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Regionalism and Memory Politics in Central Asia: Common or Competing Histories?

Regionalizm i polityka pamięci w Azji Środkowej: wspólne czy konkurencyjne historie?

• Abstract •

The paper aims to examine the connection between historical narratives constructed by Central Asian states and the phenomenon of regionalism. It analyses how the elites refer to the shared historical legacy of the region and discusses selected historical disputes between states. Theoretical framework is based on the region-building approach. The concept of memory politics is significant for this study. Memory politics might contribute to the integration of society (or societies) and to the creation of collective identity (also regional). The main research method is discourse analysis. The paper focuses on statements of Kazakh and Uzbek presidents. The comparative method is adapted for the juxtaposition of the official historical narratives.

Keywords: Central Asia; memory politics; regionalism

• Abstrakt •

Celem artykułu jest analiza relacji pomiędzy narracjami historycznymi kreowanymi przez państwa Azji Centralnej a zjawiskiem regionalizmu. W artykule przeprowadzona została analiza tego, w jaki sposób elity odnoszą się do wspólnego dziedzictwa historycznego regionu oraz wybranych dysput historycznych pomiędzy państwami. Ramy teoretyczne pracy zostały oparte na koncepcji budowania regionu (*region-building*). Pojęcie polityki pamięci ma istotne znaczenie dla tego artykułu. Polityka pamięci może przyczyniać się do integracji społeczeństwa (bądź społeczeństw) oraz do tworzenia zbiorowej tożsamości (także regionalnej). Analiza dyskursu jest główną metodą badawczą. Praca koncentruje się na wystąpieniach prezydentów Kazachstanu i Uzbekistanu. Analiza porównawcza została użyta do zestawienia oficjalnych narracji historycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: Azja Centralna; polityka pamięci; regionalizm

Introduction

Central Asia is still one of the least integrated regions. Various reasons have been pointed out in the literature as to why regionalism is not developing well, which I will discuss later. In this article, I focus on regional identity and state-constructed historical narratives. Undoubtedly, history can serve as a significant tool for nation-building projects, but it can also serve region-building purposes. Narratives from Central Asian states often highlight shared cultural heritage, but they also reveal clashing interpretations of history that may negatively affect the integration process.

This paper aims to examine the relationship between state-constructed historical narratives and the regionalism process. I attempt to answer the questions: How is shared history used by Central Asian elites in the official discourse? What is the connection between memory politics and the process of regional identity formation? I focus on identifying projects that emphasise shared past, as well as on highlighting historical inconsistencies and differences that might hinder the creation of a regional identity.

I define Central Asia as comprising five states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Definitions of the region differ, nonetheless the spatial dimension viewed from the perspective of Central Asian elites has been established. Starting with the meeting in Tashkent in January 1993, the presidents of these five states began to recognise themselves as Central Asia¹, not as Middle Asia and Kazakhstan, as the Soviet label suggested (Olcott, 1994; Rosset & Svarin, 2014, p. 245). In the official discourse, the presidents use the term ‘Central Asia’ and identify it with these five states (for more details see: Waśkiel, 2020).

The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the concept of memory politics and the region-building approach. As I. Neumann aptly points out: “regions are also imagined communities”. According to the author, a region is constructed through speech acts by region-builders: “the existence of regions is preceded by the existence of region-builders”. These are political actors “who, as part of some political project, see it in their interest to imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region” (Neumann, 2003, p. 161). In the article, I assume that Central Asian elites, in particular presidents, are the political actors who are imagining the region.

¹ As M. Olcott aptly summarises this event: “While that may strike the Western reader as little more than a semantic footnote, to those gathered it was a statement of unity, an explicit declaration that the five states now shared a common fate” (Olcott, 1994, p. 549).

My understanding of memory politics is focused on “official” actors and acts² (Nijakowski, 2008). I limit my analysis to state actors led by presidents who can be described as mnemonic hegemons (Molden, 2016). I do not analyse the involvement of other mnemonic agents. It is true that to some extent, even in the case of authoritarian states, official narratives are shaped by other actors, bottom-up memories, etc.

In the literature concerning memory politics and international relations, its potential negative effects on inter-state relations are often emphasised. Thus, the concepts of memory wars, mnemonic conflicts or mnemonic security are applied. Memories are perceived as potentially conflictual, causing tensions in diplomatic relations. Nationalistic narratives might lead to conflictual situations with neighbours and could pose a threat to the ontological security of a state (Mälksoo, 2015).

Certain authors emphasise the positive potential of memory politics for international relations. H. Henning Hahn introduces the concept of transborder historical policy, pointing out that the identity of one state might become a subject of another state’s policy. Limiting his considerations to Europe, he suggests creating a “code of memory” practices (Hahn, 2008). A. Assmann notes that “memory can be both a force for refuelling hatred and violence and thus maintaining and hardening divisions, as well as a therapy for integration” (Assmann, 2015). Considering how to reconcile divided European memories, she writes about dialogic memory as a panacea for the monologic nature of national memories. This kind of memory “acknowledges historical violence, suffering and trauma” (Assmann, 2015, p. 206), and it is based on dialogic engagement and mutual recognition, not one single dominant narrative.

In the first part of the article, I refer to the literature concerning the process of regionalism in Central Asia. In the second part, I analyse selected concepts of common heritage and examine conflictual interpretations of history. I use discourse analysis to analyse selected speeches of Central Asian presidents (mainly Kazakhstan’s president – Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and Uzbekistan’s president – Shavkat Mirziyoyev).

² One of the definitions proposed by L. Nijakowski can be invoked here: “all intentional actions of politicians and officials with formal legitimacy aimed at perpetuating, removing, or redefining specific contents of the social memory” (2008, p. 44).

Regionalism in Central Asia

The regionalism in Central Asia has been described in a rather negative manner. K. Collins highlights the differences between security and economic regionalism (2009), emphasising that in the field of security, cooperation is stronger³, although still limited (2009, p. 250). This limited progress is marked by trade wars, border disputes, and disagreements over the management of the use of water and energy (Linn, 2012). The economic barriers are visible like high non-tariff trade barriers (Bohr, 2019, p. 70). The point often made is the lack of intergovernmental institutions, an issue that I will come back to later. Due to these issues, regionalism in Central Asia has been described in terms such as “virtual regionalism” (Allison, 2008) or “mission impossible” (Bohr, 2003). There have been claims that Central Asia should not be considered a region at all (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020)⁴ or that “effective regional cooperation [...] remains a distant dream” (Linn, 2012) and that “Central Asian integration today merely functions as part of a wider Eurasian integration” (Rosset & Svarin, 2014, p. 264).

In the literature, scholars identify various reasons why regional integration has not proceeded as expected. The reasons for this failure are seen in different spheres, to name just a few. Certain authors highlight the link between low levels of cooperation and the regime type (Collins, 2009). For instance, K. Collins identifies the main reasons in the patrimonial system of Central Asian states, where leaders are driven by survival mode and economic liberalisation might be perceived as a threat (2009). A. Matveeva lists different obstacles to regional cooperation such as power imbalances between states, mutual security suspicions, cross-border violence, environmental conflicts, distrust among leaders, sovereignty entrenchment and others (2007, p. 4). D. Rosset and D. Svarin trace the causes of the failure of Central Asian regionalism in the common Soviet past and inherited perception of power relations (2014). Others highlight the extra-regional economic dependence (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020). This dependence is also noticeable through the lens of intergovernmental organisations, another factor often emphasised by the authors. Central Asian states do not belong to an “autonomous” organisation that would not include members outside of the region; the exception is the specialised institution – International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (Costa Buranelli, 2021,

³ K. Collins describes Central Asian regionalism as security-oriented, although still challenging. It is “generally less threatening to patrimonial systems, since it does not necessarily imply economic or political liberalization” (Collins, 2009, p. 277).

⁴ Summary of labels (ranging from medical to religious metaphors) describing regionalism in Central Asia is provided by Filippo Costa Buranelli (2021, pp. 3–4).

p. 15). Projects of integration, such as the Central Asian Union (founded in 1994), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (founded in 1997), and the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (founded in 2002) have not survived to this day (Azizov, 2017, p. 128; Costa Buranelli, 2021, p. 9; Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020, p. 348)⁵. Central Asian states are members of supra-regional organizations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Initiatives that include powerful external states might have a “protective character” and hinder actual cooperation between states (Allison, 2008).

When Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President in 2016, succeeding Islam Karimov, media and analysts began to prognose a potential new era of regionalism in Central Asia (Costa Buranelli, 2021, pp. 10–11). The second President of Uzbekistan emphasised that regional integration became a priority for his state and implemented reforms in the sphere of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. The factors behind this “drastic change” (Dadabaev, 2019, p. 894) of foreign policy were influenced, to a large extent, by a desire to improve the economic position of Uzbekistan. The first President liberalized the visa regime and entry regulations, opening his country more widely to foreign investment. Movement between Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics increased. S. Mirziyoyev initiated or gave impetus to various transport initiatives (such as the Trans-Afghan railway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project), and significant progress has been made in the process of demarcation, delimiting borders and water-related disputes (Bohr, 2019, pp. 74–79; Dadabaev, 2018; Ozod Tanbaev, 2023, pp. 6–8). S. Mirziyoyev adopted a new “soft approach”, in contrast to I. Karimov’s “heavy-handed” (Dadabaev, 2019, p. 911) responses towards its neighbours. The President initiated or rather renewed⁶ the idea of meetings among the five Central Asian states. Although there is still no formal intergovernmental organization, regular Consultative Meetings of Heads of States of Central Asia (referred to later as the Consultative Meetings) have been organized, with the most recent (the 6th) held in Astana. T. Dadabaev argues that the previous experience in the 1990s of “moving too fast” (2019, p. 904) is a factor that shapes the current foreign policy of Uzbekistan. Due to that, states do not “engage in immature institution building but rather focus on building bilateral relations”

⁵ They were not including Turkmenistan, who pursues a policy of permanent neutrality (Rosset & Svarin, 2014, p. 246).

⁶ In the 1990s, meetings between the heads of states were organized quite regularly (Azizov, 2017, p. 128; Dadabaev, 2018, pp. 165–167). Uzbekistan initiated most of the integration structures (Bohr, 1998).

(Dadabaev, 2019, p. 905). It is true that there is a new atmosphere in the region that might have positive influence on the creation of regional identity.

Regional identity and common history

Regional identity is crucial in the process of region-building. However, it is not pre-existing, but rather shaped by political actors' interests, who may create it through their speech acts (Neumann, 2003). Similar to the process of regionalism, the status of regional identity in Central Asia has been described in rather unfavourable terms. This is partially confirmed by the analysis of public opinion, which shows that Central Asian societies know little about themselves (Central Asia Barometer, 2021).

Central Asian states sometimes refer to broader communities, raising questions about the extent of their identification with the region. For a long period of time, Kazakhstan has been creating its identity as a Eurasian state, an ideology strongly pursued by Kazakh authorities, which portrays the state as a bridge between the East and the West and is fully aligned with its multi-vector policy. F. Tolipov argues that the focus on the Eurasian ideology of Kazakhstan is an obstacle to integration (2006). On the other hand, it could be argued that Kazakhstan is not being exclusionary. The state might be promoting both Eurasian and Central Asian integration (Rosset & Svarin, 2014, p. 255), or it may be starting to see itself more distinctly as a key part of the Central Asian region (Bohr, 2019, p. 70).

The project that had strong historical references and could serve as an idea integrating the five Central Asian states was the concept of Turkestan. The above-mentioned projects of integration in the 1990s were to a certain extent based on this idea. Being a revival of the concept of regional autonomy and identity pursued by the early 20th-century thinkers, Turkestan assumes the common home of Turkic nations. This idea entailed the integration of all five Central Asian states, and potentially also Turkic communities outside, based on historical, cultural, and language commonalities. The project would also include Tajikistan, even though its language is rooted in Persian heritage. The concept of Turkestan was quite popular in intellectual circles in Central Asia after gaining independence, as it carried "the prestige and romantic allure completely absent from the term 'Central Asia'" (Hyman, 1997, p. 343). This project was highly visible among others in the final communiques and speeches of the meetings in Tashkent and Almaty in 1993–1995 (Azizov, 2017, pp. 127–129). Turkestanism, an idea that imagines all five 'stans' as a unity, was strongly advocated by Uzbek elites and would entail a central role for Uzbekistan in this integration

project (Abashin, 2012, p. 161). This is very noticeable in the speech by Islam Karimov, the first president of Uzbekistan, titled: *Turkestan is Our Common Home*, where he clearly stated the need for integration between Central Asian states based on the shared historical heritage (Hyman, 1997, pp. 348–349). Although popular in the intellectual circles in the 1990s, it seems that over time pan-Turkistan ideas have faded due to a lack of popular and political support (Dadabaev, 2019, p. 903).

Nowadays, Turkistani discourse has been abandoned, nonetheless, Central Asian presidents refer to their common Central Asian heritage and history. Below, I will briefly discuss K.J. Tokayev and S. Mirziyoyev speeches delivered during the Consultative Meetings and an article published in Kazakh journal “Kazpravda”. The presidents address the need for further integration in economic sphere, transport, energetic sector, summarise the achievements of the Consultative Meetings so far, and many others. Below, I will focus only on references to common heritage and past.

In the article with a very telling title, *Central Asian Renaissance: On the Path to Sustainable Development and Prosperity*, published in the journal “Kazpravda”, K.J. Tokayev frequently emphasises shared historical heritage and past. The president claims that the long-standing interactions between nomadic and settled cultures in the region created a unique identity that has survived to this day. The president writes: “There is no doubt that the common historical past, centuries-old traditions of friendship and good neighbourliness will continue to serve as an unshakable basis for the rapprochement of our brotherly peoples” (2024). In the context of national memories, K.J. Tokayev mentions that Central Asian states should focus more on “the remarkable chapters of our [Central Asian] shared past” (2024). The president writes about the need to write a common history of Central Asian states, based on different sources, but does not elaborate more on how to do that. In another part of the text, references to the common past are used to illustrate the shared destiny and the necessity of further integration (Tokayev, 2024). Although references to history are not so frequent in the speeches of K.J. Tokayev during the 3rd and 4th Consultative Meetings, one can also notice that common heritage and history is used as an argument for further integration (2021, 2022).

In the speech during the 6th Consultative Meeting, the president of Uzbekistan briefly refers to just described article by K.J. Tokayev and emphasises its importance, claiming that it was a “deep analysis” of the integration efforts (Mirziyoyev, 2024). In S. Mirziyoyev speech, the Consultative Meetings are “a new page” in the centuries-old cooperation of Central Asian countries, therefore emphasising the historical continuity of the regional interactions (2024). Similarly to K.J. Tokayev, he speaks about the common historical heritage, which also serves as a reminder

to develop “a sense of belonging, unity and shared responsibility” within Central Asian societies (Mirziyoyev, 2024). The president of Uzbekistan stresses the need to develop projects that would strengthen regional unity among societies, in particular young Central Asians. In the speeches of S. Mirziyoyev delivered during the 4th and 5th Consultative Meetings, in 2022 and 2023, respectively, references to history are less frequent, nonetheless, common heritage and past are emphasised (2022, 2023). He claims, among other things, that a “thorough study of our [Central Asian] shared history” will contribute to further integration (Mirziyoyev, 2022).

In the speeches of both presidents, there are clear references to the need to build regional identity (Mirziyoyev, 2024; Tokayev, 2024). President S. Mirziyoyev mentions that this is just the “beginning of the formation of a common regional identity” (2024). K.J. Tokayev writes that one of the pillars of the regional identity is the “respect for shared historical roots” (2024). Central Asia is described as a place that historically served as a transport hub connecting different civilisations, a place of cultural exchange, therefore the presidents portray the region as “the Crossroads of Civilization”. In the speeches, collaboration between academic institutions to conduct joint projects of historical and ethnographic nature is encouraged. Both presidents establish clear connection between historical heritage and current integration, with history serving as a strong foundation for these initiatives (Mirziyoyev, 2022, 2023, 2024; Tokayev, 2021, 2022, 2024).

Based on the speeches of the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, one could argue that they are “imagining” the region, linking it with the common past. However, an open question remains about the extent to which nation-building efforts might hinder the region-building process. Since gaining independence in 1991, Central Asian states have focused on creating a coherent national ideology, a significant part of which was the official historical narrative⁷. The priority of building a cohesive nation-state identity may have overshadowed efforts to build regional identity, making the process of “demarcation of history and heritage” more difficult (Kudaibergenova, 2014, p. 168).

In the search for national heroes and foundations of history, history has been treated as a political resource, which is not unique to this region. The elites in Central Asia have referred to the distant past to identify national heroes and a golden age with their respective histories. This process has been described as a state-sponsored primordialism (Kudaibergenova, 2014). Kazakhstan typically refers to the legacy of the Kazakh Khanate. Uzbekistan displays the figures of Tamerlan and Ulugh-Beg.

⁷ This does not change the fact that contemporary narratives to a large extent are based on narratives created during the Soviet period (see, for instance, Gorshenina, 2016).

Kyrgyzstan emphasises the figure of Manas and Kyrgyz Khaganate. Tajikistan refers to the great tradition of the Samanid dynasty, especially Ismail I Somoni, and attempts to trace its heritage back to the ancient Aryan civilization. The Turkmen elites identified themselves as the descendants of Oghuz Turks, tracing their lineage to the semi-legendary Oghuz-khan (Abashin, 2012; Wański, 2024). Nationalizing narratives which refer to the distant past highlight the achievements of a particular nation. At the same time, they can downplay the importance of the achievements of other nations/ethnic groups. These attempts to nationalize and ethnicize historical heroes and silhouettes can lead to different disputes.

In Central Asia, there have been certain mnemonic conflicts over the national affiliations of great historical figures, such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Yusuf Balasaguni, Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, and Alisher Navoi (Baydarov, 2023). For instance, Al-Farabi, a renowned 10th-century scholar and philosopher, is claimed by Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, and, outside of the region, also by Iranians (Galiev, 2015, p. 140). Kazakhs argue that he was born in an area that is now part of Kazakhstan and his name is used in the official narrative. This has prompted protests from Tajik elites, who maintain that it was Soviet-era manipulation to associate Al-Farabi with Kazakhstan (Galiev, 2015, pp. 140–141). Another mnemonic conflict centres around the early Iron Age descendants – the Saka and the Massagetae – whom different Central Asian states claim as their ancestors (Schnirelmann, 2009).

Dispute over the sedentary versus nomadic status involve Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. For Tajikistan, a central value in the official narrative has become association with the settled cultures in Central Asia. Sedentism is portrayed as “evidence of being rooted in the region” and presented as “superior to nomadism” (Włodek, 2016, p. 58). Presenting themselves as the only “settled” culture in the region can be quite conflictual if, at the same time, the nomadic way of life is depreciated and considered inferior (Włodek, 2016). Additionally, there are further historical grievances between these two countries. Tajiks have long been inhabitants of some of the largest Uzbek cities, such as Samarkand and Bukhara. During the Soviet-era administrative division, these cities were incorporated into the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, leaving many Tajiks outside of their home territory. Overall, during the division, the Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was included in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, and only in 1929 did Tajikistan become a “full member” of the USSR, gaining the status of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (Włodek, 2016). It is important to note that the relationship between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have improved significantly in the recent years (for further details see: Dadabaev, 2019, pp. 205–207), therefore these historical disputes will likely ease as well.

These competing narratives are primarily aimed at strengthening national cohesion. Selected figures and symbols are used to legitimize national identity and may also support the legitimacy of the ruling elite, particularly if these narratives are linked with the current leadership. While used mainly for internal purposes, to some extent, these visions might be used for external promotion, nation-branding. Although the abovementioned disputes seem to be less visible, due to the increasing cooperation, the emphasis on distinct national identities can hinder the development of a regional identity, especially if emphasised in official discourse.

Conclusions

As I. Neumann aptly points out, regional identity is often perceived as natural, because political elites' discourse reinforces this picture (2003). Cultural similarities and common historical heritage alone are not sufficient to create a unified, consolidated region. To do so, they must be emphasised and given political relevance by region-builders.

As illustrated by the speeches of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, political actors emphasise cultural and historical bonds of Central Asian region. Shared history is utilized in the discourse as a foundation for integration. Consultative Meetings between presidents are framed within historical traditions of interaction, giving them the significance of historical continuity. This narrative creates a picture of common destiny of Central Asian states and implies inevitable regional unity and integration.

However, nationalistic and primordial narratives might represent an obstacle for the creation of regional identity. Conflictual interpretations of history and discussions over national affiliations of historical figures, as well as claims to the oldest or the most significant cultural legacy, may hinder the process of constructing a common historical narrative. The potential differences and historical inconsistencies may not significantly impact the process of regionalism in Central Asia unless they are emphasised by the political elites.

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