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Challenges of Social Cohesion and Tensions in Communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border

Asel Murzakulova

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Challenges of Social Cohesion and Tensions in Communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border

Asel Murzakulova

Abstract:

The report is dedicated to the problems of social cohesion and conflicts on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border after countries' independence. Based on the methodology of Knowledge Attitude and Practice, the study analyzes actors and spaces that play a vital role in shaping the social cohesion of border communities. On the basis of in-depth interviews and living with families in border villages, the research analyzes two case studies. The first case study examines the communities of Dostuk villages (Kyrgyzstan) and Chor (Tajikistan) through the prism of transformation of the border regime and the construction of a new transport infrastructure. The second case studies the implications of the Soviet agrarian policy and the impact of entrepreneurial networks on social cohesion between the communities of Kara-Bak (Kyrgyzstan) and Lacon (Tajikistan).

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Keywords: social cohesion, conflict, border communities, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan

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Glossary

Aiyl Aimak is the smallest administrative division in Kyrgyzstan, encompassing several villages.

Ashar is the traditional practice of collective unpaid labor for the benefit of a community or family; such as cleaning canals, building houses for the poor, community facilities, etc.

Dehkan farm is a farm whose subject of entrepreneurship, production, storage, processing and sale of agricultural products is based on the activities of one person or several people who own the land and property.

District is an administrative unit that encompasses several Aiyl Aimaks in Kyrgyzstan and Jaomats in Tajikistan.

Mardakers are wage laborers usually day laborers.

Murab is a person elected by fellow villagers to manage a community's irrigation water.

Oblast is an administrative unit comprised of several districts in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Jamoat is the smallest administrative division in Tajikistan, encompassing several villages.

Abbreviations:

DWMD	District Water Management Department
KR	Kyrgyz Republic
MOC	Medical and Obstetric Center
PC	Pasture Committee executive body of Pasture User Association
RT	Republic of Tajikistan
SALRI	State Administration of Land Reclamation and Irrigation
WUA	Water User Association

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following the collapse of the USSR, land and water disputes in communities on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border intensified with the formation of new national states. Unexpectedly for local residents, the administrative borders between the republics of the USSR had become international, leading to the practical irrelevance of state borders and people's daily lives (Megoran, 2002).

During the independence period there have been conflicts between communities that break traditional practices of sharing natural resources in borderland areas (Murzakulova, 2017). A new transport infrastructure is emerging, which will reformat the Soviet legacy with modern «independence» projects, such as new roads, designed to run exclusively through the territory of one country in detour of traditional intercommunal connections (Reeves, 2014a). At a political level, border issues between Central Asian countries were not as acute during the first years of independence as they are today. Tensions gradually grew from the mid-1990s, when questions of delimitation and demarcation of state borders were raised and actualized by the Presidents of the Central Asian republics. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, the rhetoric of Central Asian integration and free movement of peoples, goods and services was replaced by a rhetoric of national sovereignty and border protectionism (Megoran 2017).

The Kyrgyz-Tajik border remains the most liberal in terms of crossing policy, and less “materialized” in comparison with the two countries' borders with Uzbekistan and China, as well as with Afghanistan (for Tajikistan) and Kazakhstan (for Kyrgyzstan). The process of forming a new map of national states has been taking place for nearly three decades on this large territory. These border areas also are where the infrastructure logic of Soviet planning and ideas of independent development collide (Reeves, 2017).

The process and projects of border materialization, undertaken by the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, affect the lives of border communities, introducing discord and breaking traditional forms of intercommunity relationships and interaction. The social cohesion of border communities is under great pressure and communication and interaction within these communities can become rapidly fragmented. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the challenges of social cohesion in border communities and to understand how various forms of social cohesion are both broken and created in the context of conflict in border areas.

The study was conducted in the Kara-Bak Aiyl aymak in Batken rayon (Kyrgyzstan) and the jamoats of Lyakon and Surkh Isfara district (Tajikistan).

This study aims to answer two main questions: Which institutions play an important role in the formation of social cohesion between communities? How are the practices of social cohesion affected and influenced by conflicts taking place between border communities?

These questions are addressed based on five research components.

A group of forty people consisting of local residents, school teachers, doctors and nurses, farmers, labor migrants working abroad, religious leaders (imams), local activists and business people were surveyed following the ‘Knowledge, Attitude & Practice’ (KAP) methodology. In this part of the study, we were particularly interested in what people knew about their neighboring community in the other country, their various attitudes towards them, and the relationships they maintained with them in their daily lives.

The second component included forty expert interviews conducted in Bishkek and Batken (Kyrgyzstan), and Isfara and Khujand (Tajikistan). This component allowed us to understand the current discourse in terms of defining the problem of borderlands.

The third component of research was based on participant observation, enabled by living with local families in border villages for one week in each season between September 2016 and September 2017. This anthropological approach helped us to observe daily social practices in border areas and to witness firsthand how people interact with each other.

The fourth part was comprised of a visualization of spatial changes over time, with comparative analysis of satellite imagery taken of the study areas in 1970 and in 2016. Such comparison allowed us to better understand the spatial context of agriculture and resettlement processes following the construction of the largest Soviet irrigation project in the Isfara River Valley, the Tort-Kul Reservoir.

Finally, the results of the study were presented at a regional roundtable held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 15 April 2018, with the participation of stakeholders from both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Author received valuable comments and feedback on the findings of this study during the roundtable, which helped to clarify findings and further improve this research report.

2. A GEOGRAPHICAL PUZZLE

Mobile phones have great difficulty in identifying the correct national territory of villages in the border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Local residents have even greater difficulty determining their location: *«Look at Google Maps, it shows I'm in Tajikistan! Why do they give incorrect information? This is Kyrgyzstan, the land of my ancestors!»*¹ Different versions of territoriality and ownership of disputed border areas are plentiful, and Google Maps is just one of these sources – and it is causing Nurbek, one of the study respondents living in Dostuk village in Batken oblast, to protest profusely.

An attempt to determine the ownership of disputed land in these areas was made several times during the Soviet period. For example, following a major confrontation between the communities of Vorukh, Chorku, and Khodja-Lo (Pravda kolkhoz in the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (TSSR)), on the one hand, and Ak-Say, Ak-Tatyr, Samarkandek (100th anniversary of Lenin sovkhos Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR)), on the other hand, the governments of the Kyrgyz and Tajik Republics made attempts in 1989 to determine an official border based on current actual land use. However, this initiative failed, as had previous attempts of bilateral conciliation commissions, which had, by the time of the 1989 dispute, already convened sixteen times (Reeves, 2017b).

Long-term leasing of land had been actively practiced between collective farms with the introduction of large irrigation systems and facilities in the past, but these have more recently led to a situation in which territorial decisions between the (former) Soviet Republics were now deemed of dubious legitimacy. The decisions of territorial conciliation commissions have never been jointly ratified by both parties (Reeves, 2017). As the central government authorities of both Republics have distanced themselves from making final decisions on inter-republic territorial disputes, today these territories have become the subject of interethnic negotiations between the Central Asian countries. A number of disputed areas and so-called “neutral zones” have thus been formed.

In his study about conflict on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, Megoran (2017) found that life in a neutral zone forms a socio-political environment that both constantly demands local residents to decide with which country they should side, and at the same time demonstrates a local refusal to make such choice. This

¹ From an interview with a Dostuk village farmer on June 10, 2017.

«intermediate» state disappears, however, under the pressures of national security policy, which leads to the militarization of disputed territories and articulation of state power in the marginal periphery, where it has previously been scarce.

3. EROSION OF SOCIAL COHESION AND COPING STRATEGY: ACTORS AND SPACES

Social cohesion is the ability and aspiration of members of a community to cooperate with each other for the sake of survival and prosperity. In other words, it is a characteristic of the state of relationships within the community when its members prefer cooperation to non-cooperation or confrontation.

Social cohesion is a common theme for studies in the Central Asian region, with an emphasis on inter-ethnic relations (often with a focus on conflicts) and the problems of building social cohesion or civic identity (Esenaliev et al., 2016, Silova et al., 2007). In our study, we proceed from the assumption that adjacent communities (villages) living across modern borders of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are socially cohesive communities (in the broader sense) following from a traditional way of life. However, projects of social and economic modernization introduced under the Soviet Union, and construction of new sovereign states in these territories, has led to some erosion of social cohesion that traditionally existed between and within the study communities. We understand the term “erosion of social cohesion” as the gradual disintegration of established traditional ties, accompanied by tensions and conflict.

This process of disintegration and the formation of new types of social relations is a common theme in modern academic studies focusing on the borders in the Fergana Valley (Revees 2014, Megoran 2017, Matveeva 2017).

This study aimed to identify the agents, places and practices of social cohesion that take place in the modern borderland areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Fergana Valley. Based on the interviews conducted, we highlight the following significant components of social cohesion that are under pressure because of the institutional logics arising from the construction of independent states, and that are consequently in a state of erosion:

1. Medical workers and cross-border teachers;
2. Mardakers (hired day workers), murabs and herders;
3. Cell phone communication and public transportation and cross-border bazaars.

3.1. Actors

3.1.1. Medical workers

In Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan borderland, Kyrgyz villagers often turn to Tajik medical institutions and doctors practicing in neighboring villages in Tajikistan. Tajik authorities unofficially prohibit doctors from providing medical services to residents of neighboring villages that fall under the jurisdiction of the Kyrgyzstan, and similarly, Kyrgyzstani authorities do not welcome the practice when their citizens turn to doctors in Tajikistan. During the study, several respondents from the Kyrgyzstan informed us that local Kyrgyzstani nurses had refused to provide them with injections that had been prescribed by doctors in Tajikistan. Furthermore, medical tests undertaken in Tajikistan are not recognized in hospitals in Batken (Kyrgyzstan), and Kyrgyzstani villagers must routinely do the tests again if they are to be accepted in regional hospitals. However, in the Kyrgyzstan at least, the further

from the border areas that patients turn to doctors with the results of medical tests done in Tajikistan, the less significant the origin of the tests becomes.²

The practice of turning to doctors from cross-border neighboring villages has been widespread, but the institutional barriers that prevent this cause discontent among the residents of communities in border areas. Today, governments of both countries still insist on the principle of separate provision of medical services.

3.1.2. Cross-border teachers

In border villages in Kyrgyzstan, until around 2000 it was a common practice to invite teachers from neighboring schools in Tajikistan to teach in Kyrgyzstani schools. These teachers taught Russian language, chemistry, biology, and other subjects. However, normative changes in the legal conditions for hiring foreign nationals and introduction of a quota policy disrupted this practice. We interviewed three teachers, citizens of Tajikistan, who, at different times, had taught in schools in communities in border areas. These individuals had themselves decided to stop the practice of cross-border teaching, and cited increased border disputes between the two countries, and the appearance of border posts, as reasons influencing their decision. Crossing the border became too costly and time-consuming for teachers. Along with this, bureaucratic obstacles to recognizing work experience made legal employment in the two countries unprofitable.

For school students today, cross-border teachers are a relic of the past, although their parents' generation were familiar with this practice. Cross-border teachers were an important element of social cohesion between the communities, because their presence allowed communities to have constant contact with a member of the neighboring community with the teacher facilitating interaction between the young people at the schools in the cross-border areas. The status of a teacher in a rural school is high, and rural teachers are highly respected by the community, but financially, wages are low, and therefore only dedicated enthusiasts remain in this profession, and they are most commonly women.

3.1.3. Mardakers (hired day workers)

In border areas, wage laborers are actively involved in seasonal land cultivation, especially during the harvest period. There is no official data on the scale of labor migration within communities in border areas, but experts estimate that 300-1000 people per day cross the border from Tajikistan to work in Batken and Leilek districts of Batken oblast.

As wage workers, middle-aged women from border villages in Tajikistan are hired by Kyrgyzstani farmers. These female workers, known as mardakers (day laborer), are made up of both small (3-5 people) and large groups (10-20 people). They are paid on a fee-for-service basis, starting at 200 KGS (USD 3) per day. Women can be accompanied by their children.

The demand for wage workers is stable in border villages in Kyrgyzstan, due to large-scale external labor migration and the resulting shortage of local labor. According to Kyrgyzstan's National Statistics Committee, Batken oblast receives the highest total monetary sum of remittances from labour migrants in the country. Along with investing in housing construction and livestock, remittances are also used to pay for hired labor.

² For example, respondents described several instances of people visiting hospitals in Bishkek, where medical tests undertaken in Tajikistan, such as MRI scans, were recognized and accepted as basis for further treatment.

The legal status of labor migrants within border communities is regulated by the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Protection of the Rights of Labor Migrants, signed by the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and provides a legal framework that supports cross-border wage laboring. In practice, however, these rights may be violated by local authorities.

Despite the fact that the practice of recruiting wage workers is widespread in border areas and is an important channel for mutually beneficial cooperation within border communities, strengthened border regimes have resulted in breaking of community ties and increased tensions within border communities.

3.1.4. Transboundary Murabs

Murabs are community-elected water managers, usually men, whose task is to ensure provision of water to the community, to resolve water conflicts, to make a schedule for watering, and to organize the community for the *ashar* – the communal practice of cleaning irrigation canals and of preparing the water supply in early spring. *Murabs* are elected by a rural gathering for the irrigation season period. It is considered an honour to become a *murab*, and it is also an opportunity for seasonal employment. However, it also carries with it a large and important social responsibility and a *murab* is subject to community pressure if he/she does not ensure sufficient water provision.

In all villages in border areas, both in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, water is supplied through cross-border canals, legacies of the interconnected infrastructure developed during the Soviet period. In both countries, the process of establishing community water management organizations is underway. Although working within the framework of Water Users Associations (WUAs) the *murabs* receive official employment and a fixed salary with contributions to the government social fund. Along with this their work within the WUA has led to a restriction of their mandate due WUA can works only on one side of the border. The activities of WUAs have been limited by the creation of national borders, and because of this, WUAs and local authorities began to consider *murabs* of transboundary areas as illegitimate entities violating the mandate of their position. The emergence of tensions in border areas has also led to unsafe working conditions for these *murabs*. During the study, we interviewed 4 *murabs* (citizens of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) working in transboundary areas who were experiencing increasing difficulties conducting their roles because of permanent tensions within border communities, a deterioration of water and irrigation infrastructure due to spring mudflows, and labor migration and the resulting outflow of the able-bodied male population. As such, one of these respondents from Tajikistan pointed out that ‘Ashar is mostly implemented by women and adolescents, because all the men have migrated’.

3.1.5. Herders

Traditionally, Kyrgyz herders had provided their services to communities in border areas, and during the Soviet period they constituted one major group of workers on Soviet collective farms (Köchümkulova, Köchümkulov, 2014). In the border communities of Sughd region, in Tajikistan, Kyrgyz shepherds had taken livestock to summer pastures under the mandate of Kyrgyzstan. However, in 2009, a moratorium on the lease of pastures or their use by foreign citizens was introduced, and this practice is no longer legal. Since border *Joamats* (Tajikistan) do not have pasture areas, this ban led to a massive slaughter of livestock within Tajik border communities, and the transfer of the remaining animals to corrals, triggering a rise in the price of fodder.

In order to bypass the moratorium, Kyrgyz herders now take livestock from their neighbours, registering these livestock under their own names. The main opponents of this practice are pasture committees in Kyrgyzstan, whose mandate includes managing *aymak* pastures, despite the fact that legalizing common

grazing practices could increase revenues for local pasture committees. This critical issue has yet to be resolved. Kyrgyzstan's authorities are currently lobbying Tajikistan to sign an interstate agreement on cross-border pasture use, but Tajik authorities do not support this move because they consider that pasture access should be open, and not subjected to the charges currently levied under Kyrgyzstan's laws (Olimova, Olimov, 2017).

3.2. Spaces

3.2.1. Cell phone connection

Border villages actively use SIM-cards of operators in both countries. This has advantages over using international roaming, because even calls to neighboring houses in border communities can be subject to international call rates. The introduction of obligatory SIM card registration in Tajikistan in 2017-2018 led to the deactivation of numbers whose owners were not registered in Tajikistan. This measure made it difficult for residents of Kyrgyzstan living in border communities to access the connection of mobile operators in Tajikistan. To solve this problem, Kyrgyzstani citizens turned to neighbors from border villages in Tajikistan to register Tajikistani numbers under their name. Acquisition of Kyrgyzstani SIM cards is subject to less strict regulations, and foreign citizens have the right to purchase a SIM card without declaring residency in Kyrgyzstan.

Villagers actively use social media, including instant messaging applications to transmit information and, in cases of community tension, to mobilize others. Mobile Internet is the main channel for disseminating information about the situation in the village. VKontakte, Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber platforms are the main sites for publishing and disseminating information from the residents of border communities, as was the case in the recent conflict between Uch-Dobo and Khodja-Lo in spring 2018³.

3.2.2. Public transportation

Public transportation networks are better developed in border villages in Tajikistan than in counterpart border villages in Kyrgyzstan. One of the important reasons cited by respondents for choosing to ride in a Tajikistani rather than Kyrgyzstani minivan is the more economic price: on a shuttle bus running from Vorukh in the direction of Isfara (Tajikistan), the fare for the Dostuk (Kyrgyzstan) - Isfara (Tajikistan) section is 30 KGS (USD 6 cents) for the 10 km ride, a much cheaper option compared to transportation via the territory of Kyrgyzstan for the same destinations by minivan, but covering 40 km, which costs 200 KGS (US 3 dollar). However, in the densely populated Tajik communities, minivan drivers



Photo 1. Cross-border marshrutka. Photo: Asel Murzakulova

³ A video of the conflict can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mc594Msu9I>.

generally have more clients, bringing down travel fare, even though gasoline in Tajikistan is more expensive than in Kyrgyzstan.

Furthermore, our survey revealed that the public transportation system appears most vulnerable in terms of being shared social space for interaction within border communities. After any conflict, Kyrgyzstani communities stop using Tajikistani minibuses, and these ties are difficult to resume.

3.2.3. Cross-border markets

A system of cross-border bazaars has been established in the study areas. The trading day, when traders and buyers from both countries come to the market, alternates between border communities. In Surkh (Tajikistan), the bazaar is open on Tuesdays, in Kara-Bak (Kyrgyzstan) on Thursdays, in Lyakon (Tajikistan) on Fridays, Samarkandek (Kyrgyzstan) on Saturday. Bazaars in Kyrgyzstan host large cattle markets while Tajik markets are focused more on dried fruits, other food, and construction materials. Cross-border markets are an important space for communication, information, and building relationships between communities.

Almost all respondents who participated in the study noted that markets remain an important place for interaction between Tajikistani and Kyrgyzstani communities, and they appear to survive after conflicts. For example, during a 2013 conflict⁴, local government administrations on both sides of the border imposed temporary bans preventing foreign citizens from a neighbouring country from trading (Revees, 2017). Thus, the Samarkandek market was closed to traders from Tajikistan, and the Chorku market was closed to traders from Kyrgyzstan. In the post-conflict period, however, trade relations were gradually renewed with sellers continuing to trade in neighboring communities.



Photo 2. Border market Surkh. Photo: Ikhtiyor Aliyorov



Photo 3. Border cattle market in the Kara-Bak. Photo: Altyn Kapalova

⁴ Tension between Ak-Sai and Vorukh villages turned to violence in 2013 with the burning of a residential building in Ak-Sai.

There is also an established infrastructure around bazaars for the delivery and transit of goods between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan-Russia route remains important, too. In connection with the entry of Kyrgyzstan into the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU), transport trucks with Kyrgyzstani number plates can pass tax-free from Kyrgyzstan into Kazakhstan and Russia, creating a new niche for the residents of our study areas in Kyrgyzstan, including provision of parking lots and loading services. Goods from Tajikistan are thus often reloaded in trucks registered in Kyrgyzstan in the neutral zone, helping to reduce the costs of transit, however this is also complicated by high corruption and informal payments for allowing goods to pass through national borders in the Ferghana Valley countries (Egizbaev, Asanaliev, 2017; Coulibaly, & Thomsen, 2016). Against the current backdrop of bureaucratic obstacles and corruption costs when crossing the border, ‘neutral zones’ for transporting goods in the study area are in stable demand, and an informal logistics infrastructure is built around them.

4. CASE STUDIES

4.1. CASE STUDY 1. Peni Enclave, Dostuk village (Kyrgyzstan)

4.1.1. Dostuk and National Security Puzzle

The history of Dostuk village life is a vivid example of how the dynamic border regime affects the life of border communities, transforming the traditional ties that contributed to social cohesion between communities into fragmented forms of interaction.

The community of the village of Dostuk (“Friendship” in Kyrgyz), as well as of neighboring Chor kishlak village (Surkh jamoat, Tajikistan) is populated by Kipchaks people (a Turkic group of tribes). It is a special context of the study area, as the majority of communities on the territory of modern Kara-Bak aimak (Kyrgyzstan) were resettled to this area during Soviet times. The neighboring Lyakon jamoat (Tajikistan) has a similar history of resettlement in the Soviet period (Abdurashitov, 2014). During the period of Soviet collectivization (1920-1930), new settlements appeared in the study area as a result of the forced settlement of nomadic Kyrgyz, along with forced internal migration of sedentary Uzbeks and Tajiks to the area.

The construction of sovereign states that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union had little effect on the interaction and day-to-day life of the residents of Dostuk and Chor kishlak villages. However, the situation began to change after the border became increasingly associated with problems of national security. This shift took place in a context of border crises that began with the Batken events (Megoran, 2017) when on July 30, 1999, a group of militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) attempted to enter the Soh enclave of Uzbekistan (Beyshenov, Osmonaliev, 2015) via the village of Zardaly in Kyrgyzstan, which as part of Dostuk village belong to Kara-Bak Ayil aimak. The head of the village was ordered to go to the district center, where law enforcement bodies and local authorities had established a local headquarter. The head of the village, Rabiev Abdivali, described the events as follows:

“We, as heads of villages and liable for military service, were summoned to the operational headquarters. That was a very turbulent period of time, everyone expected that we would soon be affected by military actions. Distances here are small: both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are very close to us, [Dostuk village is] such a strategic place”.

The Batken events had actualized the problem of border security for Kyrgyzstan, the narrative of which, until that point, had been based around maximum support for the liberal regime of Central Asian borders

as the foundation for regional cooperation (Akaev, 1996). When new national rhetoric appeared in the government's agenda for the region, including 'international terrorism' and 'extremism', it led to a reshaping of the vision for the region, and was strongly influenced by a vulnerability to security issues. On 13 October 1999, Batken Oblast was created, including the city of Batken, the Leilek and Kadamjay districts of Osh Oblast, and the town of Kyzyl-Kiya. It was believed that the inclusion of these territories into a separate provincial-level administrative unit would improve the ease of administration and would contribute to solving the multi-layered security problems in the region.

The Batken events also actualized the issue of border security for Kyrgyzstan's neighbours, prompting Uzbekistan to lay anti-personnel mines in the frontier belt along borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan therefore then began to implement a number of infrastructure projects aimed at reducing transport interdependence.

The only road through which the residents of Dostuk village could reach the administrative center of the district, and the wider region, ran through Tajikistan's territory. Thus, Dostuk village was a peni-enclave: a territory that can only be accessed via the roads of the neighboring state. Dostuk village was not only dependent on Tajikistan's road infrastructure, but was also widely integrated into other infrastructures belonging to Tajikistan. For example, before 2003, the village was connected to Tajikistan's electricity system via Tajikistani electric lines, the only cell phone reception available for Dostuk village is provided by Tajikistani companies, and the irrigation and drinking water is supplied from Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstani



Map 1. Old and new roads around Dostuk village. Source: GoogleEarth, 2018.

The information on this map was derived from openstreetmap data-base. The border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is being demarcated by an intergovernmental commission. MSRI cannot accept any responsibility for errors, inaccuracies or omissions. There are no warranties, expressed or implied accompanying this product.

television channels are not broadcast to the village, and the most accessible way to learn news of what is happening in the outside world is through media from Tajikistan.

The inclusion of Dostuk village in Tajikistan's infrastructure, coupled with its location, made it a favored place for cross-border trade because traders could bypass the border posts. Authorities on both sides of the border considered Dostuk a bulwark of contraband. From the standpoint of the local population of Dostuk and Chor kishlak, Dostuk village was a 'free economic zone', which allowed opportunities to purchase necessary materials with a lower markup, and a place to refuel on the way to the district center of Isfara (Tajikistan) with cheaper gasoline from Kyrgyzstan. In fact, refueling in a neighboring country is not illegal, and within Dostuk village, there were 30 shops (kiosk) selling gasoline and three gas stations. Several warehouses for the resale of construction materials were also established here.

Local authorities of both countries and law enforcement agencies turned a blind eye to the liberal economic regime of Dostuk village, which was beneficial to all. Local residents had to earn money, and residents of Isfara could buy gasoline at a good price and could also purchase cheap Chinese goods.

4.1.2. Transformation of the border regime

During a long period of time, Dostuk was an insignificant village on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. Then suddenly, the authorities of both countries became aware of the fact that the village was an important point in the geographical puzzle and for national security. Two kilometres of the strategic Isfara-Chorku-Vorukh road passes through the territory of Dostuk. Tajik authorities became increasingly alert to the strategic importance of this two kilometre stretch because of a growing regional discourse around national security, as well as the occurrence of violent seasonal conflicts in neighboring communities of Chorku (Tajikistan)-Kök-Tash (Kyrgyzstan) and Vorukh (Tajikistan)-Ak-Say (Kyrgyzstan). Tajik authorities began to build a bypass road and a new bridge that diverted the Isfara-Chorky-Vorukh road away from Kyrgyzstan's territory. At that time Kyrgyzstan's authorities then realised that Dostuk was at real risk of being trapped and isolated because of the new road diversion, and therefore a new gravel road was built from Dostuk through the mountains to the next nearest Kyrgyzstani village, Kyzyl-Bel (17 km). After that, Kyrgyzstan established a border outpost near the village. Reeves (2017) describes the construction of this new bypass road in Vorukh and Ak-Sai as something she terms 'the infrastructuralization of state power' and claims that it may lead to new forms of antagonism in the borderland.



Photo 4. Abandoned petrol station Dostuk.
Photo: Asel Murzakulova

The border regime around Dostuk then began to intensify with a trend towards militarization, which was followed by an escalating number of conflicts. As a result, in 2006, border posts were established on both sides of the road linking the village with Tajikistan. The cemetery in Dostuk village, previously used by both residents of Dostuk and Chor kishlak, was abandoned by Chor kishlak because Tajik authorities organized a new cemetery on Tajik territory. The biggest blow to the economic well-being of Dostuk was caused, however, by the construction of the bypass road and bridge (as described above). This de facto blockage of Dostuk village deprived the community of its main source of income, the sale of gasoline, as cars with Tajikistani number plates stopped coming to the village.



Photo 5. A gravel road leading to fields belonging to farmers from Dostuk village, laid through the vegetable garden of a villager.
Photo: Aysel Murzakulova

After the bypass road was built and the border closed, Dostuk village became economically depressed. Furthermore, the village became very isolated, with no access to infrastructure and services in Tajikistan and difficulty accessing services in Kyrgyzstan. Dostuk witnessed a mass outflow of people who traveled to Russia as labor migrants. This economic depression was further exacerbated by actions of the Kyrgyzstani authorities, who decided to close schools that did not meet the required number of 15 children, a step introduced as part of a national educational reform aiming to increase the number of students in classes in the country's remoter villages. Because many classes could not enroll this number of students, many secondary school students and their families were forced to leave Dostuk in order to pursue education elsewhere, especially in villages of Kara-Bak aimak and in the city of Batken.

Dostuk has limited agricultural land, only covering the basic household need for vegetables, not enough to produce crops for sale. During the privatization of land following independence, the collective farm employees each received 11 acres of land, and all the other villagers were allocated 8 acres each. Fields of Dostuk residents were, however, disconnected from the village because they were located beyond the neighboring Tajik village. To irrigate their fields nowadays, farmers from Dostuk either have to cross a border post and enter into Tajik territory, walking only 200 meters along an asphalt road, or if wishing or needing to stay within Kyrgyzstan, they must travel 15 km on a mountain road further in order to reach a water source. The choice was obvious, before border posts were erected next to the village.

In 2016, the murab of Surkh (Tajikistan) who had served Dostuk village in this role from 2013-16 refused to continue providing services, citing the growing problems with the WUA in Surkh, which unofficially banned services provision to Dostuk.

4.1.3. Community Resilience

The strengthened border protection regime in this area interrupted the economic ties that existed between Dostuk and the neighboring communities of Surkh jamoat in Tajikistan. Social ties were also lost, but some social practices remain resilient despite the new border regime. In Dostuk village, there is a medical and obstetrics centre, built with the support of international organizations. It is serviced by one employee, a nurse. In order to see a doctor, villagers must travel to Kara-Bak or Batken, around 25 km away. This is inconvenient and costly for local residents, and they often resort to seeing doctors in neighboring villages inside Tajik territory, such as Chor kishlak (50 metres) and Isfara (10 km).

Primary school teachers in Dostuk village initiated an extra-curricular class for students on the subject “Yntymak” (social harmony). During the class, students discuss the concept of “yntymak” and are taught to understand it as community value shared by residents of both Dostuk and Chor kishlak villages.⁵

For men, a traditional place for exchanging information and socializing is the Mosque in Chor kishlak. It should be noted that there has been a long religious tradition in Dostuk village, one of the first names of the village being Azhy Kara-Bak (‘Azhy’ means a Muslim who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca). The community has its origin with Saparkul Azhy, the Dostuk people consider themselves his descendants. The mosque in Dostuk was built following the Ashar method, on the site of the male madrasah that was established during the Kokand Khanate (XVIII-XIX century). On Fridays, the mosque is unable to accommodate all worshipers, and traditionally many villagers would make their Friday prayers over in Chor kishlak. As the example of Dostuk shows, at the grassroots level, religious communities may help to mitigate some of the social erosion emanating from border securitization trends. Religious communities can provide a social support network for low-income and large families, give access to religious education, and resolve family conflicts. This is the only actor or institution in the region that speaks about the commonality of Muslims, rather than focusing on the differences between citizens of different countries.

The village received its current name in 2014, when district authorities changed the villages name from Suu-Boyu Kara-Bak to Dostuk (‘friendship’ in Kyrgyz). Today, this name evokes irony among the villagers who during a short period of time experienced both prosperity and serious economic depression, and who learned that authorities’ words about friendship and cooperation could be followed by a radically opposite practice. Today, the range of social relations between Dostuk and Surkh villages has decreased markedly, and is limited mostly to young women crossing the border with their children to attend an appointment with the only pediatrician in the border area, and men who cross the border to discuss local news after Friday prayers.

4.2. CASE STUDY 2: Kara-Bak Aiyl Aimak (Kyrgyzstan)-Lyakon jaomat (Tajikistan)

4.2.1. The localization of Soviet agrarian policy

The second case of this study is focused on the villages of Kara-Bak (Batken district, Kyrgyzstan) and Lyakon (Isfara district, Tajikistan). This territory is characterized by a low level of conflicts between communities; seasonal tensions are mainly related to the access to irrigation water. This case is particularly interesting from the standpoint of large-scale changes in the development of new

⁵ From an interview with an elementary school teacher, Dostuk village, July 2017.

territories for agriculture and changes in land use practices in retrospect. Against the background of the widely held opinion that land shortage and overpopulation are the cause of conflict in the region, this case shows little researched data, such as consequences of the intensive agrarian policy pursued by the Soviet Union, and how the implication of land reform after independence of both countries affects community interaction.

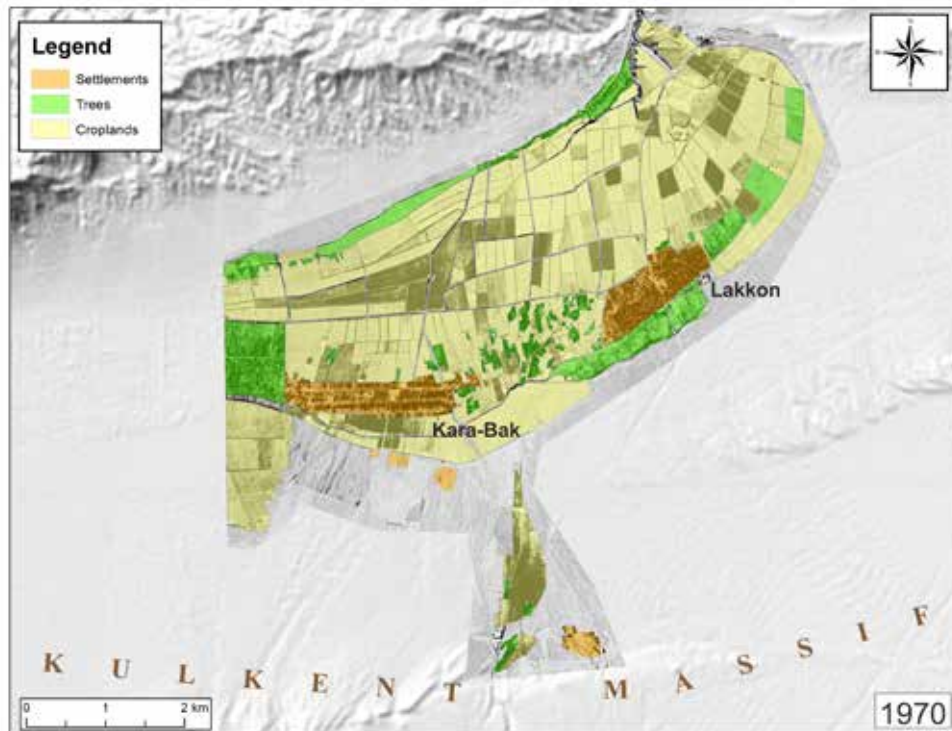


Figure 1a: The land use in the 1970 Kara-Bak and Lyakon

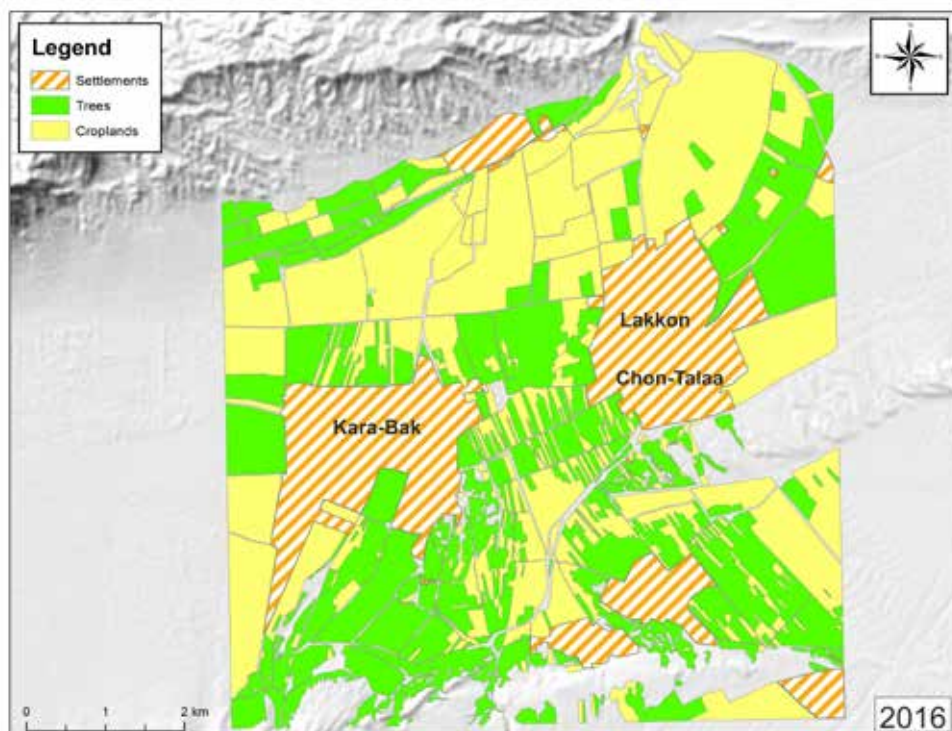


Figure 1b: The land use in the 2016 Kara-Bak and Lyakon

To understand this second case, it is necessary to understand the development of large-scale Soviet era irrigation infrastructures in the Isfara River valley, and the consequences of Soviet agrarian policy. The Tort-Kul reservoir, constructed between 1963-72, became a key reservoir in the context of large-scale irrigation plans for the Batken Valley and Kulkent Massif, areas that spanned the then Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs. The construction of that reservoir was designed to irrigate 11.5 thousand hectares of dryland (Bilik, 1994) and lead to large-scale changes in land use, including the transformation of pasture land into agricultural land for growing fodder and other crops. For the neighboring Isfara district in the Tajik SSR, the construction of Tort-Kul reservoir had negative consequences and the community faced two new problems: rising ground water, and salinization of the soil. As a compensation mechanism between the Soviet republics (Wegerich et.al, 2016), the Kyrgyz SSR built a drainage infrastructure in Lyakon and several villages in the Isfara district in the Tajik SSR. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, this network system ceased to function, and Tajikistani farmers now periodically still encounter the problem of flooded fields as well as salinization of the soil. These problems form the basis of on-going discontent and tensions in this region. For example, at the level of water management institutions, this situation is considered an urgent problem and fuels mistrust and latent conflict between the Water Departments of the Isfara (Tajikistan) and Batken (Kyrgyzstan) districts. The Isfara State Department of Land Reclamation and Irrigation (SDLRI) and the Batken District Water Management Department also are chronically underfunded and understaffed. In such a context, it is increasingly difficult to implement existing agreements around water allocation and infrastructure maintenance.

We used a comparative spatial analysis to visualize the scale of changes that have occurred within these areas due to the construction of the Tort-Kul reservoir. Spatial analysis revealed large-scale changes in land use in the study area between 1970 (Figure 1a) and 2016 (Figure 1b). In 1970, most of the arable land available was used for growing fodder crops, however by 2016 apricot orchards occupied the vast majority of this area. Furthermore, there was a significant expansion of existing settlements since 1970 along with the emergence of new villages.

Residents in Kara-Bak village (Kyrgyzstan) and Lyakon (Tajikistan) are engaged in seasonal farming, with Lyakon residents working as mardakirs (day laborer) for farmers in Kara-Bak. When conflict occurs along the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, border guards refuse to allow Lyakon wage workers to enter Kyrgyzstan, depriving them of an opportunity to earn money and to access labor for local residents.

4.2.2. Land use and the abolition of the collective farm in Lyakon

In 2016, the Sughd authorities in Tajikistan issued a resolution in order to finalize a land reform that had been initiated in 1996 but never concluded. In essence, the resolution adopted by regional authorities disbanded collective farms and formed different types of *dehkan* farms. In reality this meant that farmers received allotments of land, although the land continued to belong to the government as there is no private land ownership in Tajikistan. During 2014, 2015 and 2016, Tajik authorities formed 32,719 *dehkan* farms in the Sughd region, an addition to the 23,281 *dehkan* farms already formed between 1996 and 2014, bringing their total number to 56,000 (Mirsaidov, 2014). Under this reform, *dehkans* can choose which crops they grow and they are allowed to receive income from leasing their land. Allowing *dehkan* farmers to choose their crops was a significant step for agricultural development because state sanctioned crop choices did not always reflect market demand.

Spatial comparison in the study area between 1970 and 2016 shows the difference in development of arable land between the Kara-Bak and Lyakon (Figure 2). The figure shows that the majority territory of

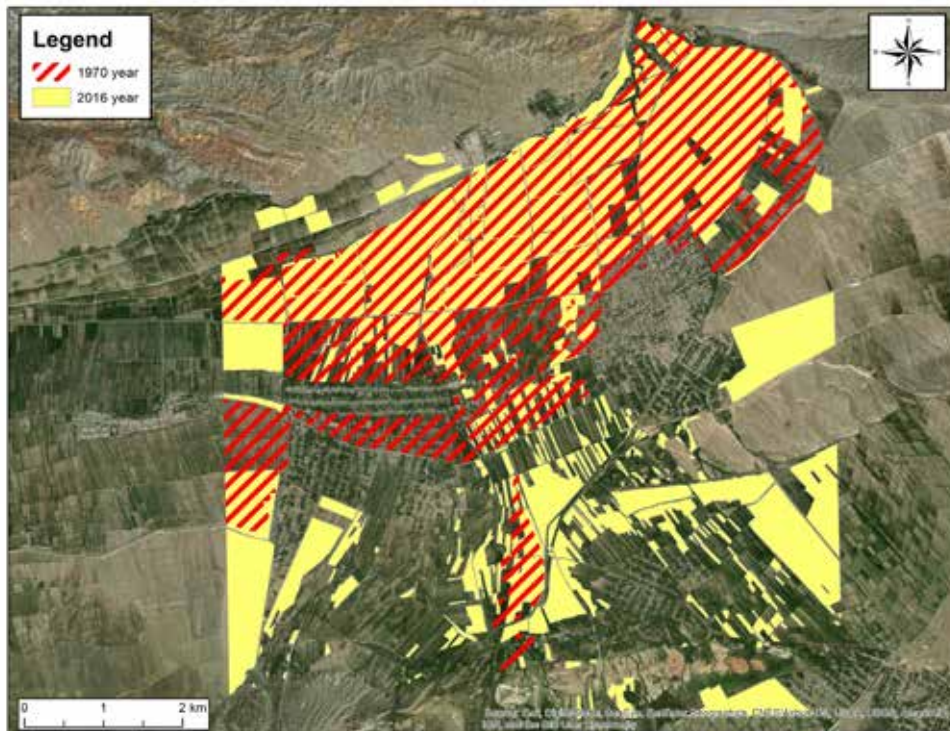


Figure 2. Distribution and land area of fields in Lyakon and Kara-Bak villages in 1970 and 2016.

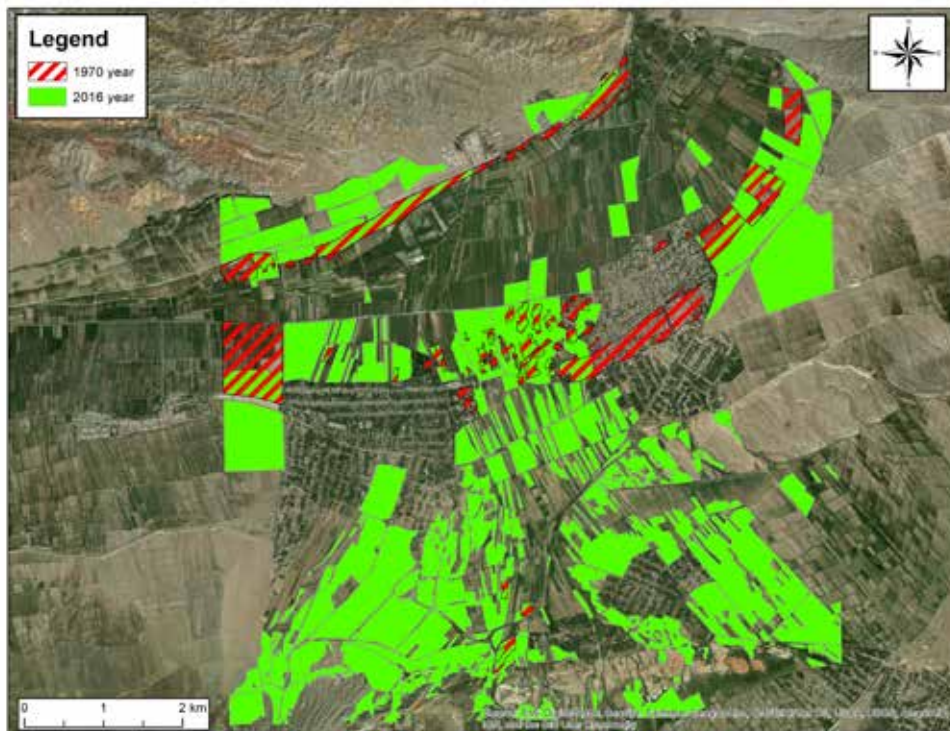


Figure 3. Distribution and land area of gardens in Lyakon and Kara-Bak villages in 1970 and 2016.

Lyakon farmers is still used as arable land, just as 70 years ago. The change occurred mainly in northern areas, as the process of cultivating new lands after 1970 reached the foothills due to the limited land in the valley. While for Lyakon the process of land development went up into the highlands, the territories of Kara-Bak farmers have been significantly transformed: the territory of the arable lands has expanded, and a large part of the land used for gardening (Figure 3). Spatial analysis also reveals the expansion of agriculture to mountain areas. Previous research has suggested that “the relative scarcity of land could greatly increase the likelihood of ethnified tensions” (Hierman and Nekbakhtshoev, 2014), however we did not find examples of such a causal relationship through the collection of field data for this study. In our opinion, it is rather land degradation resulting from Soviet agrarian policy that is a primary catalyst for conflict. It should also be noted that in both cases presented here, intra-community tensions and conflicts are occurring mainly due to lack of access to irrigation water.

Access to pastures, on the other hand, is not an acute problem for the residents of Lyakon because farmers in this village focus on crop production. As noted above, conflict mainly springs from the issue of water use – with the extensive network of cross-border canals between communities becoming a trigger point for tension and conflict. At the same time, the interdependent water infrastructure does not allow for direct conflict at either the level of water management institutions (SDLRI and DWMD) or at the community level between Lyakon and Kara-Bak villages.

4.2.3. Apricots and entrepreneurial networks in communities in border areas

Previous studies have shown that dried apricots constitute the largest ‘export good’ from border regions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The region also was a leader in the exports of fresh and dried fruits during the Soviet period (Coulbaly and Thomsen, 2016). The sale of dried apricots still provides the economic basis for the relationship between the border villages of Kara-Bak (Kyrgyzstan) and Lyakon (Tajikistan), and tens of thousands of hectares of apricot orchards are located on land belonging to these two villages. According to local authorities in Batken, the district (rayon) produces 20,000 tons of apricots each year, of which 75% is exported to a processing plant in Isfara, Tajikistan (Razakov, 2016).

Extensive entrepreneurial networks have emerged around this industry, which support social cohesion between the two communities and help to mitigate intra-community tensions and conflicts. The main sources of income for many of our study respondents are remittances and revenue from apricot sales, and these two income streams help families survive in border areas where other economic opportunities are rare.

Farmers from Lyakon and Kara-Bak both constantly exchange skills and information about horticulture, including how to grow seedlings, care for seedling and trees, good practices for fertilizing and watering, how to control pests and deal with diseases, pruning methods, and information on selling final products. These practical issues are the subject of everyday communication between farmers.

“I wasn’t engaged in horticulture before, I used to teach primary school classes, but now it has become very profitable [to grow apricots] as one can sell good quality apricots for 350 KGS [USD 5 dollars] per kilogram. I learned from my neighbors from Surkh how to take care of [apricot trees] and how to prune them. [My neighbors] have been doing this for a long time and know how the seedlings take root in our land.” (Adalat, Kyrgyzstani female farmer residing in Kara-Bak 52 years old)

“I am engaged in reselling apricots in the Surkh market [Tajikistan]. I buy them from the Kyrgyz [in Kyrgyzstan] and then resell them in bulk to Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk. It is always

different: sometimes the season can turn out good, but sometimes we can sit without work when the harvest is bad or if the weather isn't good enough for a good harvest. I have friends among Kyrgyz people who help find a good product based on price per piece, it is beneficial to all of us.”(Maksut, Tajikistani trader in the Surkh bazar, male 44 years old).

This coherent network of mutual exchange and mutual benefit is under pressure today. The dependence of Kyrgyzstani farmers on both Tajikistan's dried fruit border markets and on apricot processing infrastructure is considered by some local businessmen in Kyrgyzstan as reducing their own potential income. Initiatives to increase income from the sale of apricots in Kyrgyzstan are supported by international organizations. For example, in 2018, with the support of USAID, a mini processing plant was built in Uch-Korgon (Kyrgyzstan), the central village of Kadamjai district of Batken oblast, designed to help Kyrgyzstani farmers receive more from their apricot sales through



Photo 6. Monument to the apricot in Isfara town.
Photo: Asel Murzakulova

initiatives to add value to their products and to increase the competitiveness of their product on the export market.⁶ It is still difficult to assess how such initiatives will challenge existing business networks, but the growing transaction costs involved in exporting goods across the borders of Central Asian countries could threaten existing trade relations between local communities such as those existing between Kara-Bak and Lyakon villages.

5. SECURITY ISSUES AND THE ROLE OF BORDER SERVICES

The myriad of complex problems that exist within border communities was articulated by the respondents of this study and framed through the problem of borders and the status of disputed territories. As Reeves (2014) notes: “For people living along this [Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border in Fergana Valley] disputed border, the lack of judicial determination and the perceived lack of access to justice if a crime is committed by someone from ‘the other side’ [of the border] have increasingly made the ‘border problem’ an object of every talk and political mobilization.”

In frontier villages, border guards perform the *de facto* role of the police, although this is not within their legal mandate. Almost every conflict that took place in the past 10 years in the border area was accompanied by participation of border guards. Disputes between farmers over the distribution of water quickly escalated into armed confrontation when border patrol guards became involved.

Between 2005 and 2006, the sporadic so-called ‘border posts war’ took place in the border areas of

⁶ More information can be found here: <https://www.usaid.gov/kyrgyz-republic/press-releases/jun-18-2018-usaid-and-interfruit-llc-launch-new-fruit-processing>

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan oblast (Matveeva, 2017, Murzakulova, 2017). These events led to an agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that guarantees the neutrality of border guards during conflicts resolution. In 2007, the commanders of the border troops signed a protocol on the norms of behavior of border guards with the aim of preventing border guards from becoming involved in conflicts between civilians. However, subsequent conflicts in 2013, 2014, 2018 have shown that the border services of both countries have ignored this agreement and violations were reported in the conflicts along the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border where border guards were involved (Murzakulova, 2017).

In Kyrgyzstan, the adoption of the Law “On giving special status to certain border areas of the Kyrgyz Republic and their development (2011)” envisages the development and implementation of the state program for ensuring security and socio-economic development in these areas. However, in reality, the law only reinforced the immobility of residents living in border villages. The Law also tightened the regime around the length of stay of foreign citizens in the border areas and prohibited the sale of land and houses to foreigners. Unfortunately, the governments of both countries appear to grasp and interpret the border problems in terms of national interests, while a discourse around the benefits of cooperation remains marginalized.

The actions of border services from both countries are escalating increasingly quickly: any action that is perceived as hostile is quickly followed by a counter-action, unfortunately increasingly accompanied by the use of violence. At the same time, the capacity of local communities to cope with the rapidly deteriorating infrastructure is weakening against a backdrop of national policies that support militarization of borders and growing nationalist movements.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Residents in the Isfara River valley face a range of issues that challenge their daily way of life. Social cohesion and trust between communities living in border areas has been undermined by modern policies of nation-building, which promote the physical materialization of borders (Megoran, 2018) in the Fergana Valley. The purpose of this study has been to shed light on challenges of social cohesion in the communities of Dostuk, Kara-Bak (Kyrgyzstan) and Chor kishlok, Surkh, Lyakon (Tajikistan) living along the border, and to understand how different forms of social cohesion break down, or are created, in the context of border materialization.

We found that day-to-day practices in border areas which play a role in maintaining social cohesion between communities are facing growing pressures. Some of these practices, such as cross-border teachers, are already a thing of the past, while cross-border medical services, hired labor (mardakers), shepherds and murabs are currently experiencing a situation of constant uncertainty regarding their status and their legitimacy. We have shown that community organizations such as WUAs and pasture committees, as well as national governments, operate largely according to an understanding that their mandate stops at administrative borders, rather than at the boundaries of actual natural resources use – yet this adversely affects local community access to resources, as well as creating distrust where it was not present before.

Reeves describes changes in border regimes in the Ferghana Valley as a social and political process that reveals the modality of power. She argues that “[the] absence of durable and sustainable sources of livelihood [and] ever-greater emphasis on ‘security’ through increased military presence ... risks transforming the border into an increasingly lucrative (and prospectively violent) space for the extraction of tribute, transforming issues of local resource allocation into matters of national politics” (Reeves, 2014). This new environment transforms the traditional values of sharing infrastructure, natural resources and human capital into terms of individualistic ownership and protectionism.

At the same time, we see that entrepreneurial networks remain a stable space for social cohesion, and that their sites, such as cross-border bazaars and goods transit infrastructure, are important agents of communication and cohesion. These spaces appear to survive even in an environment in which space for collective action is constantly decreasing, using the simple logic of mutual dependence and mutual benefit.

The case of Kara-Bak and Lyakon highlights how the Soviet legacy and changes in organization of agriculture after independence create different institutional environment in border areas around land use. Today, the previously functioning principles of interdependence and complementarity in rural agricultural production (as practiced under Soviet regime) have become a relic of the past⁷, and farmers have had to adapt to market conditions and less permeable national borders. The costs of this process have been, and continue to be, extremely high for the farmers of border areas, and in order to maintain their livelihood they are often forced to seek out and support any form of beneficial cooperation, which in present circumstances are often deemed illegal by the authorities.

The example of Dostuk and Chor kishlak villages clearly shows how physical materialization of the border can lead to economic stagnation, which in turn can provoke a rapid outward migration of the local population. In such a situation, religious ties become a rare opportunity for inter-community communication. This example is especially important to consider in light of alternate arguments that

⁷ This refers to the specialization of collective farms. In Tajikistan, they specialized in plant growing and cotton production, while in Kyrgyzstan, emphasis was placed on livestock and fodder crops.

favor mainly a rapid process of delimitation and demarcation of the national borders – deemed in some political discourse as being the only effective ‘silver bullet’ that will lead to resolution of all disputes and border conflicts, and which should automatically lead to peace. Our research, however, has shown that the break of traditional social practices and social ties, and the interdependence of communities living in border areas, often create a stagnation and depression in places where otherwise all the prerequisites for prosperity exist.

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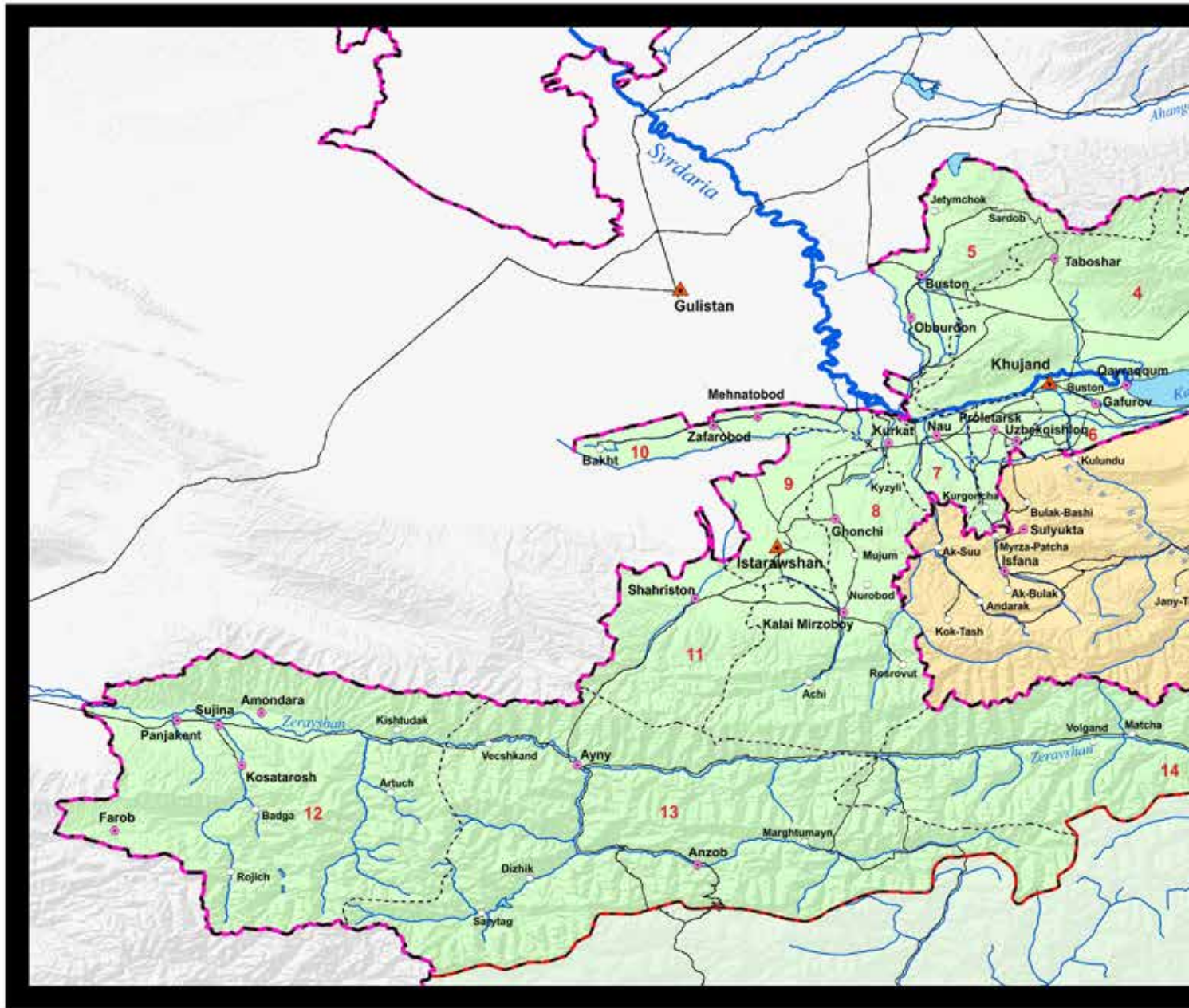
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BATKEN PROVINCE SUGHD PROVINCE



The numbers on the map shows the regions

Number	Name of region	Number	Name of region
	Tajikistan	10	Zafarobod
1	Isfara	11	Shahrison
2	Konibodom	12	Panjakent
3	Asht	13	Ayni
4	Gafurov	14	Kuhistoni Mastchoh
5	Mastchoh		Kyrgyzstan
6	Jabbor Rasulov	15	Leilek
7	Spitamen	16	Batken
8	Ghonchi	17	Kadamjay
9	Istaravshan		

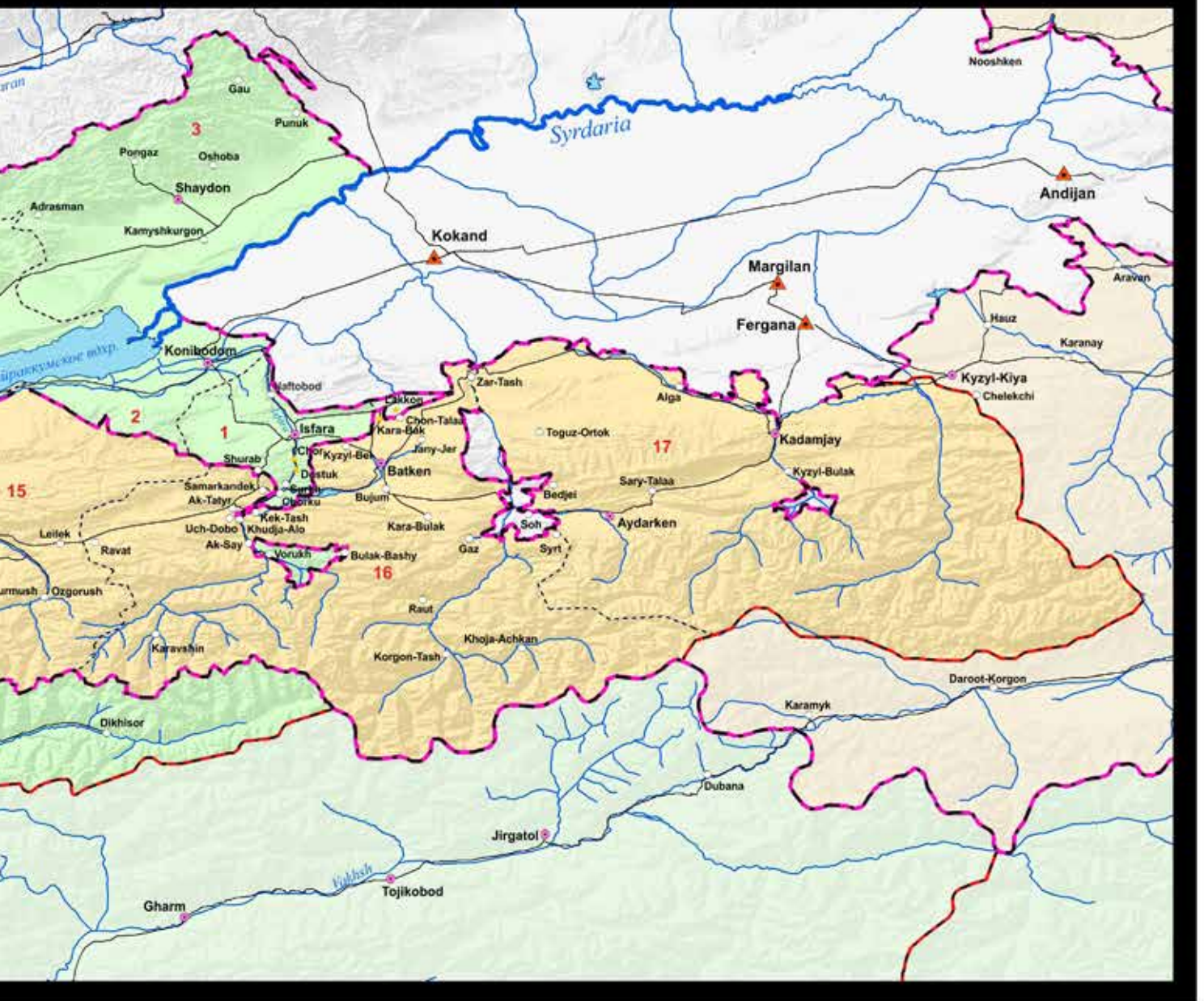
1:155000



1 cm is equal 15.5 km

CE, KYRGYZSTAN

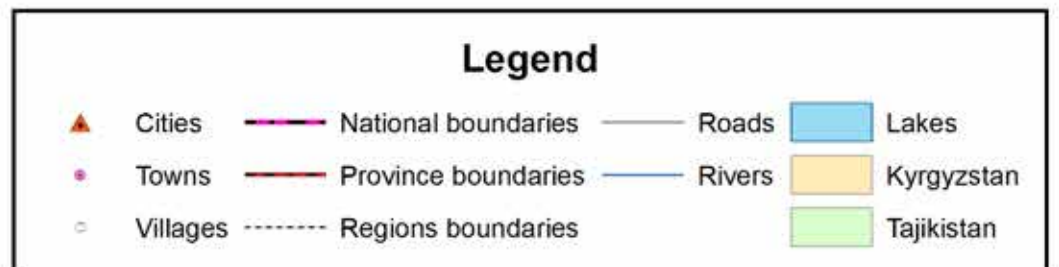
CE, TAJIKISTAN



00

150 200 KM

m



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