

# On the causes of socialism's deconstruction

Contrary to the well-known curse “*may you live in a time of change*”, the dismantling of socialism at the end of the 1980s - beginning 1990s was in fact affirmably advertised to the former citizens of the socialist block as a positive change. The acquired freedoms of speech and expression are believed to be the key benefits of bringing socialist economies to a halt. In this article, based on recorded life stories,<sup>1</sup> I would like to discuss how contemporary citizens of two former Soviet Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), and *de jure* independent Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), perceive and understand the deconstruction of socialism.

Irina Morozova



“Poisk Novogo Myshleniya” [The Search for New Thinking] “Issyk-Kul Forum”. Painting by S. Torobekov, S. Kypychbekov, Yu. Shygaev. Image courtesy of Yu. Shygaev. Among the participants of the Forum were: Alexander King, president of the Club of Rome; American playwright Arthur Miller; American novelist James Baldwin; Russian-born English actor and writer Peter Ustinov; French writer and Nobel Laureate Claude Simon; Alvin Toffler, author of ‘Future Shock’; Cuban author Lisandro Otero; Spain’s Federico Mayor, the UNESCO General Director appointed soon after the Forum; Indian composer-musicologist Narayana Menon; Ethiopian painter Afewerk Tekle; and others.

## The hall of mirrors in historiographies

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the re-nationalisation of historical writing began in the newly independent states of Central Asia and Mongolia, and the temptation to predict future developments spurred a rush of publications re-conceptualising Central Asian modernity, the very recent socialist past was either blurred as a period of social chaos or contrasted as a birth of national awakening. Not only did the official historiographers of the newly independent states view the whole socialist period as a deviation from the *normal* development of their nations, so too did this vision prevail in the writings of many prominent Western scholars.

Our knowledge of communal life and identities in late socialist Central Asia has been greatly influenced by Cold War ideological biases about the causes of the USSR's disintegration. Political clichés and catch-all notions on ethnicity and culture have formed this lexicon with which scholars repeatedly approach the problems of late socialist transformations. It has been generally taken for granted that the Soviet secular society could not resolve ethnic conflicts and cultural tensions without systemic reform. Michael Gorbachev pronounced that idea at the meeting of the Politburo of the CC of the CPSU on 29 February 1988, which was devoted to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh: “interethnic conflict exists everywhere”, having great potential for socio-political instability, and referenced his conversation with the director of the Institute for Ethnography (USSR Academy of Science), academician Yuri Bromlei. The reference to the authorised opinion of this ethnographer helped Gorbachev to frame an all-encompassing explanation for socio-economic and political tensions in the late 1980s. The talk of “ethnic strife” in Central Asia was popularised in the Soviet and Western public domains, and special emphasis was put on ethnicity as a cause of negative long-term socio-economic consequences for Europe (when it would face migrants from the southern peripheries of the Soviet Union).

Even the publications in the regional Central Asian press in the 1980s reveal the communist party members' concern for a possible “threat” coming from nationalism and its possible alliance with Islam.<sup>2</sup> It was those available Soviet sources, upon which the Western academia had to rely to set up new trends in their studies. Research on perestroika became grounded in discussions on nationalism. Renowned scholars such as H. Carrere D'Encausse, A.A. Benningsen and S.E. Wimbush contributed to the idea that perestroika released the suppressed national feelings and identities, allowing them to rise to the surface and predominate in political and public life.

In their turn, the Western scholars' views, previously unknown and hidden, suddenly acquired special meanings of truth among Central Asian intellectuals.<sup>3</sup> These scholars promoted the vision of the “formerly oppressed ethnic and religious feelings of the Soviet Muslims”. In most works by them, Islam or Buddhism were seen as brutally oppressed religions, and Muslim intellectuals or Buddhist monks as potential rebels against the socialist state.

Later, when perestroika led to the USSR's disintegration and dismantling of socialism, democracy was intertwined with nationalism and explained as the right political system that would legitimately favour various nationalistic and religious expressions. Although the very recent Western historiography attempts to overcome those stereotypes, they become more grounded in the national historiographies of Central Asian Republics and Mongolia. This “*hall of mirrors*” is continuously reproduced as our reflections upon late socialism change under the influence of the current socio-political and cultural transformation.<sup>4</sup>

## Knowledge production in socialist Central Asia and elitist perestroika debate

Education and knowledge had been monopolised by religious and spiritual elites in Turkic-Iranian Central Asia and Buddhist Mongolia long before the establishment of the local Soviets in the 1920s. The rhetoric of national awakening served as an instrument for the struggle within those elites, in which the “holy alliance” between national intellectuals and Bolsheviks became victorious. The well-known delimitation of the Soviet Central Asia and the establishment of the MPR in 1924 became the outcomes of those processes. In the 1940s, the establishment of the Republican Academies of Science was accompanied by the launch of fundamental projects on writing the history of the Kazakh SSR, Kyrgyz SSR, etc. In the MPR, the presence of Soviet specialists contributed to the creation of new social hierarchies, within which the knowledge of the Russian language became a tool for a better career path. An academic career in the Soviet Central Asian Republics was considered to be an elitist one, and promised great social prestige.<sup>5</sup> Lucrative positions in the Academy of Science gave those people additional motivation to co-operate with the state and party authorities, rather than to oppose them in an open or hidden way.

The social significance of scriptural knowledge and education, as a sign of belonging to the upper strata of the community and possessing the most prestigious status of spiritual teacher, was also noteworthy in the MPR. Perhaps due to the extreme under-population of the country, the ties between Mongolian academia and nomenklatura were even closer than in the Soviet Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. The history books articulate that the progressive democratic change came to Mongolia via young sculptors, painters, writers and journalists, who

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## Elitist discourses and people's perceptions in contemporary Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia

formed their own social networks of urban intelligentsia in the 1980s, and held informal gatherings, which evolved into the first democratic units in 1989.<sup>6</sup>

The Soviet official discourse on perestroika was elitist and shaped by representatives of conservative and liberal wings of nomenklatura, together with their supporters among intelligentsia. The latter had certain access (more limited for the Soviet Central Asian Republics and wider for the independent MPR) to the outside world via economic and diplomatic lines and exchange, international socialist institutions and communist parties' networks. Many in the West learned to perceive perestroika through their eyes.

Gorbachev approached the liberal intelligentsia in the Central Asian Republics in search for legitimisation of the perestroika course. One of the manifestations of this alliance was the Issyk-Kul Forum held in October 1986 at the Issyk-Kul lake in Kyrgyzstan, organised by the world-famous writer from Kyrgyz SSR, Chinghiz Aitmatov. The Kyrgyzstani intelligentsia spread the word that the writer, commonly remembered above all as the initiator of the development of the Kyrgyz language, had himself initiated the event and had personally invited respectable figures of world cultural and intellectual life in order to set up and test perestroika's "new thinking".

### People's perceptions of ethnicity as the cause for socialism's deconstruction

The narratives by non-intelligentsia and non-elitist social strata – peasants, workers and low-scale officials – are very different from the intelligentsia story, but their voices do not find adequate representation. Ethnicity is imagined and interpreted by the interviewed common people as a factor of accumulated social deprivation and frustration that finally led the socialist system to collapse. The highest degree of social deprivation is fixated for people who do not reflect on social system or inequalities at all, but who focus on ethnicity as the

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key reason for their personal misfortunes. However, when confronted with the question "how and when did you learn about your ethnicity and ethnic tensions", many people say that they never thought of it during socialism and only started recognising it as a problem during perestroika, or even after 1991. Ethnic Russians in Central Asia project their present perception of Russia, as a hostile to Central Asian societies, onto the past. For the citizens of Mongolia, the unpleasant personal experiences in Russia format the perception of offence about the USSR's quick withdrawal from their country at the end of the 1980s.

The majority of the interviewed people talk of "ethnic tension" as a reason for socialism's deconstruction only if specifically asked; the manipulation and reproduction of ethnic conflicts in contemporary Central Asian states make people reluctant to talk of ethnicity as the reason for dismantling socialism. Among the preconditions for the USSR's disintegration people see not the "ethnic strife", but rather false policies or the lack of political will by the socialist leaders.

The individual and collective behavioural patterns of the respondents show that national identities promoted by contemporary states call for collectivist rhetoric and marginalise individual reflections on the past. At the focus-group in the Kazakhstani city Shymkent, after all the participants (of various ethnic background) stated that they viewed the disintegration of the USSR in a negative rather than positive light, the youngest respondent, a Kazakh man in his forties, noted: "as a Kazakh ... I think we should be independent ..." His reply made all the others reformulate their previous statements in a more affirmable nationalist way.

As long as the falsely reproduced memories and historical amnesia about the recent past are not given scholarly attention, and the concepts, with which we approach

the systemic changes of the late 1980s-beginning 1990s, are not scrutinised and methodology reflected upon, the Western scholars are likely to continue to follow-up the nationalist focus of Central Asian states' historiographies.

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### Notes

- 1 The author is grateful to VolkswagenStiftung for sponsoring the project *The History of Perestroika in Central Asia*.
- 2 Based on the content analysis of provincial Kazakhstani newspapers (*Kommunistik enbek*, *Ortalyk Kazakstan* and *Enbek tuy*, 1982) by Saltanat Orazbekova.
- 3 On the apologetic promotion of the liberal ideology of free market and democratic institutions by Central Asian scientists and intellectuals see: Amsler, S. 2009. *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia*. London and New York.
- 4 Saroyan, M. 1997. "Rethinking Islam in the Soviet Union". *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping community in the former Soviet Union*. E.W. Walker (ed.) Berkeley, pp. 15-17.
- 5 Some scholars describe how the descendants of the urban families of saints became recognised scientists, preserving due to that lineage some kind of intellectual if not spiritual authority. See: Abashin, S. 2007. *Natsionalizmy v tsentral'noi Azii. V poiskah identichnosti*. [Nationalism in Central Asia. In Search of Identity] St. Petersburg: Aleiteya, pp. 223-228; Muminov, A. 2011. *Rodoslovnoe drevo Mukhtara Auezova* [The Genealogical Tree of Mukhtar Auezov] Almaty: Zhibek Zholy.
- 6 Interview with Dr. Hulan Hashbat, Ulaanbaatar, May 2008.

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