

## THE ROLE OF ETHNOCULTURAL TRADITIONS IN THE NEW CENTRAL ASIAN POLITICS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The fall of the Soviet Union led to the clearest expression of the ethnocultural peculiarities of the territories it controlled or depended on it, and this also applies to those of Central Asia. Although there were particular cultural preservation policies applied already in the Eastern Bloc, the ethno-cultural factor seems to become of vital importance in this historical period for this geographical-political context. This paper wants to trace a limited perspective of how important this aspect is in this portion of the globe, and how it can influence the future of the politics of the actors that determine its existence.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia; Ethno-cultural traditions; Politics; Nations; Eurasia*

In the Soviet Union and in the so-called Eastern Bloc there was a paradox, which was that of the development of nationalities and territorial cultures. On the one hand, the Soviet Union promoted cultural difference and the preservation of national peculiarities, on the other hand it implemented a process of homogenization typical of modern forms of statehood. Obviously, this type of contradiction must be conceptualized in its dialecticity, and must be compared with the historical context and the political-strategic options that the decision-makers had to take. In line with the Machiavellian distinction between means and ends<sup>35</sup> which has always undergone political mechanics, the relationship between real socialism and the national question has been multifaceted. In very general terms, we can say that the preservation of cultural differences could have been the aim of the politics of the USSR, where the power of the Soviet state and the communist geopolitical sphere which tended to standardize cultures were the means. Even more, this paradox can also be found within the communist doctrine, where (for Lenin and Stalin) the battle for

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<sup>35</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, in *Opere*, Biblioteca Treccani, Rome 2006, p. 58.

national independence seems to be defined sometimes only as a means for the defeat of bourgeois imperialism. At other times, however, it seems clear that the people, in their Marxian meaning, are such only according to their ethno-cultural characteristics. Thus, as always in the field of politics, this type of stratification of means and ends, and this continuous reversal between one and the other, produce a difficult understanding of historical events and the nature of political phenomena. Paradoxically, Marx himself, with his distinction between the structural and superstructural element of socio-economic-political formations, attempted to extricate himself from this type of hermeneutic tangle<sup>36</sup>. This complexity, however, cannot be reduced solely to the production of superstructural justifications of structural productive organizations, as also claimed by Engels<sup>37</sup>: everything is much more complex, especially when one confronts the question of nationality.

On the one hand, the national question was a fundamental starting point for the Marxian discourse, as well as an element of great importance in the subsequent development of this school of thought. Roman Szporluk was able to describe communism as the continuation of the nationalistic ideology of the nineteenth century by other means, a continuation that paradoxically eventually consolidated itself to Soviet nationalism<sup>38</sup>, the phenomenon that Mikhail Agursky will call “national-Bolshevism”<sup>39</sup>. In short, at the time of Marx it was neither possible nor conceivable to operate a division between people and nation, even if the anti-capitalist vulgate often suggests that these two subjects are opposed since the nation is necessarily a transversal corporate and interclass concept. In reality, the “classic” Marxist option was to exclude the bourgeoisie from national membership, since its interests were inherently transnational and anti-popular.

Leninism, by relating Marxian communist theories with the ethno-cultural mosaic of the Russian Empire, had to take the national question

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36 Karl Marx, *Per la critica dell'economia politica*, Editori Riuniti, Rome 1979.

37 Friedrich Engels, *Engels to J. Bloch in Königsberg*, in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir I. Lenin, *On Historical Materialism*, Progress, Moscow 1972, pp. 294-296.

38 Roman Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993.

39 Mikhail Agursky, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR*, Westview, Boulder 1987.

seriously, elaborating for it an even more complex vision than that developed in Central Europe by Marx and Engels, given that the social reality of the Russian imperial space was very composite and largely untouched by modernization and therefore by those political structures and institutions that instead existed in the West. Lenin took very seriously the question of the nationalities that made up the Soviet Union, going so far as to ask Stalin to continue this work through a systematic theoretical elaboration<sup>40</sup>. The Soviet dissident of Georgian origin Michel Mouskhély wrote in this regard:

«Russia, wrote Lenin, is the prison of the peoples». The October Revolution gave the signal for an uprising: one after another the alien peoples broke away from the dying empire to form independent communities. It was the case of Ukraine, the Baltic countries, the nations of the Caucasus, Belarus... Engaged in the civil war, the Bolsheviks ran the risk of having other parts of their national territory torn apart. To face all these dangers, to unite the dispersed peoples, to decide to regroup them again, there was only one way: to make the revolution the instrument of liberation of the enslaved peoples. One of the first acts of the leaders was the «declaration of the rights of the peoples of Russia» (November 15, 1917). The declaration set the following four principles:

- 1) Equality and sovereignty of all peoples of Russia;
- 2) Right of the peoples of Russia to dispose of themselves until separation and the establishment of an independent state;
- 3) Abolition of all privileges and restrictions of a national or national-religious nature;
- 4) Free development of national minorities and ethnic groups established on the territory of Russia. »<sup>41</sup>

Stalin, disputing the ideas in the socialist world that believed that the role of communism was to amalgamate the nations, wrote thus, in response to a letter he received:

«The Russian Marxists have long had their theory of nations. According to this theory, a nation is a historically evolved, stable

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, Foreign Press, Paris 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Mouskhély, *Il paradosso della Federazione Sovietica*, in *Il Federalista – Rivista di politica*, i. 5 y. 2, 1960: <https://www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/it/saggi/1355-il-paradosso-della-federazione-sovietica> [translated from Italian].

community of people, based upon the common possession of four principal attributes, namely: a common language, a common territory, a common economic life, and a common psychological make-up manifesting itself in common specific features of national culture. This theory, as we know, has received general recognition in our Party.

[It is] a grave error in putting an equal sign between the period of the victory of socialism in one country and the period of the victory of socialism on a world scale, in asserting that the disappearance of national differences and national languages, the amalgamation of nations, and the formation of one common language are possible and necessary not only with the victory of socialism on a world scale, but also with the victory of socialism in one country. And you furthermore confuse entirely different things in "abolition of national oppression" with "elimination of national differences," "abolition of national state partitions" with "dying away of nations," with "amalgamation of nations." It must be observed that for Marxists to confuse these diverse concepts is absolutely impermissible. National oppression in our country was abolished long ago, but in no wise does it follow from this that national differences have disappeared and that nations in our country have been eliminated. National state partitions, together with frontier guards and customs barriers, were abolished in our country long ago, but in no wise does it follow from this that the nations have already amalgamated and that the national languages have disappeared, that these languages have been supplanted by some one language common to all our nations».42

This type of concept was, whatever may be said, closely related to the ideas of Lenin43. Nonetheless, the paradox we spoke of at the beginning, according to Mouskhély, is to be considered produced by a certain Leninist pragmatism:

«Even in matters of nationality, Lenin adopts and follows the ideas, moreover schematic, of his illustrious predecessors. Should national aspirations be encouraged or stifled? Marx and Engels could perhaps have overlooked this question, but Lenin, a contemporary of the era of

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42 Joseph Stalin, *The National Question and Leninism*, International Publisher, New York 1929, pp. 1-10.

43 Joseph Stalin, *The National Question: April & May 1924*, in *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, Foreign Press, Paris 2021, pp. 183-184.

nationalities, could not avoid it if he did not want to compromise the success of the revolution he was preparing. And it is precisely in function of the revolution that he fixes his positions as a man of action and not as a theorist. He cares very little about the question of the nation itself and of national values themselves. What interests him in the first place is the use of national dynamism in the service of the struggle against capitalism.»<sup>44</sup>

This type of predisposition to the primacy of administrative and government techniques would have led, in the long run, to a loss of sight of the protection of national identities, according to Mouskhély, who, in a particularly harsh way, thus condemned these outcomes:

«Philosophers elaborate a communist morality made up of absolute loyalty to the Soviet homeland and to its leader, the Communist Party. Writers create a communist literature, a synthesis of all national literatures, but under the predominant influence of Russian literature. The works of art are dedicated to the glorification of «socialist realism», far from any «petty-bourgeois idealism» or the decadent forms of Western art. Sociologists boast the new socialist traditions, such as «socialist emulation», «socialist cooperation», socialist festivals and folklore, etc. The architects build modern-style homes that progressively replace the previous national-type homes. Even in furniture and clothing, a common style gradually replaces the diversity of indigenous styles.

Thus, thanks to a common effort, a new culture is created and spread, the «communist culture», with an identical background of values, ideas and traditions that Soviet men share, whatever nationality they belong to. What then remains of the national form? «Language as a way of expression and development of the communist culture of peoples».<sup>45</sup>

This type of criticism, of course, suffers from a certain political enmity between the Author and the Soviet state, and these tendencies, even real, did not replace the fact that many of the national and popular traditions were preserved, east of the Curtain of Iron. In reality, in our opinion, the Soviet state was prey to those mechanics of cultural uniformity that were put in place for administrative and bureaucratic needs

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<sup>44</sup> Michel Mouskhély, *Il paradosso della Federazione Sovietica*, in *Il Federalista – Rivista di politica*, i. 5 y. 2, 1960: <https://www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/it/saggi/1355-il-paradosso-della-federazione-sovietica> [translated from Italian].

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

in the construction of modern states<sup>46</sup>. It is therefore interesting to note how, paradoxically, in the doctrine of its builders the Soviet Union should have avoided, as far as possible, the dissolution of national differences.

Given that politics constitutes the field of the heterogenesis of ends, it is interesting to note how Lenin himself had theorized the very important role of nationalities in the multiform chessboard of Central Asia. Mouskhély himself also noted:

«Finally, it was necessary to deal with the latent nationalism of the peoples of Asia. Lenin turned out to be a seer here. In his «Imperialism the huighest stage of capitalism» he foresaw the defeat of colonialism and the sudden uprising of the liberated masses. What a boon for the communist revolution this immense miserable and ignorant «proletariat». But to take him on its side, shouldn't it begin by respecting the national sentiment that animates him and which is all the more hostile the younger he is?»<sup>47</sup>

Obviously Mouskhély's tones are vehemently anti-communist, and his analysis is affected by his political positions. In reality, Lenin had not “prophesied” a phenomenon by mistake, but on the one hand he grasped the discrepancies of power between the world of advanced capitalism and the economically backward one, on the other – also through national liberation struggles – he was the first to theorize an uprising of the economically exploited peoples against the capitalist powers. Be that as it may, the link between Asian nationalism and twentieth-century historical communism is, as we have said, dialectical. The identity of the peoples of Central Asia obviously existed before communism, but communism has helped these nations to modernize, so that this process has produced modern nationalistic forms<sup>48</sup>. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, these national and ethnic identities saw a new period of flowering. We

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46 Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Intervista sull'identità*, Laterza, Bari 2003, pp. 15-16.

47 Michel Mouskhély, *Il paradosso della Federazione Sovietica*, in *Il Federalista – Rivista di politica*, i. 5 y. 2, 1960: <https://www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/it/saggi/1355-il-paradosso-della-federazione-sovietica> [translated from Italian].

48 The case of Tajikistan is emblematic: «At the beginning of the 20th century, it had been Russian scholars who took up the cause of the Tajik nation. When in 1924, the Soviet government decided on the “National Territorial Delimitation”, it was exclusively Russian “orientalists” who contributed to the exhaustive study of the Tajik nation that was to promote the realisation of the Tajik “ethnie”.»

Paul Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic*, I. B. Tauris, London / New York 2007, p. 127.

reiterate once again that we must keep in mind this type of dialectic between Soviet heritage and the overcoming of culturally centralistic elements in order to fully understand the nature of the post-communist transition in these countries.

Bernard Chavance, in his text with an economic-institutionalist approach on the reforms that took place in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern Bloc, highlighted how the process of autonomization (in economic and political terms) can be described as a process of de-Stalinization<sup>49</sup>. This process took place (especially in countries such as Poland or Hungary) with the questioning of the models of economic interpretation generally spread from universities. For the countries of Central Asia the cultural element was perhaps more important than the economic one, considering how they simply sought to deepen and further distinguish the elements that made up their specific identity.

Writing for the peculiar case of Kazakhstan, Ayşegül Aydıngün notes how the reconstruction of national identity started from an objective fact, which was the feeling of generalized anomie that constituted the dominant atmosphere of the end of the Soviet Union:

«A situation of anomie became visible in Kazakhstan beginning in the Gorbachev period and increasingly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which necessitated a search for a new social order. [...] It is within this atmosphere of anomie that the cultural revival project has been launched. »<sup>50</sup>

The same factor can be considered – where more and where less – as influential in the processes of ideological reorganization of the other Central Asian states, which tried to become autonomous since the times of Glasnost and Perestroika<sup>51</sup>.

According to the author herself, a prominent role was exercised by Islamic religious identity in the case of Kazakhstan:

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<sup>49</sup> Bernard Chavance, *The Transformation of Communist Systems: Economic Reform Since the 1950*, Routledge, Abingdon / New York 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Ayşegül Aydıngün, *Islam as a symbolic element of national identity used by the nationalist ideology in the nation and state building process in post-soviet Kazakhstan*, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 6 i. 17 y. 2007, p. 69.

<sup>51</sup> Payam Foroughi, *Tajikistan: Nationalism, Ethnicity, Conflict, and Socio-economic Disparities – Sources and Solutions*, in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, i. 2 vol. 22 y. 2002, p. 39.

«The revival of Islam is expected to play a significant role in this project and Islam is being used as one of the basic elements of culture that will contribute to the integration of the new Kazak national identity. Islam, in this context, is also used as a tool in the struggle against the Russian and Soviet heritage and is expected to play an integrative role. This integrative function is perceived as necessary for the construction of Kazak national identity.» 52

If on the one hand the sponsorship of Islam has served the new Kazakhstan to distinguish itself from Russian culture (predominantly Christian) on the one hand, and from Soviet history on the other, the dialectic we spoke of earlier comes into play where the religious and national elements assume a role of ethical structuring of social relations in a condition of absence of an order of this type due to the collapse of the USSR:

«The new Kazak political power attempted to fill the vacuum left by the Soviet ideology at the beginning of the period of Perestroika through promoting ethical values within an atmosphere of insecurity. In other words, the careful promotion of religion that is under strict control of the government plays two significant roles: firstly, it fills the ideological and moral vacuum as a result of the disappearance of the Soviet system causing an important environment of insecurity, and secondly, it offered people an alternative to political parties that based their activities and projects on political Islam being in complete harmony with the position of the government.» 53

As has been noted, there is an attempt on the part of the Kazakh political hierarchy to fill the organizational and planning void left by the Soviet Union, and also in this sense the projects and development plans of the country should be read<sup>54</sup>. Secondly, it must be remembered that the President of Kazakhstan until 2019, Nursultan Nazarbayev, came from the ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and from those of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan.

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52 Aysegül Aydıngün, *Islam as a symbolic element of national identity used by the nationalist ideology in the nation and state building process in post-soviet Kazakhstan*, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 6 i. 17 y. 2007, p. 69.

53 *Ivi*, p. 81.

54 Diana T. Kudaibergenova, *The ideology of development and legitimation: beyond 'Kazakhstan 2030'*, in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 34 i. 4 y. 2015, pp. 440-455.

«From a humble village background, Nazarbayev trained as a steel worker before climbing through the ranks of the Communist Party. He obtained the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan in 1989 just prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Elected president in 1990, he emerged as the central figure responsible for guiding Kazakhstan through its incipient years of independence». 55

The political-economic proximity of Kazakhstan to the Russian Federation, as well as participation in the Eurasian Economic Union project (the only Central Asian country together with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), do not separate the Central Asian country from Soviet history. Simply this, as we have already seen, is subject to revision, in a similar way to what happened in the Russian Federation itself. This type of rethinking of the historical past, the distancing from excesses, the revision of some elements are at the basis of the neo- and post-communist tradition in the post-Soviet space – especially as regards the question of religious identity<sup>56</sup>.

In this sense, Kazakhstan, under the leadership of Nazarbayev, has fully embraced its Eurasian dimension. This is not only for geo-economic reasons, as has also been pointed out<sup>57</sup>: its membership of EurAsEc (Eurasian Economic Union) and its political proximity to Russia in the shared regional space. Although there are those who support a new purely techno-economic dimension of Eurasianism, in its post-Soviet revival<sup>58</sup>, we can say that this is not the case in Kazakhstan. In fact, Nazarbayev has

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55 Rico Isaacs, 'Papa' – Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan, in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 10 i. 3 December 2010: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01089.x>

56 Gennadij Zjuganov, *Stato e potenza*, Edizioni all'Insegna del Veltro, Parma 1999.

57 Maria Lagutina, *A concept of Eurasia: From classical Eurasianism to pragmatic Eurasianism*, in AA.VV., *Regional Integration and Future Cooperation Initiatives in the Eurasian Economic Union*, IGI Global, Hershey 2020, pp. 1-15.

58 «Post-Soviet Eurasian integration should focus on the economy. The collaboration between the Customs Union (a common customs space) and the Common Economic Space (dozens of agreements to establish uniform rules in the economy; in effect, it is a Eurasian common market) establishes a solid groundwork for integration. This focus will help strengthen the technocratic element and dedicate integration instruments to resolving the main task – economic modernization and increased global competitiveness.»

Yevgeny Vinokurov, *Pragmatic Eurasianism: Prospect of Eurasian integration*, in *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. II i. 2 April-June 2013, p. 93.

made explicit his belief in the Eurasian theses of Lev Gumilëv<sup>59</sup>, but not only: he has repeatedly reiterated how the Kazakh identity is determined by the encounter of the various religious cultures that characterize it<sup>60</sup>. Not only the pre-eminent role of Islam which provides the guarantee of the maintenance of a public ethics, but also other traditions and cultures in a harmonious coexistence.

«The challenge was to promote Kazakh identity, thus strengthening the ethnic integrity of the nation, while ensuring other ethnic groups, especially the Russians, were not marginalised. [...] This commitment to a multi-ethnic and multi-faith Kazakhstan has been the cornerstone of Nazarbayev's nation-building policy.»<sup>61</sup>

Kyrgyzstan, instead, if it shares with Kazakhstan the membership of the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>62</sup>, it also shares its common nomadic identity<sup>63</sup> so dear to Eurasianism (which openly refers, already with the thought of Leont'ev, to the conjunction between the Slavic sedentary heritage and nomadic identity of the Tatar invasions<sup>64</sup>) and its re-propositions in a contemporary key. This conception, in open contrast to the previous Soviet ambiguous vision on nomadism<sup>65</sup>, takes on a religious and political dimension in the space of Kyrgyzstan in the phenomenon of

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59 «Beyond academic circles, the acknowledgment of Gumilev's theories extends to the political authorities. Thus the new Kazakh State University founded in 1996 was named after him, and the Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbaev is proud to display his familiarity with Gumilev's works.» Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*, Woodrow Wilson Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington D.C. 2008, p. 10.

60 Yerzhan Saltybayev and Lidiya Parkhomchik, *The Eurasian idea of Nursultan Nazarbayev*, in AA.VV., *Regional Integration and Future Cooperation Initiatives in the Eurasian Economic Union*, IGI Global, Hershey 2020, pp. 193-208.

61 Rico Isaacs, 'Papa' – Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan, in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 10 i. 3 December 2010: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01089.x>

62 Membership that increased the country's import and export levels: Kubanychbek Sagaliev, *Kyrgyz Republic: Effects of joining the EAEU*, from Center for International Private Enterprise: <https://www.cipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/04-Kyrgyzstan-EAEU-report-ENGLISH.pdf>

63 Cf. Rico Isaacs and Erica Masat, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*, Routledge, Abingdon / New York 2022.

64 Konstantin Leont'ev, *Bizantinismo e mondo slavo*, Edizioni all'Insegna del Veltro, Parma 1987.

65 Aysegül Aydıngün, *Islam as a symbolic element of national identity used by the nationalist ideology in the nation and state building process in post-soviet Kazakhstan*, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 6 i. 17 y. 2007, pp. 69-83.

“tengrism”<sup>66</sup>, which recovers the proto-Turkish identity of the inhabitants of the nation<sup>67</sup>.

«Among the newer tendencies in Tatar society connected with Turkism, the form of neo-paganism known as Tenrgism stands out (Tengre was the pre-Islamic sky god of the Turkish peoples and in old Tatar simply means 'God'). Tengrism became widespread in the second half of the 1990s [...]. Tengrists see the meaning of life as living in harmony with the surrounding natural world. They regard tengrism not as the religious doctrine of Turkic nations but as a central element of the Turko-Mongol historical way of life and worldview now essential for the contemporary consolidation of the Turkic nations.» [68]

The Tajiki, for their part, claim their ancestral Persian origins, having clashed with the lack of recognition of their particularity for decades. Specifically, Tajikistan and its political authorities struggle to assert their difference from the generically Turkish roots of most of the rest of Central Asia<sup>69</sup>. The panturk discourse was so strong, especially in Soviet times, that even some hierarchies of the local Communist Party allowed themselves to be influenced by this narrative<sup>70</sup>. In any case, it is precisely because of the revitalized Persian identity that relations between this Central Asian country and Iran are very close, even when particularly lively. In fact, Tajikistan and Iran have gone through a phase of fairly important diplomatic disputes in the last period, despite the fact that Iran itself was the first country to open an embassy in Dushanbe. To date, relations between the two countries are optimal and are substantiated in exchanges and large commercial agreements<sup>71</sup>.

The case of Turkmenistan, on the other hand, is slightly different: as in Kazakhstan, in Turkmenistan the Soviet political legacy is very strong. The country's life president (deceased in 2006) Saparmyrat Nyýazow was

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66 Harun Güngör, *Tengrism as a religious and political phenomenon in Turkish world: Tengriyanstvo*, in *Karadeniz Uluslararası Bilimsel Dergi*, i. 19 y. 2013, pp. 189-195.

67 Cf. Rico Isaacs and Erica Masat, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*, Routledge, Abingdon / New York 2022.

68 Roland Dannreuther and Luke March (edited by), *Russia and Islam: State, society and radicalism*, Routledge, Abingdon / New York 2011, p. 106.

69 Paul Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic*, I. B. Tauris, London / New York 2007, p. 15.

70 *Ivi*, pp. 18-19.

71 Francisco Olmos, *Busy times in Iran-Central Asia relations*, on *The Diplomat*: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/busy-times-in-iran-central-asia-relations/>

also from the ranks of communism as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan. When Turkmenistan acquired effective independence, he endowed it with a strong nationalistic political import, of a more secular character than the ethno-primordialist or religious forms that have taken hold in the other countries of the region. However, this constituted the fundamental imprint of Turkmen politics in the new phase of global politics inaugurated with the end of the Cold War. In fact he said:

«Our ancestors formulated the principles which allowed the Turkmens to not merely preserve, for many centuries, their traditional features, but also face the challenges of time with dignity. The Turkmen people are a direct heir to the ancient world civilizations. Throughout the centuries of their history brimming with dramas, triumphs, and tragedies, the Turkmens have accumulated a powerful spiritual potential and preserved their national identity.»[72]

Nyýazow explained the statist nature of the Turkmen national identity thus: «Unlike for people in the West, the state is not a ‘night-watchman’ for Turkmens. They see it as a paternalistic organ, which displays father-like care for them, transforms the population into a single nation. It also takes care of its unity, ensures its security, makes them happy, and provides them with a free life. This is the reason why the Turkmen people adore with devotion the state and its President, believe in it, support it, and are willing to die for it.»<sup>73</sup>

Finally, Uzbekistan represents with its recent history the exemplary case with respect to the mechanics of distancing and proximity that have reconstituted the cultural map of Central Asia. On the one hand, it has freed itself from Soviet identity by claiming its national roots<sup>74</sup>, on the other it is part of a shared regionality with Russia which sees it as a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization<sup>75</sup>. Uzbekistan has recently entered the EurAsEc, and the economic-political results seem to

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72 Quoted in Maxim Kirchanov, *Turkmen nationalism today: Political and intellectual mythologemes*, in *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, i. 11 vol. 1 y. 2010.

73 Quoted in Т. Халыев, *Концепция Сапармурата Туркменбаши об обществе переходного периода. Демократия и право*, in *Журнал Туркменского национального института демократии и прав человека при Президенте Туркменистана*, i. 25 vol. 3 y. 2000.

74 James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: A Soviet Republic's Road to Sovereignty*, Routledge, Abingdon / New York 1991.

75 Cf. Embassy of Uzbekistan in Tokyo, *Uzbekistan's SCO leadership: Effective partnership, tasks, prospects*, on *The Japan Times*: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/2022/06/23/special-supplements/uzbekistans-sco-leadership-effective-partnership-tasks-prospects/>

be very good for the country<sup>76</sup>, nevertheless it will be necessary to see how much this turning point will affect the ethnocultural narrative, compared to the common Eurasian roots with Russia. Certainly, however, the influence of Turkism in Central Asia has been strongly guided, in recent history, by Uzbekistan itself<sup>77</sup>. We must also remember the case of a particular independentist type of nationalism that has awakened in the Uzbek state, and that is that of the Karakalpak, an ethnic group that would like to affirm its identity even with the secession from Uzbekistan (despite the requests for now are predominantly those of greater autonomy)<sup>78</sup>.

To summarize this brief and certainly not exhaustive discussion, it is necessary to reiterate how the role of ethnocultural traditions and their rediscovery or reinterpretation within the Central Asian scenario from the period from the end of the Soviet Union to today is of no small importance. This type of role is not only self-representative, for a context where a unity of general sense was missing. Rather, there are major political derivations from this type of phenomenon. Sometimes, in reality, it is difficult to distinguish between the socio-political element and the identity element, since policies of this nature are often justified in this way. It is evident how the counterweight of the rediscovery of national traditions can favor autonomist policies, just as embracing the Eurasian theses can favor collaboration with Russia or at least with neighboring countries. However, this does not affect either the originality or the bona fide with which these cultural elements have been brought to light or revived. Rather, in our opinion, this represents a trend of no small importance in contemporary international politics, which is starting to take into account the multiplicity of territorial and cultural identities below, above and within the historically determined structure of the national state.

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan: National Identity and the Origins of the Republic*, I. B. Tauris, London / New York 2007, pp. 15-19.

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