

FIELD REPORTS FROM THE FERGHANA VALLEY, CENTRAL ASIA

By *Fatimakhon Ahmedova*

I. Enclaves May Provoke Conflicts

All individuals who are nation-conscious possess, to a greater or smaller extent, a sense of patriotism. They cannot help loving their motherland in a broad sense of this word; the nation, that part of the globe they were born in. Any democratic country puts primary value in individuals and they themselves have the right to decide where to live, or whom to trust if they find themselves in a desperate position. It is this very approach to people as upheld by international law that enables them to determine their own fates. However, very often these norms are incompatible with big politics when the latter enters the world. The Great Russian Empire being a residue of the Soviet Empire was guided by these norms; one day, it would smash to smithereens at once, and at least fifty states would form on its territory. If the peoples inhabiting these lands were allowed to determine by virtue of referendum their appurtenance to the land they live on, the world political map would look very different today. In that case a part of Kazakhstan territory might be swallowed by Russia; Abkhazia would become an independent state; Bukhara and Samarkand, Surkhan-Darya and Ferghana viloyats (regions) of Uzbekistan could all be included in the Tajik state; and Uzbekistan would possibly take hold of the Osh province of Kyrgyzstan.

One enclave in Central Asia may be equally claimed by three states – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is the whole district with the population totaling 52,000 people. Formally, the enclave currently has the status of a territorial unit of Uzbekistan. Geographically, it is located in the depth of Kyrgyzstan's territory. By the composition of its population, however, the enclave has no reference either to the first or to the second state, as over 90 percent are Tajiks. The Sokh district of Uzbekistan is included in the Ferghana viloyat. Nowadays, Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular, are close to terminating negotiations on demarcation and delimitation of state frontiers. However, disputable territories such as Sokh became a stumbling block in negotiations. For the time being two states – Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – claim the territory, though it is Tajikistan whose case would be much stronger, in part because Tajiks make up the majority of population. However, Tajikistan's present leadership comprehending the senselessness of territorial disputes has not displayed any efforts to retrieve Sokh (at least at the present stage of negotiations). It is not entirely impossible though that in the course of bilateral negotiations with Uzbekistan the issue on Sokh status may be raised. Debates continue regarding the fate of another disputed territory – Vorukh – a Tajik enclave inside the territory of Kyrgyzstan with over 20,000 inhabitants. The Kyrgyz side also acknowledges that Vorukh is Tajikistan's territory. The issue is of a different character here: where should the frontiers of Tajikistan be delineated?

The fact that democratic processes taking place in the post-Soviet space promote civil freedoms gained by the people cannot be interpreted otherwise. But at the same time, under the conditions of limited knowledge of law among the population of Central Asia, these same processes significantly destabilized the situation in the region. This became obvious especially in the first years of independence gained by the former Soviet republics. However, the effects were most evident in the Ferghana Valley, a zone densely inhabited by the three peoples – the Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. Formal state structures in the form of union republics might have been the best option for joint co-existence of the neighboring people, as no other solution has been proposed so far to relieve the plight of people. Throughout centuries the population of the Ferghana Valley never adopted such notions as frontiers since they lived supporting one another. Under present conditions the territorial claims raised by the three Central Asian states bordering on each other in the Ferghana Valley are less dangerous than the social factor of land re-allotment. The population



deprived of state support is compelled to secure livelihood. Land consequently becomes a principal source of family support. Some sustain land deficiency, others have it in surplus – this discrepancy gives rise to belligerent spirits, while some people attempt to seize empty lands in bordering areas. The trouble is that no effective mechanism exists for regulated land division at the moment. In this respect the arguments about the status of Tajik and Uzbek enclaves located on Kyrgyz territory pose a great danger.

The Uzbek enclave of Sokh is troublesome because the majority of the population there are Tajiks. A small valley, about 300 square kilometers in size, situated at the foothills of the Turkistan range and stretching along the river of the same name, became a subject of great controversy between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The information put forth by Yekaterina Adamova's group of Russian scientists in *Kommersant-Vlast* magazine (27 May 2003) asserting allegedly that "an Uzbek party leader wants the territories from his Kyrgyz colleagues in cards" is devoid of sense, inasmuch as exclusively Tajiks lived there. If such a thing ever happened, it might be only with the participation of Tajik and Kyrgyz party leaders. "In merit, the question was quite of a different virtue," says a revered old man Sayfiddin Ikromov, a Sokh area native who now resides in the Isfara district of Tajikistan. The Sokh area was in fact considered hardly accessible. In the Soviet times an appurtenance of a territory was of no importance. Since the mid-1950s the Soviets started a policy of erasing differences between nations in pursuit of a communist society with common national property and the unified Soviet people. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan facing problems with the delivery of national economy freight through mountainous overpasses might have refused this territory voluntarily as it was much easier to govern it from Ferghana viloyat of Uzbekistan than from Leninabad viloyat of Tajikistan or Osh province of Kyrgyzstan. The only claim of the Kyrgyz party based on certain grounds, as the Tajik historian Abdumannon Raupov argues, is that the land in question is surrounded with steppes following the formal division of Soviet territories. "Few Kyrgyz families which led a nomadic way of life up to the mid-20th century can be called native inhabitants of the valleys where Tajiks, and later on Uzbeks, representatives of Turkic peoples mixed with local residents, settled many centuries ago. As for Sokh," the scientist continues, "even nowadays local Tajiks preserve their ethnoses and avoid mixing with other nations."

The assertion of the Tajik scientist is upheld by the Batken State University professor Bektash Usmanov who recognizes that the Kyrgyz adopted agriculture (already developed in Central Asia chiefly along rivers and lakes) from Tajiks who are more ancient than other peoples of the region. In terms of road infrastructure, the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan is itself practically isolated and transport arteries going through the territories of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have strategic importance for this territory. Quite understandable is the position of the Kyrgyz government, which avails itself skillfully of the controversy over the territories; in the negotiations they try to persuade their neighbors to make concessions, which would allow solving the problems of economic and political character.

Uzbekistan, which currently administers this region, strives to obtain a transport corridor from Kyrgyzstan in order to connect Sokh area with the rest of the country. Russian scientist titles the information in *Kommersant-Vlast* as "Land Controversies as the 'Most Ancient' Ones in Human History." The alleged assertion that the miraculous nature of the Ferghana Valley – oases scattered along the banks of local mountainous rivers, and fertility of its lands – might serve as the reason for internecine wars is wrong as these conflicts never bore ethnic character. Moreover, the Kyrgyz, being few in numbers, may not have been involved in such clashes. Drawing on historic materials, all three native peoples inhabiting the Ferghana Valley jointly challenged outside aggressors. The land controversy is engendered by the last Soviet epoch. It results from demographic changes caused by a high birth rate in Central Asian region, resettlements to more convenient places for residency, and development of interest in agriculture.

It was this very factor that brought about the first ethnic conflicts on the territory of Central Asia at the end of the 1980s. One of them refers to the events evolving near another enclave of the Ferghana Valley belonging to Tajikistan. A small territory of less than one hundred square kilometers in the northeast of Tajikistan is singled out on the territory of Batken province of Kyrgyzstan as an enclave on the modern political map of the world. About one hundred families scattered along the foothills of the Turkistan range in the mid-1950s testify to the fact that this ethnos has been represented on this territory. But practically all of them were citizens of Tajikistan.

Yulchiboy Tuychiyev, a resident of the largest Kyrgyz populated settlement – that of Samarkandek rural board – lived previously in Chorkuh village, the Isfara district of Tajikistan, where he attended Tajik school. He remembers well how his forefathers worked in a Tajik collective farm and got their salaries there. Then in the mid-1970s they were lured by a Kyrgyz state farm suffering from deficiency of hands. More than half of the population residing in his village came from outside. This is just a contingent that nowadays inhabits chiefly Aksay village, not far from Vorukh Tajik enclave. Local residents do not deny that the borders of the two republics were never determined here. And controversies arise from the shortage of land, which does not suffice the growing Tajik population. The Kyrgyz have enough land considering the fact that the Kyrgyz authorities try to convince local residents to accept a unilateral scheme. The only thing they complain about is roads crossing the Tajik territory. The Vorukh Tajik enclave, on the way to which the Aksay Kyrgyz village grew, confronts the same problem. The enclave population, which for the last three decades increased almost thrice, began to reclaim actively the empty surrounding lands. The conventional borders determined by the powers of the USSR turned out to be inadequate in order for the population to build houses and engage in traditional agriculture. The improvident policy of the Soviet leadership did not take into account demographic changes and determined the boundaries for local Tajiks only along irrigative lands. The names of many mountainous massifs are words of exclusive Tajik origin, offering proof that Tajiks were old residents of the entire northern belt of the Turkistan range even before the USSR was founded. “Not a single ancient archeological item dug out here confirms any other settled way of life except Tajiks,” states Abdumannon Raupov who has worked on excavations in this region for many years. Mountainous paths stretch from the north to the south reaching the Qarotegin Valley, the population of Sokh and a part of Isfara district related in dialect and traditions with the representatives of southern Tajikistan – these are the factors offering evidence this territory was central to the region inhabited by Tajiks. Therefore, claims for land on the part of nomadic peoples who preferred the settled way of life only in the middle of the past century appear groundless.

However, in spite of the entire complexity of the situation, the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan behave rather cautiously. They try to find an optimal option settling the problem at the negotiating table. One factor brings them closer to each other: both republics depend on Uzbekistan in a number of issues. In particular, Uzbekistan is endowed with road infrastructure and power stations. Under such conditions two former Soviet republics more oriented on Russia seek possible ways out of the impasse. Tajikistan needs a road to Russia without having to cross Uzbekistan. There are possibilities. One of them is the Kyrgyz territory, where they intend to build a highway connecting the republic with Russia through Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan needs road infrastructure not only for having access to the sea, but also for maintaining the activity of its own territories. Hence, it is very important for both states to preserve good neighborly relations aggravated sometimes just in the zone of Vorukh Tajik enclave and in a number of other settlements along the Turkistan range. And it is not fortuitous that one of the rounds of intergovernmental talks at the beginning of 2003 was held in Isfara, the administrative center of the most violent conflict zone, with the Vorukh enclave being subordinated to it. An optimal solution of the land dispute may be far away, but the

commission's recently passed resolutions have considerably removed tension in the border areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is unknown yet what subsequent decisions may be taken in regard to the status of disputed lands, but frontiers need to be determined as they are one of the most important attributes of statehood. Heads of states, parliaments of the countries, and their governments are to decide what kinds of frontiers they are bound to be. Meanwhile, the majority of the population – both Kyrgyzs and Tajiks – believe that the frontiers in these areas should remain as transparent and conventional as they were in the Soviet times. Land utilization and watershed normative provisions should be mapped out, which would remove any tensions in the relations between the two neighboring peoples.

II. Cross-border Trade as a Form of Economic Cooperation

The eye of an interested observer meets with a virtually identical scene every day – a long line of people desiring to cross the frontier winds on either side of the border since the early morning. The inhabitants of Uzbekistan wait to enter Tajikistan and Tajiks the other way round. Most of these people are petty traders who strive to support their families. The more adroit traders contrive not only to ensure comfortable existence, but also to launch their own businesses and subsequently to attain a more venerable position as business people.

Pursuant to the Intergovernmental Agreement introducing a new visa regime, the citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in borderland districts have a right of unrestricted transit of the frontier and sojourn on a contiguous territory for five consequent days and nights, while pensioners are entitled to even more rights. In spite of these new limitations the life in borderland districts practically has not changed. The new visa regime has a dual effect: it brings some wherewithal, while simultaneously inducing the growth of corruption and bribery among the militia, border guards, customhouse employees and sanitary-epidemiological service. New limitations were imposed on export and import of certain kinds of goods in order to protect the country's consumer market, but this was always followed by reciprocal measures aggravating interstate relations. Planned to achieve some sort of efficacy, the consequences of these limitations have turned out to be much worse. Now the authorities appear unable to guarantee basic order in both states. The result is a situation in which money is the key to everything. As people conveyed goods over centuries, they continue to do so in no smaller amounts, and illegally to gain profit. Through the Yakkaterak crossing post alone, on the borderline of Konibodom area (Tajikistan), they transport daily between 40 and 50 tons of foodstuffs to either side. These goods are mostly sugar, flour, butter, vegetables, fruits and other types of food. A number of enterprises have emerged with their own carts, mules, auto transport and hired workers. And all those seeking substantial achievements in this business must have capital at their disposal and master well the rules of frontier transit privately established by the customhouses, militia, and border guards of the two states. You are lucky if your connections are strong: success is then ensured. It is about the most enterprising traders. But ordinary people suffer from paying illegitimate borderline extortions. And official markets for cross-border trade remained in the planning stage only, while these markets have been functioning illicitly. Will the zones of cross-border trade adopted at a recent meeting of the leaders of Sughd Viloyat (region) and Batken region stimulate the process?

The Ferghana Valley, which experts predict to be the next zone of considerable economic decline, might serve as an example of a real free economic zone that politicians only dream to create. Nowhere else on the former Soviet territory is there a zone where friendship ties are so strong between the peoples of several new states living in proximity and having found themselves in disagreement with the will of their politicians. State leaders impose obstacles but something quite different is important for ordinary people – i.e., to find a means of support for their families. Frontiers are being closed, but people still get through any

cordons, continue to trade and cooperate as is evident from the extensive economic relations between the Tajik, the Uzbek and the Kyrgyz peoples in the borderland. A common religion, similar mentality, customs and traditions characterize the region where Tajiks, Uzbeks and Kyrgyzs live in such proximity. Scientific research analyzing values of the peoples in the three states points to its usefulness for strengthening mutual respect and confidence, which might in turn reduce tensions not only in the Ferghana valley but all over Central Asia as well. One can daringly assert that where the peoples build their relations on trade and close economic ties, there can be no wars unless extremists provoke them. Protection of family interests, ability to earn, to be engaged in business, commercial-economic relations and friendly contacts – these factors enhance peace and stability. Instead, politicians sometimes regrettably provoke one another to adopt retaliatory steps in the name of the so-called national interests and disunite peoples. But they fail to admit that this is the most unfortunate way of development. Meanwhile, it is observed that Central Asia has experienced a certain temperature rise in intergovernmental relations since 2001. The primary reason is probably a realization that there is no alternative to peace and friendship. If, on the one hand, the fear of another drought was a factor that led Central Asian countries to the conclusion that they must work together, it is also believed that Russia, especially since President Putin's rise to power, has contributed to the building of trust and respect between CIS states.

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