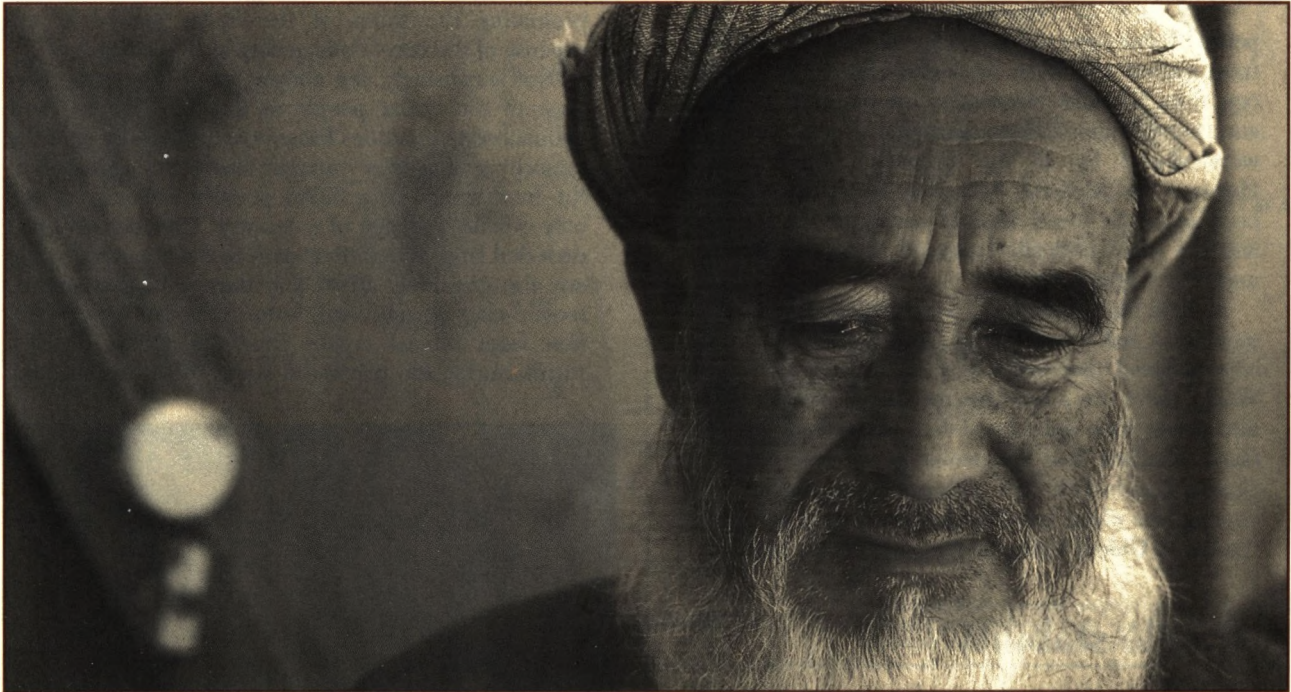


# Central Asia



JON SPAULL / PANOS PICTURES

*Uzbek man, Tajikistan*

## A time of transition

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 set the Central Asian states – Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – on a course of rapid and tumultuous change. Huge readjustments are taking place in the economic and political spheres. Independence has brought many advantages and opportunities, along with a series of problems. For example, much of the population is experiencing considerable hardship. This inevitably places a strain on society, exacerbating latent fears and tensions.

All the Central Asian states are multi-ethnic and multicultural, with representatives of 80–100 different groups within their borders. Every ethnic community is different, with its own history, characteristics, and coping strategies. Moreover, conditions vary between and within states. However, many of the ethnic groups' concerns about the future are very similar. The experience of Poles from western Ukraine, deported to Kazakstan in 1936 on Stalin's orders, illustrate some of the dilemmas that such groups now face.

When these Poles first arrived in Central Asia the Soviet authorities left them in the middle of the empty plains along with some guards to make sure they did not escape, gave them some tents, and then abandoned them to their fate. 'At first we had absolutely nothing, and we had to build everything up from scratch – our sheds, our crops – everything with our bare hands', said

BB. In the winter, temperatures frequently fell below – 40 °C. Many, especially children and older people, died of cold and hunger.

Gradually, however, through their hard work, the Poles began to prosper. The land was fertile and yielded good harvests. 'The poverty and misery lasted a long time', said FB. 'Things started to improve a bit at the beginning of the '70s.' Some of the community became successful and important figures in the local administration. In the late 1980s they were able to teach their children Polish at school (this was previously forbidden) and to build churches. By local standards, they were often well off.

Then the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Once more, all the rules changed. 'A new law is in force stating that only those people with the state language – Kazak – have a right to work in state and economic administration', said PP, 'but we don't know it: how could we possibly have learnt it? Anyway, there are hardly any Kazaks in these parts. Once again we'll be left doing the dirty work.'

These comments were made shortly after the establishment of independent Kazakstan. Since then many Poles, like thousands of other members of ethnic minorities,<sup>1</sup> have emigrated, or are waiting to do so. Some feel they no longer have a place in this new state. The continued uncertainties of life as a minority community, combined with nostalgia for a homeland where they can belong to the majority culture, are powerful incentives to leave.

(SOURCE FOR QUOTATIONS: 'SEARCHING FOR HOME: POLISH EXILES IN KAZAKSTAN', *THE WARSAW VOICE*, 18 OCTOBER 1992.)

## Sudden independence

The countries of Central Asia did not acquire political independence due to national struggles for liberation, independence came after the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union. The governments of the newly independent states were confronted, almost literally overnight, with the task of assuming direct responsibility for a huge range of administrative, economic, environmental and social problems.

They faced an exceedingly uncertain future, hampered by shortages and limited resources in every field, from trained specialists to modern industrial technology, from financial reserves to international transport and telecommunications facilities. These problems were shared by all the former Soviet republics. However, in Central Asia they were more acute because of the lower level of economic development and the more critically balanced social and environmental conditions.

In 1992 there were many – particularly foreign commentators, but a number of Central Asians as well – who believed that these new states were not viable. Worse, there was a fear that the region would descend into chaos, torn apart by violent inter-ethnic conflicts (such conflicts had happened in several places in Central Asia in 1989–90). This prediction seemed to be coming true when, less than a year after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan was engulfed by civil war.

## A fragile stability

Five years on, the situation is far better than had been anticipated. Enormous problems remain in almost every sphere, yet there have also been several positive developments. The economic crisis has not been resolved, but there are signs of stabilization, particularly in Uzbekistan. Some efforts are being made to build civil societies, notably in Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan. The civil war in Tajikistan has not spread to the other states. It has remained localized, mostly confined to the south. By late 1996 peace talks between the main contestants were providing grounds for cautious optimism.

## The minorities question

All of the states of Central Asia contain dozens of ethnic groups. Although most share Islam as a traditional religious affiliation, every group has its own languages and cultures. The proportion of these non-titular peoples ranges from some 55 per cent of the total population in Kazakstan to some 30 per cent in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Some of these minority groups are themselves Central Asian (e.g. Uighurs or are from the titular groups of neighbouring states). Others are relatively recent arrivals (e.g. in the 1960s–70s), yet more have been established in the region for several generations. The Russians are the largest minority overall. There are some 8 million Russians in Central Asia, over 6 million of whom are in Kazakstan. Among the other immigrant groups there are Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Germans, Greeks, Koreans, Poles and Ukrainians. In the past, inter-group relations were generally harmonious.

Today, this has started to change. The minority communities have started to feel under threat. One reason for their sense of insecurity is the post-Soviet governments' policies of 'state'-building. These are firmly rooted in the history, culture and linguistic heritage of the titular people of the state (i.e. the Kazaks in Kazakstan, or the Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan).

It is, perhaps, inevitable that the primary focus of post-Soviet nation-building should be the titular peoples. However, these states are far from mono-ethnic and minorities see the governments' policies as promoting the status of the titular groups at the expense of the non-ethnic quality of citizenship.

Not surprisingly, the current emphasis on the heritage of the titular people as the basis for the new national-state identities has aroused the concern of the minority groups. For example, many feel aggrieved at the introduction of a titular peoples' language as the only official language of a country. They not only feel excluded from full participation in the community, but are also genuinely afraid that they will be treated as second-class citizens, with fewer rights and less protection from official organs than the titular peoples. Furthermore, the privileged status of the culture and



Russian woman in the bazaar, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

## CENTRAL ASIA



language of the titular people has encouraged the rise of an outlook, which, in some cases, has taken the form of crudely aggressive, xenophobic, ethnically-based nationalism. This has sometimes resulted in instances of informal discrimination and harassment at work, for example. Compared with conditions under Soviet rule, there has been a deterioration in the position of the non-titular groups. That, at least, is how many representatives of minority groups perceive their situation.

Concerns about their future prospects prompted hundreds of thousands of immigrants to leave Central Asia in the first few years after independence. There was also a rise in tension between ethnic groups, especially those in border areas, such as, for example, in the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Old rivalries over land and water have resurfaced, exacerbated by the worsening economic situation in Central Asia. In general, inter-group relations – previously relatively amicable – have started to show signs of strain.

### Building for the future

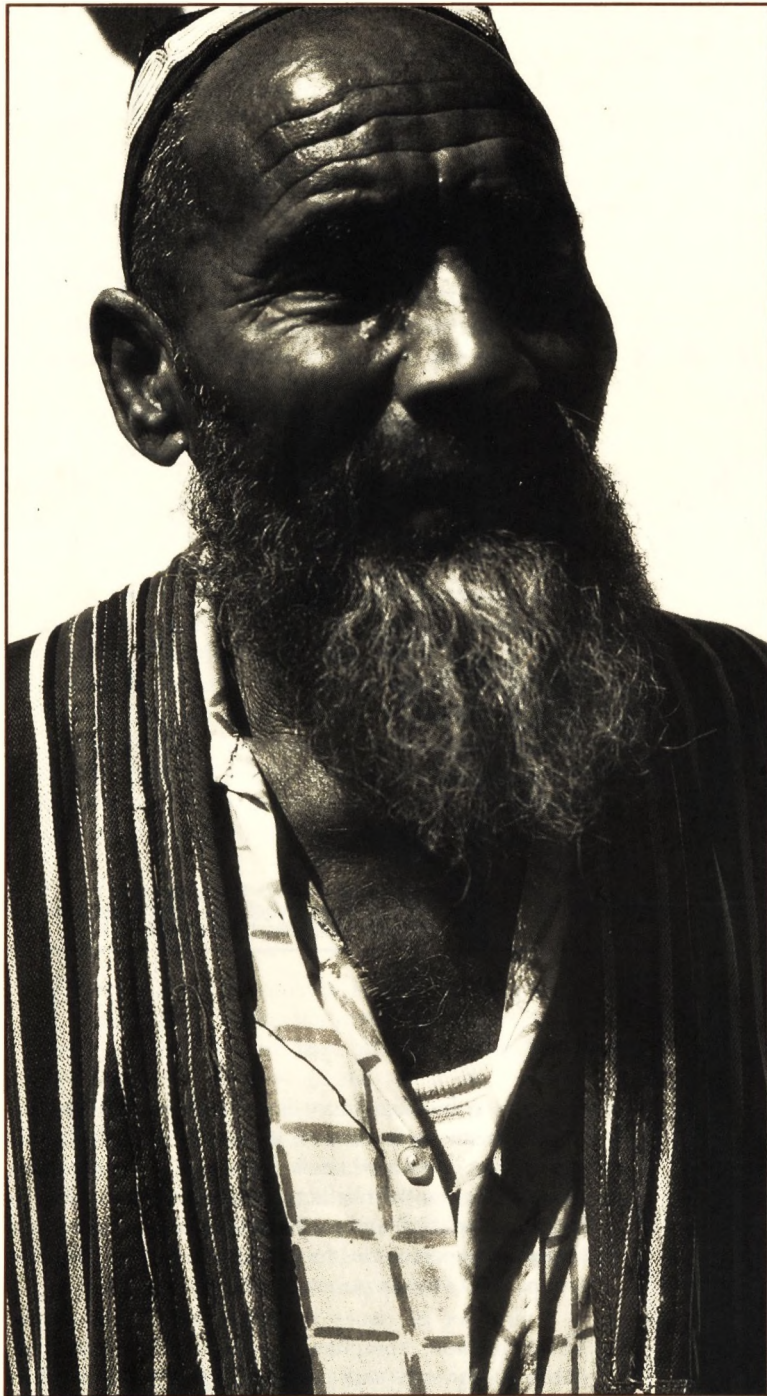
The governments of the Central Asian states have since taken steps to improve the situation. A number of confidence-building measures have been initiated, aimed at reassuring the minorities that their

civil and cultural rights will be respected. However, much remains to be done. If good inter-ethnic relations are to be developed it is important that the root sources of potential conflicts are addressed. For this to happen, a political and social climate is required where there are opportunities for dialogue between different groups and between government and society.

A number of issues require particular attention. These include: compliance with international standards for human and minority rights most notably, through enhancing the civic character of the state, the promotion of non-discrimination and equality of treatment, and of the rights of minorities to effective participation, and the development of civil society and the right to associate. Creating opportunities for dialogue and exchange, and promoting the use of conflict prevention measures should be encouraged, and poverty alleviation and development questions also need to be urgently addressed.

### Note

- 1 The term 'minority' is used in this Profile to refer to the non-titular peoples in a given state. However, this term is not widely used in Central Asia and in some states, notably Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, it is regarded as an inappropriate designation.



JOHN SPALL / PANOS PICTURES

*Uzbek living in Tajikistan*



## MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP

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