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**Everyday Diplomats: New Perspectives on Networks, Commerce, and Regional Integration
in Central Asia**

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Summary

This report provides a discussion of a neglected topic in debates about regional connectivity and Central Asia. We focus on the status of transnational communities and networks in Central Asia, the significance of such actors for regional connectivity, as well as their importance for Central Asian security dynamics. We use the term transnational networks to refer to groups of actors that work collaboratively across the boundaries of multiple nation states, especially but not exclusively in the field of commerce. Research has thus far concentrated largely on the drivers of ethnic conflict in Central Asia. Attention needs to be paid however to the transnational networks that connect Central Asia to neighbouring regions and to globalising processes more generally. Central Asia's transnational networks tend to be regarded with suspicion by policy makers within and beyond the region. Such networks are widely assumed to be connected to the flow of radical Islamic ideologies and/or organised crime.¹ Yet such assumptions can be misleading. A careful and detailed consideration of the activities of Central Asia's transnational networks reveals their current significance to Central Asia's economic and political dynamics, and their potential future contribution to the region's prosperity and stability. This is especially the case in terms of these communities' contribution to the region's economies. But we also bring attention to the role such networks play in the informal mediation of inter-state relations. In this respect, we regard Central Asia's transnational actors as playing the role of "everyday diplomats". This term emphasises the capacities that particular groups have in the skills of diplomacy, especially those of negotiation that arise out of an aptitude for cultural/linguistic versatility. Transnational actors play such roles in the region's societies despite not being officially appointed representatives of nation-states. Nation-states beyond Central Asia increasingly recognise how the diplomatic skills of their populations can add depth to their foreign policy agendas and inter-state relations,² and "we can expect to see states interacting more and more beyond the constraints of the formal interstate system".³ In

¹ UNODC, *Misuse of Licit Trade for Opiate Trafficking in Western and Central Asia: a Threat Assessment*, 2012.

² Alan Christelow, *Algerians without borders: the making of a global frontier society*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012).

³ Yolaçan, Serkan, "States and Networks in the Frontiers of West Asia: A Diasporic View", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Forthcoming.

what follows, we urge policy makers concerned with Central Asia to reflect on the measures that can be introduced to nurture and sustain both the activities and livelihoods of the region's "everyday diplomats", as well as, more generally, as the diplomatic skills they embody.

Everyday Diplomats: New Perspectives on Networks, Commerce, and Regional Integration in Central Asia

Introduction and Context

The nation-states that make-up modern Central Asia were largely delimited in the 20th century; they are home to ethno-linguistically diverse populations. In terms of language, ethnic and religious identities the region is largely populated by Sunni and Shi'i Ismaili Muslims, though it also home to significant communities of Christians, Buddhists and Zoroastrians. Ethno-linguistically the region's population is widely distinguished on the basis of those who speak Turkic languages (Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Tatars, Uyghurs and Dungans), Persian-related dialects (from Tajikistan and Afghanistan) and the Indo-Iranian Pamiri languages (e.g. Wakhi, Rushani, Bartangi, Oroshor, Khufi, and Shughni). There are of course also significant numbers of Russian-speakers, especially in the region's main cities and across Kazakhstan.

Almost all scholarship on identity in Central Asia emphasises the extent to which identities in the region are fluid and situational: mixed families blur stark and often politically manufactured ethnic identity boundaries and reflect a past in which ethnicity was less central to society and politics than is the case today. Additionally, Central Asians have long-lasting experience of many forms of historical mobility and migration – knowledge of past lives in different place for an important undercurrent of identity and culture in the region. In the context of the enforcement of national borders from the 1920s onwards, many Central Asian communities were forcibly relocated and resettled, and required to undergo multiple forms of identity registration: these state-defined identities often bore little relationship to the region's peoples own self-understandings.⁴ This history of movement and mobility is an important aspect of debates about identity and political affiliation in the region today.

Central Asia and Europe-Asia Relations: the Importance of History

Scholars of Global History have recognized that Central Asia's contribution to the world has historically arisen from its geographical position between Asia and Europe. Until recently,

⁴ Magnus Marsden and Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (Hurst and Co.: London, 2012).

the attention of historians centred on Central Asia as a land-lock territory which served as a site of struggle between the world's great imperial powers, especially in the nineteenth century.⁵ More recently, there has been a growing recognition of the ways in which Central Asia's societies have both facilitated and benefited from the region's status as a connecting corridor between Asia and Europe – a corridor along which circulations of knowledge, goods and people have been channelled. In pre-modern and early modern Central Asian history, local states, populations and institutions benefited from external political patronage, transregional trading connections, and the circulation and interaction of learned people, state officials and opinion-formers.

In the early 13th century, Central Asia passed through a period of intellectual efflorescence. This period of efflorescence arose partly from the role that the region's urban centres played as vibrant sites of interaction for commercial actors and thinkers from multiple parts of Asia.⁶ It is widely assumed however that the rise of the Indian Ocean maritime trade from the 17th century onwards resulted in the demise of the overland caravan routes that had connected Central Asia to both Europe and East Asia. Recent work shows that, in fact, the rise of the Qing dynasty in China in the 19th century facilitated a period of economic prosperity and intensive state building in Central Asia. During this period, Central Asian rulers were able to establish close relationships with Qing Emperors, while also lobbying diplomatically for the rights of Central Asians merchants conducting trade and commerce in China's western regions. As a result, Asian merchants enjoyed close relationships with Qing China, meaning additionally that they sent substantial proportions of their profits to their homelands in Central Asia. This revenue flow was critical in the expansion of the state coffers of political entities, especially the remarkable Khanate of Khoqand and the Emirate of Bukhara. Central Asian merchants based in China were involved in the transport of Chinese products – notably wild rhubarb – to Russia, Iran, and Europe.⁷

A series of policy initiatives in Central Asia –including the United States “Silk Road initiative” and more recently China's “Belt and Road” strategy – have sought to reinvigorate Central Asia's historic role as a corridor of exchange between Asia and Europe. Such projects largely

⁵ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in Central Asia*, (London: John Murray, 1996/2016).

⁶ Frederick S. Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁷ Scott S. Levi, *The rise and fall of Khoqand, 1709-1896*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016);

take a bird's-eye-view on the global integration of Central Asia. They produce images of how regional connectivity should look, for example, if only Central Asia's states were able to provide a suitable climate for international investors or if the correct levels of infrastructure were in place to support international businesses. As a result, such projects rarely consider the *actually existing* nature of regional connectivity. By being unwilling to address *regional connectivity from the ground up*, they tend to promote a utopian understanding of the region's future - a future that rings hollow for Central Asians themselves, and stands thus as a source of frustrated aspirations.⁸ Finally, by emphasising infrastructural projects and commercial treaties that are framed by and in relationship to the state rather than connections mediated from the bottom-up by the region's societies, mega projects rarely identify the local actors who have forged and sustained existing forms of regional connectivity. Rarely, indeed are the experiences of local players in ongoing processes of regional connectivity – be such players transnational merchants or mobile medical professionals – taken seriously by policy makers. Nor do policy makers ask how the projects they develop might affect in a positive or negative manner *actually existing* inter-regional arrangements. A consideration of the activities of Central Asia's transnational actors reveals how better understanding the activities and pressing needs of such groups would assist in the development of policies concerning connectivity in Central Asia that better reflect the region's own dynamics and its people's contemporary needs.

Central Asia's "Everyday Diplomats"

Transnational networks are historically durable only if those who form them are flexible and able to respond to shifting political and economic circumstances. The capacity for flexibility evinced by the individuals who form such networks is what makes it helpful to consider such actors as being "everyday diplomats".⁹ In the context of wider debates surrounding the projection by nation states of "soft power" using instruments beyond those that are

⁸ See for example, James. D, and Chih Yuan Woon. 2017. "Chinese Narratives on "One Belt, One Road" (一帶一路) in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts." *The Professional Geographer* 69:4, 591-603.

⁹ Magnus Marsden, Diana Ibanez Tirado and David Henig, 'Everyday diplomacy: introduction to special issue', *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 34 (2). pp. 2-22. For a Central Asian diplomat's take on the concept of "everyday diplomacy" see Faizullaev, A. 2017. "Mastering the art of Everyday Diplomacy" presentation at the US Embassy Alumni Programme, US Embassy, Tashkent: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8el6qa-DyT0>.

formally part of the interstate system,¹⁰ scholars and policy makers have dwelled recently on the significance of cultural, public or two-track diplomacy to the “intermediation between states” carried out by way of “the interaction of non-state actors”.¹¹ The term “everyday diplomacy” emphasises however *the capacities and skills* that particular communities and groups of people have in being diplomatic, notably negotiation and cultural/linguistic versatility.¹² Such capacities arise out of decades and often generations of experience in inhabiting the region’s cultural and political frontiers. Central Asian’s transnational merchants are not formal diplomats or the beneficiaries of diplomatic immunity. Engaged in historic international activities in a manner that requires the building and maintenance of trust-based cross-cultural interactions, rather, their cultural conversance with “multiple political domains” underpins the role the vital roles they play as intermediaries across international borders.¹³

A range of actors, institutions and networks rooted in Central Asia’s Muslim majority states have played an intensive role in small-scale yet cumulatively significant acts of cultural and political mediation over the course of the past four decades. The net result of such activities is rising levels of inter-regional connectivity at the level of society-to-society interactions. A result of the activities by such “everyday diplomats” has been the creation of an expansive arena that is cross-crossed by networks of traders, students, professionals, and artists, and dotted with vibrant commercial nodes. Far from being supported by the region’s nation-states, such activities have often carried on apace in the face of official opposition if not outright hostility. We discuss some of the most recent aspects of such hostility to transnational networks below.

Such networks are rarely, if at all, defined by the Central Asia’s official national boundaries. Instead they link the region’s nation states and societies to one another and connect these to further regions beyond. Policy seeking to expand the scope for regional connectivity

¹⁰ Eurasian Council of Foreign Affairs, *Soft Power of Central Asian Nations in the 21st Century: Heritage, Modernity, Aspirations*, February 2018.

¹¹ Yolacan, Serkan, “States and Networks in the Frontiers of West Asia: A Diasporic View”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Forthcoming.

¹² Magnus Marsden, Diana Ibanez Tirado and David Henig, ‘Everyday diplomacy: introduction to special issue’, *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 34 (2). pp. 2-22.

¹³ Yolacan, Serkan, “States and Networks in the Frontiers of West Asia: A Diasporic View”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Forthcoming

needs to recognise the capacity of actors on the ground for forging connections across boundaries. There is also a need for policy that strengthens rather than inhibits the activities of Central Asian agents of *globalisation from below*.¹⁴

Actors involved in the field of “everyday diplomacy” work across a range of fields. Most obviously, they are merchants and traders. But Central Asian networks of medical personnel, students at higher education institutions and humanitarian aid workers are all involved in such intense and complex forms of *globalisation from below*. Such actors are extremely knowledgeable and informed about the opportunities and barriers to commerce, infrastructure and security in the region. Policy makers stand to learn a great deal from their perspectives and experiences about a range of fields, including the development of sustainable policy relating to commerce, connectivity and regional security.

Central Asia’s culturally adaptable and politically skilled “everyday diplomats” evince the following three features that are all of critical significance to the region’s future:

1. Based on knowledge and experience such networks lay the foundations for *resilient and sustainable forms of regional interconnectivity*;
2. By facilitating the circulation of knowledge and information across political boundaries the activities of these transnational networks *mitigate against interstate conflict*, and;
3. in the context of political tension, the networks provide *tangible channels of communication and exchange*, often unavailable to official state authorities and diplomats.

Transnational Networks in Central Asia (1) – The view from below: Informal Diplomacy, and Commercial Integration

The term “transnational” is used in reference to the networks discussed in this paper because these networks criss-cross the region’s national boundaries. The internal composition of such networks is however also transnational: the individuals who form them enter into professional, commercial and emotional partnerships with people of backgrounds

¹⁴ For a discussion of the concept ‘globalisation from below’, see Gordon Matthews et.al. *Globalization from Below: The World’s Other Economy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012). For a case study, see Magnus Marsden 2017. “Actually existing silk roads” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8(1):22-30.

very different from themselves. They also establish durable ties to state officials, ties that are critical to their work, especially at times of flux and uncertainty. As such, these networks are of vital to the making of the “social infrastructures” along which knowledge about the region’s changing conditions circulate. It is within such networks too that individuals acquire the linguistic, cultural, social and political skills that facilitate their cultural immersion in multiple contexts.

Importantly, such transnational actors not only *use* existing infrastructures to travel, and obtain the working and residency permits they require in order to be able to operate. In addition, they are constantly *testing* and *evaluating* new developments in the domains of policy and infrastructure that affect their lives, often choosing whether to embrace these continue with tried and tested structures.

This mixture of skills, activities and levels of experience mean that transnational networks are central to the ways in which relationships across vexed political boundaries are managed and sustained. Indeed, the mobility and linguistic-cultural skills of transnational actors as “everyday diplomats” often mean that the individuals who form such networks have access to locations and types of knowledge that are out of bounds for the region’s formal *corps diplomatique*.

We will now examine a cross-section of examples from a much broader field of Central Asia’s everyday diplomats.

1) Central Asia’s Afghans

An especially poignant example of a transnational network operating in Central Asia is the region’s Afghan traders.¹⁵ Mobile Afghans in Central Asia are largely viewed by officials from the region and beyond either as refugees or as terrorist/criminal actors. Yet the findings of extensive and long-term research with Central Asia’s Afghans attests to the nuanced role that they play in “regional connectivity from below”. Afghans living in Central Asia as

¹⁵ Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*, (London: Hurst and Co. 2016).

recognised refugees are regularly supported economically by established Afghan commercial networks that are a long-term feature of the region's commodity markets.¹⁶

Such commercial networks were mainly established by Afghans who studied in Central Asia's Soviet universities and technical institutes during the 1970s and 80s. Afghans studying in the Soviet Union simultaneously engaged in petty forms of trade, such as foreign currency dealing and the sale of Indian cloth and jeans to Soviet citizens. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the activities of such small-scale traders became central to ensuring that the Soviet Union's successor states received a supply of basic goods – including most importantly foodstuffs. Today, such networks remain of significance for Central Asia's economies. Afghans import foodstuffs to Central Asia from Iran and Pakistan; they also bring commodities of everyday use made in China to the region.

Increasingly, however, Afghan traders are using the knowledge they have developed of trading routes and practices in Central Asia to facilitate commercial operations elsewhere, especially in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Western Europe. After the establishment of the Eurasian Customs Union, Afghans arranged for example for the shipment of goods to Russia and Belarus using Kazakhstan's port and rail network.¹⁷ The capacity of Afghans to engage in such activities depends to a significant degree on their ability to live in and travel through Central Asia, as well as to employ refugees from Afghanistan in their businesses. Afghan merchants operating in this expansive context are always fluent in both Central Asia's Turkic and Persian languages, as well as knowing Russian and often also Mandarin or Cantonese.¹⁸ In order for the networks to function, the merchants must also develop close relationships with regional officials, both at the national and local tiers of government. Such relationships are also important because they help to insulate traders at times of political sensitivity. It is an over-simplification to interpret this type of relationship between state officials and traders through the one-sided lens of corruption alone: the precarious situation in which

¹⁶ There are currently close to 4000 refugees and approximately 200 established traders in the country. Smaller communities of Afghan traders exist in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, although no official statistics are available. Tashkent was a major centre for Afghan traders in Central Asia until the early 2000s.

¹⁷ Approximately 4000 Afghan traders are active in Ukraine, whereas the number of traders from Afghanistan in Russia likely exceeds 50,000 individuals.

¹⁸ A central node for Afghan transnational trading activities in China is the city of Yiwu which is the permanent base of approximately 4000 Afghan traders.

such merchants find themselves while working far from home is the central driver behind the cultivation and subsequent maintenance of such ties. More generally, our research findings suggest that these merchants have had a palpable influence on interstate relations: Central Asia's states frequently depict Afghans in terms of discourses of terrorism and criminality, yet the region's public widely regard them as successful and adaptable traders. This disjunction in images of Afghans arises from the interaction of Central Asian populations and Afghans in the region's bazaars. It indicates the important implications beyond the economy of cross-border mobility and exchange.

2) Cross-Central Asian Uzbeks

Another example of transnational network acting as everyday diplomats in the region are Cross-Central Asian Uzbeks. Uzbeks constitute the largest Turkic group in Central Asia and the majority of the population of Uzbekistan. Most other Central Asian states, however, are also home to significant communities of ethno-linguistically Uzbeks including Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where they constitute approximately 15 % of the population.¹⁹ In Afghanistan, Uzbeks are also an important Turkic-speaking minority. Although Central Asian Uzbek societies are proficient in the languages of the societies in which they live (Kyrgyz, Tajik/Dari and Russian), they consider Uzbek as their mother tongue and the preferred language of communication in domestic spaces and amongst kin, friends and business associates.²⁰ Central Asia's Uzbek communities are characterised to an important degree by a high degree of mobility and internal forms of solidarity within their transnational networks. Such networks have arisen against the backdrop of increasingly exclusionary national policies that stigmatise ethno-linguistic minorities and constrain their movements and activities, especially in the field of commerce.

Throughout Central Asia, Uzbek minorities are regarded as being active and successful merchants and entrepreneurs who, historically, have been able to form connections within settings in Central Asia, Eurasia and the Arab world (e.g. Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia). Uzbek traders do not form a single trading group but, rather, constitute poly-stranded

¹⁹ Matteo Fumigalli, 'Framing ethnic minority mobilisation in Central Asia: The cases of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan' *Europe-Asia Studies* 57.4: 567-590

²⁰ Peter Finke, *Variations on Uzbek identity: strategic choices, cognitive schemas and political constraints in identification processes* (New York: Berghahn, 2016). Morgan Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

networks that are active in different niches of the economies of the countries in which they work.²¹ They are usually involved in local bazaars and shopping centres, but they also participate in transnational trade between Central Asia and neighbouring regions; they are also regarded as skilled restaurateurs and agriculturalists. The Uzbeks' vital involvement in local economies has often resulted in them being targeted by exclusionary state policies, and occasionally acts of violence, involving the complicity of local societies and state officials. In June 2010, for example, violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan involving ethnically Uzbek and Kyrgyz individuals left approximately 470 people dead: nearly 100,000 people temporarily fled the violence to neighbouring Uzbekistan. Yet the ability to move to neighbouring countries in search of security, trade or family visits depends on the often tense diplomatic relations of Central Asian governments, as well as on the increasingly tight policies concerning cross-border movements in the region.

In addition to structural discrimination and violence, the hurdles to trade erected at Central Asia's international borders also affects the efficiency of Uzbek trading networks. As with the case of Afghans, Uzbek kin groups are dispersed across the entire region as a result of historic cycles of mobility, both forced and voluntary. In addition, Uzbeks are an increasingly mobile society on the global scale: Uzbeks from northern Afghanistan Uzbekistan itself have increasingly migrated to Russia, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, Malaysia, Europe and the USA, often for commercial and educational reasons. If Afghan trading networks have played a critical role in connecting Central Asian markets to the global economy, there are strong indications that Uzbek networks will not only continue to play a critical role in connecting Central Asia's states but also in further mediating its connections, liaisons and negotiations with the wider world, especially to Europe and North America.

3) **Transnational Healthcare networks**

Not all of Central Asia's transnational networks inevitable are based-upon ethnic or linguistic identities. A different type of network is constituted by profession and training. One such network important to Central Asia is made-up of skilled medical professionals and caregivers. While government funded healthcare facilities have decayed, an increasing number of private hospitals and healthcare providers have opened in the region's cities.

²¹ Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers*.

Such healthcare providers include international institutions that are staffed by foreign medical personnel, for example, of Iranian, Russian or European origin. There has also been a rapid expansion in recent years of traditional medical clinics offering Chinese medicine, especially in Tajikistan. Although popular, such facilities come at a great expense for the local population who cannot afford continuous treatment and frequently build up substantial debts in order to treat their illnesses. Such international healthcare centres also serve as nodes in transnational networks of individuals seeking treatment abroad: Tajik patients wishing to undergo treatment in Iran, for example, or Uzbeks seeking healthcare in China. However, bilateral and multilateral tensions in the region make the mobility for healthcare contingent and unpredictable: visas, border openings and changing open-skies agreements rapidly change against the backdrop of diplomatic tensions. Little is understood at present surrounding the ways in which such movements impact on interstate relations and regional connectivity more generally. Though it is interesting to note that the Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan has established a unit for better understanding the impact of the country's health tourists on its relations with neighbouring countries, suggesting recognition of the forms of informal diplomacy enacted by such actors.²²

4) Central Asia's Uyghurs

The Uyghur are often neglected in scholarship on Central Asia - largely due to the bulk of the population currently being confined to the Xinjiang region of China. Nonetheless, they have historically played a significant role as cross-border traders, often as a part of the informal economy. They have filled this role as shifts in local economic conditions and border regimes have provided opportunities to do so. As Rune Steenburg has suggested,²³ the marginalised position of the Uyghur - as uniquely bereft of a state amongst major Central Asian Turkic groups, and as a deeply securitised minority within China - is structurally related to their engagement in such "high risk, pioneering business undertakings" and the maintenance of the strong, wide-ranging social networks that underpin them. As outlined below, recent political and economic developments have hampered the maintenance of networks of this

²² Wahid Majrooh, "Medical Tourism: from Afghanistan to India and Pakistan", (Paper presented at the Wellbeing and Migration: Inter-Asian Perspectives Launch Conference, Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey, May 7-8, 2018).

²³ Rune Steenburg, "Accumulating Trust - Uyghur traders in the Sino-Kyrgyz border trade after 1991." In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Studies*, Horstmann, A., Saxer, M. & Rippa, A. (eds.), (New York: Routledge, 2018).

kind; these same developments are likely to further necessitate Uyghur engagement in such enterprises and thus to simultaneously drive transnational mobility.

The Uyghur population of Xinjiang - China's most westerly region, which borders the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Russia, as well as Pakistan and India - has at least eight million inhabitants. Hundreds of thousands more Uyghurs live in the Central Asian states, with the largest concentration, of around 200,000, in Kazakhstan;²⁴ these communities are the result of a series of migrations over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁵ Exploiting a niche left by Kazakh and Chinese state-run industries, many Kazakhstani Uyghurs have exploited a niche as "shuttle traders" along the Khorgos road between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan. Economic mediation of this type, between China and Central Asian states, was characteristic of the activities of Uyghurs across Central Asia from the early 1990s and through the first decade of the 21st century.²⁶ It has declined in recent years, principally as a result on the one hand of grand infrastructure projects that value the high-volume containerised trade of commodities, and, on the other, the more focused efforts made by both the Chinese state and the Central Asian states to inhibit the extension and consolidation of transnational Uyghur networks.²⁷

Uyghur traders from China have exploited similar niches to their Central Asian counterparts. They played an important role in moving low-cost Chinese goods from eastern China into Central Asia from the 1990s onwards, contributing to the rapid expansion of this market through the early 2000s.²⁸ They pioneered, for example, the Sino-Kyrgyz trade in the decades following the opening of the border in 1992.²⁹ Their virtual disappearance from these Kyrgyz markets since 2015 reflects the flexibility of Uyghur trading practices resulting

²⁴ Suchandan Chatterjee "Bordered Conscience: Uyghurs of Central Asia" in *The Uyghur Community: Diaspora, Identity and Geopolitics*, Ercilasun, Güljanat Kurmangaliyeva; Ercilasun, Konuralp (eds.), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 105-120.

²⁵ See David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

²⁶ Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies* (Washington DC: John Hopkins University, 2009).

²⁷ On the ways in which new infrastructure projects work to reduce the role of small-scale actors in the region's borderlands in a manner likely to have long-term implications for regional stability see Hasan H. Karrar and Till Mostowlansky "Assembling marginality in northern Pakistan," *The Journal of Political Geography*, Vol 63. March 2018.

²⁸ Rune Steenberg, 'Network or Community? Two tropes for analysing social relations among Uyghur traders in Kyrgyzstan' *Crossroads Asia Working Paper*, no.17.

²⁹ Rune Steenberg, 'Embedded rubber sandals: trade and gifts across the Sino-Kyrgyz border' *Central Asian Survey* 35.3: 405-420.

from their marginalisation from formal markets, and their consequent ability to respond quickly to the recent economic downturn. It also reflects however the tightening of both economic and border laws by Kyrgyz and Chinese governments respectfully.

To sum up this empirical section: Central Asia's transnational networks highlight the role played by a specific network to Central Asia's economic globalisation. Long before regional connectivity became a leading geopolitical concept or the focus of multimillion dollar infrastructure projects, Afghans, Uzbeks, and Uyghurs amongst many other groups were already active in supplying and connecting the region's market places and bazaars. Simultaneously, they opened channels of communication across previously rigid Cold War boundaries. As we explore below, questions now loom over their ability to remain active in Central Asia: the policies of Central Asian states restrict the rights of such transnational actors to live in the region's nation states, while international actors and organisations approach such networks through a simple security lens. Finally, as we have noted above, infrastructure projects designed to facilitate regional connectivity often result in marginalising the activities of smaller scale actors. Yet while small scale such actors hold unique and intimate knowledge about cross-regional dynamics and are therefore of critical significance both to the region's economic and also political dynamics.

Transnational Networks in Central Asia (2) – The view from the top: National and International Anxieties

Central Asian nation-states and international organisations active in the region tend to treat transnational networks such as those described above through an overly simplifying security lens. Such transnational networks overwhelmingly tend to be regarded by the region's states as dangerous founts of religious-political radicalism. the participation of such networks in transnational activity and the ability of the individuals to form relationships with Muslims from backgrounds other than their own, often reinforce the fallacious idea that Muslims who lead informal transnational lives are inevitably more likely to be hostile to the nation-state than their sedentary co-religionists.³⁰ In official discourses Central Asia's transnational networks are also often connected by officials to the spectre of organised

³⁰ Cemal Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

crime, most especially in terms of their participation in activities relating to the “opium economy”. Yet recent analysis suggests that the connections that existed in the context of post-2001 Afghanistan between the commodity trade and the smuggling of narcotics has given way to the emergence of more specifically criminal networks.³¹

Yet being viewed through such a lens, Central Asia’s transnational traders must regularly deal with low levels of confidence and trust amongst their international partners. As a result, they are increasingly required to surmount barriers to international commerce that merchants from other world regions do not. The families of such merchants also suffer from stigmatisation and exclusion, often finding it difficult to access relevant identity documents or even the most basic of social services in the countries in which they are based. Greater awareness and understanding in the region’s societies about such groups and the contribution would assist in undermining such corrosive and stigmatising stereotypes.

Policy makers in Central Asia widely regard the presence of foreigners – especially traders and merchants who build deep roots to local societies - as being inherently suspicious politically. Indeed, the tendency regard transnational networks as inevitably involved in clandestine political activities in the region has resulted in several Central Asian states introducing legislation that is designed to weaken their presence. Such legislation takes multiple forms. In some contexts, Central Asian states have introduced legislation that prevents or at least makes it difficult for locals to marry foreigners.³² In other contexts,

³¹ Abdul Qadeer Mufti, Bahram Amirahmadian, and Gulshan Sachedva, *Strategic Analysis of the Chabahar Port: Afghanistan-Iran-India Relations*, (Kabul: Afghanistan Institute of Strategic Studies, March 2016).

³² According to a new ‘Marriage and Family Code’ introduced by the government of Turkmenistan in the spring of 2001, foreign citizens married to Turkmen women had to sign a special contract that needed to be ratified by officials and they were also required to pay \$50,000 to the state: the payment was officially a guarantee to the state for the child’s welfare. News agencies close to the Turkmenistan government depicted this piece of legislation as being designed to protect ‘young women’ who ‘fell into the hands of rich Asians’ harems’ or who were duped by ‘wandering adventurers posing as rich foreign businessmen’. Rustem Safronov, ‘Turkmen’s Marriage Decree Helps Deepen the Isolation of Citizens’, *Eurasia Insight*, 2002, 18 June 2001 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav061901.shtml>; accessed on 27 Jan. 2010). In 2011 a comparable piece of legislation was brought to law by the government of Tajikistan: foreigners marrying Tajik women must have lived in the country for one year and sign a prenuptial agreement committing them to provide housing for their spouse. As foreigners can only buy property after having lived for five years in the country, the legislation was interpreted in the media as being designed to ensure that the home of foreign men married to Tajik women is registered to a Tajik national; in turn, this would ensure that fewer Afghan ‘businessmen’ could earn Tajik citizenship through marriage. See ‘Tajikistan Tightens Marriage Rules: Move Appears Designed to Stop Foreign Nationals Marrying Tajiks to Get Passports’, Faromarz Olamafruz and Yasmin Khushbakht, *Central Asia Human Rights Reporting Project*, RCA Issue 643, 3 Mar. 2011 (<http://iwpr.net/report-news/tajikistan-tightens-marriage-rules>; last accessed 18 Nov. 2012).

legislation has been introduced that prevents officially registered 'refugees' from living in the urban centres in which they are also able to earn a livelihood.³³ More generally, the visa requirements for citizens of neighbouring states tend to change rapidly and be highly volatile: this makes commercial and other types of visit for such types of actor complex, unreliable and expensive. Such policies are resulting in the degradation of transnational networks in the region and the increasing desire of migrating to and thus investing in the "West". They are testing the resilience of the exact communities that possess the cultural competencies and skills necessary to bridge contentious political boundaries in Central Asia and thus to forge sustainable forms of regional connectivity.

Central Asian Transnational Networks and The Wider World – the case for a nuanced approach

We acknowledge that there have been terrorist events involving the type of transnational Central Asian discussed in this report. Abdulgadir Masharipov is one example. This ethnically Tajik citizen of Uzbekistan who was fluent in Russian, Turkish, Chinese and Arabic, and had ties to Uyghur communities in Central Asia and Turkey. He played a leading role in the attack on an Istanbul nightclub on January 1st, 2017. Yet a far more important and widespread issue is the indiscriminate criminalisation by states and international organisations of Central Asia's mobile transnational actors and the intricate networks they form. Such criminalisation is based on the analysis of a few cases that are themselves rarely fully contextualised in relation to the specific political and historic issues out of which they emerge. By pointing to other dimensions of the activities and implications for Central Asia of such networks, this report seeks to underscore the need to cases such as those of Masharipov as important exceptions but not evidence of a general trend. .

There are three specific reasons as to why the EU should direct serious and immediate attention toward the legal status and well-being of minority groups and transnational networks in Central Asia:

³³ A government decree adopted in 2000 bars refugees from living in the capital, Dushanbe, confining them to the surrounding towns of Vakhdat, Hissor and Rudaki. See Jeremie Berlioux, 'Tajikistan: Afghan refugees in limbo, adapt to Staying Put', *Eurasian net* Jan 12th 2016, accessed on May 17th 2018 at <https://eurasianet.org/s/tajikistan-afghan-refugees-in-limbo-adapt-to-staying-put>

Firstly, individuals and families making-up such transnational networks opt to live in Central Asian contexts for three reasons:

- 1) they recognise the region's potential for earning a livelihood.
- 2) they hail from countries that share important cultural and linguistic continuities with Central Asia's societies
- 3) they recognise the value in settling in regions adjacent to their home countries.

Hostile official legislation has meant that such individuals, families and communities are increasingly left with few options other than to treat Central Asia as a way-station en-route to third countries/regions. Such third contexts include countries West Asia (notably Turkey) and Europe (the Schengen countries in particular). Better recognition of the contributions made by such actors and the networks they form in Central Asia will result in higher degrees of regional integration, and less recourse to informal migration elsewhere.

Secondly, the status and experiences of transnational networks in Central Asia also has significant implications for the EU's security dynamics as well as those of its neighbouring states. A great deal of scholarly and policy discourse on "radicalisation" in Central Asia has focused on the socio-economic factors leading to the recruitment of individuals in such networks. The absence of basic Islamic knowledge in the region in the wake of Soviet rule is also widely interpreted as having made it easier for radical organisations to make in-roads into the underbellies of local societies. More recently, experts have brought attention to the relationship between radical secularism and sympathy for Islamist movements. These general theories delve into the wider context behind individual and collective radicalisation. They are less successful at appreciating however specific issues raised by individual terrorists.

According to the research that we have conducted over many years in Central Asia, the activity of foreign migrants and networks in Central Asia and neighbouring regions in terrorism and criminal activities is extremely marginal. There is an urgent need to better understand however the extremely complex circumstances that Central Asia's mobile communities endure, both within the region and beyond. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is home to approximately 50,000 Uzbek-speakers who migrated from Central Asia for

Afghanistan in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution and moved to the Arabian Peninsula by way of Pakistan in the 1980s.³⁴ These double emigres are often today successful business people. Yet thousands continue to have access neither to permanent Afghan or Saudi citizenship. Most are also estranged from their ancestral homelands: they are often regarded by the authorities in Central Asia as a dangerous source of radical Islam. A need exists for communities such as these to be better integrated into the societies in which they are located. As importantly, greater recognition of the role played by transnational networks with wide-ranging political loyalties in ensuring the prosperity and political stability of Central Asian societies would allow regional and international policy makers to focus their attention more accurately on the considerable security issues the region faces.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Central Asia's transnational networks have played a critical role in the region's deeper and recent history – they are likely to do so in the future. Unfortunately, both at the national and international levels such networks are poorly understood because of an over-simplistic focus on security and criminality. The tendency to assume Central Asia's transnational merchants are involved in criminal activities is based both on outdated understandings of the workings of the region's criminal networks, as well as an ongoing perception that simplistically treats Central Asia as a "space of danger".³⁵ There is indeed a worrying trend within Central Asia and beyond to associate almost all forms of informal transnational connectivity with insecurity and criminality. The net result of such policies and attitudes is likely to be poorer regional integration, fewer channels for communication across political boundaries at times of political tension and upheaval, weaker economies and markets, and rising numbers of individuals and groups who have experienced legal and socio-cultural exclusion from the region's societies. In addition, the experience and skills acquired by these "everyday diplomats", and the mediating roles they are uniquely qualified to continue to play, are being lost as such groups are marginalised by the security-driven policies of nation-states and a growing international preference for large-scale commerce. The social and

³⁴ Magnus Marsden, "A Century After the Russian Revolution, How did Bukhara Immigrants Make Afghanistan's Trade Global?" (Kabul: Afghanistan Institute of Strategic Studies, 2017) http://www.aiss.af/aiss/news_details/opinions/5a1fafd957be1

³⁵ John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran, "Contesting danger: a new agenda for policy and scholarship on Central Asia", *International Affairs* 87. 3, 2011: 589–612.

economic marginalisation of such skilled social actors represents a decidedly uncreative approach to the region's human capacity. It also raises further issues about how actors that have undoubtedly played a positive role in earlier waves of regional connectivity will themselves respond to being pushed to the peripheries of a world of which they have both unparalleled experience and understanding.

The following activities on the part of the EU have the potential of addressing critical issues surrounding the treatment of Central Asia's transnational networks.

- **Engage central Asia governments and international NGOs** – the rights of migrants and foreigners in Central Asia need urgent attention by the region's governments. Central Asia's current climate for such actors would better reflect the region's history if it were to be more inclusive to such groups and cognisant of the positive role they have played in Central Asian economy and society over time.
- **Initiate wider discussions on the importance of informal/everyday diplomacy to interstate relationships** – such discussions could take the form of policy events at regional dialogues on the field of informal and everyday diplomacy and its relevance to the region today.
- **Support local and foreign academic in research on migration** – the field of migration studies, especially pertaining to migration to Central Asia beyond the lenses of labour-migration (to Russia), remains relatively poorly developed in Central Asia: further support for this an area of priority for Central Asian research institutions would be a valuable EU contribution.
- **Lead media campaigns on inclusion and diversity** – there is an urgent need to temper the focus on national security by focusing on inciting greater levels of public discussion about Central Asia's ongoing significance as a site of cultural interaction. The current levels of discussion surrounding the Belt and Road initiative make this a unique opportunity to foster debate in Central Asian civil society about cultural heterogeneity and the contributions of minorities to local societies.

Appendix I

Medical Care in Central Asia: Disability Strategy and Hepatitis C Agenda

The EU Central Asia strategy which has been in effect since June 2007 was a good partnership initiative with the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The main focus and strategic interest of the EU in the region has been security and stability due to shared concerns over strengthening the border with Afghanistan to combat drug and human trafficking, illegal trade with weapons, terrorism and organised crime. The strategy also included adherence of the EU to human rights, the rule of law, good governance and democratisation, widening of bilateral and regional economic cooperation as well as partnership in the sphere of education and vocational training.

However, the strategy did not include any cooperation in the sphere of health and social protection systems to address the needs of vulnerable layers of population in Central Asia. For instance, there was no single orientation to persons with disabilities in the previous EU strategy, or an orientation towards health-related issues of critical importance in the region, principally the lack of appropriate policies towards Hepatitis C. In this annex we focus on these two themes.

Disability

Disability was neglected in the United Nations Millennium Declaration but with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which the EU is the party, disability has become a human rights issue which is not a matter of discretion. Importantly, disability has been included into five Sustainable Development Goals on quality education, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities and partnerships for the goals with the global agenda to 'leave no one behind.'

The 2007 EU Strategy in Central Asia was not disability-inclusive as the rights of persons with disabilities enshrined in the UNCRPD were not included in the aims of the EU and Member States on strengthening human rights, the rule of law, education and other sphere of social development. This is in contradiction with the External Action under the European Disability

Strategy 2010-2020, which identifies eight main areas for action: Accessibility, Participation, Equality, Employment, Education and Training, Social Protection, Health, and External Action. According to this document 'the EU and the Member States should promote the rights of people with disabilities in their external action, including EU enlargement, neighbourhood and development programmes.' The EU has achieved considerable success in implementation of the UNCRPD in many areas of life of persons with disabilities and therefore by sharing its expertise it could become a role model for the Central Asian states to follow.

In Central Asia, persons with disabilities are experiencing systemic discrimination and social exclusion due to attitudinal and environmental barriers. Their living conditions are further aggravated by the failure of government led rehabilitation and social protection policies which are on medical understanding of disability. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have ratified the UNCRPD, while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan only signed it and Tajikistan is not even among signatories to the Convention. Being in geographical proximity to each other, all these countries share similar history and culture, which defines unique concepts of disability and what constitutes being disabled in the local environments. National legal definitions of disability are still influenced by the Soviet legacy of institutionalised disability policies and the concept of 'invalid', which is not compatible with the UNCRPD definition based on social model of disability.

In 2017, the prevalence of disability in Central Asia was reported to be very low (Kazakhstan 3%, Tajikistan 2.1%, Kyrgyzstan 2%, Uzbekistan 1.3% and Turkmenistan N/A) while one in six people in the EU has some form of disability or about 80 million persons with disabilities. According to World Report on Disability (2011) 15.3% of the world population experience significant functional difficulties related to disability while 80% of them are living in developing countries. A wide discrepancy in reported disability prevalence in the EU and Central Asia can be attributed to outdated methodologies of data collection and disability classification focused only on impairments, rather than barriers to participation and social inclusion. Therefore, it is believed that many persons with disabilities are left behind in the national statistics which means that they are remaining invisible to national policies, benefits and social services. Admittedly, the EU's support is needed in terms of funding, research, raising awareness, statistics and proper data collection based on internationally

recognised standards like the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).

New disability-inclusive EU Strategy for Central Asia can become a driver of barrier-free and inclusive societies for children, youth and adults with disabilities with physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments in Central Asia by sharing its rich expertise and lessons of implementation of the UNCRPD. The new EU strategy should include the objectives to promote the rights of persons with disabilities, making goods and services in the region accessible (e.g. based on the experiences with the European Accessibility Act), ensure their participation in all spheres of society, combat discrimination based on disability, promote inclusive education (e.g. based on the experiences of the European Agency for Special Needs Education), provide decent employment and livelihood opportunities, enhance living conditions and provide equal access to health services.

A fruitful academic partnership can be established between the EU and the Central Asian institutions which can be developed based on the model of the Academic Network of European Disability Experts (ANED) to carry out rigorous analysis of disability situation in the Central Asian states, increase effectiveness and efficiency of national policies and disability disaggregated data. Finally, cooperation between disabled people's organisations in the EU (e.g. European Disability Forum) and the Central Asian organisations of persons with disabilities can be established to build capacities of local civil society institutions to promote rights-based approach to disability and social development.

HEPATITIS C (HCV) affordable optimal treatment protocols

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is spread by blood-to-blood contact and affects the liver. Frequently, the infection is asymptomatic, but once established, chronic infection can cause inflammation of the liver and produce chronic hepatitis, fibrosis or scarring of the liver, liver cancer and diverse types of cirrhosis. This type of damages to the liver can cause life threatening disorders and death. According to research conducted in 2014 (updated in 2017) approximately 5.4% of the population in Central Asia are antibody-positive for HCV with more specific numbers of infected patients as follows: Kazakhstan 3.3% (255,000 – 510,000 inhabitants); Kyrgyzstan 2.5% (220,000); Tajikistan 3.1% (200,000). The lack of accurate and up-to-date numbers for all countries in the region signal the absence of crucial

policies in Central Asia to deal with the disease that elsewhere in the world is managed with higher success rates. For example, approximately 15 million people live with HCV in the EU, and HCV continues to be the main cause of liver transplants and liver cancer. Nevertheless, an average of 90% of patients in the EU who receive appropriate treatment for HCV are cured.

In the last decade, there has been increasing global attention to the importance of HCV and other forms of hepatitis (e.g. A and B): the World Health Organization (WHO) has urged countries to take urgent action on the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of all forms of viral hepatitis, and international protocols have been developed. In Central Asia, however, most states have not developed specific policies regarding this illness, and their protocols have not been updated or are in need of revision. The existing policies and projects on how to prevent and treat people infected with HCV in the region and how to support the patients' families are limited. In terms of human security, we think the EU should seek to work with Central Asian countries to address the diagnosis, treatment and care of those infected with HCV.

Knowledge and prevention

In recent decades, health-related research and policies in Central Asia have focused on HIV, but the salient topic of Hepatitis C has been under researched and under-estimated.

Although vaccines exist to prevent Hepatitis A and B worldwide, there is no known vaccine against hepatitis C – the most serious variant of this disease. Once the patient has been diagnosed with Hepatitis C, the symptoms of infection can be medically managed, and a proportion of patients can be cleared of the virus by a course of anti-viral medicines.

Although early medical intervention is helpful, people with HCV infection can experience mild symptoms, and consequently do not seek treatment. This is one important reason for high levels of HCV infection in Central Asia. The target populations identified in the region are users of injected drugs, as well as health care workers and patients undergoing invasive /hospital level procedures.

Campaigns to raise awareness

Recent research conducted in 2017 at Tajikistan's National Medical University with a sample of approximately 3000 patients showed that the infection rate of HCV is more common in

patients infected with injected drugs; to a lesser degree in patients infected as a result of medical manipulation, and finally among primary blood donors and pregnant women. In Tajikistan in 2014, the City Council of Dushanbe city closed 12 private dental clinics after residents claimed they had contracted hepatitis while undergoing treatment. Cases such as these reveal the urgent need for developing policies to prevent and manage the spread of HCV, as well as to raise awareness of how the disease is transmitted. The association of HCV with patients who inject drugs raises issues not only about prevention, but also about the potential stigmatisation of infected patients in Central Asia. It is common amongst the population of Central Asia to blame patients who use drugs for being responsible of causing their own health-related disorders, and thus to assume that they should not be entitled to government-funded treatment. Awareness needs to be raised about the rights of patients infected with HCV and the necessity of providing them with appropriate care. In addition, public understandings of HCV need to ensure there is greater recognition that this disease is not only related to drug addiction, but also to medical facilities with poorly sterilised medical equipment.

Treatment

In Tajikistan, there is no national strategy to prevent the spread of Hepatitis C or care for patients suffering this life-threatening illness. According to Tajikistan's Ministry of Health, treatment for hepatitis "A", "B" and "C" in the country is free, but officials from the ministry say that only those who have special benefits are treated free of charge. On the whole, the great majority of patients who suffer HCV must seek medical care in private clinics where the cost of treatment is usually unaffordable. In 2011, for example, the NGO 'HOPE' conducted a project on Hepatitis C in northern Tajikistan. According to data from HOPE, patients needed a six-month treatment with an injection of the drug Pegasys every week. In total, each patient needed 24 injections. One ampoule of this medical preparation costs US\$509 and the over-all treatment of one patient comes to US\$12,500. To put these costs in context, the official average salary in Tajikistan is US\$120. In other Central Asian countries, the prices and procurement of treatment vary: in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, the 12-week treatment price (Sofosbuvir) costs approximately US\$ 780. It is not only the price what posits challenges, but also the procurement of the treatments: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan reported that important number of treatments are imported through 'buyer's

clubs' that arrange the shipments from countries such as India and Egypt for 'personal-use'. These forms of procurement incur potential risks as drugs escape necessary quality checks, and also involve semi-legal activities. Finally, buyer's clubs create the potential of excluding from treatment patients who are not members.

Health tourism and debt

The lack of treatment to cure the infection in its early stages, to treat those patients with developed forms of HCV, and to provide compassionate care to terminal patients create wider problems the societies of Central Asia. In our research experience in Central Asia we have known numerous patients and their families who acquire debts from relatives or local loan-sharks, or sell properties in order to pay for treatment and/or palliative care in private clinics in the capital cities, or in medical centres abroad. Amongst the countries where patients from Central Asia tend to travel for healthcare are Russia, Turkey and Iran. HCV thus results in associated processes of unsolicited migration and family rupture, as well as debt and impoverishment. The debts families incur to be able to treat HCV in private clinics or abroad often continue even after the patient has died thus having long-lasting effects on the well-being of the patients' children and relatives.

Recommendations:

- Implement HCV treatment per current international guidelines (WHO).
- Affordable optimal treatment protocols: guaranty availability of drugs, check of quality of products, facilitate mediation to discuss with recognised suppliers and pharmaceuticals.
- Appropriate technical support to develop research per country (surveys and better knowledge of numbers, patients and epidemiology, medical facilities).
- Design policies for prevention, treatment and care, as well as to tackle social stigmatisation.
- Provide special policies and guidelines and support for medical staff to protect them from infection at work.

- Special measures to prevent infection in medical centres and most especially at birth clinics (where there is also a target group amongst mothers giving birth).
- Advocate for HCV medication price reductions or development of generics through stakeholders: negotiations for price reduction (learn from example of HIV).
- Seek more cooperation between private international clinics and state-run hospitals not only in the capital cities but also in the rural areas and regional towns where this type of care is necessary.
- Seek donor funding to develop programs for HCV