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Trust and Informal Power in Central Asia

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Central Asia still seems obscure to most outsiders, thirty years after the region’s Soviet-created republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) became independent nation-states in 1991. The region has received international attention primarily when it serves as an economic and strategic playing field for prominent powers, such as Russia, China, the United States, international organizations (like United Nations agencies or the World Bank), or multinational corporations. Much journalistic, policy, and academic writing about the region has focused on themes that arguably derive from the interests of these big external players: hydrocarbon energy, economic development, military bases, political stability, ethnic identity, Islamic extremism, elite corruption, human rights, and civil society, to name a few.

These topics are certainly worthy of investigation, but one wonders what is missing in the usual rendering of the region. What are Central Asians themselves most concerned with? How are people constructing livelihoods amidst the economic hardship and political dysfunction that have characterized this post-Soviet region?

In what may be an important yet largely unnoticed regional trend, local leaders are assembling their own arrangements of businesses, institutions, and networks to enable entire communities to prosper. These leaders are often entrepreneurs who become patrons, mobilizing people and resources to accumulate power and dispense benefits to their constituencies. (In the situations surveyed below, they are all men; studies of women leaders are greatly needed.) The emerging picture is that these local arrangements, organized not by states but by individual authority figures, are becoming increasingly important in some parts of Central Asian life, three decades into independence.

Why are nonstate actors wielding influence in post-Soviet Central Asia? Simply put, these entrepreneur-patrons are operating in many areas of society, impacting how Central Asians are provisioned and organized, in ways that rival the supposed prerogatives of states. They are growing local economies, building infrastructure, providing political stability and security, increasing social and intellectual capital (building and funding schools, for example), offering social protections for the unemployed and pensioners, and establishing media and religious institutions. Taken together, their endeavors offer glimpses of a complex, variegated landscape of power, where much more is happening to determine a population’s well-being than just the policies or activities of the state.

However, the communities organized by these leaders may not resemble what Western observers recognize as “civil society,” the voluntary association of autonomous individuals. Rather, they emerge from the particular socio-historical contexts and political economies of the region. They represent Central Asian solutions to Central Asian problems.

Who are these nonstate actors, what are they up to, and how are they able to sometimes perform almost state-like functions? To find answers, we need to unpack how these figures are located within their communities and relate to their people, and how their endeavors are organized and institutionalized to channel money, resources, labor, connections, and knowledge toward certain ends.

A crucial factor in their success in making a difference on the ground is their ability to cultivate and sustain high levels of interpersonal *trust*. These local leaders can spend years carefully building their positions, crafting their images as

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patrons who act as benefactors for their local constituencies. They maintain trust by delivering material goods to their communities: jobs, commodities, loans, and aid. They also sustain trust by delivering what we may call capacity: education, information, opportunities, and networking. But it is perhaps the intangible benefits that most powerfully cement the relations of trust between patron and constituency: senses of solidarity, local pride, cultural flourishing, or religious piety.

A characteristic of how these Central Asian entrepreneurs exercise power is their great skill in navigating these multiple levels of maintaining trust with the community, from the most material to the most spiritual. They do so in a manner that resonates strongly with cultural sensibilities, mobilizing locally circulating tropes of legitimate authority, beneficent wealth, and moral personhood. These patrons make themselves indispensable, developing into elites who alone can work for the common good. In a context where the ability of states to promote the commonweal effectively remains under constant question, this is a claim carrying great resonance.

Intangible benefits cement the relations of trust between patron and constituency.

Interpersonal trust underlies the socioeconomic arrangements that shape the lives of Central Asians. The region had been seen as an environment of low general trust among strangers, especially after the dissolution of the collective purpose that state socialism had partially provided. The 1990s brought a disturbing period of socioeconomic instability that was read as a society-wide moral crisis as much as a material one—human relations became inhumane, selfish, and predatory. The Central Asian bazaar stood as a metaphor for the new market relations, a space of chaos, exploitation, and struggle.

This state of affairs could not endure; every society needs to somehow secure conventions of trust-building in order to function. Trust has underpinned cooperation in commerce throughout history, whether via kinship ties in a family business or through legal institutions binding participants in a modern corporation. Some creative Central Asians have come up with their own ways of solving the problem of communal trust to enable collective endeavor in the post-Soviet era.

ETHNIC AND ISLAMIC AFFINITIES

How are these relations of trust being organized into new arrangements, mobilizing people and resources? The evidence is admittedly fragmentary at this time. We are connecting dots from recent studies of various phenomena that the authors and subjects themselves do not necessarily identify as part of a trend. Still, we can attempt to paste these snapshots of Central Asian lives onto a bigger canvas, tracing how trust, as social capital, gets converted into economic and political impact.

A good starting point is to reconsider the many studies of ethnic identity in post-Soviet Central Asia. Much attention has been paid to how these states have elaborated nationalist ideologies that highlight the distinctive history and heritage of the ruling ethnic groups, and how these ideas take form in architecture, monuments, art, books, posters, museums, public performances, television programs, street names, school curricula, and political speeches. Other studies examine the situation of ethnic minorities, border disputes, conflicts over resources, or armed violence between ethnic groups.

These different contexts and problems could also be read as revealing efforts to consolidate communities of trust based on ethnic affinity. Whether it is Central Asian states defining post-Soviet terms of national belonging or local actors mobilizing communal projects for something or against somebody, ethnicity stands available as a basis for delineating the boundaries of trust for a common purpose. The social dynamics of ethnicity involve much more than that, but the desire for recognizable categories of people to trust in socioeconomic life is worth noting.

Another major concern of scholarship is the region's so-called Islamic revival. Some studies interpret the past three decades of mosque construction, modest dress, religious education, and Islamic observance as nationalist projects of restoring religious heritage suppressed by Soviet rule. Others see the phenomenon as driven by grassroots community building, the accumulation of prestige via piety, or the cultivation of virtuous character in obedience to God. In any case—and these interpretations are not mutually exclusive—the increase in Islamic activity does help establish circles of trust based on a shared commitment to faith.

Particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since the 2000s, there has been a proliferation of "halal," or religiously compliant, business associations, as the sociologist Aisalkyn Botoeva has shown. Entrepreneurs in various sectors (retail, services, manufacturing, or distribution) establish private networks to exchange goods, capital, expertise, information, and labor within states where banking and judicial contract enforcement are not trustworthy. These business networks are by invitation only, based on personal relations and reputation.

A centerpiece of reputation and trust is the participants' very public piety. They practice Islam and claim to conduct business according to high religious standards of probity and social justice. Some customers and clients want to deal with them because they believe these enterprises avoid corruption and contribute to the commonweal through humane employment practices and charity.

One collective of pious businessmen operated in Andijan, Uzbekistan, providing credit, jobs, Islamic education, and aid to the city's communities. In June 2004, 23 of these men were arrested and accused of membership in an Islamic extremist group and of plotting to overthrow the state. Andijanis organized months of peaceful protests against these arrests, but on May 12, 2005, a group of demonstrators stormed into police stations and a military garrison, armed themselves, freed the 23 defendants, occupied the provincial government building, and called for the central government to acquit the businessmen and address the city's economic problems. The government suppressed the uprising with overwhelming military force, killing hundreds of mostly unarmed civilians.

The Andijan Massacre was a complicated series of events with many causes and contingencies. But a less noted aspect of the case is that, whatever else these 23 men were up to, their organization and operations resembled Islamic business networks across Central Asia that provide tangible economic benefits to their communities. That explains why crowds of ordinary people were rallying on their behalf for months before the violence—the business circle had accumulated a reservoir of trust within the city. It may also point to the real threat that these entrepreneurs posed to the Uzbekistani state. Their circle of enterprises was acting almost like a miniature private state, contributing noticeably to the socioeconomic needs of the city, and highlighting the government's shortcomings. The national state, unable to brook this rival, moved decisively to dismantle it.

Local arrangements of trust

Shared ethnic affiliation and religious commitment can facilitate relations of trust that get things done. But trust can be built by other means in Central Asia. One theme running through the cases considered here is that trust helps establish predictability in human affairs and business dealings. Trust stabilizes socioeconomic order.

Central Asian bazaars were seen as exemplars of unpredictability and disorder in the initial years of independence, as the prices, quality, and availability of goods varied seemingly without reason. By the 2000s and 2010s, bazaars had become quite orderly (though still crowded and noisy). The change came not only from state regulation and better supply chains. More significantly, according to the political scientist Regina Spector, some open markets in Kyrgyzstan became domains of successful commercial endeavor because innovative entrepreneurs created for themselves conditions of security and predictability. Wholesale bazaars such as Dordoi, outside of Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, emerged as major transit hubs for Chinese goods moving across Eurasia starting in the 2000s, even as the state's enforcement of regulations and contracts proved weak and inconsistent.

Dordoi's owner, Askar Salymbekov, forged personal relationships with high government officials, built up the market's infrastructure, and negotiated supplier pipelines to secure and expand his bazaar. Dordoi was also organized from the bottom up—traders formed their own union and appointed "elders" from among their ranks to protect and train the sellers on their market rows. The union negotiated with the police and tax officials to create a regularized system of taxation and inspection. It also mediated disputes between bazaar workers, forming a community of mutual help and camaraderie. Spector's research reveals that the bazaar workforce was multiethnic, bound together with the common goal of a well-run business environment.

Bazaars become efficient and profitable thanks to the work of different actors. Dordoi's sellers, their supervising elders, and their unions formed their own domains of cooperative trust. Their organization and activity were enabled by the political cover secured by Salymbekov, the market's owner. The state's relevance consisted mostly

of staying out of the way, according to terms personally negotiated by him. This case shows the importance of individual entrepreneurs, skilled in both business strategy and political positioning, when it comes to creating conditions of possibility for trust relations and economic activity.

Entrepreneurial figures like this are readily found elsewhere in the region. In rural Kyrgyzstan in the late 2000s, a man called "Rahim" by the anthropologist Aksana Ismailbekova succeeded rapidly in becoming an influential businessman and elected official. His power base was a former collective farm that was distant from the republic's urban centers. He soon became the big patron of the area. Rahim constructed social circles of trust that cleverly evoked culturally resonant imagery of Kyrgyz kinship and tradition, casting himself as a native son who promoted the prosperity of the village.

This patron inspired great loyalty from his many clients by offering them personal access to the money, equipment, and supplies of the farm in times of crisis. He also provided services such as resolving conflicts or dealing with the government, which he was competent to handle due to his personal connections with provincial and national officials, as well as his elected position. His patronage network mobilized resources and labor to improve the local economy noticeably. To top off his status as benefactor, he funded village construction projects, such as a mosque.

Patron-entrepreneurs are non-state actors embedded in and emerging from communities.

Rahim's case shows the subtle connections between official roles and informal influence. It also displays the interlaced roles of economic development, material benefits, political cover, ethnic culture, and eloquent rhetoric in building relations of trust. This entrepreneur was successful because he could adeptly juggle these very different forms of trust cultivation, turning social capital into economic and political capital, and vice versa.

A POLITICAL ENTREPRENEUR IN JALAL-ABAD

An intriguing parallel case is that of Kadyrjan Batyrov, an Uzbek entrepreneur who played an instrumental role in shaping some of the basic infrastructures of everyday life in Jalal-Abad, an Uzbek-majority city in southern Kyrgyzstan. He built and ultimately led an extensive suite of interconnected institutions that provided a broad range of services: a university, a newspaper, a publishing house, a school, a medical clinic, cultural centers, shops, bazaars, other commercial enterprises, a mosque, and a theater, among others. The material presence and economic impact of these projects became increasingly noticeable in Jalal-Abad starting in the 1990s. They were picking up speed during the 2000s, when I conducted ethnographic fieldwork there.

Similar to Salymbekov and Rahim, Batyrov was not only a successful businessman but also a political entrepreneur, working out innovative arrangements with governmental authorities to protect his endeavors from state interference or predation. Under Batyrov's patronage, ethnic Uzbeks, a minority facing discrimination, flourished under politically adverse circumstances in the 1990s and 2000s. This was a remarkable accomplishment given the troubled history of Kyrgyz–Uzbek relations in Kyrgyzstan, starting with the 1990 Osh Riots, a series of armed interethnic conflicts.

Batyrov helped create the conditions for vibrant economic and professional activity that provided employment and services to Jalal-Abad's Uzbek community and others. He did so by cultivating a personal relationship with then-President Kurmanbek Bakiev, an ethnic Kyrgyz who was also from Jalal-Abad.

Batyrov carefully crafted a public image of a patron acting not only for Uzbek interests but also for the common good of Kyrgyzstan. In my interviews with the leaders of Batyrov's institutions, they made emphatic claims about how the businesses provided essential goods, services, and jobs to Jalal-Abadis of all ethnicities. Batyrov's university in Jalal-Abad was called the Friendship of Peoples University, appropriating the Soviet trope of interethnic harmony. His Uzbek-language newspaper *Diydor* reported Kyrgyzstan's events as occurring in "our country," and referred to Bakiev as "our president," whereas news from Uzbekistan was placed in the "foreign" section. The newspaper's geographical categories were clearly signals to the Kyrgyz authorities, because its (Uzbek) readers in fact saw themselves as being more connected to people and places in Uzbekistan (whose border is less than 10 kilometers from Jalal-Abad) than in Kyrgyzstan.

In such ways, Batyrov positioned his institutions as loyal Kyrgyzstani outfits that bore no hint of Uzbek nationalism, a sensitive political trigger in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, Batyrov's

urban enterprises literally went up in smoke during the country's 2010 political crisis, when opposition to Bakiev's rule, initially unrelated to the Kyrgyz–Uzbek question, evolved into a wider uprising. Uzbek majority cities in Kyrgyzstan's south, like Jalal-Abad, plunged back into interethnic violence. Kyrgyz mobs targeted Batyrov's institutions, revealing that his years of careful cultivation of relations with Kyrgyz leaders and the Kyrgyz community in the city had provided only fragile cover for his endeavors in a time of unrest. In the years since, no large-scale Uzbek-led organization has emerged in Kyrgyzstan.

Even though Batyrov's story appears to be one of failure, his accomplishments were extraordinary until external events overtook his work. During the first two decades of post-Soviet independence, he managed to construct an extensive set of profitable businesses and institutions that affected thousands of lives in the city. He connected with the population on multiple levels simultaneously, providing them with material benefits (markets, goods, services, jobs), capacity (education, news), and cultural-religious facilities (theater, cultural centers, mosques).

To the city's Uzbeks, Batyrov provided a sense of communal pride and belonging in their Kyrgyz-dominated country. The grand Uzbek patron of Jalal-Abad could do all this because he was skilled in cultivating and channeling relations of trust—very successfully with the city's Uzbeks, and successfully enough with the city's Kyrgyz—until a national crisis hit. He created a model of social and economic flourishing under unlikely political circumstances, and it worked well for quite a while.

PATTERNS OF PATRONAGE

There is a pattern to informal leadership in Central Asia, discernible even in the small number of documented cases considered here. These patron-entrepreneurs are central in organizing arrangements of people and resources that develop local economies and structure social life. They are creating the conditions for better provisioning populations, an accomplishment that is usually seen as the duty of the state, particularly under expectations set by the Soviet experience. These are nonstate actors embedded in and emerging from communities. Operating on a small scale, they address the socioeconomic challenges with which the post-Soviet Central Asian states have struggled: poverty, inequality, unemployment, inflation, poor education, corruption, injustice, and conflict.

There are notable trends in how these nonstate actors accomplish almost state-like functions, juggling affairs on multiple fronts. For starters, they tend to be *business* entrepreneurs who can effectively raise capital, secure supply chains, recruit talent, manage labor, read market signals, serve clients, expand their activities, and then turn a profit at the end of the day. They also tend to be *political* entrepreneurs who cultivate personal relations with relevant government officials, such as regional authorities, police, and taxation and inspection organs. A patron's political connections help his enterprises avoid state predation. In Batyrov's case, they also secured cover for an ethnic minority to pursue organized activity in a political context where any large-scale Uzbek endeavor is seen as potentially seditious.

Moreover, these patrons need to be skilled narrators, adept at crafting images of themselves as benefactors. They are elite figures who present themselves as serving not only their own personal enrichment and political ambition, but also the needs of the community. They do so by engaging in philanthropy, emphasizing the material benefits conferred by their businesses, and narrating their endeavors in terms of culturally resonant tropes, such as being an authentic native son of the land, grand patron of the city, or paragon of pious virtue. Claims about the moral character of the leader—honesty, selflessness, industriousness, courage—often underpin his image.

The cultivation of trust is a crucial thread running through these different endeavors. Successful local leaders maintain trust with constituents, partners, and political figures by offering arrangements of mutual benefit. Those material and social benefits both enable and are in turn enabled by the coordinated collaboration of the parties under the patron's leadership. Patronage, if cultivated well, has this kind of self-enforcing dynamic and thus fosters stability. Patrons' special manner of conducting socioeconomic relations and the particular cultural narratives that they use to craft their self-presentation as virtuous benefactors may be seen as specifically Central Asian characteristics of this phenomenon.

CONCEIVING CENTRAL ASIAN FUTURES

The ways in which community is organized and provisioned under this kind of patron represent Central Asian solutions to Central Asian problems

of economic hardship and political inequities. With most of the population living in poverty and the republics' wealth (deriving mostly from natural resource exports) disproportionately distributed to connected elites, the persistent question for most citizens is how to fashion viable lives amidst these structural disadvantages. Their needs present opportunities for local business-political entrepreneurs to mobilize people and resources into culturally resonant arrangements that create new economic and political possibilities, including for minorities subject to discrimination.

Contrast these communally embedded endeavors with many Western-led development programs. Far from a consultant's one-size-fits-all plan, these local entrepreneurs calibrate their strategies to the specifics of Central Asian social practices and moral sensibilities. American-style business skills, individualism, rights, and democratic participation have no place in the toolbox of these patrons. Rather, their model centers on an authoritarian "big man" carving out a private domain of personal trust relations that delivers tangible and intangible benefits to many dependents. The arrangements are paternalistic and communalistic, bound by feelings of moral obligation between patron and clients. No Western NGO would conceive of such a paradigm for communal flourishing. This is not the "civil society" of autonomous citizens in voluntary association that an outside analyst might promote.

Local entrepreneurs calibrate their strategies to Central Asian social practices.

These patterns in local leadership and organization do not imply that all Central Asians prefer a society of many local patrons to one with strong state institutions, consistent law enforcement, impartial courts, and equal treatment of citizens. Some are well aware of the differences in governance between their countries and others in the world, especially now that there are growing Central Asian diasporas and social media connections. Yet the existing socio-political realities at home make other options difficult to obtain in practice.

Patronage confers advantages over reliance solely on inadequate state structures. Moreover, many find the figure of a virtuous benefactor organically tied to the community to be a compelling presence—much more so than an abstraction such as the "rule of law." Some of these leaders do seem to deliver much of what they promise, improving lives in tangible ways. That may be more than development experts have accomplished in the region over the past thirty years.

These observations do not necessarily constitute an endorsement for this form of patronage as the best societal paradigm for Central Asia's future. Just because an arrangement has cultural resonance does not make it the eternal first choice for Central Asians, particularly if viable alternatives become truly available. Cultural sensibilities are not fixed, as seven decades under Soviet rule revealed. The task of conceiving and achieving alternatives is fiendishly difficult, but if Central Asians themselves take the leading role, it may be possible.

Notions of mutual obligation and common good inform the relations of trust cultivated by local patrons. If the mutuality of the commons could be extended to genuinely include people of all ethnicities and localities, then the interdependence of face-to-face community might be widened to approximate national civic belonging, but on terms connected with Central Asian communal experience. Likewise, if trust between familiars could be extended to bring about increased trust among strangers, social and business affairs would be conducted more effectively outside the sphere of personal networks. This amounts to reimagining the nation as a trust community where social differences matter less than the shared purpose of making a fair commonweal. In such a world, local patrons would become less necessary.

Certainly, there would be a constructive role for the state as well as mechanisms of accountability, but any effective societal paradigm needs to connect with the patterns and moral orientations of social life. Central Asians will have to reconcile the tensions between existing arrangements and what they may conceive as a more just society. This will require a novel synthesis. But if we have learned anything from this tour of ground-level trends in Central Asia, it is that the people of the region are creatively innovative. ■