to deploy soldiers and reinstate the death penalty to bring down crime rates.

INDIA

Aug. 5—Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government revokes Article 370 of the Constitution, which for decades has guaranteed a degree of autonomy for Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state. It will be split into 2 territories directly administered by New Delhi. The government sends in 35,000 troops and imposes extraordinary security measures for weeks after the constitutional change: a communications blackout cuts off Kashmir from the outside world, and 1,000s of Kashmiris, including political and business leaders, are reportedly detained. The actions follow the victory of Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in April–May parliamentary elections, giving him a 2nd term. Pakistan, which borders Kashmir and claims part of its territory, condemns the change in its status.

ITALY

Aug. 5—Interior Minister Matteo Salvini pushes through a new law setting heavy fines for nongovernmental organizations that bring refugees to Italy by boat without the government's approval.

Aug. 8—Salvini, leader of the right-wing League party, announces the collapse of the governing coalition it formed in 2018 with the populist 5-Star Movement.

Aug. 28—The leaders of the 5-Star Movement announce that they have reached an agreement to form a government with a bitter rival, the center-left Democratic Party, excluding Salvini and the League. They retain Giuseppe Conte as prime minister.

SUDAN

Aug. 17—After months of demonstrations and negotiations, and a June massacre of protesters by paramilitary forces, representatives of the military regime and the civilian opposition sign a power-sharing agreement that calls for elections to be held in 3 years. An interim government led by Abdalla Hamdok, an economist who has worked at the UN and other international agencies, will replace the ruling junta Sept. 1. But it will be overseen by a Sovereign Council comprising both civilian and military members, and to be led by a general for the first 21 months.

Aug. 19—The trial of former President Omar al-Bashir on corruption charges begins in Khartoum. Police testify that Bashir admitted to accepting \$90 million in payments from Saudi Arabia. The military ousted him in April in response to mass protests that began in late 2018. Bashir had seized power in a 1989 coup. The generals have refused to hand him over to the International Criminal Court to face charges of genocide and other war crimes against Sudanese civilians in the region of Darfur. ■

