



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Kelly M. McMann

Country: Kazakhstan

Topic: *Everyday Coping in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Ethnic Influences and Political Implications*

Research Report

With the dismantling of communism in the former Soviet bloc, state services have dwindled, forcing residents of these countries to cope with everyday problems that were once resolved by their governments. The Soviet government provided low-quality, broad social assistance, but, in the post-Soviet era, market reforms and economic crises have eroded the state welfare systems. My project examines how citizens' means of dealing with problems no longer resolved by the state shape their attitudes toward their governments and their relationships with their leaders. Namely, *how does citizens' reliance on private services affect state legitimacy and efficacy?* For instance, when citizens can readily obtain social assistance from a nongovernmental group, do they consider state institutions that fail to provide services, yet collect taxes, as legitimate? Furthermore, to what extent do coping behaviors, such as drug smuggling for income, undermine state capacity?

These issues are particularly salient in post-Soviet Central Asia, where declining social welfare and ineffective governance ignited battles in 1999, 2000, and 2001 between government troops and supporters of the loosely knit, multinational Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—an organization designated by US President George W. Bush as part of the global terrorist network. Throughout the region Islamic traditions have predisposed some of the movement's supporters to see an Islamic state as a solution to their everyday problems, and the proximity of Afghanistan has enabled them to rely on arms and drug trafficking and a wider fundamentalist Islamic network as means of

coping. By exploring the connections between coping behaviors such as these, and state-building in Central Asia, this project will evaluate the extent to which these countries may serve as a breeding ground for global terrorism. Moreover, the project will suggest how economic development, specifically the improved provision of services, can promote security in the Caspian Sea region and worldwide. This interaction between economic welfare and global terrorism is a primary concern of US policymakers.

Besides offering policy suggestions, my study addresses weaknesses in two scholarly literatures. By examining how citizens' relations with their leaders and non-state service providers influence state development, my work improves upon existing studies of post-Soviet state-building, which focus on the design of governmental institutions, overlooking the impact of citizens' attitudes and behaviors on the government's ability to operate effectively.¹ My work also departs from investigations of coping, which concentrate on the everyday problems people face and the means individuals use to resolve them.² These studies do not consider how survival strategies influence larger societal phenomena, such as state development. By contrast, I draw out the connections between citizens' struggles with the decay of the Soviet state and the prospects for developing new legitimate, efficacious governments.

1 For example, see: Pamela Jordan, "Russian Courts: Enforcing the Rule of Law?" *Building the Russian State: Institutional Crisis and the Quest for Democratic Governance*, ed. Valerie Sperling (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 193-212. Michael McFaul, "State Power, Institutional Change, and the Politics of Russian Privatization," *World Politics*, 47 (January 1995), 210-43. Cynthia Roberts and Thomas Sherlock, "Bringing the Russian State Back In: Explanations of the Derailed Transition to Market Economy," *Comparative Politics*, 31, 4 (July 1999), 477-498. Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, "Central Weakness and Provincial Autonomy: Observations on the Devolution Process in Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 15, 1 (1999), 87-106. 2 This is a large literature, but some of the key works about the post-Soviet sphere include the multiple publications and projects by Jude Howell, Branko Milanovic, Richard Rose, and Cynthia Werner, the World Bank's Living Standard Surveys, and the United Nations Development Programme's *National Human Development Report* for individual countries.

To achieve these objectives, I interviewed 101 individuals in Kazakhstan, and I will use this data to design a mass survey to be administered throughout Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in 2002. In Karaganda and in a village in the southern region of Zhambyl I conducted interviews with members of Kazakh and Russian households to examine how problems, coping strategies, and attitudes toward the government differed between ethnic groups. I also interviewed groups of unemployed individuals in each region, since unemployment is one of the most common and troubling issues for citizens of Central Asia and other post-Soviet regions. Furthermore, in Karaganda I interviewed university students who were looking for post-graduate employment. In both locations I conducted interviews with potential service-providers, including religious leaders, wealthy entrepreneurs, private employment agencies, and representatives of foreign and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In Almaty I spoke with foreign and local social welfare consultants to obtain background information, and in Astana and each province I

interviewed officials about their role in helping people solve everyday problems. In Astana, Almaty, Karaganda, and the capital of Zhambyl, Taraz, I also gathered statistics about welfare and the economy. In sum, the research sites were Almaty, Astana, Karaganda and its satellite towns, Taraz, and a village in Zhambyl province.

Although I have only conducted a preliminary analysis of the data at this point, I expect to draw the following conclusions, among others. First, radical Islamic movements based on discontent with economic circumstances and state policy toward religion, like the IMU, are not likely to take hold in Kazakhstan. Second, “coping opportunities,” such as the availability of government employment centers or wealthy mosques, influence the strategies people employ, and general economic trends affect people’s attitudes and actions toward the government. These factors mediate the influence of both ethnic identities and the level of urbanization on coping strategies and state legitimacy and capacity.

In response to new economic problems, citizens of Kazakhstan have turned to nonviolent, secular forms of coping. In urban areas citizens tend to rely on old and new “formal” structures of support, such as government employment centers and university placement services that have evolved from the Soviet era and for-profit employment agencies and charities that have appeared since the demise of communism. In rural areas people seek support from family and friends, as they did in the Soviet era, but also from those private farmers who have managed to create successful businesses in the post-Soviet period. Islamic institutions seem to play only a minor role in charity, competing with many other possible service-providers in urban areas and causing suspicion among citizens in both cities and villages. Even in villages where people may respect Islamic leaders, they tend to be wary of contact with mosques. This is most likely because of the relative weakness of Islam in the pre-Soviet steppe and the atheistic propaganda during the Soviet era. Moreover, village mosques and Islamic leaders are not necessarily rich in resources, which hinders their ability to solve people’s economic problems. Finally, coping behaviors, whether tied to Islam or not, are not likely to challenge the state. Citizens of Kazakhstan explained that they have adapted to the new, reduced role of the state in society and expect little of the government. They tended to blame not the government, but rather the “times” or the “era” for their problems. Even unemployed individuals expressed relative satisfaction with the government, noting that salaries and pensions were typically paid on time—unlike in previous years—and that there was the possibility of finding a job if one searched thoroughly.

While these preliminary conclusions about Kazakhstan are relatively optimistic, it also became clear in my fieldwork that these findings will not likely hold in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Originally, I hypothesized that ethnic identity and level of urbanization directly influenced coping strategies and relationships with the state, but I now believe that coping opportunities and general economic trends play a mediating role. Consequently, I expect that coping strategies will challenge the state more in other Central Asian countries. In Uzbekistan more coping opportunities are tied to radical Islam, and in Kyrgyzstan a declining economic situation has led to disgust with the government. The mass survey in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan will be critical for clarifying these ideas.

Based on my recent fieldwork in Kazakhstan and my research in 1997 and 1998 in the capitals and outlying provinces of Kyrgyzstan and Russia, I have reached the following conclusion about how to promote economic development and thus stability in this region of the world. The most effective use of US funds to the former Soviet Union seems to be through microcredit programs. In the course of my projects, I interviewed many representatives of international and local organizations focusing on economic and social development and lived with and met numerous local families. Although the current microcredit programs affect few people, those they do affect receive considerable benefits. The most immediate effect is to provide some income for families, but the programs also provide economic independence from local authorities, which is important for the development of democracy.³ Moreover, participants in the program acquire an increased sense of responsibility for their lives and a feeling of greater confidence. While the programs do need to evolve, perhaps to include increased collaboration with government officials who can help create markets and favorable legal regimes, microcredit is a clear benefit of foreign involvement in the region.

My current project emerged from my prior fieldwork in Central Asia and Russia. The question of coping is central to the lives of the people in the region. The influence of these behaviors on state legitimacy and efficacy are critical to theories of state-building, and the impact of survival strategies on security is important to US interests. I believe scholars would profit by beginning with questions that are central to the peoples of the former East bloc. This is likely to be more relevant than beginning with a Western concept such as “party-building” and exploring it in a country, such as Kazakhstan, where the issue is simply not central. Questions that are most salient to the region will then best inform US policies and political theories. My experience suggests that some of the other issues most important in Central Asia today are corruption, political protests, market creation, and relations between countries of the region.

3 For more information on the impact of economic autonomy on democracy, see Kelly M. McMann, “The Personal Risks of Party Development,” *Policy Dilemmas in Post-Soviet Countries*, ed. Joel C. Moses (Chicago: Burnham Publishers, forthcoming).