



# UNISCI Discussion Papers

## LEARNING TO LIVE WITH FRONTIERS: NEW FRONTIERS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Frontiers, dividing space and marking out the limits of a State's authority, are also places of contact, exchange and confrontation. The new borders that have been created in Central Asia constitute a precedent in a world where the tendency is for frontiers to be abolished. A new iron curtain is descending across this region which is making daily life extremely difficult for the people who live there. What is currently happening on the ground represents a step backwards in time: the iron curtain, or rather curtains, is breaking up an area which has never been divided before throughout its long history. Each country is gradually erecting a wall of barbed wire and mines.

In this vast space, several types of border problem can be distinguished:

- The delimitation of borders, in other words the actual marking of boundaries, which is the subject of negotiations between States and which can last several years;
- Crossing state borders, this is what people and goods have to do on a daily basis;
- The sharing of water resources, which is a geopolitical problem;
- Movement within countries where each *oblast* is protected by its own borders.

### 1. The difficult process of learning to live with the frontier

The new frontiers in Central Asia are the legacy of the Soviet regime. The new republics inherited them after the collapse of the USSR. They have supervised them since 1991, the year of their independence.

It must be understood that until 1991 the people living in these regions had never experienced a frontier. This was a totally unknown concept for them. Even in the 19th century

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and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the vast territory of Central Asia was called Turkestan where everyone moved around freely. There was indeed a frontier with the Chinese Empire and with the area of British influence to the south, but no one crossed these borders, apart from a few nomads who had no need for passports as they were not recognised as citizens by any of the States.

During the Soviet period, the Central Asian states had no experience of frontiers, or rather their frontiers were virtual ones, with no reality except on the map. People moved on a regular basis from one State to another, with no need for formalities since each Soviet citizen automatically received a passport and could move around freely with no visa or special procedures being required. Today the populations of the five Republics are beginning to learn what a frontier is. Families have been brutally split up by a line that is impassable or almost, a line that is closing in more tightly day by day. A visa is compulsory for anyone who wants to cross this line.

There is one exception: people living in the *rayons* that border the frontier are able to cross to visit their family members on the other side. Even though no visa is needed in this instance, a fee is levied for the crossing (\$7), and the duration of these visits is limited. But in any case, a passport is required. For Europeans, it did prove possible to cross the border into an enclave of the Kyrgyz Fergana region for 2 hours, in exchange for a large bribe and a meal for the 3 soldiers who were accompanying us. Some sectors, however, even with bribes, proved to be impenetrable. This was the case in the Sokh district in the Kyrgyz Fergana region and in the Uzbek-Tajik border region around Sharisabz (near Samarkand). Very close-knit families, who used to visit one another every week, can now do so only on special occasions.

Since independence (1991), the situation has hardened a little more every day. The delimitation of the borders is currently being carried out. In certain sectors this is an extremely sensitive process as it may require the agreement of two or three parties. There are still 130 points of discord in this region! The Fergana valley is one such: several countries are involved in this delimitation process and it is a sensitive sector as it is the most densely populated region of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the richest in agricultural terms for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and it is also rich in energy and mineral resources (oil, water, gold). It is also an area of crossing points: a zone where Islamic extremists are able to infiltrate, where drug traffickers can cross, etc. The ethnic groups are extremely intermingled: large minorities from each country have settled in the neighbouring countries. To complicate the situation even further, there are Uzbek and Tajik enclaves in Kyrgyzstan, and Kyrgyz and Tajik enclaves in Uzbekistan. The line of the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is the subject of bitter discussions in this sector. With Tajikistan, however, no discussion is underway since, in order to protect itself from Islamic extremist infiltration, Uzbekistan has mined the entire border and thus has unilaterally delimited it, a situation which is not without posing problems for the border populations, who use the mountains for grazing. Many people are blown up by the mines, whose positions were originally marked but which are now covered by vegetation. Animals are also killed of course and this represents a tremendous loss for these people who are already very poor. There are frequent incidents involving border guards. Border posts are frequently moved in this mountainous zone between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Kazakhstan recently closed its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and this threatens the very survival of some of the population of Bishkek who used to cross every day to sell



their fruit and vegetables, and also people from Tashkent who came to buy supplies, as prices in Kazakhstan were lower. There is a stalemate with Turkmenistan as they have put up a barbed wire fence, particularly in Khorezm, in the Uzbekistan border region which historically stretched along both sides the Amudarya river. These new borders are therefore making life very difficult for people who are already very poor. How do they manage to bypass the border where this is possible? How are they able, despite all this, to keep in touch with family members on the other side of the line? How do they feel about these borders? It is this vision that we will try to look at, based on surveys carried out in the Fergana region in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and in Khorezm and Karakalpakhistan in Uzbekistan.

It is always possible to cross the border illegally, with a bribe. Contraband food products, textiles and petrol are common currency in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Thus in the Kyrgyz Fergana, along the border, there is not a single petrol station where you can buy petrol; but they are not necessary as every house along the road sells Uzbek petrol. This is brought in by car or even on foot, by bike, in carts (the women can bring in as much as 500 litres a day across the fields!). In the Uzbek Fergana, however, or even in Tashkent, there are petrol stations, but many of them are closed as they have not paid the commission due to the State in order to receive a delivery. Those that are open steal some of the customers' petrol, which they can then sell on as contraband!

Along the Turkmen border, in the Khiva or Nukus sector, the contraband petrol arrives from Turkmenistan where it is less expensive. In Kyrgyzstan, in the Talas region or around Bishkek, sectors close to Kazakhstan, the same happens, and we find petrol in bottles or in jerrycans! The profit for the seller: a miserly 1 or 2 pence per litre!

## **2. The old frontiers inherited from the former Central Asian States of the ex-USSR and the implantation of the capitals**

After lengthy disputes, discussions between the new States and China resulted in a series of agreements. However, with the post-Soviet territorial regime in Central Asia there have been potential and actual disputes between States when the delimitation of shared borders was under consideration.

Kazakhstan and China have just completed the delimitation in the field of their 1,782 kilometres of frontier<sup>3</sup>. The situation between China and Kyrgyz is quite different. The President, fearing the power of his Chinese neighbour, gave up some hundreds of thousands of hectares in the mountain area, but this was Kyrgyz land, given up without any reference to Parliament. Many protests followed, including some very serious incidents. The inhabitants of Kerben (very far from the Chinese border, but they belonged to the southern clans, whereas power was in the hands of the northern clans) were furious, and revolted, organising in spring 2003, a 500 km march to Bishkek.

The border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was drawn up unilaterally. And the Kyrgyz were not given the right to protest. A new iron curtain appears to have been set up between these 2 countries and along the border with Tajikistan too, which has been mined. In the Batken province (Kyrgyzstan) crossing into Uzbekistan is particularly difficult. The dead

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<sup>3</sup> IWPR, 13 February 2004.



and injured are numbered in dozens, because they are either blown up by the mines or shot by the border guards, who give the pretext that they are “fighting terrorism” and preventing the Islamic militants from penetrating Uzbekistan.

The border between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is also seeing a new iron curtain descend. From one day to the next villagers in Khorezm found themselves cut off from their land and crops by barbed wire. Anyone who crosses illegally risks being shot by the border guards.

It should be noted that the capitals of the 5 ex-Soviet Central Asian States are all located close to the borders. Historically, the choice of capitals in the Central Asian countries has always been calculated to strengthen the hold of the centre over the periphery. Territorial control was always essential for the Soviets, who did everything to prevent the formation of a vast Turkestan which could have escaped their grasp.

Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan until 1999, was tucked away in the south of the country, near the Kyrgyz border, in the region dominated by the Great Horde. The capital has recently been moved to Astana (formerly Tselinograd, then Akmola)<sup>4</sup> in the north of the country, closer to the zone where large minorities of Russians are concentrated and which may demand its independence or want to break away from Kazakhstan to return to Russia.

In 1924, the Soviet regime of the October Revolution established the capital of Kazakhstan in Orenbourg, in the north, hence on the Kazak periphery. In 1925, the capital was moved to the steppe at Kyzyl Orda (formerly Ak Mechet or “White mosque”) in order to consolidate Soviet power over the region. Orenbourg broke away and was incorporated into Russia, and this marked the separation of the Volga Muslims from those of Central Asia. A new change occurred in 1927: the capital was moved to Alma Ata, (formerly Verny, and Almaty after Independence) in the south of the country. The proportion of Kazaks dropped from 57 % in 1926 to under 50 % in 1939.<sup>5</sup>

In Kyrgyzstan, the capital in the north of the country on the border with Kazakhstan, was from the outset a Russian city, Frunze, named after a Russian Communist leader (Mikhail Frunze), a descendant of colonists who had settled in the country. Since independence, it has reverted to the Kyrgyz name of Bishkek.

Uzbekistan is the most populated country in Central Asia and the only one that has a common border with the other four. It was the Uzbeks who had the strongest political tradition of the entire region. It was they who directed the khanat of Khokand<sup>6</sup>, the Emirate of Bukhara and the khanat of Khiva which were maintained until after the collapse of the Russian Empire. To thwart the Uzbeks’ vague desires for independence and prevent them from trying to reconstitute a great Muslim Turkestan, the Soviets created a country that was very long in shape with very indented borders. Moreover, out of the 447,000 km<sup>2</sup> that make up Uzbekistan, the autonomous republic of Karakalpakistan occupies about 180,000 km<sup>2</sup>. This republic,

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<sup>4</sup> During the Soviet period, the city was called Tselinograd, and was later baptised Akmola. When some who were sceptical about the location of the new capital translated its name by white tomb, it was decided to call it Astana, which means "capital" in Kazak. It is located in the middle of a steppe battered by violent winds, with saline soils, and a very harsh climate where temperatures can drop to -50°.

<sup>5</sup> Kolarz, Walter (1954): *La Russie et ses colonies*. Paris, Fasquelle éditeurs, pp. 354-355.

<sup>6</sup> The khanat of Khokand disappeared in 1875.



which was part of Kazakhstan until 1930, then passed under the control of the Soviet Russian Federation, was incorporated in 1936 into the Uzbek Republic<sup>7</sup>.

The choice of the capital represented a strategic choice here too. For the Bolsheviks, Samarkand was best placed, as it was an important intellectual centre. This was a failure, however, as the authorities did not succeed in turning it into a “red” capital. In 1930, the capital was transferred to Tashkent. Each time the capital is transferred it is for a profound political reason, with fundamental consequences for the country concerned. Although Samarkand was an Uzbek city (few Russians lived there), permeated with the history of the Uzbek people, Tashkent was a modern city, European in appearance and population, and essentially Russian. Tashkent, moreover, is really close to the Kazak border.

Tajikistan, where the language is Persian, was probably the most important country in Central Asia for the Soviets, as it was the bridgehead for their Afghan, Indian and Iranian policies. This is why the Bolsheviks wanted to make it the leader of the Persian world, the heart and the head of the Iranian world. The republic was created in 1929. The population of the capital Stalinabad (now Dushanbe) increased from 5,607 inhabitants in 1927 to 82,500 in 1939, and in particular, from being a poor market town it became a modern city, entirely dominated by the Russians<sup>8</sup>.

Concerning Turkmenistan, the upper course of the Amudarya is in Afghanistan and its middle course forms the border between the two countries. By developing irrigation the Russians hoped to break up Afghanistan and provoke the autonomisation of the neighbouring Persian provinces (Khorassan and Asterabad), as Turkmens live in Afghanistan and Persia.

### **3. Movement within ex-Soviet Central Asia**

This delimitation of the borders is such that, when travelling within one country it is necessary to cross the borders of at least one other country.

The Batken *oblast* (Kyrgyzstan) contains no fewer than 7 enclaves belonging to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. To go from Bishkek to Batken, it is necessary to cross several of these Uzbek or Tajik enclaves, and this requires the possession of visas.

The Osh *oblast* forms part of the rich Fergana plain. This land belonged to Uzbekistan, but was divided up by the Soviets in 1929. To travel from Djellal-Abad to Osh, two towns in Kyrgyzstan (Osh *oblast*), it was necessary to cross part of Uzbekistan. There was no road that followed the frontier until 2002. Since then, a road has been built that avoids Uzbekistan: it passes through Özgen, which adds almost 100 km to the journey and which has enabled Uzbekistan to regain the Andijan reservoir which had been allocated to Kyrgyzstan! Also in Kyrgyzstan, a little to the north of Djellal-Abad, the road around Kochkor Ata travels for a few hundred metres through Uzbek territory. The border crosses the village where there has been constant harassment. To avoid this, the Kyrgyz solved the problem by building a 10 km bypass road which allows them to avoid the village completely!

<sup>7</sup> This scarcely populated republic, which lies to the south of the Aral Sea, at first had Karalpaks (38.1 %), Kazaks (28.1 %), Uzbeks (27.7 %), Turkmens (3.2 %) and Russians (1.8 %). Kolarz, Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

<sup>8</sup> Kolarz, Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 378-388.



The fastest road from Bishkek to Talas, capital of the Talas *oblast*, passes mainly through Kazakhstan, but to travel on this road a visa is necessary.

The most direct Andijan-Samarkand road (2 towns in Uzbekistan) passes through Tajikistan for over a hundred km before returning to Uzbekistan. The Tashkent-Samarkand road (both cities in Uzbekistan) crosses Kazakhstan for 40 km. Although in 2001, there were no border checkpoints along this route, in 1999, there were police and customs posts. In 2003, this direct road had been closed for several months, necessitating a detour via Gulistan, if one was to remain in Uzbekistan, which represented an extra one and a half hours on the journey time. Kazakhstan demands that Uzbekistan pay royalties for using “their road”, but Uzbekistan refuses.

After 150 km, the road that links the two capitals Tashkent and Dushanbe crosses over for a few kilometres into Tajikistan, to cross back into Uzbekistan, then Tajikistan, into Uzbekistan again, to end up in Tajikistan.

It is not only the road that zigzags across the frontiers, but even the railway line. The line between Tashkent and Termiz, a historic town on the Amudarya at the Uzbek-Afghan border, crosses the Turkmen border south of Qarshi, then meets up with the Amudarya again as it flows into Turkmenistan, then recrosses the Uzbek border 160 km further on, at the same time as the Amudarya, 50 km from Termiz. The river remains in Uzbek territory as far as the border with Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, it forms the border with Afghanistan, apart from a short stretch where it flows into Afghan Badakhshan.

The railway line from Tashkent to Nukus, capital of Karakalpakstan, (autonomous republic of Uzbekistan) first crosses Kazakhstan for forty kilometres<sup>9</sup>, going through Samarkand, Navoy, Bukhara, and then turns south-west of Bukhara to the Turkmen town of Chardzhev. The line then follows the Amudarya in Turkmenistan as far as Drujba, then returns to Uzbekistan and goes on to Urgench. Some 60 km further on, at Dashovuz, it once again crosses the Turkmen border, to return to Karakalpakstan at Takhiatash. The Tashkent-Ashkabat railway line, like the road, also passes via Bukhara and Chardzev.

To avoid the constant problems, Uzbekistan has built a railway line from Nukus to Uchkuduk, which then goes through Zarafshan, Navoi, Gulistan before reaching Tashkent. This line crosses the Kyzyl Kum desert for 500 km and was built in 3 years by political prisoners from the Uchkuduk prison. The train journey from Tashkent to Nukus takes 25 to 26 hours. This is slower than the car (20 hours), but there are no checkpoints to go through.

This constant crossing and recrossing of borders to get from one town to another within the same country only increase the difficulties in circulation, which is already difficult enough because of the climate, the relief and the effects of the environment. Administrative and political hassles are always possible and the frontier may close at any time. Indeed, during July 2001, the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border in the Fergana was opened to road traffic, and in August it was completely closed in order to prevent any infiltration of terrorists or Muslim fundamentalists who might have disturbed the festivities to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence that took place from the end of August to the beginning of September. The departure of the Soviets has seriously complicated geopolitics in Central Asia.

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<sup>9</sup> Like the road, it now has to make the detour via Gulistan to bypass Kazakhstan.



#### 4. Questions of minorities in the Central Asian States

Existing or dormant conflicts based on ethnicity have their origins in questions of minorities that develop into inter-ethnic border problems, but which may also have serious consequences for the stability of the region. With the resurgence of local ethnic identities and the presence of Russians who originated from these regions, the situation has become very sensitive.

Basically, each State corresponds to an ethnicity and bears the name of the ethnic group that predominates in the country. However, the borders have been drawn in such a way that in each country there are several minorities from the predominant ethnic groups from neighbouring countries. The Soviets were well aware that this situation would spark off problems between ethnic groups. This is exactly what happened after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Large Kyrgyz minorities settled in eastern Tajikistan and eastern Uzbekistan (Dostlik and east of Jizzakh). Similarly, large Tajik minorities settled in the areas around Samarkand and especially Bukhara, towns that had belonged to Tajikistan before the Russian invasion and to which they were now laying claim. In Bukhara, three languages are spoken on a regular basis and taught in the schools: Tajik, Uzbek and Russian. All of the Fergana valley belonged to Uzbekistan and was peopled by Uzbeks. But this area has now been divided between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There have been revolts in Osh (Kyrgyzstan), where Uzbeks predominate. The Uzbek and Tajik enclaves in Kyrgyzstan pose a problem and border incidents are becoming more frequent.

*Table 1: Main ethnic groups in Central Asia according to size and concentration by titular Republic in USSR, 1989*

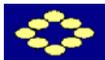
	Size of ethnic group	Total population	Population of titular group	% of ethnic group in the republic	% of titular group in the population of the republic
Uzbeks	16,697,000	19,906,000	14,124,000	84	70
Kazaks	8,136,000	16,538,000	6,532,000	80	39
Kyrgyz	2,529,000	4,291,000	2,228,000	88	52
Tajiks	4,215,000	5,112,000	3,168,000	75	75
Turkmens	2,729,000	3,534,000	2,524,000	92	92

Source: *Journal of Soviet Nationalities*, vol.1, n°2 (1990), pp.157-159.

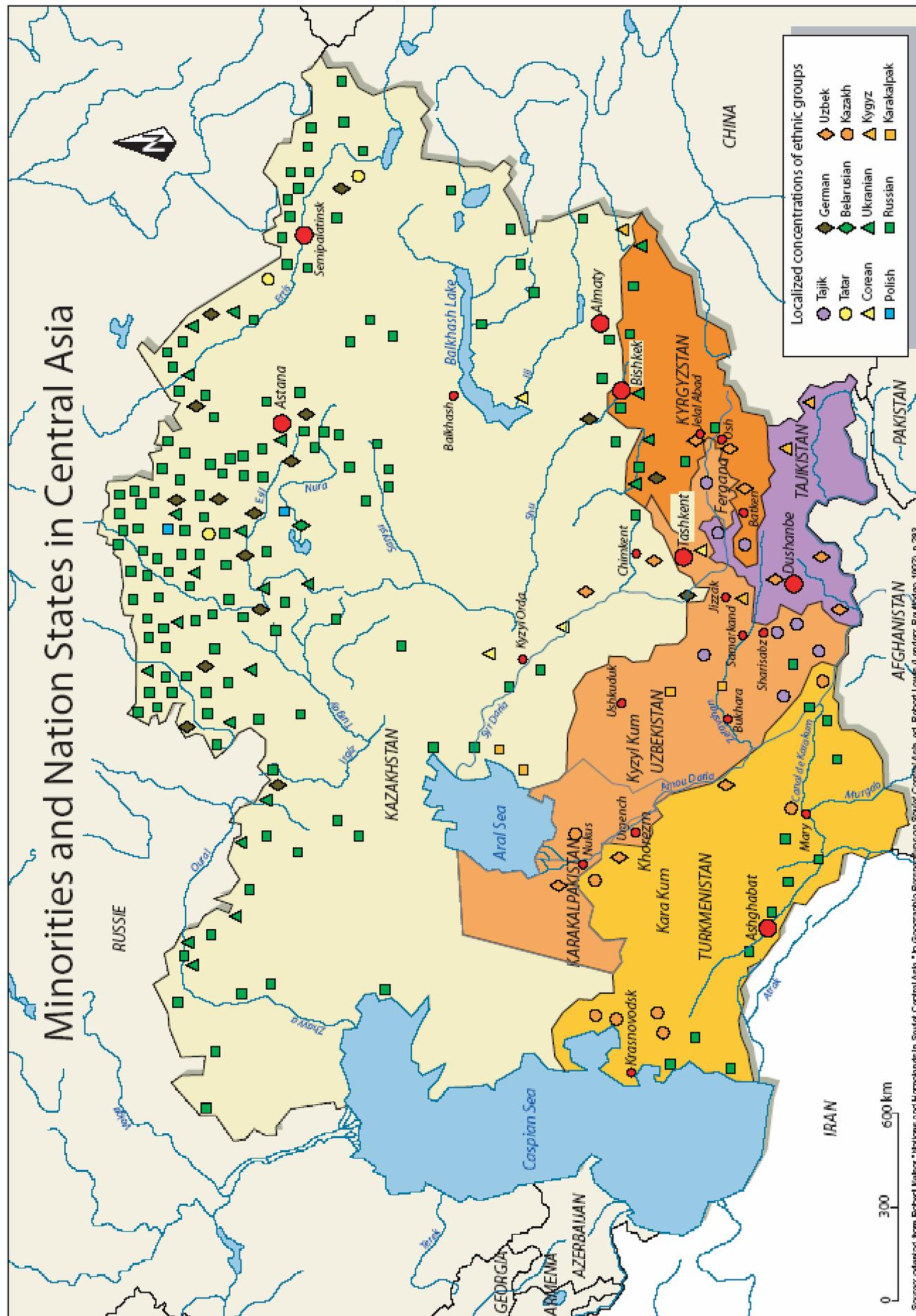
*Table 2: Ethnic distribution of population in 1999/2000*

	Kazakhstan %	Kyrgyzstan %	Uzbekistan %	Tajikistan %	Turkmenistan %
Kazaks	51		4		
Kyrgyz		56			
Uzbeks	2	13	75	25	9
Tajiks			5	67	
Turkmens					77
Karakalpaks			2		
Tatars	2		2	2	2
Russians	32	21	6	2	7
Ukrainians	5	3	1		
Germans	2				
Koreans			1		

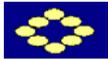
Source: Djalili, Mohammad-Reza and Kellner, Thierry: *Géopolitique de la nouvelle Asie centrale*, p.35



# Minorities and Nation States in Central Asia



Source: adapted from Robert Hauser "Nations and Homelands in Soviet Central Asia," in Geographic Perspectives on Soviet Central Asia, ed. Robert Levine (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 283.



## 5. Cross-border water supplies

This concerns the use of water resources in Central Asia, not only from the Aral but also from international rivers on the periphery of the region. The points of discord and cooperation amongst the States bordering the cross-border river basins in this vast region, and the status of the Caspian Sea are also problems that must be resolved which do not make life easy for local inhabitants. For example, there is the threat that hangs over the inhabitants of the Amudarya valley if the President of Turkmenistan persists in his wish to create a vast lake in the Kara Kum desert (Desert of the Black Sands) by diverting water from the Amudarya at Chardzhev. Then not only would the Aral Sea be deprived of water, but the Bukhara and Khorezm regions would be wiped off the map. The Kara Kum canal, completed in 1958, the pride of Moscow, which draws water from the Amudarya at Kerki and takes it as far as Gyzylarbat, passing through Ashgabat, has already drained up to 35 % of the Aral Sea.

While Kazakhstan may have resolved the question of its land border, there remain profound disagreements with China over the cross-border rivers: the Illi and the Irtysch. China wants to divert a great deal of the water from these rivers, which would deprive the country of its main drinking water supplies (including Astana and other towns).

Torrential rains recently beat down on the south of Kazakhstan, producing catastrophic flooding in the Syr Daria valley<sup>10</sup> and providing an opportunity to test the strength of regional cooperation. These floods destroyed many houses and fields near the Kazak-Uzbek border. During this catastrophe, the Central Asian States demonstrated their total inability to manage their water resources in a coordinated and rational way. The 2004 floods constitute a good argument for establishing cooperation in the future and a reprimand to governments for not having done so sooner.

At the heart of the problem is the Toktogul reservoir in Kyrgyzstan which largely controls the upstream section of the river Naryn, one of the main sources of supply for Syr Daria. Kyrgyzstan releases water from Toktogul to generate the hydroelectricity that it badly needs in winter. Uzbekistan and Kazakstan need water to irrigate their crops in spring and summer. During the time of the Soviet Union until 1991, water management was carried out by a central body for the benefit of the entire region. Since Independence, however, Kyrgyzstan's primary objective has been to maximise the use of water in order to produce electricity in winter and the objective of the downstream States is to maximise water use for irrigation in spring and summer. It goes without saying that these objectives are conflicting and contradictory (winter/summer). Over the last few years, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have tried to help Kyrgyzstan satisfy its energy requirements by providing coal, natural gas and oil in exchange for a reduction in water discharge. The agreement never worked very well, however, as the participants had a tendency to break off the arrangement as soon as they began to feel that they were losers in the deal. Water management constitutes a major geopolitical problem which it will be difficult to resolve.

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<sup>10</sup> *Central Asia Report*, volume 4, Number 7 (16 February 2004), in <http://www.rferl.org/reports/centralasia>.



## 6. Internal borders: a new concept specific to Central Asia

There is another much more insidious matter that must be mentioned, and that is the question of internal borders. These exist in all the countries of ex-Soviet Central Asia, apart from Kyrgyzstan where they were abolished 4 years ago. Take the example of Uzbekistan, where we were able to go. Whenever one travels from one *rayon* or *oblast* to another, there is a very strict border control to go through, very much like an international border checkpoint, with barriers. On each occasion, the driver and passengers must show their papers, luggage is searched and the militia try to extort money (sometimes successfully, to avoid trouble). Thus internal frontiers exist between provinces and also between Uzbekistan and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakistan. All travellers, whether foreigners or local residents, are subjected to the same regime. Anyone wanting to travel by road from Tashkent to Nukus (capital of Karakalpakistan) will have to pass through about fifteen border checkpoints. By travelling by train, all these hassles will be avoided, as a single control is carried out on the train before reaching Tashkent. It must be noted that the crossing of the Kizil Kum (the Red Sands desert) does not encourage anyone to run away. Anyone who attempts to travel by road to Tashkent during the Independence celebrations (end of August) is worthy of the exploit. The authorities fear the infiltration of Islamic extremists into the capital to carry out an assassination attempt on the President, and so screening is extremely rigorous.

At the entrance to Karakalpakistan, the “autonomous republic” that has been an integral part of the Republic of Uzbekistan since 1936, checks are even more thorough on the way in than on the way out. The situation here is fairly dramatic as this republic has its own government represented in Tashkent, but with no power and very little of its own income. At present, although the frontier has been laid down on the map, it is difficult to make it out on the ground except along the main Nukus-Bukhara-Tashkent road where the Uzbek State checkpoint is located. With the exception of the Amudarya valley with its meagre trickle of water, the rest of this tiny republic is a desert (Kizil Kum). The Uzbek State is currently trying insidiously to “suppress” the Karakalpak ethnic group. So when someone of Karakalpak ethnicity wants to renew his passport, a compulsory document for all citizens in order to circulate even within the country, if he puts his nationality as “Karakalpak”, he will have a very long wait. So there are many who, tired of these complications, prefer to say that they are of Uzbek nationality. This process leads inevitably to the official disappearance of the Karalpaks and as they will before long be almost inexistent, there will no longer be any reason for a republic to exist.

Another technique is to keep them in a state of poverty, bordering on starvation, by constantly making them grow more cotton when the lack of water is obvious and all the soils are suffering from excessive salinity, making all cultivation impossible. Faced with this situation, the Karakalpaks prefer to emigrate to neighbouring Kazakhstan, especially as the language is very similar.

## Conclusion

The 5 States really do need to cooperate, if only to manage their water resources, but these border problems are so serious that each one manages them in their own way, preferably by inconveniencing their neighbour. Tensions are steadily increasing between them. Behind the



frontiers the problem is a political one. Uzbekistan, the most populated country and the most advanced economically, would like to be leader of the region. Its rapprochement with the United States proves its will to detach itself definitively from Moscow. Kazakhstan, the largest in area, and very rich in energy resources, has chosen the Russian route because there is a problem of a large Russian minority in the north on the border with Russia who are simply asking to secede, hence the transfer of the capital to Astana. Kyrgyzstan, which contains the sources of the Syr Daria, is not short of water but nor does it have anything else; after September 11 they agreed to the presence of an American base and more recently, to a Russian base, however, the Kyrgyz language has recently become compulsory for all administrative purposes. Turkmenistan, a rich country because of its oil, is isolating itself and has cut off all links, including those with Russian residents, who are now obliged to leave the country. The main finger of blame is pointed at Tajikistan, the poorest State, because it allows drug traffickers to pass through and is believed to be harbouring Islamic terrorists.