



# “Nobody has ever asked about young people’s opinions”

**Young people’s perspectives on identity, exclusion and the prospects for a peaceful future in Central Asia**



March 2012

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## Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort between young researchers from Central Asia and Saferworld. The final report was compiled and written by Maija Paasiaro, Katya Quinn-Judge and Mirajidin Arynov. Dinara Abjamilova, Mirajidin Arynov, Katya Quinn-Judge, Eraj Sodatsairov, Gulshod Sharipova, Iroda Bobojonova, Omaid Mahmoodi, Sherzod Mukhamadiev, Gulasal Kamolova and an anonymous Turkmenistani researcher conducted or contributed to the research and analysis of the findings. Deepthi Wickremasinghe copy-edited the report. The research team is grateful to Johannes Olschner for providing valuable desk research assistance and to other Saferworld staff and Teresa Dumasy of Conciliation Resources for comments and suggestions during the editing process.

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## The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project

The People's Peacemaking Perspectives project is a joint initiative implemented by Conciliation Resources and Saferworld and financed under the European Commission's Instrument for Stability. The project provides European Union institutions with analysis and recommendations based on the opinions and experiences of local people in a range of countries and regions affected by fragility and violent conflict.

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## Research locations in Central Asia



This map is intended for illustrative purposes only. Borders, names and other features are presented according to common practice in this region. Saferworld takes no position on whether this representation is legally or politically valid.

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# Executive summary

**THE POST-SOVIET GENERATION** in Central Asia represents an important demographic, both in terms of its size and as a potential driver of conflict, or of peaceful development, in the region. Central Asian countries have a high proportion of under 24-year-olds. This generation is now coming of age and is often at the forefront of religious, political and social struggles. The group has grown up and matured in a completely different political and historical context to previous generations: today's Central Asian youth have no common Soviet identity, have been educated in an impoverished and deteriorating education system, have limited economic prospects and have been raised in an environment of nation-building and religious revival.

This analysis investigates the perceptions, attitudes and aspirations of young people, in order to understand what kind of role they play currently, and could potentially play in the future, in the development of Central Asia. It is based on a participatory conflict analysis and presents the perceptions and voices of young people from different parts of the region. Young researchers and civil society activists from Central Asia conducted the research among young people from the region, using interactive and participatory research methods developed and designed by Saferworld and local researchers.

The research focuses on what might be considered the geographic centre of Central Asia – the countries which share the Ferghana Valley – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Additional research was conducted in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, which allowed us to identify common themes that are present across the region, as well as key differences between different states and communities.

It paints a mixed picture. Many young people in the areas surveyed feel largely excluded from politics, the economy, the legal system, protection by law enforcement, quality public services and decision making processes at the local, family and even personal level. This feeling manifests itself through behaviours such as emigration or regular migration, criminality, affiliation with extremist movements and participation in ethnic violence. However, a number of young people are also finding ways to work creatively within – or around – existing structures, to achieve their goals peacefully and constructively within their home countries.

The research findings are arranged under three themes:

- Young people's relationships to national and communal identities. How young people in young states, with distinct ethnic, religious and regional groups, identify themselves, to what extent they feel included or excluded by their governments' attempts to create a common national identity and what young people's visions are for the future of their states.

- Young people's perceptions and experiences of democratic governance, and the barriers to their participation, and to what extent young people in Central Asia are being equipped to contribute to stable and democratic societies in the future.
- Common issues which young people identified as contributing to tensions and insecurity within their states and societies; how the responses of internal and external powers to these concerns are affecting young people's relationships with each other, the state and the international community; and how young people feel they could contribute to their resolution.

### **Young people's relationships to national and communal identities**

The findings show a strong trend among young people from across Central Asia to emphasise 'communal' identities, as being identities shared with members of the communities in which they lived. These communal identities are primarily centred on ethnicity, but also frequently involve concepts such as religious affiliation and place of birth. For many research participants, a sense of national identity, based on citizenship of a particular nation state, was at best, secondary to their communal identity.

With a few exceptions, young people's attitudes towards those with different communal identities to their own were overwhelmingly negative. The most common attitudes were suspicion, prejudice and apprehension. Young people gave varied reasons for why they felt so strongly, and negatively, about people with different communal identities to their own. A common theme throughout the region was references to a shared violent history, giving rise to fear and apprehension in the present day.

Nevertheless, there were some rare expressions of genuine tolerance and friendship towards young people with different communal identities. In some areas, there appeared to be a tradition of tolerance and acceptance of those with different communal identities.

A strong theme across the region was a blurring of the concepts of state and ethnicity. This was particularly evident when young people were asked to discuss attitudes towards people with different communal identities to their own.

Representatives of ethnic minorities in locations across the region expressed a sense of being excluded from civic involvement because of their ethnicity. In some parts of the region, disengagement from central authorities – from the public sphere – and dominance of informal structures, provided an alternative survival strategy for minorities.

### **Young people's engagement with democratic governance**

Young people's engagement with democratic governance across Central Asia appears to be limited and very few young people had any experience of being involved in decision making processes.

Some research participants showed a poor understanding and appreciation of democratic institutions and how they function, and not all the young people seemed to understand the definition of democracy.

It would appear that the education system is not equipping many young people with the tools to contribute to innovative and constructive solutions to their societies' ills. While participants in several focus groups spoke of their admiration of good teachers and acknowledged the value of education, comments suggested that for many, their educational experience involved learning by rote.

Furthermore, rarely did the young research participants appear to have access to the variety of information sources that would likely allow them to develop informed, nuanced views on regional, national, or even local concerns. Some urban youth

reported engaging positively with news media and suggested this was due chiefly to superior Internet access, however, rural youth were much more likely to engage with news media solely through television, where their reception ranged from a single official channel to a modest range of domestic and Russian channels. While some spoke of their trust for domestic or, more frequently, Russian news channels, others presented themselves as caught in a cycle of being ill-informed and disillusioned with politics and the state.

Young people also identified the attitudes of older generations as a barrier to their participation in decision making. Some claimed that, in the eyes of elders, especially in Afghanistan and in some rural areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, young people are not considered mature enough to make a contribution.

In addition, the participation of young women in any form of government was seen as culturally unacceptable, particularly in rural areas.

Respondents suggested that the region's youth institutions did not alleviate the obstacles to youth participation in democratic processes, but in fact, reinforced them. Where mentioned, few perceived these institutions as forums through which their grievances could be addressed.

Some young respondents spoke positively about participating in skills building activities organised by international organisations and the non-governmental sector, however, only a limited numbers of young people can be exposed to these influences, and these will generally be city dwellers. When rural youth had a chance to get involved in decision making, it was more likely to be through their own initiative.

Throughout the research activities conducted with young people, it became clear that the majority are not satisfied with the current state of affairs, whether that be the economic situation, education system, political system or access to luxury goods.

The vast majority of young people want change, but they express their visions for how to obtain that change in different ways. For many, the answer seemed to lie in emigration or periodic migration. Other young Central Asians across the region expressed anger and frustration and, in some cases, a willingness to use violence to achieve their aims.

### **Common issues identified by young people as contributing to tensions and insecurity within their states and societies**

In numerous research locations, young people suggested they felt oppressed by corruption, economic exclusion and the absence of the rule of law. Some went so far as to call this oppression an experience of violence. In many cases, young people have suffered the effects of corruption and economic exclusion since childhood, due to the economic crisis of the 1990s and concurrent instability in the region.

The educational system is another area in which economic strain compromises young people's values and narrows their opportunities. In a number of research locations, research participants suggested that low salaries for teachers and learning by rote conspired to create a negative environment in many schools. Money and corruption were also mentioned as pervading adverse factors in primary, secondary and higher educational establishments. For many students who cannot pay, this can mean simply giving up on higher education.

Many participants appeared to view law enforcement agencies as threats to security, rather than providers of security and stories of unlawful arrests, planting of evidence, beatings and even torture, were widespread. Some depicted abuses by law enforcement agencies as a regular feature of life in their community.

The spectre of Islamic terrorism appears to play a complex role in the relationship between young people and the state/police. Years of financial strain within the families



and a resulting lack of adult guidance were often cited as contributing factors to the susceptibility of young people to extreme views – causes also cited as contributing to other forms of violence observed among youth in Central Asia.

Yet, while alleged repression and abuses by law enforcement agencies may be earning radical movements the sympathies – or at least, the understanding – of some young people, for others, it seems the opposite is happening. Numerous respondents cited religious radicalism as the most significant – and sometimes only – threat to their region and showed minimal ability to relate to their fundamentalist peers. It seems that dialogue must take place between these two groups, in order to de-escalate their growing animosity, but any attempts at dialogue will be an uphill struggle.

Employment too, often appeared to be the key factor in whether or not a young person felt any attachment to the state. Being unemployed can mean being unable to participate fully in the institution on which culture is based – the family – and for some that may mean leaving their native country. The unemployed respondents suggested that their anger was only partially attributable to their inability to support themselves. Largely, their anger sprung from a sense that the state was complicit in the large gap between rich and poor.

Rural research participants were just as likely, if not more likely than their urban peers, to identify education and peace as key priorities. Yet those in rural areas with unreliable, or in some cases, nearly non-existent infrastructure were more acutely affected by government corruption, and consequently more likely to harbour resentment towards the state. Conscription added to the sense that young rural dwellers were being forced to serve a state that many felt did not serve them in their day-to-day lives and strengthened anti-state sentiments among rural youth.

A small number of participants spoke of the importance of internationally-funded/administered initiatives, which work directly with young people in order to enhance their understanding of democratic principles and civic involvement, either through promoting voluntary activities, or organising seminars where young people from different countries could meet and share experiences. Nevertheless, some research participants in Uzbekistan suggested that international communities could not help – either in tackling corruption and economic exclusion, or in addressing the violence that these phenomena helped to bring about.

A number of respondents associated democracy with conditions that they saw as desirable, but lacking in their countries and said the current environment in their countries represented a perversion of democracy. However, a worrying number of youth appeared to associate democracy, to varying degrees, with afflictions that they associated with the West, or with the invasion of western values.

The report makes a number of recommendations to national governments of Central Asian states and to international donors and governments providing bilateral support to Central Asian countries. These include suggestions for priorities and approaches, on nation-building and institution-building; on how an enabling environment for the active participation of young people in the political process might be created; on how to build young people's skills in democratic practices; on strengthening social cohesion through cross community and cross-generational dialogue; and on combating extremism.

# 1

## Introduction

**THE POST-SOVIET GENERATION** in Central Asia represents an important demographic, both in terms of its size and as a potential driver of conflict, or of peaceful development, in the region. Central Asian countries have a high proportion of under 24-year-olds. In 2010, this ranged from 45.1 percent of Kazakhstan's population to 60.5 percent of Tajikistan's population.<sup>1</sup> This generation is now coming of age and is often at the forefront of religious, political and social struggles. The group has grown up and matured in a completely different political and historical context to previous generations: today's Central Asian youth have no common Soviet identity, have been educated in an impoverished and deteriorating education system, have limited economic prospects and have been raised in an environment of nation-building and religious revival. The role of young people in violent events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and the widespread perception in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that young people are susceptible to religious radicalisation, have raised awareness of the importance of youth to conflict dynamics in recent years and has led us to ask the question: what can be done to ensure that young people in Central Asia are able and willing to contribute to peaceful development of the region in the future?

This analysis takes young people as its starting point, investigating their perceptions, attitudes and aspirations, in order to understand what kind of role they play currently, and could potentially play in the future, in the development of Central Asia. It investigates whether today's youth in Central Asia are drivers for peace and prosperity, or for violence and instability. The aim is to provide international policy makers with recommendations about what can be done (and what young people themselves feel can be done) to ensure that young people contribute towards the peaceful development of the region.

The report presents the perceptions and voices of young people from different parts of the region. Young researchers and civil society activists from Central Asia conducted the research among young people from the region. Saferworld worked with local researchers to develop and design interactive and participatory research methods, which would provide opportunities for young people to analyse and reflect on their own context, perceptions and opinions. Young researchers then worked with local civil society activists to carry out the research. The researchers used different avenues of access to young people in order to ensure that a wider range of young people's views were heard than in is often the case in small studies which can tend to rely on the same voices. In total, across six target countries, there were 48 focus group discussions, which involved interactive, participatory and creative activities; 51 in-depth individual and group interviews; and 73 key informant interviews. By describing and analysing youth perspectives, this report aims to bring policy makers closer to young people's

<sup>1</sup> See annex 1.

understanding of the causes, actors and dynamics of conflicts. It presents young people's contribution to defining peacebuilding agendas and their understanding of what is possible and what is needed. This is a perspective which is rarely captured and which is seldom made accessible to policy makers.

The research focuses on what might be considered the geographic centre of Central Asia – the countries which share the Ferghana Valley – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Additional research was conducted in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, which allowed us to identify common themes that are present across the region, as well as key differences between different states and communities. The inclusion of Afghanistan into a study on Post-Soviet Central Asia may be unconventional, but its physical and ethno-cultural proximity allowed the research team to reflect on the commonalities across the inter-connected region. Often, findings show that Afghan youth face more virulent forms of the problems present in the other target countries. The research does not purport to cover the entire Central Asia region, or provide national analyses of all target countries, but rather provides a snapshot of a range of different youth perspectives from Central Asia by putting several locations 'under the microscope' and investigating in depth the perceptions, dynamics and outlooks which form young people's opinions. The map at the front of the report gives an overview of the field research locations.

Rather than providing individual country analyses, the report is structured thematically and compares a range of youth perspectives from different parts of Central Asia.

The second chapter of the report examines young people's relationships to national and communal identities<sup>2</sup> and what this can tell us about potential conflict. The chapter examines how young people in young states, with distinct ethnic, religious and regional groups, identify themselves, to what extent they feel included or excluded by their governments' attempts to create a common national identity and what young people's visions are for the future of their states.

The third chapter examines young people's perceptions and experiences of democratic governance and the barriers to young people's participation. It asks to what extent young people in Central Asia are being equipped to contribute to stable and democratic societies in the future.

The fourth chapter looks at some of the most common issues which young people identified as contributing to tensions and insecurity within their states and societies: corruption, economic exclusion and forms of extremism/violence. It asks how the responses of both internal and external powers to these concerns are contributing to the problem; how these responses are affecting young people's relationships with each other, the state and the international community; and how young people feel they could contribute to their resolution.

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<sup>2</sup> By national identity, this report refers to the identity based on the citizenship of a certain state, which is sometimes also referred to as civic identity. By communal identities, the report refers to identities shared with members of the communities in which people live. These communal identities primarily centre on ethnicity, but also frequently involve concepts such as religious affiliation and place of birth.

# 2

## Young people and identity

**THE GENERATION OF CENTRAL ASIANS** born during the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath has grown up amid an unprecedented period of change in national, regional and ethnic identities, as the newly independent states, their leaders and citizens have endeavoured to redefine their identities.

This chapter seeks to understand the ways in which young people in these young states, with their diverse and distinct ethnic, religious and regional groups, now identify themselves. It investigates how young people relate and respond to those whom they perceive to have different identities to their own. It looks at how identity impacts on young people's feelings of inclusion or exclusion, particularly in light of governments' attempts at creating common national identities, and how concepts of identity shape young people's visions for the future of their countries.

### Loyalty to communal identities

When asked to describe and analyse their identities, there was a strong trend among young people from across Central Asia to emphasise 'communal' identities, being identities shared with members of the communities in which they lived. These communal identities were primarily centred on ethnicity, but also frequently involved concepts such as religious affiliation and place of birth.

*"Most of the young generation, both male and female, identify themselves by their ethnic identity and are really proud of their ethnic identity." ... "I am very thankful to have been born an ethnic Pashtun."*

A Pashtun university student from Kabul, in Afghanistan

*"First and foremost, I am [ethnic] Kyrgyz. My parents are [ethnic] Kyrgyz. My grandparents and their grand-grandparents were also [ethnic] Kyrgyz. That is why my heart beats as an [ethnic] Kyrgyz and I have pure [ethnic] Kyrgyz blood. I cannot change my blood and heart."*

A 22-year-old ethnic Kyrgyz male from Murghab, in Tajikistan

A sense of national identity, based on citizenship of a particular nation state, was described by many research participants as being, at best, secondary to their communal identity.

*“For me being an Ismailia is the foundation of my identity. Whatever I am now is informed by my Ismaili identity. ... I identify myself as a Tajik not for myself, but for others.”*

A 20-year-old ethnic Ismaili woman from Murghab, in Tajikistan

*“Young people don't respect their national identity, but they live with their street identity [an identity based on the immediate neighbourhood in which a person lives].”*

A community leader in Khorog, Tajikistan

This sense of national identity being subordinate to communal identity was strongest in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but was nevertheless present across the region.

*“Being Afghan is not important for us. What is important is what kind of Afghan we are – our language and cultural characteristics.”*

A university student in Kabul, Afghanistan

### Suspicion and prejudice towards those perceived to have different identities

With a few exceptions, young people's attitudes towards those with different communal identities to their own were overwhelmingly negative. The most common attitudes were suspicion, prejudice and apprehension. For example, one young ethnic Tajik from Murghab described how, compared to the older generation,

*“We young people don't co-operate or build friendship with our Kyrgyz peers [living in Murghab]. They don't approach us and we don't go to them. I only know my neighbours and we often keep it at the ‘Salomalek’ [a common greeting] level ... Sometimes I want to mingle with them, but it is hard when you feel different.”*

A 19-year-old male from Murghab, in Tajikistan

A young Tajik woman in Afghanistan described how,

*“We don't need to have friendships with them [young people of non-Tajik ethnicity]. In fact, if we do, it will diminish our pride, as they are of less value.”*

Focus group in Kabul, September 2011

The attitudes of young people in Uzbekistan seemed to buck this trend. Although the young people interviewed in Uzbekistan defined themselves by way of communal identities, which were predominantly ethnic identities, they spoke almost unanimously of there being ethnic unity in their country. As will be seen elsewhere in this chapter, the reality of the situation in Uzbekistan often fails to live up to these claims. Due to the restrictions on conducting research in Uzbekistan, it was only possible to carry out a comparatively small number of interviews – and all interviewees had at least one ethnic Uzbek parent. It is possible that the young researchers would have come across conflicting views if they had been able to look into the issue more thoroughly, yet the fact remains that the limited findings gave room for cautious optimism.

Elsewhere in Central Asia, young people recognised that their negative attitudes informed the way in which they treated people with different communal identities to their own. A youth worker in Baghlan, in Afghanistan, explained that ethnic discrimination had become a defensive reflex for many of his fellow citizens:

*“Our students and teachers all grew up in a war environment ... discrimination has become sort of habitual to them ... For example, a Pashtun teacher will always try to support a Pashtun student in exams, scholarships and everything, rather than any other student ... Ethnic discrimination has been taught to [young people] by their parents since childhood – [for example,] Pashtuns are our enemy, they have killed many Hazaras, and don't be friends with them, or take revenge on them.”*

Interview in Baghlan, September 2011

Some young people recognised the potential for communal identities to have a divisive and destructive effect on society: “The main causes of conflict are regionalism

and ethnic differences.”<sup>3</sup> In the limited research carried out in Turkmenistan, it was suggested that such regional and ethnic differences come to light in Ashgabat’s construction sites and university dormitories, where young people from different regions feel discriminated against by the dominant regional and tribal groups.<sup>4</sup>

Young people gave varied reasons for why they felt so strongly, and negatively, about people with different communal identities to their own. A common theme throughout the region was references to a shared violent history, giving rise to fear and apprehension in the present day. A young Hazara woman from Bamiyan, in Afghanistan clearly illustrated this:

*“We don’t like other ethnic groups because they killed many Hazaras under previous regimes. They are our enemy – even now if they get the chance they will punish us and kill us because they don’t like us by nature.”*

**Focus group discussion in Kabul, September 2011**

Not surprisingly, negative attitudes towards others are particularly strong in areas that have experienced inter-group conflict over recent years. Following the inter-ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, young people’s negative attitudes towards those with different communal identities to their own were particularly pronounced and reports of ethnic discrimination, prejudice and hatred in Kyrgyzstan were high. “Now we hear more and more young people calling each other Kyrgyz, Uzbek, because there is hatred towards each other,” focus group participants in Leilek district reported.

Young ethnic Kyrgyz from rural areas used words like “cunning”<sup>5</sup> and “brutal”<sup>6</sup> to describe young ethnic Uzbeks, and held them responsible for the violent events of 2010. Young ethnic Kyrgyz from urban areas characterised young ethnic Uzbeks, particularly those raised in the traditional mahallas<sup>7</sup>, as being “poor”, “uneducated,” and out of touch with mainstream society.

Ethnic Uzbek focus group participants did not share any of their stereotypes about ethnic Kyrgyz people with our young researchers. However, other sources were available, which suggest that the stereotypes are just as negative as those held by the ethnic Kyrgyz youth about ethnic Uzbeks.

Ethnic Uzbek participants voiced frustration at the increased ethnic discrimination following the events of 2010. An ethnic Uzbek focus group participant in Leilek, Kyrgyzstan, said; “Now I don’t feel secure walking around later [in the day].” Another participant said, “Some guys will yell at me and intimidate me over something that is not my fault. It was never like this before June [2010].”<sup>8</sup>

Some respondents suggested common religious convictions could help overcome differences associated with other communal identities, such as ethnicity. For example, young Ismailis in Murghab, Tajikistan, explained how “Our Hazir Imam [the Aga Khan] helps us both [ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Tajiks] and we are never divided under his guidance.”<sup>9</sup> However, other respondents, when discussing Islamic sects and movements different to their own, displayed levels of communal prejudice and discrimination on a par with those in relation to ethnicity and often conflated these two communal identities. The views of one young ethnic Kyrgyz focus group participant in Murghab appeared representative of others in the group, when he said, “Kyrgyz are ‘true’ Muslims, because they follow the five pillars of Islam as it is written in the Quran – unlike the Tajiks.”

<sup>3</sup> Young employee at an international organisation, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*; Instructor at state educational institute, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

<sup>5</sup> Focus group in Leilek, August 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Focus group in Talas, September 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Conversations with young people in Osh city, March–November 2011. Mahalla is the Uzbek word for neighborhood; in Osh it refers to any of the old quarters of the city characterised by individual homes laid out along narrow streets, with a courtyard or garden attached to each cluster of houses.

<sup>8</sup> Focus group in Isfana, Leilek district, August 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Interview in Murghab, July 2011.

**Insecurity and inter-communal prejudice limits information intake**

The June 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan has driven many young people in conflict-affected areas to turn inwards, reducing their exposure to other communities and different perspectives. In some areas, young people showed a reluctance to engage with news media, dismissing it as untrustworthy or partial to the “other side,” and suggested that word-of-mouth information from family and community members was filling the void. This behaviour is not devoid of justification. The media is indeed believed to have played a key role in violence, in that some outlets published inflammatory material, or reported rumours that drew on negative perceptions of one community or another.<sup>10</sup> However, a refusal to engage news media does not mean one is shielded from false and damaging rumours and may mean young people limit their opportunities to verify and critically examine the information they receive.

In Afghanistan, which has seen generations of violence, this tendency appeared to manifest itself in a more extreme form. Research participants complained that frequent fighting in their area meant they were often not allowed to leave home, which limited their range of interaction dramatically. They suggested that many young people know little about the lifestyles of other communities; their perceptions are shaped by stereotypes absorbed in the home. To quote one Kabul student; “If we ask a youth from the Sunni community about the Shia community, he will directly reply that they are infidels, without having any information, or if we ask a youth from the Hazara community about the Pashtun community, he will directly abuse [them].” Our young field researcher was asked by discussion participants not to discuss religion in mixed faith focus groups, as the topic is so explosive. It appears that different communities’ ignorance of each other’s perspectives is a vicious cycle; it feeds resentments that rule out potentially enlightening dialogue.

The diverse population of Central Asia and the impossibility of matching states’ borders to the boundaries of the region’s communal identities mean these inward-looking and divisive attitudes do not bode well for the development of peaceful societies. Nevertheless, there were some rare expressions of genuine tolerance and friendship towards young people with different communal identities. For example, in Tashkent, young interviewees claimed that there were absolutely no differences between the relationships they had with Tajik and Russian classmates. In Kyrgyzstan, some ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek focus group participants were keen to stress that they had friends from other ethnic groups.

In some areas, there appeared to be a tradition of tolerance and acceptance of those with different communal identities. A respondent from a historically multi-ethnic village in Kyrgyzstan, known by its Soviet-era name ‘Internatsional’, said:

*“For ages our village has been an international village, as its name says, and different ethnicities have been living here. Therefore, people have always been careful about peace and security. Maybe in other villages where only monoethnic Kyrgyz live, there might be conflicts.”*

A young ethnic Uzbek man in Murghab, in Tajikistan, described his own community’s multi-culturalism:

*“I am a Pamirian Uzbek brought up with Sunni and Shia Ismaili teachings equally. I love both and can’t say I belong to only one. Sometimes I find it hard ... I am not an Uzbek amongst Uzbeks, but for Tajiks I am an Uzbek ... Being Murghabi is an important part of my identity. It combines all the other identities I have. It is like ground where different flowers grow ... Sometimes outsiders do not respect our good traditions. They ... want us to discriminate against one another. [They] really can’t understand the complexity of our environment. They think us savage or illiterate, looking to our clothes or appearance. We are really shabby, but our hearts encompass everything ... I think people ... really need to*

<sup>10</sup> See, for example; National Commission report, 20 January 2011, [www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6871](http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6871), accessed 17 February 2012; Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010*, May 2011, p 23, [www.k-ic.org/images/stories/kic\\_report\\_english\\_final.pdf](http://www.k-ic.org/images/stories/kic_report_english_final.pdf), accessed 1 February 2012.

*go through some kinds of courses about pluralism and natural differences ... they need to learn about us.”*

An ethnic Uzbek, aged 25, in Murghab

## Equating communal identities with citizenship

A strong theme in the research carried out across the region was a blurring of the concepts of state and ethnicity. This was particularly evident when young people were asked to discuss attitudes towards people with different communal identities to their own.

In Uzbekistan, for example, despite respondents speaking almost unanimously of their country's inter-ethnic unity, a 23-year-old ethnic Uzbek migrant labourer from Navoi gave the impression that his views of ethnic Russian Uzbekistanis depended on his attitude towards the citizens of the Russian Federation. He explained how, at one time, he had considered ethnic Russian Uzbekistanis to be accountable for the behaviour of citizens of the Russian Federation:

*“Honestly, when I was first coming back from Russia I didn't like Russians. They live well here in our [country], no one hurts them. In Russia they beat us up and took our money. But then I understood that not all Russians are like that. Besides, I've been going there for so many years and Russia feeds me and my family. So now I don't have any negative feelings towards the Russians here.”*

Interview in Navoi, September 2011

In the aftermath of the 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan, the feeling that people should live in the country bearing the name of their ethnicity has become widespread among ethnic Kyrgyz people. In the words of one participant;

*“Two people might be arguing about a very simple thing and then start blaming each other's nationalities, saying you are Kyrgyz and you are Uzbek. They say you are an Uzbek and you should live in Uzbekistan. It started after the Osh events, before, it was not like this at all ... It doesn't happen only among youth, even among adults, even adult women and men talk like this. And of course small children see it and also talk this way.”*

Focus group in International village, Leilek district, August 2011

This blurring of distinctions between Uzbek ethnicity and Uzbekistan the state was reported across Kyrgyzstan.

*“People think Uzbeks should go to their own country.”*

A female focus group participant in a historically multi-ethnic village known by its Soviet-era name 'Internatsional', in Kyrgyzstan

Young interviewees in Bukhara and Navoi, where the bulk of our research in Uzbekistan was conducted, unanimously stressed that they lived in environments of inter-ethnic harmony. Two added that their cities were, in this respect, “not like the Ferghana valley.” A middle-aged contact in the city of Termez, near the border with Afghanistan, who appeared to go out of his way to paint a positive picture of the situation in the region, remarked that; “The attitude of young people in their early 20s to [ethnic] Kyrgyz and to Kyrgyzstan in general is one of anxiety concerning what happened in Kyrgyzstan last year. Believe me, this is something unprecedented, and not good.”

Some young Afghan research participants appeared to share the notion that the names of states coincide with the ethnicity of their ‘proper’ inhabitants. Coupled with the widespread belief that the terms ‘Afghan’ and ‘Pashtun’<sup>11</sup> are synonymous, this attitude leads to statements like the following:

<sup>11</sup> Scholars generally accept that ‘Afghan’ and ‘Pashtun’ – or variants of these terms – have been used interchangeably since the 3rd Century. Several ethnic Pashtun focus group participants stated that their peers from other ethnic groups were, by definition, not Afghan.



*"I believe that Tajiks must go to Tajikistan, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, Turkmens to Turkmenistan, and Hazaras must go to China or somewhere. This country is ours only – it belongs to Pashtuns, not to any other ethnic communities or tribes that have migrated to Afghanistan."*

Focus group in Kabul, September 2011

The narrative surrounding the inter-ethnic violence in June 2010, in southern Kyrgyzstan illustrates how this blurring of ethnicity and state can lead to ethnic minority demands being viewed as a threat to sovereignty (see case study).

#### Kyrgyzstan case study: Young ethnic Kyrgyz people's views of the June 2010 events

*"I started thinking about my nationality and about being Kyrgyz after the Osh events. We watched the videos, we saw how Kyrgyz people were tortured and we felt pain for them."*

*"We saw some young people in Karakulja who were real patriots ... patriotism means not hesitating to sacrifice your life in order to defend your country against enemies. Uzbeks are the enemy."<sup>12</sup>*

Focus group participants in Karakulja, Osh province, August 2011

The young ethnic Kyrgyz people who were interviewed largely adhered to the Kyrgyzstani establishment's narrative of the June 2010 violence.<sup>13</sup> This version of events asserts that, following the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010, ethnic Uzbek elites attacked Kyrgyz sovereignty through a series of high-profile rallies, during which they called for their community to play a greater role in public life. According to this narrative, large-scale violence against ethnic Kyrgyz on the night of 10 June 2010 represented the culmination of this premeditated attack. News of Uzbek-perpetrated atrocities prompted rural Kyrgyz to head to Osh and Jalalabad, to fight en masse.<sup>14</sup> The establishment narrative frames the actions of ethnic Kyrgyz fighters as largely spontaneous and defensive in nature.<sup>15</sup>

Ethnic Kyrgyz youth in Kyrgyzstan have responded to this narrative in various ways. At the militant end of the spectrum are youth from remote monoethnic areas, who see the targeted attacks on Uzbeks as acts of heroism. A young man from a district now famous for providing participants in the violence proclaimed, "I am proud to be from Alai, from the land of Aylmbek Datka and Kurmanjan Datka.<sup>16</sup> During the June events, we showed that we really are their descendants."<sup>17</sup> In the words of a young man from another rural area, "All Kyrgyz owe the Kyrgyz from Alai for protecting Kyrgyz land." In extreme cases, this view of the June 2010 conflict dynamics leads young people to boast of their own violent deeds in graphic detail.<sup>18</sup>

While urban and/or university-educated young people often made a point of stressing their own tolerance when speaking of the events, their basic narrative largely coincided with that of their more militant peers.

It is important to note that this dominant narrative blurs the concepts of state and ethnicity; it springs from a conceptual framework whereby the states of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan give shape to the identities and mark the land of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks respectively. This framework dictated that participants of the protests in April and May 2010 could not simultaneously be fighting for their rights as ethnic Uzbeks and as citizens of Kyrgyzstan: their calls for greater ethnic Uzbek political representation were necessarily perceived as anti-Kyrgyzstan and by extension, anti-Kyrgyz.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 'Patriots' here refers to young 'volunteers' from Karakulja who went to Osh during the June 2010 violence, ostensibly to defend Osh's ethnic Kyrgyz against local ethnic Uzbeks.

<sup>13</sup> *op cit* National Commission report, January 2012; Ombudsman's Commission report, <http://news.fergananews.com/archive/2011/akuna.html> accessed 25 January 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The fighting resulted in the destruction of thousands of Uzbek homes and businesses; of the 470 people killed in the course of the violence, according to an international inquiry released in May 2011, 74 percent were Uzbek, 25 percent Kyrgyz, and 1 percent belonged to other nationalities. (*op cit* Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, p 44.)

<sup>15</sup> On June 15, 2010, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that the violence appeared to be "orchestrated, targeted and well-planned," and that it was set off by 5 simultaneous attacks by armed masked men in the city of Osh." (*Partial Truth and Selective Justice: The aftermath of the 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan*, Amnesty International 2010, p 8, [www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR58/022/2010/en/2e04ab9b-73e6-46a1-98d7-563198e7255e/eur580222010en.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR58/022/2010/en/2e04ab9b-73e6-46a1-98d7-563198e7255e/eur580222010en.pdf) accessed 1 February 2012).

The 2010 International Crisis Group report on the violence states: "Although the profound belief in the Uzbek community that the pogroms were a state-planned attack on them is not borne out by the facts, there are strong indications that prominent political figures, particularly in Osh city, were actively, perhaps decisively, involved. Most security forces in the region, who in Osh currently answer to local leaders rather than the capital, were slow to act or complicit in the violence. The pattern of violence in Osh moreover suggests a co-ordinated strategy; it is unlikely the marauders were spontaneously responding to events. The criterion that guided looters in all the districts attacked was ethnic, not economic." (International Crisis Group, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, 2010, Asia Report No193, p i, [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/193%20The%20Pogroms%20in%20Kyrgyzstan.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/193%20The%20Pogroms%20in%20Kyrgyzstan.pdf) accessed 8 January 2012).

"The failure of members of the security forces to protect their equipment raises questions of complicity in the events, either directly or indirectly. Further, some members of the military were involved in some of the attacks on the *mahallas*." (*op cit* Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, 2011, p iv).

<sup>16</sup> 19th Century Kyrgyz states people known for their initial resistance to the Russian empire.

<sup>17</sup> In-depth interview with young man in Gulcha, Alai region of Osh oblast in Kyrgyzstan, in June 2011, Saferworld Community Security Assessment of Osh, Jalalabad and Batken oblasts, July 2011 (unpublished).

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> See: *op cit* Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, pp 14-16, for a narrative of the April-May 2010 Batyrov-led protests in Jalalabad and of their reception in various ethnic communities.

Reflecting on how their ethnicity relates to their Kyrgyzstani citizenship, young ethnic Uzbek participants painted a mixed picture. “We were born in Kyrgyzstan and grew up in Kyrgyzstan,” a young woman told us. “We also have patriotic feelings towards our country. When we are stigmatised by our nationality [ethnicity] we feel upset, it negatively impacts our patriotic feelings.” Others were keen to demonstrate their current identification with ethnic Kyrgyz language and culture, speaking of their admiration for Kurmanjan Datka,<sup>20</sup> or their ambitions to become Kyrgyz language teachers.<sup>21</sup> In a private interview a young ethnic Uzbek professional added that the June 2010 events had destroyed ethnic Uzbeks’ faith in civic action, as a means to get their needs met, and convinced them of the virtues of disengagement. According to him, while ethnic Kyrgyz had previously derided Uzbeks for their lack of civic involvement, they interpreted their appearance on the political scene in May 2010 as an attack – and responded accordingly.

These types of views, on the relationship between ethnic identities and citizenship of particular countries, largely mirror the ways in which different Central Asian states have defined their independent nations since the 1990s.

All five post-Soviet states have promoted as the predominant markers of citizenship forms of the culture, traditions, language and religion of their titular ethnic group. While some states have included statements welcoming diversity, others have apparently failed to take into account the disparate make-up of their populations.

President Akaev, the first president of Kyrgyzstan, encouraged a national identity based on the slogan ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’ and the epic legend of the Kyrgyz Manas. This first element suggested an inclusive, and possibly even pluralistic, approach to non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups. However over time, this slogan has been dropped and only the references to Manas remain.

Uzbekistani state propaganda misleadingly suggests that the ethnic category ‘Uzbek’ has been more or less constant since the establishment of a Turkicised khanate in the 13th Century and it frames its presence within the borders of current-day Uzbekistan as a historical inevitability.<sup>22</sup>

Official measures in Tajikistan, introduced to instil patriotism since the 1997 ceasefire, include promotion of the Aryan ideology<sup>23</sup> and the cult of Ismail Somoni,<sup>24</sup> through television programmes and school campaigns. Another notable component of national ideology is the 2008 law on the state language,<sup>25</sup> which dictates that any contact between citizens and state institutions must take place in a standardised form of Tajik that differs markedly from the Tajik spoken in many parts of the country.<sup>26</sup> According to young research participants, the current national identity policies deepen a sense of “us versus them”.<sup>27</sup>

Representatives of ethnic minorities in locations across the region expressed a sense of being excluded from civic involvement because of their ethnicity. A large proportion of the non-ethnic Tajik respondents in the western Tajikistan provinces of Soghd and Khatlon<sup>28</sup> stated that they felt as though state national identity policies

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 16.

<sup>21</sup> Focus group in Osh city, August 2011.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of how official propaganda glosses over complexities in the history of the Uzbek ethnicity, see Dick Martin, ‘Religious Aspects of Uzbek Nationalism’, *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, 29 January 2006, <http://asiaquarterly.com/2006/01/29/ii-125/>, accessed 9 February 2012.

<sup>23</sup> This ideology came to the fore in 2005, which President Rakhmon named the Year of Aryan Culture. “One of main goals of the Aryan project is to prevent the possibility of the Islamization or Turkification of Tajik society. At the same time, there is a danger that if the Aryan project is radicalized, it could lead not to unity within Tajik society but to fragmentation. In particular, this risk is greatest in the northern region of Tajikistan, which is heavily Uzbek-populated and considered by the Tajik nationalist elites as the region of the country where the process of Turkification has progressed furthest and poses a threat to the state.” (Shozimov P, *Tajikistan’s year of ‘Aryan civilization’ and the competition of ideologies*, Central Asia Caucasus Institute, 10 May 2005, [www.cacianalyst.org/newsite/newsite/?q=node/3437](http://www.cacianalyst.org/newsite/newsite/?q=node/3437), accessed 19 December 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Considered the father of the Tajik nation, Somoni cultivated Sunni Hanafi ideologies during his reign.

<sup>25</sup> *Tajikistan Drops Russian as Official Language*, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 7 October 2009, [www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan\\_Drops\\_Russian\\_As\\_Official\\_Language/1846118.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Tajikistan_Drops_Russian_As_Official_Language/1846118.html), accessed 30 December 2011.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Official’ Tajik is classified as a western Iranian language, while the dialects spoken in the Pamirs fall into the Eastern Iranian category. The western and eastern dialects can be mutually incomprehensible.

<sup>27</sup> Focus groups in Soghd and Khatlon provinces, July 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Tajikistan’s western region includes Soghd province, whose ethnic breakdown is roughly 68 percent Tajik, 30 percent Uzbek, and 1.3 percent Russian; Khatlon province – 79 percent Tajik, 18 percent Uzbek, 3 percent Russian; and part of the Districts of Republican Subordination, in which research was not conducted – 81 percent Tajik, 15 percent Uzbek, and 3 percent Kyrgyz.

had resulted in them having a lower status than ethnic Tajiks and caused them to have reduced levels of participation in the life of state. As a middle-aged community leader in Ganchi district explained, “Not knowing the state language hinders Uzbeks and others [other ethnic minorities] in making decisions and creates a negative attitude towards politics.”<sup>29</sup> Some of the young people suggested that the state language policy contributed to the marginalisation of minority groups in schools. “When faced with a choice to select a Tajik pupil or an Uzbek pupil [for a competition], they’ll take the Tajik one. As a result, young [Uzbek] people are already starting to lose interest in public life in their school years.”<sup>30</sup>

Young Afghan respondents did mention one positive development in the state’s national identity policies, which had taken place in their lifetimes: in 2002, the practice of specifying ethnicity in passports was abolished. Some respondents said they had seen young people make appeals to national identity to solve religious and ethnic disputes. However, other respondents stated that the Government had taken no further steps in this area, missing an opportunity to build on a success.

Even in Kazakhstan, where the state’s attempts to promote a national ideology based on capitalism, stability, Europeanisation and assimilation – but rooted nevertheless in ancient Asiatic traditions – appear to have been largely successful, there are signs that the state’s vague definition of tolerance, coupled with the state’s perceived corporatist tendencies, could become an object of discontent among young people. (see Kazakhstan case study)

### Young people’s visions of the future largely exclude pluralism

*“Racism and nationalism are positive in our case. We want to be racist, to preserve our culture.”*

A focus group participant in Osh city, Kyrgyzstan

*“It’s time to stop all this talk about how we’re a multi-ethnic state. It carries no weight. It’s time to understand that [ethnic] Kazakhs are the foundation of our state.”*

Janbolat Mamai, leader of the youth wing of Kazakhstan’s parliamentary opposition

*“We cannot have Chinatowns!”*

A young civil society leader from Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, on mahallas, the city’s traditional Uzbek neighbourhoods

When asked to consider the future of their state, few ethnic Kyrgyz young people in Kyrgyzstan appeared to favour the development of an explicitly multi-ethnic national ideology. This was also the case with the young respondents from the titular ethnic groups in other Central Asian states.

In Kyrgyzstan, the hard-line nationalist doctrine aggressively asserts that there should be ethnic Kyrgyz dominance in the political, educational and religious spheres and that Kyrgyz traditions should play an active role in the state. A young focus group participant in Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, told us:

*“I want to unite all Kyrgyz people. For that I will find supporters. I will create a Kyrgyz Kingdom ... The Kyrgyz are hospitable people. Provided [Uzbeks] know their place in our society, we will work for the development of Kyrgyzstan together. We Kyrgyz do not want a war. If other ethnic groups do not want peace, then the rest is God’s will, everything is up to God.”*

A school-aged participant in a focus group in Osh city, August 2011

Other ethnic Kyrgyz focus group participants in Kyrgyzstan envisaged an assimilationist state,<sup>31</sup> where members of any ethnic group could achieve mainstream acceptance, provided they confined expressions of non-ethnic Kyrgyz identity to the home. There were no clear trends amongst the types of young ethnic Kyrgyz

<sup>29</sup> Interview in Ganchi district, Soghd province, July 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Ethnic Uzbek woman aged between 22 and 27 years, focus group in Ganchi district, July 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Assimilationist is used here to mean refers to the idea whereby minorities are eventually absorbed into the majority group. It is opposed to separatist or pluralistic ideologies about minority positions/roles in society.

### Kazakhstan case study: An example for others to follow?

Kazakhstan's longstanding reputation for tranquillity began to fray in 2011, with several apparent terrorist attacks and an oil workers' strike, which culminated in numerous deaths. These events prompted new interest in the economic grievances of certain segments of the population, including youth. An examination of how some young Kazakhstanis view the interaction between inter-communal relations and economic inclusion may serve as a useful guide for Central Asians who find inspiration in the country's economic growth, but wish to learn from its mistakes.

Young interviewees who were affiliated with the Government painted a rosy picture of tolerance and prosperity. The head of the student alliance in Aktau, in western Kazakhstan, spoke of the country's high living standards and the "love" among different ethnic groups. She said that she hoped the next president would be "a copy of Nazarbaev, of course". "We're all happy with our President," she added, "he understands everybody."<sup>32</sup>

There were strong indications that wealth – or at least the state's ability to project an image of wealth – was key to the country's purported culture of tolerance. The young head of a government-funded youth organisation spoke of attending the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Astana in 2010. At one event, participants had been getting up and saying, in her words, "Nazarbaev does this, Nazarbaev does that, there's no freedom of speech here ... Sitting next to me was a young man from Tajikistan. He asked, 'How many years was Astana built in?' I said it was built in ten years. He said, 'Good for your President'. Because to build a city like that in ten years, it's impossible. I felt extremely privileged, because someone from another country had recognised the only person who unites all the peoples of Kazakhstan, the only country in the world that really takes care [of its people]."

Yet others suggest that the country's wealth, when not adequately distributed, could be a source of division rather than unity. A middle-aged youth worker in Aktau said that against the backdrop of significant youth unemployment in the oil-rich region, there was genuine anger at oil companies' perceived preference for foreign or non-ethnic Kazakh workers. In a June 2011 interview<sup>33</sup>, Janbolat Mamai, the current leader of the youth wing of the parliamentary opposition, drew a bold link between ethnic Kazakh nationalism and economic grievances. He stated that it was, "time to stop all the talk about how we're a multi-ethnic, multicultural country. It carries no weight. It's time to understand that Kazakhs are the foundation of our state". He then suggested that the state emphasised multiculturalism in order to make wealthy foreign investors feel comfortable. This comfort, he implied, came at the expense of the largely ethnic Kazakh populations of the energy-rich western provinces, which draw the bulk of foreign investment. "Eager to please everybody, the state doesn't take care of Kazakhs," he said, in the course of describing the apparently anti-Kazakh caste systems employed by some foreign oil companies. Mamai was arrested in August for "inciting civic discord", after flying to Janaozen from Almaty to address the almost exclusively ethnic Kazakh strikers. Whether the strikers share Mamai's nationalist sentiments is unclear. Still, Mamai – and his considerable prominence – proves that there are young people who are ready to inject nationalist discourse into issues of economic injustice.

respondents who adhered to either the hardline nationalist ideology or the assimilationist ideology: urban and rural youth of different social classes were all equally likely to espouse either principle. Surprisingly, the principles are not mutually exclusive. The young ethnic Kyrgyz respondents often vacillated between these seemingly separate doctrines, depending on the context of the discussion.

Some young ethnic Kyrgyz respondents raised in multi-ethnic areas did, however, categorically reject the hardline nationalist ideology. A young journalist who spoke fondly of the mix of ethnicities on her street told us,

*"My family tells me, you lack patriotism. That's not true – I lack nationalism. My parents think this mayor<sup>34</sup> is brilliant. I say, he's a Nazi, obviously. Then my dad says be quiet."*

Conversation in Osh city, October 2011

The 'assimilationist' ideology seems to suggest that ethnic and national identities

<sup>32</sup> Interview in Aktau, September 2011.

<sup>33</sup> www.altyn-orda.kz, Жанболат Мамай: «Мы никогда не были многонациональной и мульти культурной страной» ('Janbolat Mamai: "We never were a multi-ethnic, multicultural country"'), 23 June 2011, www.altyn-orda.kz/interview/zhanbolat-mamaj-my-nikogda-ne-byli-mnogonacionalnoj-i-multi-kulturnoj-stranoj/ accessed 7 February 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Refers to Melis Myrzakmatov, mayor of Osh since 2009. Myrzakmatov characterises the June events thus: "The Uzbeks were infringing on the sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan, but we rebuffed them." ("Директивы правительства не имеют на юге юридической силы" [Government directives do not have juridical force in the South], Kommersant Daily newspaper, 19 August 2010, <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1489447&NodesID=5> accessed 8 January 2012). In response to allegations of nationalism, he is quoted as saying, "I am a nationalist – I love my nation and will work exclusively in its interests." Note that "nation" here, translated directly from the Russian *нация*, refers to ethnicity, not country or state. ("Да, я националист. Я люблю свою нацию и буду действовать исключительно в ее интересах") in: Мелис Мырзақматов: Я не нравлюсь хозяйствующим субъектам рынка «Жайма» в городе Оше (Кыргызстан), потому что не беру взятки и не иду у них на поводу" ["The entities in charge of the Jajma market do not like me because I do not take bribes and do not follow anyone's lead"], 24 kg news site, 29 July 2010, www.24.kg/community/79669-melis-myrazkmatov-ya-ne-nravlyus.html accessed 8 January 2012.

are mutually exclusive and that to draw attention to one's own, or another's, ethnic identity within the public sphere, is inappropriate. While purporting to establish an equal playing field, this approach actually favours the urban members of a state's titular ethnic group. A young ethnic Kyrgyz civil society professional, who has studied social work, suggested Uzbeks could improve their social standing through becoming more ethnically "neutral": Uzbeks who wore their traditional dress, she said, were jeered as 'Uzbeks', while those who were educated, spoke good Kyrgyz and wore professional dress, achieved respect.<sup>35</sup> This skewing of the definition of 'neutral' towards the titular ethnic group makes the distinction between the assimilationist ideology and the hardline nationalist ideology rather tenuous.

Respondents who were members of non-titular ethnic groups largely rejected the idea of either conforming to assimilationist policies, or of leaving the country. In a private interview, a young ethnic Uzbek Kyrgyzstani professional responded to the prominent assimilationist rhetoric by explaining that there was no need for Uzbeks to integrate into Kyrgyz society. "We are already integrated. [Kyrgyz and Uzbeks] have basically the same language and the same culture."<sup>36</sup> Uzbeks lived [in Osh] originally, and the Kyrgyz came and integrated into Uzbek society."<sup>37</sup>

Many young ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan indicated a desire to stay in Kyrgyzstan and voiced ambitious career goals – including plans to become doctors, surgeons, bankers, interpreters, journalists, athletes, architects and economists. Several mentioned that their experiences of fleeing to Uzbekistan during the June 2010 violence had convinced them that they would, "never go back, even if more violence happens at home."<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, an ethnic Uzbek civil society worker said of her community's youth, "Those who have the means have already left". Her own daughter was planning on getting Russian citizenship – a plan she encouraged. She said that many young people had viewed Uzbekistan's autocratic political system more favourably since the violence.

In other parts of the region, disengagement from central authorities – from the public sphere – and dominance of informal structures, provided an alternative survival strategy for minorities. Murghab, a district in Tajikistan's Pamir mountains with a population that is 98 percent ethnic Kyrgyz, provided a fascinating study of conflict, co-existence and complex interlocking identities. Here, ethnic Kyrgyz research participants reported poor, or no, knowledge of Tajik and a resulting inability to secure work in any official or semi-official organ. "Many young Kyrgyz people are not happy as a result," a community educator told us.<sup>39</sup> Yet young people themselves downplayed their marginalisation, suggesting that their figurative distance from central authorities gave them the freedom to take pride in their ethnic Kyrgyz identity and to express Kyrgyz dominance in their region. (Note that Murghab's local government is also dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz.) In fact, research participants characterised themselves as more Kyrgyz than the people of Kyrgyzstan. As one 18-year-old female participant told us, "Although Murghab is part of Tajikistan, we have preserved the true Kyrgyz language and culture, unlike Kyrgyz from many parts of Kyrgyzstan."<sup>40</sup> Researchers observed that young Kyrgyz seemed to make a point of speaking Kyrgyz to their ethnic Tajik peers. An informal community leader explained this behaviour; "Kyrgyz are the landlords in Murghab because it has been the land of the Kyrgyz, not the Tajiks. Let Tajiks speak Kyrgyz, since they're living on Kyrgyz land."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Interview in Osh city, October 2011.

<sup>36</sup> The Kyrgyz and Uzbek languages are mutually comprehensible. Ethnic Kyrgyz culture in southern Kyrgyzstan is largely considered to be heavily influenced by Uzbek culture, so much so that northern Kyrgyz have been known to call their southern counterparts 'Uzbek'.

<sup>37</sup> Interview in Osh, September 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Interview in Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, July 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Interview in Murghab, Tajikistan, July 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Focus group, July 2011. The participant was most likely referring to the fact that the dialect of Kyrgyz spoken in Osh and Batken provinces is considered heavily Uzbek and Tajik influenced, while the dialect of the north has more common elements with the Kazakh language. Northern Kyrgyzstan is also considered heavily Russified in its customs, and the capital Bishkek is notorious in some circles as a predominantly Russian-speaking city.

<sup>41</sup> Interview in Murghab, July 2011.

### Tajikistan case study: Ethno-religious communities in Murghab united by exclusion

In the course of discussing communal identity, young ethnic Tajiks in Murghab, where 98 percent of the population is ethnic Kyrgyz, hinted at a probable factor for the region's inter-ethnic harmony. Murghabis, they suggested, were united not only by a common love for their region, but by their common discomfort with their fellow citizens in places outside Murghab and reluctance to identify with the state. These attitudes appeared to be informed by a sense that citizenship in Tajikistan was narrowly defined, having become synonymous with ethnic Tajiks who speak one particular form of the Tajik language and practice Sunni Hanafi religious traditions. As one 16-year-old focus group participant told us;

*"We are Tajiks, but when we go to Dushanbe and other parts of Tajikistan, people call us Pamirians and do not consider us Tajiks. People are hostile towards us and we feel it. It's because of our religious beliefs."*

#### Focus group in Murghab, Tajikistan, July 2011

A peer backed him up, saying; "They want us to be converted to their faith. They don't want us to engage with our religious beliefs." Another went on to say that people in other parts of the country resented them, "Because Badakhshanis are more knowledgeable." Another added, "They pay greater attention to money, wealth and [the opinions of others] and don't want to make their brains think."

One participant told us he presented himself as an ethnic Tajik to non-Murghabis, "Because, if I emphasise my [Ismaili] faith, it might cause problems for me". Participants said language also played a role in their discomfort outside their communities, particularly given the state's narrow definition of the Tajik language.

*"I am Tajik because my passport tells me that. ... For Kyrgyz people in Murghab, we are Tajik, but when we go to Dushanbe, ... we become Pamirians, despite what is in our passports. Language is a crucial element of our identity. The majority of Tajiks do not like the way we speak Tajik. We have some kind of accent and they laugh at us ... it is hard to be Tajik and not Tajik at the same time."*

#### Focus group in Murghab, August 2011

A majority of participants ranked their Pamiri or Ismaili identity as more important to them than their Tajik identity. In a group of seven 16-year-olds, all ranked their faith as the primary component of their identity. In a group of ten 20-27 year-olds, no one said national identity was important to them. Seven members of this group ranked their Ismaili faith as the most important element of their identity and five prioritised their regional identity over ethnicity. It seems that Murghab's ethnic Tajiks would rather identify with a region in which they constitute a minority, than with a 'Tajik' state from which they feel excluded.

Murghab's ethnic Kyrgyz, on the other hand, do identify to some extent with the state of Kyrgyzstan – despite insisting that their district of Tajikistan, as opposed to Kyrgyzstan, epitomises 'real Kyrgyz'. Focus group participants spoke enthusiastically of visiting relatives in Kyrgyzstan and of plans to attend college or university there. Their sense that free speech and political engagement were impossible in Tajikistan seemed to be a significant disincentive for ethnic Kyrgyz Tajikistani young people to identify with their home state and a compelling reason to turn their sights toward Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, many contrasted the levels of free speech in the two countries and spoke of hopes to enter politics in Kyrgyzstan.

Another major factor in their ambivalence towards their home state appeared to be their perception of the 1992-1997 civil war. Research participants made it clear that they did not want to be associated with a war in which "Tajiks were killing each other". They described Murghab as, "An oasis of peace in a desert of battles", and suggested Kyrgyz were to thank for the region's having largely escaped the impact of the war. "They [older generations of ethnic Kyrgyz] provided food and shelter for Pamiri Tajiks during the war – otherwise they probably would have died,"<sup>42</sup> a focus group participant told us. Their impressions of the civil war seemed to reinforce a desire to remain on the margins of the state and to distinguish themselves from a people who, they felt, had demonstrated disunity and self-destructiveness in the past.

Although a shared sense of marginalisation may allow Murghab's ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Tajiks to live together in relative harmony, this marginalisation, combined with the intense ethnic pride of young Kyrgyz, could have had disastrous consequences in June 2010. Upon hearing of clashes between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan, groups of young Murghabi Kyrgyz, supported by their Tajik neighbours, tried to cross the border to fight Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbeks. Had they succeeded, the conflict would have taken on a new cross-border dimension<sup>43</sup> and threatened an already fragile peace between the two weak states.

A year later, several ethnic Kyrgyz research participants in Murghab echoed the sentiments expressed by some of their Kyrgyzstani peers and seemed to take pride in the violent events of 2010; "Other groups should not mess with us," one said. "The Kyrgyz are a heroic people. We demonstrated this once again in the Osh war."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> In addition to the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan cross-border aspect.

<sup>44</sup> Interview in Murghab, July 2011.

# 3

## Foundations for democracy? Young people's experience of decision making

*“Democracy is when we can express our opinion freely, and when we feel free to implement our ideas.”*

**A young focus group participant in Talas province, Kyrgyzstan**

*“In the village, everything is decided by elders ... nobody has ever asked about young people's opinions.”*

**A young focus group participant in Khatlon province, Tajikistan**

*“[I see myself working] in youth policy, in order to solve problems, but we don't have any problems right now ... We don't do analysis ... All young people's needs are met.”*

**A representative of Kazakhstan's official student alliance, in Aktau**

*“Youth do not participate in politics ... only those young people who want to become chinovniki [civil servants] are in politics. I hardly think that anyone listens to them though. And anyway, what do they talk about – nothing new, only what they can talk about.”*

**A young journalist in Bukhara, Uzbekistan**

*“If a young person cannot contribute to a single decision in the family setting, how would she then be able to take part in decisions at the level of national politics? Naturally [young women's] attitudes towards politics are negative.”*

**A young official in Kabul, Afghanistan**

Since the 1990s, international donors have been supporting programmes to build and support democratic institutions and governance in Central Asia. The long-term aim of these programmes has been to encourage the development of democratic societies in the region, in the hope that these will prove more stable and peaceful than the current regimes.

This chapter analyses the extent to which the young Central Asians of today are equipped with a ‘toolbox’ of democratic values and skills, which they would need in order to participate in democratic societies of the future. Ideally, this toolbox includes

the belief in an individual's right to contribute to decisions that affect them and their surrounding environment; the ability to obtain and critically analyse information from a variety of sources, identify problems that need to be addressed, identify the appropriate channels through which to air grievances; and see that initiatives aimed at solving problems are carried out. The research found that, as things stand, very few young Central Asians are being exposed to the types of experiences that might allow them to develop these values and skills.

### Obstacles to young people's participation in future democracy

Some research participants demonstrated a poor understanding and appreciation of democratic institutions. Not all the young people participating in the research appeared to understand the definition of democracy. "Democracy is when one leader governs a country," a young woman in Nookat, Kyrgyzstan offered. A young research participant in Kara-Kulja, Kyrgyzstan, asserted that, "Democracy is when you can take whatever you want, for free." A young government worker in Khorog, in Tajikistan, suggested his peers did not understand how democratic institutions functioned; "Young people are not aware of their rights. They don't know whom they can approach if they face a problem. They don't know the rights provided to them by the Government." In other cases, respondents did not appear convinced that a democratic system in which everyone could have a voice was necessary. "We don't need democracy," young focus group participants in Leilek, Kyrgyzstan said. "Kyrgyz have been ruled by aksakals [elders, literally, 'white beards'] for ages."

Young people in several focus groups spoke of their admiration for good teachers in their communities, and expressed a strong belief in the value of education. Yet schools in the post-Soviet era are notorious for rigidly hierarchical student-teacher relationships, and for forcing students to learn by rote, rather than exercising critical thinking. A worrying number of young people suggested this stereotype held true for their educational experience.<sup>45</sup> "There are teachers who do nothing but yell at students," said a young man in Khorog, in Tajikistan, whose fellow focus group participants went on to complain about their university professors' tendency to "lecture" rather than "explain". Another Khorogi participant lamented, "Every day they say, tie your ties, tie your ties – but they never say anything about our knowledge". A young woman in Porshinev, in Tajikistan remarked that, "Because [teachers] have no new methods, they make their students jump through hoops". These youth, it would seem, are not getting the tools to contribute to innovative, constructive solutions to their societies' ills from their formal education.

#### The exception to the rule? A positive and participatory learning environment in Talas, Kyrgyzstan

In Talas oblast in Kyrgyzstan, a village school with an inspiring leadership provided a refreshing contrast to the norm. Both teachers and pupils spoke proudly of how their school promotes free expression of opinions among students and gives opportunities for young people to take the responsibility. According to the director:

"Each year the students of 9th, 10th and 11th grades elect the president of the school. The 11th grade pupils always participate in solving school problems; they discuss it together openly with director and teachers. Each year the 11th grade pupils promise to achieve certain objectives by the end of the year and the school director does the same, promising to solve certain issues the pupils have identified. This promotes mutual understanding and support between teachers and pupils and then older pupils mentor younger students on overcoming the challenges. Pupils participate actively in meetings with the parents committee, where they discuss improving the performance.

"In addition, the school promotes creativity and innovation through its school radio, where pupils prepare their own programmes, such as news and announcements."

Rarely did the young research participants appear to have access to the variety of

<sup>45</sup> While research participants in Tajikistan's Pamir region gave us the most illustrative quotations on this issue, participants in Kyrgyzstan and western Tajikistan also complained frequently that their teachers and professors often appeared more concerned with imposing their authority, than with helping students to learn.



information sources that would likely allow them to develop informed, nuanced views on regional, national, or even local concerns. Urban youth were more likely to report engaging positively<sup>46</sup> with news media and suggested this was due chiefly to superior Internet access.<sup>47</sup> A teenager in Osh city, in Kyrgyzstan reported, "I follow world events with Google, for example, events in Norway." A university student in Kabul said, "When I hear any news from local TV, I check it for accuracy on the Internet," and added that he wished he could access CNN and the BBC as easily as he could local television. Rural youth were much more likely to engage with news media solely through television, where their reception ranged from a single official channel to a modest range of domestic and Russian channels.<sup>48</sup> While some spoke of their trust for domestic or, more frequently, Russian news channels, others presented themselves as caught in a cycle of being ill-informed and disillusioned with politics and the state. "We don't like to watch TV," a focus group participant in Leilek district, Kyrgyzstan said. "It makes me depressed. Whenever I turn on the TV, I see two stupid politicians talking."

"Our channels show a lot of concerts and celebrations, and few actual events and problems in our country," a focus group participant in Ganchi district, in Tajikistan reported. A peer from Khorog, in Tajikistan, complained that, "The Government can do nothing except air nice shows on TV." A young woman from Murghab said, "I don't trust Russian or Tajik news channels". She had previously commented that she did not think the Government was interested in her point of view and now remarked, "I think much of the news is driven by political motivations".

Young people further identified the attitudes of older generations as a barrier to their participation in decision-making. Some respondents claimed that, in the eyes of elders, especially in Afghanistan and in some rural areas of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, young people are not mature enough to contribute to decision making. At the extreme end of the spectrum, a 25-year-old, ethnic Tajik woman from Kabul told us that, "Youth are treated as *kham*<sup>49</sup> in Afghan society ... young people are thought to have full mental capacity only when they reach the age of 45". Another young respondent from Murghab, in Tajikistan, recounted, "When my friend gave his opinion during a village meeting, one elder man told him, 'Instead of giving advice to me, first you need to say the word bread right!'" One of our researchers in Tajikistan was berated for holding a focus group with "kids" rather than gathering, presumably more reliable, information from "grown-ups". Interestingly, the focus group in question included participants aged 20-27, meaning some were over Tajikistan's median age of 24.

Some research participants, particularly in rural areas, described the participation of young women in any form of government as culturally unacceptable. A young woman from Nookat, in Kyrgyzstan, said she would not dream of taking part in any kind of community-level problem solving; "People would immediately start talking about his or her daughter organising something, going to the mayor's office and demanding something ... such things are shameful in the village". In numerous research areas, including parts of western Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan where local traditions are followed strictly, young girls complained bitterly that they were sometimes not even permitted to decide their own fate. A respondent from Shakhrituz, in Tajikistan, claimed that, "There are many girls here who are forcefully handed over for marriage under the age of sixteen by elders". A young woman working in Afghanistan's Ministry

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that in both urban and rural areas, particularly parts of southern Kyrgyzstan and western Kazakhstan where youth expressed fear for their safety, researchers observed that youth tended to limit their news consumption to that which reaffirmed their pre-existing beliefs.

<sup>47</sup> Internet World Stats provides the following statistics on Internet usage in the countries studied: Afghanistan: 1,000,000 Internet users as of June 2010, 3.4 percent penetration rate; Kazakhstan: 5,300,000 Internet users as of June 2010, 34.3 percent penetration rate; Kyrgyzstan: 2,194,400 Internet users as of June 2010, 39.3 percent penetration rate; Uzbekistan: 7,550,000 Internet users as of March 2011, 26.8 percent penetration rate; Tajikistan: 700,000 Internet users as of June 2010, 9.3 percent penetration rate; Turkmenistan: 80,400 Internet users as of June 2010, 1.6 percent penetration rate, [www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm) accessed 20 January 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Young people in border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan mentioned that they often had better access to Uzbekistani channels than to domestic ones. This could be an interesting avenue to explore with regard to its implications for cross-border dialogue and/or tensions among youth.

<sup>49</sup> Meaning 'with less mental ability'.

of Women's Affairs summed up the decision making status of many of her peers in the region; "I think it is very obvious that if a young person cannot contribute to a single decision in the family setting – then how would she be able to take part in decisions at the level of national politics? Naturally [young women's] attitudes towards politics are negative".

### Youth institutions for entertainment rather than participation

As a result of these obstacles, very few respondents had any experience of participating in decision making processes. They suggested that the region's youth institutions did not alleviate these obstacles, but in fact, reinforced them.

A quick survey of youth institutions in Central Asia might give the impression that young people's needs are well represented and catered for. In Uzbekistan, Kamolot, run by the President's daughter, Gulnara Karimova, provides resources and support for youth activities. In Kazakhstan, this role is filled by Jas-Otan, the youth wing of the presidential party. In Kyrgyzstan, the relatively new Ministry of Youth and youth committees, from national to community level, are responsible for youth activism and several political parties also have youth wings. In Tajikistan, there is a national youth committee, which has a network of regional youth committees and youth representatives across the country.

Youth in Kazakhstan, who were affiliated with Jas-Otan, said that that while the organisation could potentially serve as a forum through which to air grievances, "We don't have any problems right now".<sup>50</sup> No other young respondents mentioned these institutions as forums through which their grievances could be addressed. Instead, if these institutions were mentioned at all, then it was as organisers of what young researchers in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan referred to as "mass-cultural activities" – sports competitions, festivals and, in some cases, fundraising drives and tightly controlled visual and performing art exhibitions. One young man in Tajikistan remarked that youth organisations' ability to do anything but organise sports tournaments "has yet to be seen".

A Kamolot youth leader in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, after speaking of the threat posed by religious extremists, "Who are trying to infiltrate the ranks of our youth", explained that, "Our organisation is constantly trying to involve young people in any activities, trying to organise their leisure time". This sense of needing to keep youth occupied, to prevent them from turning to vice, criminality or religious extremism, is echoed by youth organisations across the region. This appears to reflect the entrenched perception that young people are of incomplete mental capacity and are incapable of consciously choosing to engage in positive or destructive behaviours. A factory worker in Uzbekistan hinted at something more sinister – perhaps controlling – in the activities of such youth organisations; "I know that there are these youth organisations, but all the young people are there by force and for the sake of ticking a box".<sup>51</sup> Sinister or not, these organisations are not providing young people with a forum in which to discuss their needs, or an opportunity to participate in decision making processes – experiences that would equip them with the skills necessary to participate in a democratic society.

However, the picture is not entirely bleak. Some young respondents spoke positively about participating in activities organised by international organisations and the non-governmental sector. Young residents of Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, spoke enthusiastically of their experience at a Soros-funded summer camp, where 150 teenagers were tasked with governing their own 'republic'. Nevertheless, only a limited numbers of young people can be exposed to these influences and these will generally be city dwellers.

When rural youth had a chance to get involved in decision making, it was more likely

<sup>50</sup> In 2009, Jas-Otan carried out an initiative aimed, ostensibly, at shedding light on incidents of corruption in state institutions. However, no Jas-Otan-affiliated youth interviewed mentioned fighting corruption as a necessity or an aspect of their work.

<sup>51</sup> A 25-year-old female factory worker in Navoi, Uzbekistan.

to be through their own initiative. In a village in Talas province, Kyrgyzstan, school-aged girls described how;

*“We have started participating in meetings since last year. For example, we participated in a meeting where we discussed what we need at our school, what kinds of issues we have at our school. Directors, teachers and parents participate in these meetings ... we young people ourselves told parents and school directors that we want to have a sports club in our village. Then parents decided that the total cost will be allocated to each family in the village and a sports club will be built.”*

It should be noted that participants in the focus group in which this testimony was provided also appeared to have been exposed to positive learning environments and to have an above-average understanding of democracy. Democracy, they said, means that, “We can express our opinion freely and we can feel free to implement our ideas,” and they reported that their teachers, “Tell us we should know our rights and speak out”.

A group of young people from Internatsional village in Leilek, in southern Kyrgyzstan, described how they had taken the initiative to participate in addressing grievances in their village:

*“We have organised a youth foundation by ourselves. It was organised neither by the Government, nor other organisations.<sup>52</sup> All youth who are members of this foundation donate 100 som [about US\$2.0] each month on a voluntary basis. The foundation has been working for three months. Its aim is to unite the youth of our village. We also want to use the money for any community work in our village. We want to promote charity work among youth. We also want to write some projects. If we find some donors we want to co-finance and implement some projects.”*

Although these examples are encouraging, they represent only a small minority of the young people who participated in the research. There is a stark contrast between their experiences (and, one must presume, the ‘democratic skills’ they have acquired, which would allow them to participate in future democratic societies) and those of the majority of the young respondents.

### **Current avenues for expressing dissatisfaction and desires for change**

Through all the research activities conducted with young people, it became clear that the majority are not satisfied with the current state of affairs, whether that be the economic situation, education system, political system or access to luxury goods. The vast majority of young people want change, but they express their visions for how to obtain that change in different ways.

For many, the answer seemed to lie in emigration or periodic migration. “Most young people intend to emigrate to western countries to find a peaceful environment and a society where their thoughts and ideas are appreciated,” said a young respondent in Kabul, Afghanistan, while a village activist in Khatlon, Tajikistan said, “Youth believe that migration gives them some freedom and a choice in life.”

Other young Central Asians across the region expressed anger and frustration and, in some cases, a willingness to use violence to achieve their aims. In the Pamirs some young men talked admiringly of the 2011 Arab Spring and expressed a willingness to “spill blood” to establish a more just political system. In Kyrgyzstan, young people were at the forefront not only of the June 2010 violence, but of the April 2010 violent overthrow of the Bakiev regime, if not necessarily as instigators, then as perpetrators. Smaller scale expressions of violence have become a regular occurrence for young people in the country. For example, in Leilek, young respondents claimed to have

<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, a local non-governmental organisation had been implementing a project along very similar lines to those that the young people describe here, but the young people categorically stated that they were not connected to any other organisation.

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blocked a main road and held a representative of the local authority hostage.<sup>53</sup> In Talas, young respondents described how villagers had burned the office of a mining company, as a means of ensuring that grievances were heard. If such violent expressions of grievance are to be avoided, then young people must be given the skills, experiences and opportunities to learn constructive ways of expressing concerns and solving problems.

However, it may not be possible to address some causes of violence among young people simply through providing young people with a democracy toolbox. Structural issues, like economic exclusion and high-level corruption, require decisive action from high-level actors. These issues, and the way in which young people respond to them, will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>53</sup> According to a youth committee representative in Leilek, a sense of injustice led young people to resort to violence in Kairagach village recently. He said, that a number of unemployed youth regularly trade small amounts of fuel from Kyrgyzstan to bordering Tajik villages, since it is more expensive there. At the same time, fuel is traded by certain businessmen in huge cars. While the police do not say anything to the illegal trading of gas in huge cars, they often stop and extort bribes from the local youth who trade in very small amounts. During this particular incident, some young people were imprisoned and their car was taken. Other young people felt angry at such double standards, so took an oblast-level official hostage and blocked the road, demanding the release of the arrested youths.

# 4

## Young people's views of key problems and of leaders' responses to them

*"We had hope and a future, but today's youth have to struggle for it. We had access to a good education, but they are growing up in unregulated environments."*

A middle-aged youth worker in Khorog, Tajikistan

*"The one thing that could start a conflict is when people see a rich person who buys everything with money, who buys law and order."*

A 25-year-old female, factory worker in Navoi, Uzbekistan

*"Everyone's got one value – money – and their motive is power. Society and today's values inflict violence on young people."*

A 23-year-old female, schoolteacher in Bukhara, Uzbekistan

In numerous research locations, young people suggested they felt oppressed by corruption, economic exclusion and the absence of the rule of law. Some went so far as to call this oppression an experience of violence. They suggested that young people responded to this violence with violence of various sorts – including involvement in criminal groups and militant religious movements. The solution, many said, did not lie in tough measures by law enforcement agencies, or crackdowns on religious groups. Rather, the states of Central Asia must be supported to establish economies and services that treat all citizens equally – removing the material and psychological motivation for young people to lash out at society, prey upon others, or retreat into an alternative value system.

### Early life experiences of corruption and exclusion

*"I know many people who are involved in violence and affected by violence. From their family, to their school and university and finally to their job, young people are affected by various types of violence ... [the Government] can do nothing except air nice shows on TV."*

A 27-year-old male activist in Khorog, Tajikistan

In many cases, young people have suffered the effects of corruption and economic exclusion since childhood. A youth psychologist in Aktobe, Kazakhstan, said that some of today's young people "Represent a lost generation, whose parents were busy surviving" during the economic crisis in the 1990s, which she characterised as a time of "instability" and "turf wars". These parents, she said, had been unable to actively nurture their children's values. In the words of a middle-aged community activist in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, in today's families:

*"The father does not want to listen to the son, and vice versa. There is no respect in families. ... People have started living day to day. They don't think about what will happen tomorrow. The most important thing is to eat well and have money. This is our tragedy; we came to it by ourselves. We don't have any educational ideology."*

"The previous generation was raised in the spirit of friendship and mutual understanding starting from childhood," said a local official in Tajikistan's Shakhrituz district. "Today's families and schools don't have that. Families are busy just trying to clothe their children." According to a young woman in the same district, "There's not enough money to provide children with clothes, shoes and school [supplies]. Doing business is pointless, as the earnings go to taxes and bribes."

The educational system is another area in which economic strain compromises young people's values and narrows their opportunities. In a number of research locations, research participants suggested that low salaries for teachers and one-way teaching styles conspired to create a negative environment in many schools. "It is not the teachers' fault," a focus group participant in Khorog, Tajikistan, said, during a discussion about low quality teaching. "If I were in their place I wouldn't bother to do anything more for my students on such a miserable salary." A Murghabi focus group participant suggested that the practice of bribing teachers, long established in universities throughout the former Soviet Union, had spread to secondary schools:

*"I gave money in school. This is now common in schools. The schools copied it from [our] university, [which] copied it from other universities in the country. Now in schools, some teachers ... take money from students openly. When I was a student at school, students passed their exams by bringing a carton of cigarettes for the teacher ... The students who studied did not pass their exams."*

**A 22-year-old male in Barkhorog, Tajikistan**

The culture of money, corruption and violence also enters secondary schools through the practice known in the former Soviet Union as *reket*, whereby stronger and/or older students demand payment from weaker students in return for 'protection' and threaten the latter with physical violence if they do not comply. The practice, which affects girls as well as boys, was reported chiefly among students in areas where research was carried out in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. *Reket* is also thought to be rife in Kazakhstan and is cited as a key reason for Kazakhstan having one of the world's highest rates of teenage suicide.<sup>54</sup>

It was rare for a group of research participants to discuss higher education without mentioning pervasive corruption. For some students, gaining admission to university, passing regular exams and finally obtaining their diploma, all require a considerable bribe. For many students who cannot pay, this can mean simply giving up on higher education. In several focus groups in Tajikistan, participants cited cases of exceptional pupils who had gone to Russia as labourers when they could not pay their entrance bribes for university.<sup>55</sup> In one group, participants spoke of a "very knowledgeable" acquaintance from a poor rural area who had committed suicide when she could not pay her bribe.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> See: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Kazakhstan: Concerns over adolescent suicides, 13 April 2011, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/kazakhstan-concerns-over-adolescent-suicides>; see also [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/media/kaza.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/kaza.pdf), accessed 17 February 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Focus groups in Khatlon, Khorog and Murghab, July 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Focus group in Khorog, Tajikistan, July 2011.

A 17-year-old at a college in Navoi, Uzbekistan, identified “Religious extremism and professors who take bribes,”<sup>57</sup> as the key sources of tension in his area. He went on to suggest that corruption in education not only tainted young people’s university experiences, but helped mould a new generation of corrupt workers:

*“Professors who take bribes teach students to solve problems with money. And then later, when they go to work, they take bribes themselves. There are a lot of students who give bribes ... They’re all suffering from a sort of violence.”*

## Unemployment as exclusion

Employment often appeared to be the key factor in whether or not a young person felt any attachment to the state. To be unemployed, particularly for a young man, meant being unable to participate fully in the institution on which his culture was based – the family. Consequently, in order for some young people to live according to their traditional values, they felt they had to leave their native country:

*“A homeland is a place where you can realise yourself and have a dignified life. In my own country I couldn’t find suitable work to support my family and Russia provided me with good work and good pay.”*

A 27-year-old male labourer, in Ganchi district, Tajikistan<sup>58</sup>

A 23-year-old from Navoi, in Uzbekistan, who had been working as a labourer in Russia since he was 15, expressed a similar sentiment in more negative terms. He said that his initial ill will towards Russians, inspired by frequent attacks on migrant labourers, had evaporated over the years, because, “Russia feeds me and my family”.<sup>59</sup> Concerning his attitudes towards his native country, he provided this analysis:

*“How does [unemployment] affect me? I don’t want to live in this country. Because of it, I don’t trust this country at all. I don’t trust anyone. When you go abroad you see how people live there. And I understand that if we had someone else running our country we might be living better ... All young people who don’t have work are suffering. Is it not [an experience of] violence to go abroad and not have the protection of your state?”*

The unemployed respondents suggested that their anger was only partially attributable to their inability to support themselves; largely, their anger sprang from a sense that the state was complicit in the wide gap between rich and poor. With the transition to capitalism, people in post-Soviet countries have witnessed the emergence of consumerism and have seen some of their fellow citizens accumulate extreme wealth, often through semi-legal means. This is particularly true in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Here, it has become hard to distinguish between the political and economic elite, and ostentatious wealth has become not only a reality, but also an important part of the state’s image.<sup>60</sup> In light of this, research participants suggested that young people who struggle economically often experience complex feelings of humiliation and resentment. They equated dignity with the ability to display wealth, yet felt they could not access wealth legally. In the words of a young factory worker in Navoi, Uzbekistan:

<sup>57</sup> Interview in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, September 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Focus group in Ganchi district, Tajikistan, August 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Interview in Navoi, Uzbekistan, September 2011.

<sup>60</sup> In Uzbekistan, the ruling elites have co-opted the pop music industry for propaganda purposes, meaning that wealth, power, pop culture and state ideology have become linked in the minds of many young people. Out of 16 young people interviewed in Navoi and Bukhara, 14 listed either money, show business, or both, as the primary influence on themselves and their peers. Of these, 6 listed either the President, or his daughter Gulnara, as additional key influences. (The 2 interviewees who cited neither money nor pop culture as key influences were directly affiliated with the Government, and said Karimov was the strongest force in the lives of youth.) Meanwhile, Kazakhstan’s key nation-building achievement of the past two decades, the new capital, Astana, is an extravagant symbol of the booming oil industry – of which the President’s family owns a large share – and the influx of foreign investment money. The clearest indicator of young people having registered a link between oil wealth and belonging came from a September 2011 interview in Aktobe, with a psychologist working with teens in the state orphanage/boarding school system. She described her charges as patriotic, proud of their region and eager to join mainstream society upon leaving the system – which, she said, to them meant becoming rich. Most wanted to be oil workers, she said, as “Oil worker to them is synonymous with successful person”. In 2008, a consultant to the Bakiev regime in Kyrgyzstan said of the ruling family, “They are in a hurry. They want to get very rich as fast as possible.” (*Kyrgyzstan: A hollow regime collapses*, International Crisis Group, 2010, p 3, [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/B102%20Kyrgyzstan%20-%20A%20Hollow%20Regime%20Collapses.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/kyrgyzstan/B102%20Kyrgyzstan%20-%20A%20Hollow%20Regime%20Collapses.pdf) accessed 2 January 2012) This statement could be seen to sum up a mentality present among many of Central Asia’s ruling classes.

## Infrastructure, corruption and urban-rural divides

*“Who are young people today? They’re people who want to make money, have a house, have a big expensive wedding, buy a car, buy expensive clothes. There are none of those values, like when someone wants to make money honestly ... In order for us to live peacefully, we shouldn’t envy. And we envy what we don’t have. And in order for us to stop doing this, there needs to be decent work for young people.”*

A young doctor from Bukhara, in Uzbekistan, echoed this notion:

*“Peaceful development can happen in a stable situation where people have work and a house. Who has work and a decent life today? Barely anyone. For this to happen, [they] have to get rid of corruption, give young people work and raise salaries.”*

Some young people in urban areas used terms like “dumb,” “wild,” and “aggressive” to describe their rural peers. This was particularly true in Kyrgyzstan, where rural youth were key instruments in the June 2010 violence. Naturally, the testimonies of rural research participants presented a much more complex picture than their urban peers presented of them. They were just as likely, if not more likely than their urban peers, to identify education and peace as key priorities. Yet those in rural areas with unreliable, or, in some cases, nearly non-existent infrastructure were more acutely affected by government corruption and consequently more likely to harbour resentment towards the state.

Young villagers in Kyrgyzstan’s Leilek district explicitly linked poor infrastructure in their area with a financially corrupt and dysfunctional government:

*“There is much distrust towards the Government. There is no club or sports hall for youth even. There is a kindergarten on the first floor of our school. Why is it like this? There were three kindergartens before and they’re not functioning now, their land was privatised. They don’t think about people and they don’t work for them ... nobody approaches the Government. For example the local government collected 160 soms [about US\$3.5] from each family for water pipes, but [the project] has not been completed. The Government changes often, and it’s difficult to find who is responsible for what. For example, we go to the local administration and ask, ... where is the money we collected for the water pipes? The local government representatives mention the company responsible for building the water pipes and say that ... now they don’t have any information about them ... There is no transparency in local government: There was a bridge built for six million soms [approximately US\$129,000], although we know that 26 million soms [approximately US\$558,300] was allocated for its construction.”*

A young community leader in Murghab, Tajikistan, took these sentiments a step further, connecting discontent with factors ranging from poor infrastructure and ineffective governance, to potential regime change:

*“You probably already noticed that the roof of every building built by the Soviets has almost fallen down. I asked the governor of Murghab myself to think about it – let’s find resources and people will volunteer to help us repair everything. It never happened ... The cases of Tunisia and Egypt demonstrated that people will and can free themselves from the chain of authoritarian regimes as soon as they feel it’s the right time. I am fed up with democracy as a political manoeuvre in this country. De jure, we have systems in place and life is moving. However, de facto everything is moving according to a grand lie.”*

Research participants in rural parts of western Tajikistan hinted at another layer of resentment towards the state. As young focus group participants in rural Soghd province told us;

*“Living conditions in the villages are worse than they are in the district centre or in the city: it’s hard to earn, during draft time there are raids, where they grab guys of conscription age all over the place and forcibly ship them off for service.<sup>61</sup> ... This affects kids from poor families especially.”*

<sup>61</sup> See, for example; Central Asia Human Rights Reporting Project, *Press Gangs in Tajikistan*, Institute for War and Peace



The sense that young rural dwellers were being forced to serve a state that many felt did not serve them in their day-to-day lives strengthened anti-state sentiments among rural youth, participants suggested. It also provoked antipathy towards their urban peers: "All this makes people hostile towards one another– rural youth are hostile towards urban youth. To guys here, it seems like young people in the city do nothing and don't have to work to earn money to support themselves," participants in the previously cited focus group told us.

**Law enforcement:  
Security provider, or  
threat to security?**

*"The only violence I see is committed by the police. Many young men suffer from this violence ... Very often they bring young people to the hospital who have suffered at the hands of police. And it's clear that young people are developing aggression towards them ... I don't think young people have any values left."*

A 20-year-old female nurse in Navoi, Uzbekistan

*"We never approach the police to resolve problems. They always take sides. Sometimes they resolve problems by forcing one side to keep quiet."*

A 19-year-old male in Murghab, Tajikistan

*"I don't feel safe walking around late ... It was never like this before [the June 2010 violence]. I can't go to the police. Sometimes the police stop us themselves and accuse us of something."*

A 18-20 year-old male in Isfana, in the Leilek district of Kyrgyzstan

*"The police and security services are constantly creating problems for young people ... [Young people] without connections in the police force are suffering ... Because of tensions with the police and state security services, many young people are retreating into faith in Islam. They're trying to be tolerant of injustice."*

A 19-year-old male, market seller, in Bukhara, Uzbekistan

*"There is tension between law enforcement officers and those who believe in Islam. The police are angry and frightened that they will fall victim to radicals. Young people who adhere strongly to Islam are also afraid and angry, as the Government has not come to dialogue, but adopted radical steps. I mean the killings of ... people whom police identified as [extremist] criminals, but whom they killed without any investigation."*

A 26-year-old male, political science Masters' student in Aktobe, Kazakhstan

Many research participants appeared to view law enforcement agencies as threats to security, rather than providers of security. Stories of unlawful arrests, planting of evidence, beatings and even torture, were widespread. Young people felt that police often committed abuses for the dual purpose of intimidating "problem" communities and making money from bribes; and that belonging to ethnic or religious minorities increased young people's risk of falling victim to these practices. Research participants cited the issue as a major contributor to young people's loss of trust in the state and suggested it could drive them towards violence aimed at state institutions. This was particularly true, several suggested, with regard to heavy-handed measures taken by law enforcement agencies to crack down on suspected religious extremists.

Some research participants depicted abuses by law enforcement agencies as a regular feature of life in their community. According to one young man in Osh, Kyrgyzstan;

*"If they don't like a person, they slip drugs in his pocket secretly ... then they search him and take out of his pocket the drugs they put in earlier. They get a lot of young people to the police station this way, and beat them."* (In-depth interview with young man in Osh city, Osh oblast in Kyrgyzstan, June 2011)<sup>62</sup>

A young man from Uzbekistan, speaking on condition of anonymity, pointed out that illegal detention,

Reporting, 30 June 2010, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/press-gangs-tajikistan> accessed 15 February 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Saferworld Community Security Assessment of Osh, Jalalabad and Batken oblasts, July 2011 (unpublished).

*“Is a way for some policemen to earn money, on the one hand; on the other hand, by physically oppressing some young people like this, security forces send a message to other young people about what fate they will face if they go against the current regime.”*

Uzbek respondents in Osh said their communities still suffered regularly from “illegal actions”, by what they referred to as a “monoethnic” Kyrgyz police force, which targeted them by ethnicity, detaining people, beating or torturing them and releasing them only in exchange for bribes. Young men are considered particularly vulnerable to detention. As an ethnic Uzbek from Jalalabad told us;

*“Policemen recently took my neighbour’s son to a police station. Then they beat him and forced him to give a false testimony about killing a person during the conflict. Now I am afraid that the same thing may happen to my son one day.”<sup>63</sup>*

### The ‘extremist’ threat and political polarisation among young people

*“Our President, of course, influences masses of young people. But there are some young people in religious movements who listen to those who are leading them on the wrong path ... they don’t value peace.”*

A 22-year-old male member of the local administration in Navoi, Uzbekistan

*“We try as much as possible to limit our interaction with those sorts of people. After all, we all remember that during the civil war, one of the main warring parties was the Islamic opposition.”*

Focus group participants, aged 26-30, in Shakhrituz, Tajikistan

*“Our police force and security services are working well, so everything is calm. We are a country with a great future. And our President keeps the peace ... I’m not going to talk about politics, is that okay? It’s a forbidden topic.”*

An 18-year-old male photographer in Navoi, Uzbekistan

*“When ordinary people see people in hijabs or in Islamic dress they start staring at them and calling them wahabbis, while others start leaving the area. It is understandable that people are afraid of terrorism, but I think there is a misconception that could bring conflict.”*

A 26-year-old male, political science Masters’ student in, Aktobe, Kazakhstan

The spectre of Islamic terrorism appears to play a complex role in the relationship between young people and the state/police. Official organs make a forceful case for vigilance against movements whose stated goal is to establish religious rule in Central Asia, which would mean stripping citizens of freedoms seen as non-negotiable by many who came of age during the Soviet period. On the other hand, some analyses suggest that state measures, taken to clamp down on religious extremism, risk fuelling sympathy for these movements. Moreover, observers say, these measures fail to acknowledge the root causes of religious extremism, which are not dissimilar to the causes of other forms of violence observed among youth in Central Asia – including the economic exclusion and abuse of state power discussed in the preceding sections.<sup>64</sup>

Several research participants lent support to these analyses. The youth psychologist, cited above, said young people in extremist movements were emblematic of what she called the “lost generation” of youth, who had come of age amid economic turmoil and without adequate parental attention. A fellow psychologist in Aktau, Kazakhstan, said

<sup>63</sup> Interviews in Osh province, April and September 2011.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example; Clinton warns Central Asian leaders on radical Islam, Reuters.com, 22 October 2011, [www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/22/us-tajikistan-usa-idUSTRE79L0QR20111022](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/22/us-tajikistan-usa-idUSTRE79L0QR20111022); *Is Religion a Security Threat in Central Asia?*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 9 September 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/09/09/is-religion-security-threat-in-central-asia/57q4>; *Kazakhstan’s Growing Culture of Extremism*, Stratfor.com, 28 November 2011, [www.stratfor.com/analysis/kazakhstans-growing-culture-extremism](http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/kazakhstans-growing-culture-extremism); *Терроризм застала Казахстан врасплох* (‘Terrorism catches Kazakhstan unawares’) 8 December 2011, [www.ruvek.ru/?module=articles&action=view&id=6383](http://www.ruvek.ru/?module=articles&action=view&id=6383); *Government should reconsider restrictive policies in preventing violent extremism*, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 16 November 2011, [www.nhc.no/no/nyheter/Government+should+reconsider+restrictive+policies+in+preventing+violent+extremism.9UFRDO5c.ips](http://www.nhc.no/no/nyheter/Government+should+reconsider+restrictive+policies+in+preventing+violent+extremism.9UFRDO5c.ips); Testimony of Susan M. Corke, Director for Eurasia Programs, Freedom House before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Kazakhstan: As stable as its Government claims?*, 25 January 2012, [www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/CSCE%20Kazakhstan%20testimony%20Corke%20final%20012512.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/CSCE%20Kazakhstan%20testimony%20Corke%20final%20012512.pdf), (all accessed 2 February 2012).

this theory had been borne out by his own experiences of working with radicalised youth. A young student in Aktobe, who claimed personal knowledge of numerous young people who sympathise with radical movements, also cited financial strain within the family and a resulting lack of adult guidance as the main factor in their susceptibility to extreme views. He voiced a concern that state measures that take aggressive aim at the symptoms of religious extremism while overlooking the causes, could push his peers to the wrong side of “a thin line” between misguided piety and religious violence. “Police are angry and frightened that they will fall victim to radicals,” he said. “Youth who adhere strongly to Islam are also afraid and angry, as the Government has not come to dialogue but adopted radical steps.”

While alleged repression and abuses by law enforcement agencies may be earning radical movements the sympathies – or at least, the understanding – of some young people, for others, it seems the opposite is happening. Numerous respondents cited religious radicalism as the most significant – and sometimes only – threat to their region and showed minimal ability to relate to their fundamentalist peers.

Some respondents in Tajikistan associated militant Islamism – which they identified through a person’s outer characteristics, for example the wearing of a hijab or beard – with the horrors of the civil war in the 1990s. It is possible that this might reflect state policy, with some respondents implying that the state promotes a one-sided narrative of the civil war, in which the opposition are portrayed as the main villains.

Pro-government respondents in parts of Uzbekistan appeared particularly preoccupied with the extremist threat. A young representative of Uzbekistan’s official youth organisation, Kamolot, answered seven out of the nine interview questions, none of which directly addressed religious extremism, by talking about the threat posed by religious groups, “Infiltrating the ranks of our youth”. A young journalist in Bukhara stated that, “Young people play a key role in [terrorism]. In recent years they’ve been trying to change our stability. Most of them are preparing a conspiracy against peace ... most young people are zombified [sic] into [joining] religious movements because of money.” A young sociology student, who made several strongly pro-regime remarks, said of his peers in religious movements, “They probably just don’t feel like working somewhere. They’re looking for an easy way to get rich ... Peace isn’t important to them.”

The notion that young people who join religious movements are brainwashed, or blinded by financial greed contrasts sharply with the viewpoints of some of their peers. Clearly, there is a large mental divide between those young people who condemn fundamentalist movements and those who sympathise with them, with some of the former evidently refusing to examine the motives of the latter – preferring to assume instead that their peers lack basic powers of reasoning. It seems that dialogue must take place between these two groups, in order to de-escalate their growing animosity, but any attempts at dialogue will be an uphill struggle.

### Where do young people see the West fitting into this picture?<sup>65</sup>

As previous sections have indicated, a small number of research participants spoke of the importance of internationally-funded/administered initiatives, which work directly with young people in order to enhance their understanding of democratic principles and civic involvement. In a few isolated cases, young people mentioned these initiatives specifically with regard to the need to reduce the impact of corruption, economic exclusion and violence on young people.

Young civil society activists in southern Kyrgyzstan, citing high youth unemployment as a prime cause of the June 2010 violence, spoke of volunteering as a path for young people to learn new skills, increase their confidence and improve their chances of

<sup>65</sup> Young research participants largely equated the international community/international organisations with Western powers. While China and Russia both appeared to have a strong presence in the lives of many research participants, for the purposes of this report, the focus is on attitudes towards the West.

future employment. One explained that the problem was that, “Our young people demand,” meaning that Soviet policies had created a culture of entitlement, in which people expected simply to be handed employment and access to services. If young people were taught to be proactive in gaining skills and experience, she said, economic exclusion could be mitigated and future violence prevented. She concluded that international organisations could help by supporting projects to promote volunteerism.

In Bukhara and Navoi, in Uzbekistan, young respondents who were directly affiliated to the Government gave almost identical statements on the virtue of seminars led by international organisations, in which young people from different countries could meet and share experiences. Such events, they said, could “stimulate educated youth” and teach other young people about the importance of preserving “democracy” and the dangers of religious extremism.

Both the Kyrgyzstani activists and the Uzbekistani government workers suggested ways in which international organisations could empower young people in Central Asia to reject violence. In both cases, the respondents appeared to consider the young people themselves to be the problem, requiring the attention of the outside actors. The respondents appeared not to consider the possibility that the international community’s interventions could, or should, target the underlying causes of violence amongst the young people of the region.

Young interviewees in Uzbekistan largely suggested that the international community simply could not help – either in tackling corruption and economic exclusion, or in addressing the violence that these phenomena helped to bring about. “International organisations can’t do anything,” said a young man from Bukhara, having just stated that reducing economic inequality was crucial to young people’s participation in peaceful development. “I don’t think international organisations are interested in peace in our country. They all need something from us,” said a young banker, also in Bukhara, who, while strongly in favour of President Karimov, cited a “Lack of cash” as a key source of tension among young people. “International organisations won’t help us,” said a migrant worker, previously quoted as saying that because of unemployment, “I don’t trust this country at all.”

### **Has democracy developed undesirable connotations?**

A number of young respondents associated democracy with conditions that they saw as desirable, but lacking in their countries, and said the current environment in their countries represented a perversion of democracy. “Peace”, “a good life”, “equality”, and “stability” were some of the positive associations voiced in focus groups. “We don’t have democracy, we have kleptocracy,” said a young man in Khorog, Tajikistan. “‘Democracy’ is [used as] an excuse to justify all actions.”

However, a worrying number of youth appeared to associate democracy, to varying degrees, with the afflictions discussed in the preceding segments – and associated these ills, in turn, with the West. “Democracy is revolution and chaos,” a young man in Kyrgyzstan’s Leilek district told us. “If there is a revolution, the Government calls it democracy.” He was apparently referring to Kyrgyzstan’s two violent regime changes in 2005 and 2010, when new leaders, largely praised by western heads of state, presided over massive corruption and further violence. Another participant in the same focus group said democracy was, “Harming people with its wild laws”. “Democracy should be limited,” a young man in Osh city offered. “It is like a loose dog that bites everyone it wants [to].” “This [democracy] is a thing invented by Americans in order to live better,” said a university student in Khorog, Tajikistan. “They are now trying to spread the idea to other parts of the world.” A teenage boy in Osh city, Kyrgyzstan, told a researcher of western origin, “What I don’t like is that you go around advertising your democracy and your human rights ... The problem with western organisations is that they bring western values that the country isn’t ready for.” He called Kyrgyzstan’s

“unripe” democracy “worse than dictatorship,” saying it was a vehicle for “corruption and disorder.” Upon further interrogation, he appeared to have absorbed a sense that corruption and disorder in a country coincided with the presence of western democratisation initiatives. While he was unable to provide a factual basis for his views, they should not be ignored.

In other cases, young people associated these ills, not with the activities of western organisations *per se*, but with the invasion of western values. A young unemployed woman in Tajikistan’s Pamir region, who bemoaned the deterioration of what she called “family education”, the breakdown of social cohesion and the rising influence of money and criminal groups on young people, said that the most harmful factor influencing youth was:

*“Cold western individualism. We have now been introduced to many values from different corners of the world. I think individualism is completely contrary to what we have had for centuries ... For us modernism is something western but it is not good at all. Westernisation means forgetting about your own cultural and national values ... This is the reason we hate the West. It imposes values. Individualism has made young people stop caring about the environment in which they live and the people who are dear to them.”*

### **What should be done?**

Western powers cannot afford to fuel views like the ones above. Those who want to help young people become a force for peace in Central Asia need to demonstrate that democracy is not merely an ideology that the West imposes for ideology’s sake – or worse, a vehicle for corruption and predatory capitalism that tears at the fabric of society. They must demonstrate firm conditions for engagement with regimes by speaking out consistently against corruption, abuse of power and economic inequality, and contributing to improvements in these areas. The international community must prove that its priority is not whether Central Asia’s regimes claim to be democratic, but how democratic reforms are being reflected through improvements in ordinary citizens’ quality of life. It must make it clear to its partners that committing to democracy means committing to what young Central Asians say they want – improved living standards, stability and security.

## Conclusions

**THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS OF CENTRAL ASIA AND** the international community have a shared interest in ensuring Central Asia becomes a peaceful and stable region and in enabling that to happen. Apart from the desire to avoid the human suffering and loss that conflict and violence brings, Central Asia is a valuable trade partner and ally for its neighbours and the rest of the international community. The region's energy reserves and trade and transport routes will not be of any use to the rest of the world, if they are inaccessible or unreliable due to conflict and insecurity. At the same time, the region's own economic growth and development will be limited, if people do not feel secure enough to build their futures, invest in their businesses and families and remain in the region.

Naturally the national governments and the international community are well aware that there are substantial threats to peace in Central Asia. While narcotics and religious extremism are often the focus of both local and international efforts to prevent instability, this report provides evidence to suggest that other issues also exist that should cause those interested in a peaceful and prosperous Central Asia to be concerned. These are strongly reflected in the perceptions, attitudes and aspirations of young people, who will eventually be determining the future of Central Asian states.

The research shows that many young people in the areas surveyed feel largely excluded from politics, the economy, the legal system, protection by law enforcement, quality public services and decision making processes at local, family and even personal level. The causes of this exclusion are often difficult to distinguish from the consequences; together, they form a vicious cycle. The cycle consists of anger or indifference towards the political process, inter-ethnic, regional and religious tensions within states and across state boundaries; class resentment; and the breakdown or distortion of what are considered traditional family values. Taken together, these phenomena leave many young people feeling that they have no legal or non-violent means to live dignified lives in their home countries. This feeling manifests itself through behaviours such as emigration or regular migration, criminality, affiliation with extremist movements and participation in ethnic violence. However, a number of young people are also finding ways to work creatively within – or around – existing structures, to achieve their goals peacefully and constructively within their home countries.

In the long term, such tendencies towards disenfranchisement, and anger towards the state and its representatives, constitute a potential for destabilisation and conflict that should not be under-estimated.

Naturally, many of the actions required in order to change potentially dangerous and destructive attitudes and behaviour and to re-direct young people's energies to constructive and peaceful development, are down to the individual states and authorities. However, there are several ways in which the international community can also support and encourage regional leaders to address the underlying causes of tensions and conflict in the long term.

# 6

## Recommendations

**TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS** of Central Asian states and to international donors and governments providing bilateral support to Central Asian countries:

### On priorities and approaches

- 1. International donors and governments should ensure that fundamental principles of democracy and good governance are not compromised through a pre-occupation with counter-terrorism and energy security, and take a consistent public stance on abuse of power, corruption and discrimination.**

It is clear from what many young people say about democracy that the idea is losing credibility among parts of a generation that has grown up with authoritarian regimes calling themselves democratic, economic desperation and lawlessness. If young people are to be convinced of the merits of democratic societies, international actors need to demonstrate their own democratic credentials in the policies they pursue in the region, particularly with regard to the way they engage with corrupt and repressive elements within certain Central Asian regimes.

- 2. International donors and governments should translate donors' policy commitments to conflict sensitivity into practice, by ensuring that all activities have a positive peacebuilding impact. This requires underpinning any support programmes, regardless of the sector involved, with a detailed analysis of the local context.**

For instance, the education reform agenda which the European Union (EU) is supporting in Central Asia under the Investing in the future strand of its regional strategy, does not attempt to address the core problem in Central Asia's education system – corruption. Yet, pervasive corruption is, according to many young people, making education worthless for this generation of youth, thereby compounding exclusion and lack of opportunities, and fuelling disaffection and tension.

- 3. National governments should provide opportunities for young people's perspectives to be included in policy development and international actors should lead by example, by implementing and supporting participatory approaches and processes at every possible opportunity.**

Simply through participating in processes in which they are required to express opinions and feel that their opinions count, young people will be given a chance to learn the basic skills required for contributing to the development of a democratic society. International actors should commit to making such participatory processes a standard part of any programmes they support.

For instance, a recent project supported by the EU Special Representative on Bosnia and Herzegovina called *Generation Bosnia and Herzegovina for Europe* brought together 100 young people from across the country and from various backgrounds, to develop a common vision for Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was then shared with decision makers at the national, EU and international levels. Similar initiatives could be considered in Central Asia.

## On nation-building and institution-building

### 4. Central Asian states should draw on some of the lessons learnt on pluralism and inclusion from other young states' nation-building experiences and international actors should support and encourage them in this process.

In addition to components such as territorial integrity and institutions, there are 'soft' aspects of state building for which young nations may require the support of external actors. Views from young people in this report suggest that preaching one or other form of state building strategy would not be welcome and counter-productive. However, by engaging both state and civil society in a dialogue on the merits and disadvantages of different kinds of approaches and providing the space and opportunity for the views of minorities to be heard, in a constructive and non-threatening manner, international actors may help to challenge ethno-nationalistic tendencies, which exclude and alienate the region's many minorities.

National governments should:

- Study nation-building efforts of other states who have gained independence relatively recently and whose national identity embraces ethnic, religious and regional diversity, and adapt successful experiences in this field to Central Asian contexts.
- Take steps to develop inclusive national policies, such as the removal of ethnicity from identity cards.

The international community should:

- Support experience exchange programmes to showcase how other countries attempt to create inclusive national policies.
- Make available information about experience with different models of minority protection from other countries.

### 5. International actors should support governments in the region in the development of inclusive national identities.

Governments in the region should conduct participatory consultation processes on matters relating to national identity and ideology, and international actors should provide support, for instance:

- Organise extracurricular (or curricular) courses that help youth contribute to the development of suitable national ideologies for their respective countries. These courses should allow young people and experts to discuss the meaning of terms like 'tolerance', 'separatism', 'genocide', 'ethnic cleansing', 'integration', 'nationalism' and 'patriotism'.
- Explore the past with youth and other groups within society, including minorities – particularly the underlying causes of past conflict, cases of ethnic persecutions, racial and ethnic oppression, civil war and cross-border land and resource disputes – to develop shared understanding and narratives that bridge existing divides and assist reconciliation.
- Analyse from a diversity of viewpoints, at universities and in educational institutions, the complex history of the concept of ethnicity in Central Asia and tell the story of how and when today's national borders were drawn.
- Finally, the history of ethnic/cultural traditions should be examined in formal education or extracurricular activities, for instance within youth institutions. This



should allow youth to explore historical documents or evidence, both for and against, the authenticity/validity of certain practices that are currently accepted as tradition (e.g. bride kidnapping). Youth should explore the contexts in which traditions developed and be allowed to think critically about what segments of society initiated these and what role they served. Youth should be encouraged to discuss which traditions are most conducive to inclusive development in their countries.

#### **6. Take decisive measures to strengthen accountability of institutions and tackle corruption.**

National governments should:

- Develop and implement a detailed, long-term plan to eradicate corruption and nepotism, including in employment and education, in line with Central Asian republics' obligations under the UN Convention Against Corruption.
- Develop genuine mechanisms for open and transparent competition for recruitment in the public sector, thus also increasing youth access to employment at state institutions.
- Strengthen institutions by attracting talented young people, including those who have studied abroad, and make it worth their while by raising salaries and imposing harsh penalties for corruption. In Central Asia there are a lot of young people who have studied abroad and are reform-minded. However, opportunities for this potential key resource are scarce and many feel disinclined to take poorly paid jobs, where corruption creates barricades at every step of the way.

International actors should:

- In their co-operation with Central Asian states, hold governments of the region accountable against their obligations to combat corruption according to the UN Convention Against Corruption.
- Provide examples of successes and lessons learnt from other contexts and countries that have sought to tackle corruption.

### **On creating an enabling environment for active participation of young people in the political process**

#### **7. Make every effort and use every opportunity to include young people in decision making.**

Relevant state structures need to conduct activities to include youth in decision making processes genuinely, regardless of their social and political status, or places of residence.

- Institutions such as youth parliaments appear to have been relatively successful and could be encouraged and promoted.
- Genuine youth consultations on issues affecting them, where young people are not made to feel that they must reiterate whatever they have been told by elders or authorities, should be institutionalised. This should start from school age and follow through in subsequent educational institutions.

#### **8. Promote access to diverse and quality information.**

National governments should:

- Increase access to information about the activities of government institutions, by improving public information policies, websites and e-democracy.
- Support media pluralism and interactive media. There are many interactive and innovative means of communication in the non-governmental and commercial spheres, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, which are popular with young people and which could be used as an instrument to promote discussion and interaction between young people on more serious topics affecting the development of their countries and

regions, and to break down stereotypes between ethnic, religious or different regional communities.

**9. Support youth institutions and give them a serious role in representing youth interests in decision making.**

National governments and international donors should:

- Give youth organisations a place at the table when policies affecting youth are being discussed and developed.
- Provide training and support to youth organisations, particularly their leaders, in the development of genuinely youth-oriented programmes and in involving youth in their design and implementation.

**On building young people's skills in democratic practices**

**10. International democratisation efforts should not be limited to formal processes such as elections, which can easily be manipulated. More attention should be paid to the basic experiences of the young population in everyday decision making.**

Democracy is as much about attitudes and behaviour as it is about the right institutions and governance. By giving young people the chance to practice their 'democracy skills' in everyday life, international actors and reform-minded national actors can help to develop a demand for democracy in the future.

National and international actors should promote both rural and urban initiatives which:

- Provide opportunities for youth to participate in resolving community problems, e.g. through volunteerism and youth-led community-based initiatives, which build young people's confidence in their own abilities and demonstrate young people's value to older generations and authorities.
- Train young people on how to negotiate with adults.
- Use interactive methods and games to train youth in how to express their opinions and participate in decision making processes.
- Support debates and discussions among young people on issues of interest to them, in order to increase their capacity to contribute to decision making.
- Conduct activities among youth to encourage them to form their own opinions and increase their interest in participating in the decision making processes.
- Organise conferences and discussions with the participation of local youth and youth from other countries, where they can play an active role in decision making.

**On strengthening social cohesion through cross-community and cross-generational dialogue**

**11. Promote interaction between youth, elders and authorities.**

National governments and international actors should support initiatives which:

- Invite elders and the authorities to debates and discussions among youth, as observers. This would provide an opportunity for elders and the authorities to listen to what youth think about issues and for young people to deliver their needs and concerns to elders and the authorities.
- Broadcast such discussions on local TV channels and through the internet, so that other people will be able to listen to young people's views.
- Support cross-community and cross-border interaction.

**12. Take measures to build trust and interaction between communities, including across borders, and to strengthen the integration of minorities into society and the state.**

National governments should:

- Create mechanisms for contact and joint activities across different ethnic and religious communities, including across borders, especially supporting joint action to solve shared problems.
- Strengthen the flow of information and exchange of ideas between people from different ethnic, religious or geographic backgrounds, to break down stereotypes.
- Undertake efforts to achieve adequate representation of minority representatives in state institutions, including the police.
- Provide extra opportunities for young people from minority backgrounds to gain the skills required to participate and interact with the 'life of the state', to counteract some of the feelings of exclusion that young people in this report describe.
- Incorporate extra courses on state languages in high schools for ethnic minority students.

**13. Wherever possible, utilise constructive partnerships with civil society to implement the measures described in this report.**

There is a lot of variation in the level of development of civil society in Central Asia, but right across the region there exist civil society organisations and activists who have been successfully using interactive and innovative methods to work with young people over the last 20 years. National governments should utilise the existing expertise within their countries wherever possible, to learn how to make their programmes and initiatives as attractive to young people as non-governmental initiatives.

**On combating extremism** **14. The international community should support regional governments to take a preventative approach to countering extremism, rather than one that is mainly reactive and focused on military and police responses.**

This requires national governments to:

- Address the underlying causes of extremist behaviour – economic exclusion, corruption and repression.

It also requires external actors to:

- Work with Central Asian governments to take a comprehensive approach to countering extremism in the region, less focused on providing material support, which mostly addresses the symptoms of extremism, but not its roots.
- Provide examples from the region and elsewhere, of the counter-productive effects of repressive measures against extremism.
- Provide cases of successful approaches to combating terrorist threats through non-repressive means.

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## **ANNEX 1: Proportions of youth in each of the Central Asian countries where research for this report took place**

	<b>Aged 0-4</b>	<b>Aged 5-14</b>	<b>Aged 15-24</b>	<b>Total under 24</b>
Kazakhstan	10.2%	14.2%	18.7%	45.1%
Kyrgyzstan	11.2%	18.9%	22.7%	52.8%
Tajikistan	12.7%	24.3%	23.5%	60.5%
Turkmenistan	10%	19.2%	21.8%	51%
Uzbekistan	10%	19.4%	21.9%	55.1%
Afghanistan	17.7%	28.8%	20.2%	66.7%

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects, the 2010 Revision, <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/p2k0data.asp>, accessed 2 February 2012.

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## ANNEX 2: Methodological notes

Overall, in six target countries, 48 focus group discussions,<sup>66</sup> which involved interactive, participatory and creative activities, 51 in-depth individual and group interviews<sup>67</sup> and 73 key informant interviews<sup>68</sup> were carried out. The research targeted young people aged between 16 and 26. Central Asian researchers working in co-operation with local civil society organisations in 21 target locations in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The greatest share of research was conducted in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which include the volatile Ferghana valley region. Afghanistan was included for comparison, because of its physical and ethno-cultural proximity and because its youth face more virulent forms of problems present in the other target countries.

Saferworld worked with local researchers to develop and design interactive and participatory research methods, which would provide opportunities for young people to analyse and reflect on their own context, perceptions and opinions. Young researchers then worked with local civil society activists to carry out the research. The researchers used different avenues of access to young people in order to ensure that the views of young people who are often excluded were captured and the findings were not based on the views of the young ‘workshop mafia’, which has developed in some parts of the region, over the last few years.

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<sup>66</sup> Afghanistan – 4; Kazakhstan – 1; Kyrgyzstan – 17; Tajikistan – 25; and Uzbekistan – 1.

<sup>67</sup> Afghanistan – 4; Kazakhstan – 12; Kyrgyzstan – 2; Tajikistan – 10; Turkmenistan – 7; and Uzbekistan – 16.

<sup>68</sup> Kazakhstan – 11; Kyrgyzstan – 22; Tajikistan – 37; and Uzbekistan – 3.

**Saferworld works to prevent and reduce violent conflict and promote co-operative approaches to security. We work with governments, international organisations and civil society to encourage and support effective policies and practices through advocacy, research and policy development and through supporting the actions of others.**

**COVER PHOTO:** Young people in Koi-Tash, Kyrgyzstan take part in Chui Youth Peace Camp, a UNICEF initiative to promote reconciliation and diversity in October 2011. © KAREN WYKURZ



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Registered charity no. 1043843

A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948

ISBN 978-1-904833-79-6