

Central Asian Ethnicity Compared: Evaluating the Contemporary Social Salience of Uzbek Identity in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*

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Abstract: In this article, I utilize a contextual understanding of ethnicity and unique data to demonstrate that the ethnic Uzbek identity category is both widely available and frequently a useful means of making sense of the world in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. While Uzbek ethnicity is generally salient in both states, the context under which it becomes so varies across space. In particular, there are significant urban-rural distinctions in *when* Uzbek ethnicity is utilized to interpret the world. In addition, compared to others, rural Tajikistani Uzbeks perceive that the boundary between Uzbeks and the titular groups is particularly permeable.

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The five former Soviet Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have long been of interest to students of identity politics. Prior to 1991, it was predicted that the degree of distinctiveness between the region's nationalities and the Slavic core of the Soviet Union had the potential to increase the demands of the Central Asian republics on the centre or even transform them into hotbeds of separatism (Bennigsen and Broxup 1983; Carrère d'Encausse 1979; Rywkin 1982). While these predictions were ultimately not borne out in the events leading to the Union's collapse, scholarly interest in the politics of identity in the post-Soviet region has not been dampened by the fact that independence came to the five states despite the absence of separatist mobilization. Over the past two decades a rich and diverse literature has examined the ways in which various identity categories – including regional (Jones Luong 2002; Roy 2000), clan-oriented (Collins 2002; 2003; 2004; 2006; Schatz 2005), religious (Abramson & Karimov 2007; Khalid 2006; Montgomery 2007; Rasanayagam 2011) and ethnic/national identifications – can become imbued with social and political meaning within Central Asia.

Of the aforementioned identifications, the contemporary salience of ethnicity/nationality has arguably received the most attention from academics. Much of this attention stems from an interest in the nation-building efforts of the region's post-Soviet elites (Brubaker 1996; Bohr 1998; Bonenfant 2012; Cummings 2006; Hierman & Nekbakhtshoev Forthcoming). Scholars have carefully documented elite attempts to promote the titular nation through various nationalizing policies, such as linguistic nationalization (Fierman 2009), the promotion of particularistic and often exclusionary myths (Laruelle 2007; Marat 2008; Mellon 2010), the replacement of Soviet-era public monuments (Bell 1999; Cummings 2013), the orchestration of elaborate public ceremonies (Adams 2010), and even the manipulation of official census results (Ferrando 2008). Of course, nationalizing policies naturally create political losers out of non-titular ethnic minorities residing in a state, and several studies have examined the variety of ethnic minority responses to perceived political exclusion (Adams 2013; Commercio 2010; Fumagalli 2007a; Fumagalli 2007b; Hierman 2010).

A related body of ethnographically-oriented literature has explored the consequences of nation and state building policies on everyday experiences with ethnicity and nationhood. For instance, Cynthia Werner suggests that nationalizing policies have unwittingly encouraged the practice of bride-abduction in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Werner 2004; Werner 2009). In her essay on border villages in the Ferghana Valley, Madeline Reeves finds that the post-independence delimitation of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has contributed to the increased

salience of ethnicity for many villagers (2009). Relatedly, Morgan Liu has documented how Uzbekistan's official nationalistic discourse in the 1990s evoked feelings of pride amongst some members of the ethnic Uzbek community living in Osh, Kyrgyzstan (2012). While these ethnographic studies provide a great deal of insight into the structural and contextual factors which can alter the relative importance of ethnicity in specific locations, for understandable methodological reasons they are generally less focused on systematically comparing how ethnic salience varies across space in Central Asia. In this article, I take on this issue through a comparative examination of the salience of Uzbek ethnicity amongst rural and urban respondents in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Specifically, I analyse unique survey data collected in eight separate predominately Uzbek communities. These data are supplemented with 16 focus group interviews conducted in each of these communities and over 100 interviews with relevant local elites.

My analyses of these data reveal that Uzbek ethnicity is generally an accessible identity category in both states. Although this result is not surprising as it is in agreement with the findings in the literature that ethnic and national categories often play a role in shaping and structuring life in Central Asia, my data also strongly suggest that the conditions under which my respondents are likely to think, see, and interpret the world as ethnic Uzbeks (as opposed to another identity category) varies according to where they live. Put differently, I find that for most of my respondents being Uzbek is a salient identification; however there is evidence that *when* this identification is salient varies according to which country they live in *and* whether they live in a rural or urban community. For instance, urban residents are more likely to perceive that ethnicity matters when considering activity in the economic arena (such as searching for a job) than are rural residents. On the other hand, rural residents are more likely to perceive the importance of ethnicity when considering social practices (such as weddings) than are urban residents. I also present evidence that for rural residents, especially for rural Tajiks, the boundary between Uzbeks and the titular group is perceived to be far more permeable than it is for urban residents. Collectively, these findings suggest that perceptions of what it means to be *Uzbek* varies across community locations.

As these findings are derived predominately from survey data collected in multiple communities across two states, this study identifies general patterns in the salience of Uzbek ethnicity. While these data enable systematic analysis of within group difference, a caveat is in order: Because I rely on my respondents' self-reported perceptions and values, my findings are suggestive of *when* Uzbek ethnicity (as opposed to another identity category) may become salient for distinct populations, but I am unable to describe specific instances of ethnic salience altering due

to a situational trigger. For the latter, a more micro-level approach, such as ethnography or experiments, would be more appropriate.

To explore the manner in which the contemporary salience of Uzbek ethnicity varies across space, in the next section I clarify how ethnic salience is conceptualized in this paper and provide a brief overview of the historical dynamics which contributed to make the Uzbek ethnic identity category generally salient in Central Asia by the time the states of the region achieved independence. In the following sections, I present the analyses of my unique data in order to compare perceptions of Uzbek ethnicity across space.

Conceptualizing Ethnic Salience and the Historical Construction of the Uzbek Ethnic Category

Following work in social psychology, in this article a salient social identity is understood as ‘one which is functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behavior’ (Oakes 1987, p118). Due to the multidimensional nature of social identification, the salience of particular categories varies under different contexts. Although a single individual may be a member of multiple identity categories – for example a woman living in the Kyrgyzstani city of Jalalabad may be an ‘ethnic Kyrgyz,’ ‘teacher,’ ‘mother,’ and ‘apartment dweller’ – it is unlikely that each of these categories are equally salient at the same time. Instead, the elevation of one of these categories over another occurs as conditions change to make each categorization more or less relevant. Social categories become more or less salient due the interaction between the relative *accessibility* of a given category and the *fit* between the category and social context. While accessibility describes an individual’s readiness to accept a category (a highly accessible category is one which is regularly utilized and quickly retrieved), fit refers to how well a category can help make sense of a stimulus reality (Blanz 1999; Bruner 1957; Hale 2008; Oakes 1987; Turner 1999). Individuals are more likely to perceive themselves (and others) as members of particular social categories when doing so offers a relatively plausible account of the social environment and how they individually relate to it (Oakes 1987; Oakes et al. 1994).

As I will show below, in contemporary Central Asia, the Uzbek identity category is both widely accessible and fits a range of social contexts. This is a historically contingent development, however; prior to the 19th Century Imperial Russian conquest, inhabitants of the region shared a common, but diverse, culture (Schoeberlein-Engel 1994b). While labels such as Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz existed within this shared cultural space, non-ethnic categorizations (such as tribe, neighbourhood, city, village, or religion) were far more likely to be used by

individuals to navigate the social world than were the aforementioned 'ethnic' categories (Edgar 2004; Khalid 1998). The following quotation from Khalid illustrates the limited accessibility and fit of contemporary ethnic categories in pre-colonial Central Asia:

[i]ndividuals felt themselves to be Ozbek or Turk or Tajik not through some abstract sense of belonging to a national group but through the concrete fact of being born in a family that was located socially in a ramified structure of relationships conceived in kinship terms...There is no reason to assume that individuals classified by court chroniclers as 'Turk' would have felt an affinity for each other (1998, p. 190).

Following the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia, the colonial administration of Governor-General Konstantin von Kaufman made collecting information on the territory's ethnicities a priority. Unsurprisingly the ethnographers, geographers, and linguists dispatched to scientifically study (and count) the population and their customs were often frustrated by the tendency for Central Asian respondents to identify themselves as members of multiple ethnic groups (Brower 1997; Schoeberlein-Engel 1994b). Brower exemplifies this through an example in which an ethnographer was confronted with a Central Asian who states that 'I'm a Kirgiz...but I'm an Uzbek' (1997, p. 129). Brower interprets this puzzling response in a manner consistent with the observation that the salience of identity categories varies across distinct contexts. Specifically, the author suggests that in this particular case the respondent may be implying that in situations in which ancestry was relevant, his Uzbek identity was important (due to his tribal origins), whereas when social status was relevant, he identified himself as Kirgiz (because he was nomadic). Especially vexing for Russian scientists was the question of how to categorize a group known as Sarts. Indigenously, the label 'Sart' was primarily used to distinguish settled populations from nomadic groups; it could refer to both townspeople and peasants and could not be readily identified with any one 'ethnic' category (Allworth 1990; Brower 1997; Collins 2006; Khalid 1998; Schoeberlein-Engel 1994b). While the problem of classifying the Sarts would be solved in the 1920s by re-categorizing individual members of the group as either Uzbeks or Tajiks, the salience of this category in pre-20th century Central Asia demonstrates the relative importance of lifestyle distinctions prior to Russian colonialism.

Despite these obstacles, administrators were able to conduct relevant portions of the 1897 Imperial Census across the region and to generate ethnographic maps of the entire territory (Brower 1997). These actions were not only administratively expedient for the colonial power, but they also introduced new understandings of the

relationship between ethnicity, language, and territory to the local inhabitants (Edgar, 2004). Thus, their implementation expanded the range of situations in which ethnic identification could become salient.

This range of situations was further expanded through the Soviet Union's massive nation-building efforts (Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994; Suny 1993). Perhaps most noticeably, the process of national-territorial delimitation begun in 1924 and completed in 1936 rearranged the formal political geography of Central Asia by creating separate administrative territorial homelands for each of the five nationalities recognized by Soviet administrators (Fierman 1991b; Haugen 2003). However, these territorial distinctions were much more than lines on a map; they designated the areas in which different titular nations were promoted. Through the process of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*), inside each of the territories the titular language was elevated to the status of official language, national elites were recruited and placed in leadership positions, and efforts were made to inculcate national consciousness through mass schooling and literacy campaigns (Fierman 1991b; Ilkhamov 2004). Concurrently, symbols of national identity such as folklore, museums, dress, food, and customs were celebrated in part as a means to distinguish between groups (Martin 2001).

Although the formal process of indigenization ended in the 1930s, throughout the Soviet period daily life was, to a certain degree, ethnified. Consequently, as Henry Hale has stated, within the union one's ascribed nationality was often explicitly linked to one's life chances (2008, p. 97). Individuals carried internal passports that indicated both their place of birth and their nationality. An ascribed Uzbek individual had this ethnic label listed in his or her passport regardless of whether he or she was born in Tashkent, Dushanbe, or Moscow. Importantly, if this individual travelled outside of Central Asia or served in the military, he or she would be often treated as an *Uzbek*. Schooling was generally conducted in the titular language; in areas with concentrated minority populations, separate schools for the local Uzbek, Kyrgyz, or Tajik groups were often established. Furthermore, Uzbeks generally consumed Uzbek media (newspapers, radio, television) while other groups consumed the appropriate media for *their* group (Critchlow 1991, pp. 14-15). Due to the ethnification of life under the Soviet Union, Alisher Ilkhamov argues that, at least for those categorized as Uzbek, individuals began to self-identify with their registered ethnic group: "since the 1950s-1970s, to the question 'Who are you?' most Uzbeks would answer first 'Uzbek' and then would indicate their residence area" (2004, p. 322).

Although Ilkhamov does not distinguish between Uzbeks who lived outside of the Uzbek union republic from those who lived within its borders, there is no reason to suspect that Uzbeks outside of Uzbek territory would

be any less attached to the categorization. After all, Uzbeks living outside of the territory would be regularly confronted with the reality that the titular group was in a relatively favoured position compared to them. Furthermore, through the Soviet period, a member of the titular group would generally enjoy economic benefits related to an increased probability of career advancement. Of course, the porous within-union borders facilitated Uzbek travel for educational and occupational purposes; as Fumagalli states ‘contacts between Osh [in the Kyrgyz SSR] and Andijon [in the Uzbek SSR] or Tashkent [the capital of the Uzbek SSR] were as frequent (if not more so) than those between Osh and Bishkek [the capital of the Kyrgyz SSR]’ (2005, p.47). However, when at home even a well-travelled Uzbek resident of the Kyrgyz SSR or Tajik SSR would likely recognize that life chances were somewhat dependent on one’s ascribed ethnicity. Similar to the experience of Hungarians living in the Romanian city of Cluj described by Brubaker and his co-authors, for Uzbeks living in minority settings, daily reminders in the media and in objectified symbols would elevate both the accessibility and fit of the ethnic category (2006).

Since independence, these daily reminders of the accessibility and fit of identity categories have become more pronounced due to the increased difficulty of cross-border travel (Reeves 2007, 2009) and the nationalizing efforts of the titular states (Brubaker 1996). Within Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, formal and informal nationalizing policies have promoted the social, political, and economic status of the titular group. In addition, political elites in both states have, on occasion, used exclusionary language to legitmate their rule (Megoran 2012; Laruelle 2007, 2012; Hierman and Nekbakhtshoev Forthcoming). Thus, we would expect that over the past several decades the importance of ethnic identification for one’s life chances have been similarly reinforced for both Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani Uzbeks. In the next section, I present data and analyses which confirm this expectation: primarily using unique survey data, I demonstrate that the Uzbek identity category is generally salient in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The Accessibility and General Salience of Uzbek Ethnicity in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

In this and subsequent sections, I present data collected in eight separate predominately Uzbek communities between 2007-2008 (four in Kyrgyzstan and four in Tajikistan). In each state, half of the communities were urban neighbourhoods (*mahalla*) and half were rural villages (*qishloq*). Due to the scarcity and general unreliability of publically available data at the community level, it was not feasible to randomly select the communities. For example, several times I found that the data regarding ethnic composition of villages differed

between the official statistics and the information collected by the local elite of the village. However, the communities selected are controlled according to size (250-550 families) and ethnic demography (over 85% Uzbek) and therefore the results should extend to the experiences of other Uzbeks living in similarly predominately mono-ethnic communities. Villages that were not easily accessible by car under normal driving conditions were also excluded from consideration. In Kyrgyzstan, the neighbourhoods examined are in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, while the villages are in the regions of Aravan and Suzak. In Tajikistan, the neighbourhoods are in the cities of Qurghonteppa and Taboshar, while the villages are in the regions of Tursunzoda and Jabbor Rasulov. Data was gathered within each community through an original random household survey conducted by Siar-Bishkek (n = 480) as well as through focus group interviews (total of 16).

To gauge the accessibility and general salience of Uzbek ethnicity in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, my survey contained a battery of questions aimed to assess self-identification as well as affective commitment to various identity categories. Figure 1 plots the results from a series of questions that asked respondents whether they were more likely to use the pronoun 'we' or 'they' when talking about the following four groups: Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Russians. The figure only depicts results for Uzbeks, Russians, and the relevant titular group. Based on the assumption that individuals are more likely to use the pronoun 'we' when talking about a group to which they categorize themselves as belonging, these questions provide a thin measure of self-identification. As this figure indicates, more than 92% of rural and urban respondents in both states indicated that they use the pronoun 'we' when referring to Uzbeks; a chi-square test reveals that Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani respondents did not differ in their use of 'we' when referring to Uzbeks, $X^2(1, N=479) = .22$ $p = .637$.

<Figure 1 About Here>

While these are not particularly surprising results for residents of predominately Uzbek communities, it does confirm that Uzbek self-identification is widespread amongst my respondents. Self-identification as a member of a particular category has been used as a useful, if thin, measure of category salience (Bhavnani & Miodownik 2009; Eifert et al. 2010; Haslam et al. 1999). As Kinket and Verkuyten state 'A person may recognize and accept an ethnic group as self-defining, but does not have to consider this definition as personally important' (1997, p. 339). Put differently, thin self-identification as a member of a group likely indicates that a category is accessible but does not necessarily mean that it fits a wide range of circumstances or that a member considers that particular group as

sharing a common fate that distinguishes it from other groups. To better assess the emotional component of ethnic identification amongst my respondents, figure 2 presents the percentage of respondents who stated that they were personally insulted when Uzbeks were criticized, disaggregated by state and community type. If an individual's identification with a group is personally important, she is likely to feel personally insulted when that group is criticized. Alternatively, if membership in that group is not personally important, an individual is less likely to feel personally insulted when that group is criticized. Figure 2 shows that a large percentage (more than 75%) of urban and rural respondents in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan stated that they were personally insulted when someone criticized Uzbeks. Although chi square tests reveal significant differences between respondents by state and community type, $X^2 = (3, N = 477) = 39.03, p = 0.00$, the high percentage of respondents in all communities who indicated that they would be personally insulted if Uzbeks were criticized suggests that there is a high level of affective commitment to the Uzbek identity category amongst my respondents regardless of where they live.

<Figure 2 About Here>

Collectively figures 1 and 2 indicate that most Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan self-identify *with* and have an emotional attachment *to* their ethnic identity. Further support for the general salience of Uzbek ethnicity can be found in the data displayed in figure 3. This figure presents the results from a question which asked respondents to choose which group from a provided list (comprised of 10 groups in Kyrgyzstan and 14 in Tajikistan) was the most important to them in most situations in their daily lives. The list included groups delineated according to ethnicity (e.g. Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Russians), religion (e.g. Muslims and Christians), and occupation (e.g. farmers, workers, businessmen). Additionally, because my fieldwork in Tajikistan had identified sub-ethnic category groups (e.g. tribal or regional identities) as relevant in that country, I included several of these on the list presented to Tajikistani respondents. Only those categories that generated a response are depicted in these figures, therefore certain categories such as Russians and Christians are not presented. The category 'other' includes those who

indicated pensioner or one of the sub-ethnic identities.¹ As figure 3 makes clear, in both states a majority (56.9% in Tajikistan, 56.6% in Kyrgyzstan) identified ‘Uzbeks’ as the most important group in their daily lives.²

<Figure 3 About Here>

Although these findings suggest that Uzbek ethnicity is generally cognitively accessible and fits situations in both states, they also demonstrate that ethnicity is not the only category with these qualities. For example, 36% of Kyrgyzstani respondents identified ‘Muslims’ as the most important group in their daily lives. Additionally, a large percentage of Tajikistani respondents identified sub-ethnic categorizations as most important: for instance, when asked which group was the most important to their daily lives, 40% of respondents in the village near Tursunzoda stated ‘Durman’ (a tribal identity) and 31.6% of respondents in Qurghonteppa stated ‘Urgut’ (an ancestral-regional identity). Additional data based on a series of questions regarding how much respondents felt they had in common with various groups can attest to the importance of the latter group in the neighbourhood in Qurghonteppa: When asked how much they had in common with Urguts, 85% of my sample in this community stated that they had a ‘great deal’ in common.³ Previous authors have similarly found that the Uzbek population of Tajikistan is quite heterogonous and that, especially in southern Tajikistan, tribal and regional identifications remain quite important amongst ascribed Uzbeks (Akiner 2001; Roy 2000; Schoeberlein-Engel 1994a, 1994b).

¹ This was the second question on the survey to mention these categories and none had mentioned only ethnicity, so there is little likelihood that respondents were primed to answer in a particular manner. Therefore, this question should be a reliable measure.

² When disaggregated by community type, a majority of respondents in all community types except for rural Kyrgyzstanis identified ‘Uzbeks’ as the most important group: 35% of rural Kyrgyzstanis identified Uzbeks as the most important group, while 50.8% identified ‘Muslims’ as the most important group. It should be noted that in Kyrgyzstan, religiosity may overlap with ethnicity. When asked about differences between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, respondents in several focus groups stressed that Uzbeks were more religious.

³ Unfortunately, I do not have similar data for Durmans.

The importance of an ancestral-regional identity to these respondents does not necessarily diminish the importance of Uzbek ethnicity, however. For instance, in the aforementioned question asking respondents to indicate which group was the most important in their daily lives, a sizeable portion in both the village near Tursunzoda (30%) and the neighbourhood in Qurghonteppa (36.6%) stated 'Uzbek'. Similarly, 75% of respondents in Qurghonteppa stated that they had a great deal in common with Uzbeks. A cross-tabulation of responses (table 1) to the two questions asking how much in common a respondent had with Uzbeks and Urguts reveals that 66% of those who affirmed they felt a great deal in common with Urguts also felt a great deal in common with Uzbeks. Furthermore, a Fisher's exact test reveals that there is a statistically significant relationship between responses to these two questions ($p=.025$). Therefore, despite the tendency to assume that affect towards sub-ethnic groups comes at the expense of affect towards ethnic groups, this finding suggests that attachment to these identity categories may actually complement one another.

<Table 1 About Here>

Overall the data presented in this section strongly supports the notion that Uzbek ethnicity seems to be quite accessible and generally salient for respondents in both states. Further, there is no convincing evidence that the importance of sub-ethnic categories in Tajikistan weaken the salience of Uzbek ethnicity. The highlighting of similarities in the salience of ethnicity is not meant to imply that the experience of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are uniform, however. In fact, social dynamics in the two states are markedly different. Horrific events such as the Uzbek-Kyrgyz riots of 1990 and 2010 have no clear analogy in Tajikistan's recent past (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011; Tishkov 1995). Although these violent events were exceptional moments, Regina Faranda and David B. Nolle's analysis of national-level survey data reveal 'subtle prejudices' which mark Uzbeks as the 'key outgroup' in Kyrgyzstan, by which they mean that other ethnicities in the state are more reluctant to accept a close relationship with an Uzbek than with any other ethnic groups (2003, p. 182). Morgan Liu's fieldwork in Osh augments these findings by exposing some Uzbek prejudices towards ethnic Kyrgyz. According to Liu, Osh Uzbeks are generally dismissive of the Kyrgyz capacity to manage a modern state and economy: he writes: 'Uzbeks saw former nomads as being ill-suited to run the sedentary business of a modern republic. The chaos of independent Kyrgyzstan has resulted because nomads are *seated* in power, an almost oxymoronic notion to the Osh Uzbek view

of the situation' (2012, p. 69). While studies similar to Farranda and Nolle's or Liu's have not yet been conducted in Tajikistan, given the widely recognized intermixed history between Uzbeks and Tajiks, it is reasonable to expect existing prejudices between these groups are less acute than those between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz (Atkin 1992, 1993; Naby 1993).

Beyond state-level social dynamics which likely effect the context under which ethnicity is salient, there are important sub-state dynamics to consider as well. In particular, there is compelling reason to anticipate that there are different experiences with ethnicity depending on whether one lives in a rural or an urban area. As a number of scholars associated with modernization theory have argued, by bringing previously isolated groups into heavy contact with one another, the processes of modernization and urbanization may enhance ethnic attachments and perceptions of group difference (Bates 1983; Connor 1994; Gellner 1983; Young 1976). In the next section, I present data and analyses which support the expectation that the context under which ethnicity becomes salient varies both between the two states and between urban and rural areas.

When Does Ethnicity Fit? Examining Spatial Variation in Ethnic Salience

As discussed above, one of the lasting legacies of the Soviet nationality policy was the establishment of a tight connection between one's ethnicity and one's life chances. Since independence, it would seem likely that the nationalizing policies of the Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani regimes have reinforced this connection. In support of this assumption, many of my interviewees in Tajikistan stated that individuals who are officially registered as Tajik will generally have a higher probability of securing public sector employment than an individual registered as Uzbek. Several indicated that as a result of this unbalanced access to public sector employment it is not uncommon for individuals to pay a bribe in order to officially change their ethnicity or their children's ethnicity from Uzbek to Tajik.⁴ Similarly, the following 2008 quotation from an academic living in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, reflects the sentiment that one's identity affects one's employment prospects: 'Listen, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz work in different areas. It is true that if you want to work in the police or if you want to work in the mayor's office, you will need to be Kyrgyz. But

⁴ This phenomenon was noted in interviews with journalist based in Dushanbe, July 12 2008; journalist based in Qurghonteppa, August 21, 2008; Academic based in Khujand, September 6, 2008; local official in Jabbor Rusolov, September 26, 2008.

if you want to work for Gorgaz [the Osh City Gas company], or be a taxi driver, you need to be Uzbek.’⁵ This quote echoes findings from previous studies which indicated that in the city of Osh, Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Kyrgyz dominated public sector employment, while Uzbeks had tended to occupy lucrative commercial sectors, such as trade in the bazaar and taxi services (Lubin et al. 1999, pp. 65-68; Tishkov 1997, p. 137). Since the 2010 ethnic riots, the Uzbek minority position in the city’s economy has reportedly diminished as a result of migration and the seizure of Uzbek-owned assets (International Crisis Group, 2012). This has likely reinforced the perception amongst ethnic Uzbeks living in the city that their economic opportunities are shaped, and indeed often limited, as a result of their ethnicity.

But in 2008 how widespread was the perception that the ethnicity listed in an individual’s passport could have ramifications on the type of employment that he or she was able to secure? Given the divergent social dynamics within the two dyads of interest – 1) Kyrgyzstani v. Tajikistani Uzbeks, and 2) Urban v. Rural Uzbeks – whether ethnicity is perceived to *fit* situations in which an individual is looking for a job may be determined, in part, by location. As a means of evaluating whether this expectation is accurate, figure 4 presents the percentage of affirmative responses to the following question: *Does ethnicity affect an individual’s ability to get a good job?* This figure also presents positive answers to two related questions: *Does ethnicity affect an individual’s ability to get good land? Do you personally believe that your rights have ever been restricted because of your ethnicity?* Jointly, these three questions represent attempts to assess respondents’ perceptions that ethnicity fits certain economic and political circumstances.

<Figure 4 About Here>

This figure shows that a majority of urban respondents (65% in Kyrgyzstan and 51.6% in Tajikistan) believe that ethnicity affects an individual’s ability to get a good job compared to a minority of rural respondents (41.6% in Kyrgyzstan and 19.1% in Tajikistan). A chi-square test reveals that the difference in the frequency in which urban and rural respondents answered this question affirmatively is statistically significant $X^2(1, N=480) = 37.88$ $p = .000$. An additional chi-square test reveals that Kyrgyzstani respondents were significantly more likely than Tajikistani respondents to answer this question affirmatively $X^2(1, N=480) = 15.60$ $p = .000$. Figure 4 also shows that a similar relationship exists between residency location and the perception that ethnicity affects one’s

⁵ Osh based academic, February 15, 2008.

ability to access good land: higher percentages of urban respondents answered this question affirmatively (55% in Kyrgyzstan, 41.6% in Tajikistan) than did rural respondents (38.3% in Kyrgyzstan, 8.3% in Tajikistan). As above, the differences between urban and rural respondents, $X^2(1, N=480) = 32.61$ $p = .000$, and Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani respondents, $X^2(1, N=480) = 24.50$ $p = .000$, are statistically significant. Finally, as depicted in figure 4, when asked whether they personally believed that their rights had been limited as a result of their ethnicity, urban residents were significantly more likely to answer affirmatively (Kyrgyzstan 58.9%, Tajikistan 33%) than were rural residents (Kyrgyzstan 10%, Tajikistan, 15.3%), $X^2(1, N=466) = 62.62$ $p = .000$. A separate chi-square test also found that Kyrgyzstani residents were significantly more likely to answer affirmatively than Tajikistani residents, $X^2(1, N=466) = 5.30$ $p = .021$.

Overall the data presented in figure 4, and the subsequent statistical tests, can be interpreted as demonstrating that Kyrgyzstani (compared to Tajikistani) and urban respondents (compared to rural residents) were statistically significantly more likely to perceive that ethnic categories provide a relatively plausible account of variance in outcomes when an individual is looking for a good job, to acquire good land, or to personally actualize their rights. That is to say, a larger percentage of urban and Kyrgyzstani residents indicated that ethnic categories may *fit* these types of situations than did Tajikistani or rural residents. These findings thus support the contention that the context under which ethnic categories are salient varies across space.

In order to further examine the relationship between residency location and the fit of ethnicity under certain circumstances, figure 5 displays responses to three questions which asked whether it is ‘obligatory’, ‘desirable’, or ‘unimportant’ for an Uzbek to: 1) marry a fellow Uzbek; 2) speak only Uzbek; and 3) send children to Uzbek-language schools. These three questions are measures of what Russell Hardin has called ‘norms of exclusion,’ (1995) informal rules that serve to differentiate ingroup members from the outgroup. For two of the three questions, rural respondents were more likely to express support for norms of exclusion than urban residents. For instance, the figure shows that 52.1% of rural Tajikistani respondents indicated it was ‘obligatory’ for Uzbeks to marry another Uzbek and an additional 36.9% of respondents indicated that it was ‘desirable’ for an Uzbek to do so. In contrast, only 39.8% of urban Tajikistanis responded that endogamy was ‘obligatory’ (although 43.2% indicated that it was ‘desirable’). This figure also shows that endogamy is more valued amongst rural Kyrgyzstanis than urban Kyrgyzstanis; a higher percentage of rural Kyrgyzstanis indicated that it was ‘obligatory’ (10% versus 4.1%) or ‘desirable’ (49.5% versus 25.8%) for an Uzbek to marry another Uzbek. Across both states, the differences between

urban and rural residents were found to be statistically significant, $X^2(2, N=476) = 17.43$ $p = .000$. Compared to Kyrgyzstani residents, Tajikistani residents were significantly more likely to value endogamy, $X^2(2, N=476) = 126.70$ $p = .000$.

<Figure 5 About Here>

While the figure also shows that a higher percentage of rural respondents than urban respondents in both states indicated that it was ‘obligatory’ for Uzbeks to speak only Uzbek and to send children to Uzbek language schools, the difference between rural and urban respondents is only statistically significant for the latter question, $X^2(2, N=479) = 7.91$ $p = .019$. For the former question, there is no significant difference between rural and urban respondents, $X^2(2, N=79) = 5.75$ $p = .056$.⁶ Broadly these findings indicate that Uzbek ethnicity has direct bearing on the social practices of many of my respondents; this is generally consistent with Nick Megoran’s observation that participants in his focus groups in Kyrgyzstan generally defined *Uzbekness* ‘in terms of kinship networks and responsibilities’ (2007, p. 265). However, the results of the statistical tests can be interpreted as indicating that in certain social circumstances, such as when one is choosing a spouse for oneself or for one’s children, ethnic social categories are more likely to fit for my rural respondents than for my urban respondents. This adds further evidence of spatial variance in the context under which ethnic categories are salient. Of course, it should be stated that although the findings of this section indicate that the contexts under which ethnicity fits varies by residential location, these findings do not provide a definitive account for what those contexts are. In other words, although there is evidence that under certain political and economic circumstances, such as looking for a job, a larger number of urban residents perceive that ethnicity fits more than rural residents, this cannot be taken to mean that these are the only times in which ethnicity is likely to be salient for urban residents.

⁶ While there was likewise no significant difference between Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani residents in their response to the question about speaking Uzbek, $X^2(2, N=479) = 2.72$ $p = .256$, Kyrgyzstani respondents were significantly more likely to indicate the desirability of sending children to Uzbek schools, $X^2(2, N=479) = 31.73$ $p = .000$.

How Porous are Ethnic Borders? Rural-Urban Perceptions of Group-Boundary Permeability

The above sections have presented evidence that Uzbek ethnicity is widely salient across urban and rural locations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan even though the context in which it is salient can vary. In this section, I explore whether perceptions of the permeability of ethnic barriers can likewise vary across space. As previously discussed, a common assumption of modernization theory is that urban areas often become arenas of ethnic competition. The argument is that as the economic engines in a modern economy, urban areas serve as magnets for residents from peripheral regions. City dwellers are thus more likely to experience increased contact, and related competition, with members of other groups than are rural inhabitants (Bates 1983; Connor 1994; Gellner 1983; Young 1976). As a result of the competition over limited resources such as housing and jobs, it is expected that in urban areas group barriers will be more rigid than in rural areas.

A close examination of figure 1 finds some support for the expectation that the perceived permeability between ethnic groups varies amongst urban and rural residents. When asked which pronoun they used when referring to the titular group, 43% of rural Tajikistanis indicated that they used 'we' while only 5% of urban Kyrgyzstanis did so. These results imply that the rigidity of ethnic distinctions between Uzbeks and the titular group may vary across space. To better assess this variation, I also asked respondents to indicate how distinct they believed different ethnic categorizations are from one another. Figure 6 presents the results from a question that asked respondents how different Uzbeks are from the titular group. The results presented in this figure indicate that a higher percentage of urban Kyrgyzstani compared to rural Kyrgyzstani respondents believe that there are substantial differences between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz. However, it is important to note that a majority of both urban and rural Kyrgyzstani residents, as well as urban Tajikistani respondents, perceived substantial differences between Uzbeks and the titular group; specifically, 87.5% of urban Kyrgyzstanis, 67.2% of rural Kyrgyzstanis, and 73.1% of urban Tajikistanis believed that differences were either 'great' or 'medium' in magnitude. In these communities, the data suggest that boundaries between groups are fairly rigid. However, the clear outliers are rural Tajikistanis; only 29.3% of respondents in this category believed that the differences between Uzbeks and the titular group were either 'great' or 'medium' in magnitude. The differences between these categories is statistically significant, $X^2 = (6, N = 467) = 108.16, p = 0.00$. Overall, these results suggest that in rural Tajikistan, divisions between groups may be more porous than in other locations.

<Figure 6 About Here>

Importantly, there is correspondence between these survey data on group differences and my focus group responses. When asked to describe the differences between Uzbeks and the titular ethnicity, most focus groups conducted in Kyrgyzstan and in urban Tajikistani neighbourhoods generally reached a consensus that despite some commonalities, specific qualities of the groups differed, and therefore they could be distinguished from one another. A partial list of the qualities identified in different focus groups include: appearance; clothing; cuisine; culture; customs; diligence; Europeanization; generosity; honesty; intelligence; religiosity; and levels of nationalist sentiment. By contrast, focus group respondents in rural Tajikistani villages were generally less able to identify differences between Uzbeks and Tajiks. This is clear in the following passage from the men's focus group in the village in Jabbor Rasulov.⁷

Q: Are there are any differences between Uzbeks and Tajiks?

A: There are no differences except for language. In the past, Uzbek people knew two languages, Uzbek and Tajik. Now except for languages, we live the same. We have the same clothes, customs and appearance. In the past, our young men would marry Tajik girls or our girls would marry Tajik men. Now, this is more difficult. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have divided up one people into two nations. Officially, Uzbeks are 23% of the population in Tajikistan.⁸ But that is a lie! At least 45% of the population is Uzbek. For example, this region used to be only Uzbek, but over time Uzbek people have had their nationality changed to Tajik. They are separating people from their real Uzbek ancestry.

My respondent's statement is illustrative of similar responses in focus groups conducted in other Tajikistani villages. Aside from language, he does not identify any differences between Uzbeks and Tajiks, and he even suggests that the contemporary linguistic difference is historically unimportant.

While the data presented above demonstrate that ethnicity is perceived to more permeable in rural areas compared to urban areas (especially in Tajikistan), it is worth questioning how appropriate modernization theory's

⁷ Conducted on October 9, 2008.

⁸ This number corresponds to the 1989 Soviet census which identified Uzbeks as 23.5% of the population in the Tajik SSR; however, the 2000 census indicated that only 13.5% of the census is Uzbek. Ferrando (2008) is a good source on the controversy surrounding census data in Tajikistan.

assumptions are for contemporary Central Asia. Given the massive population transfers organized by the Soviet regime to provide labour to work in cotton cultivation, particularly in Tajikistan, (Nourzhanov & Bleuer 2013) the assumption that urban areas experience more cross-ethnic contact and competition than rural areas may not hold. After all, as Olivier Ferrando has found, not only did these population transfers disrupt previous patterns of rural life, in many cases they also prompted individuals to think about themselves and others as belonging to distinct ethnic groups (2011). Despite this historical transformation of identity patterns in rural Tajikistan, table 2 – which records how many members of the titular group that respondents see on a typical day – presents data which suggest that contact between cross-ethnic groups is much less regular amongst my rural Tajikistani respondents than other respondents. As the table shows, nearly 20% more rural Tajikistani respondents stated that they were unlikely to see any members of the titular ethnicity in a given day than were respondents from any other community type. Similarly, while at least 25% of respondents in each of the other groups claimed to see more than 5 members of the titular group on an average day, not a single rural Tajikistani respondent did. The differences between community types in the numbers of members of the titular group seen on a typical day is statistically significant, $X^2 = (6, N = 424) = 100.88, p = 0.00$. While these data do not shed light on the nature of competition between groups, contact is a reasonable precursor of competition and thus these results can be interpreted as suggestive that the assumptions of modernization theory are not inappropriate for Central Asia.

<Table 2 About Here>

Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated that despite the constructed nature of the Uzbek ethnic category, it is widely salient in the communities I studied in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is worth re-emphasizing that while establishing the widespread contextual salience of Uzbek ethnicity, I have not tried to argue that ethnicity is the *most* salient identity category in these communities. In fact, my results show that in some communities sub-ethnic identifications (including tribal and ancestral-regional identifications) and supra-ethnic identifications (such as Muslim identifications) are quite important. Furthermore, it is beyond doubt that given the proper context, alternative categories such as occupation or class could also be elevated in importance.

While these findings indicating that the Uzbek ethnic identity category is generally accessible and that there is a wide range of contexts in which it fits largely confirm previous studies on identity in the region, this article's more original contribution is through the analysis of unique survey data in order to uncover evidence of spatial variation in *when* the Uzbek identity is situationally utilized. Specifically, the data suggest that perceptions differ between residents of different community types in how Uzbek ethnicity affects one's relations with the broader social world. For instance, rural residents were more likely than were urban residents to perceive exclusionary social practices such as endogamy as important. On the other hand, urban respondents were generally more likely than were rural residents to affirm that ethnicity has the potential to affect one's material standing via limiting (or allowing) access to better land or employment opportunities. Furthermore, the article has presented data showing that rural residents (especially in Tajikistan) were more likely to perceive that the boundaries between ethnic groups were permeable than were urban residents.

These findings imply that despite the general importance of the ethnic category across the region, one should be cautious when attempting to broadly summarize what it means to be Uzbek in contemporary Central Asia. Even though being 'Uzbek' was personally important for my respondents regardless of location, residents of different communities often indicated distinct perceptions of when ethnicity may matter or how similar Uzbeks are to other groups. Due to the perception-based nature of the data presented in this article, however, additional work is needed to better probe how the specific conditions which may trigger the elevation of the ethnic Uzbek identity category (versus another identity category) could vary in distinct communities. In addition, while it can be expected that the conditions under which other Central Asian ethnic identity categories (e.g. Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik) are salient amongst ascribed members similarly vary across space, this is an empirical question worthy of future inquiry.

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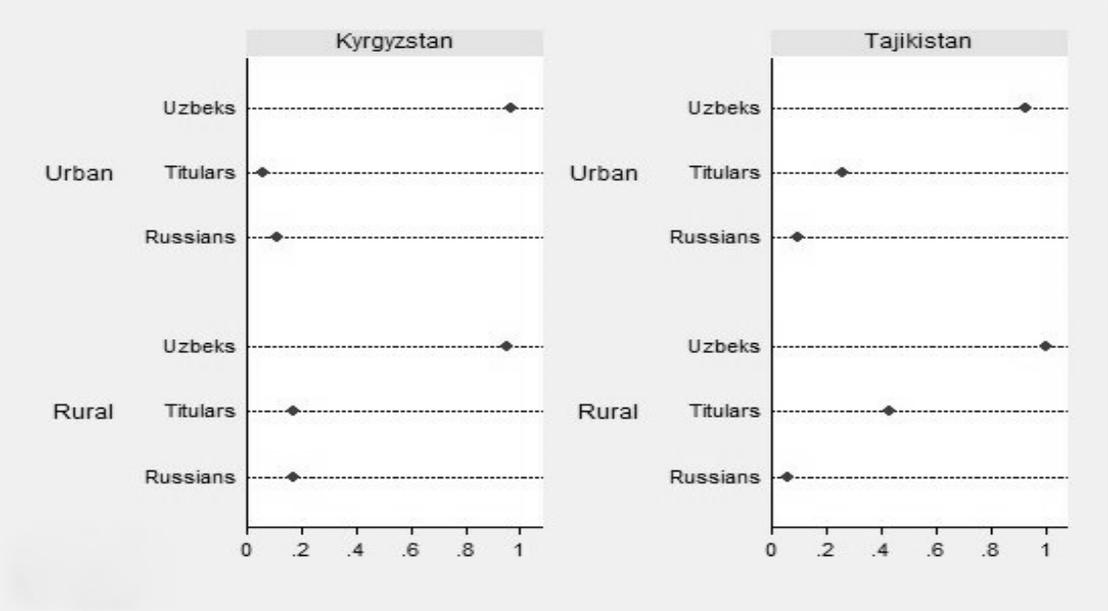
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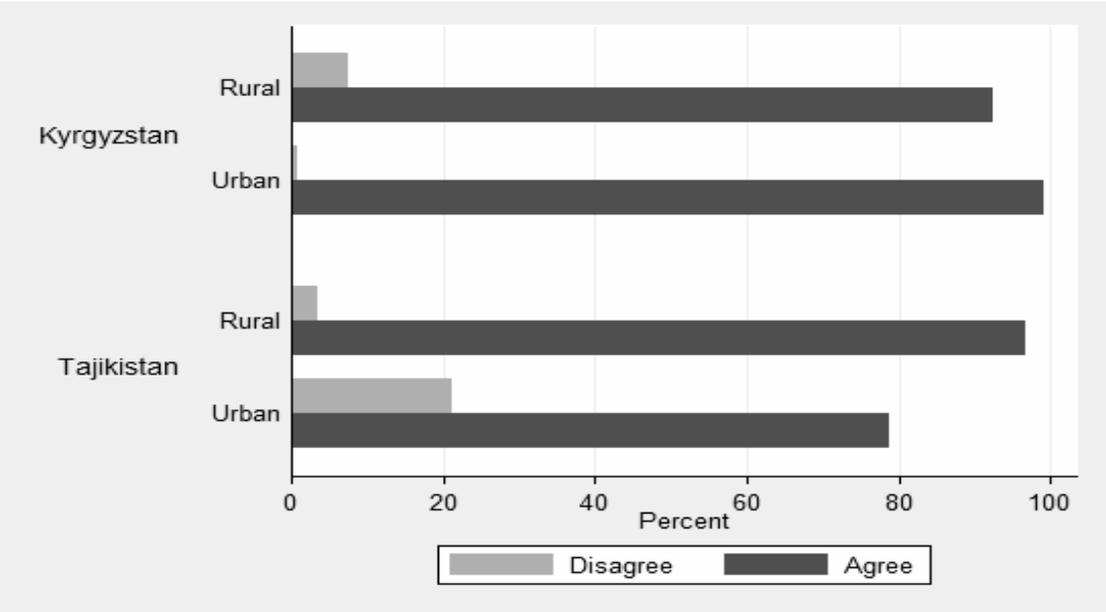
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Figure 1: Percentage Using “We” when Referring to Different Identity Categories, by State and Community Type



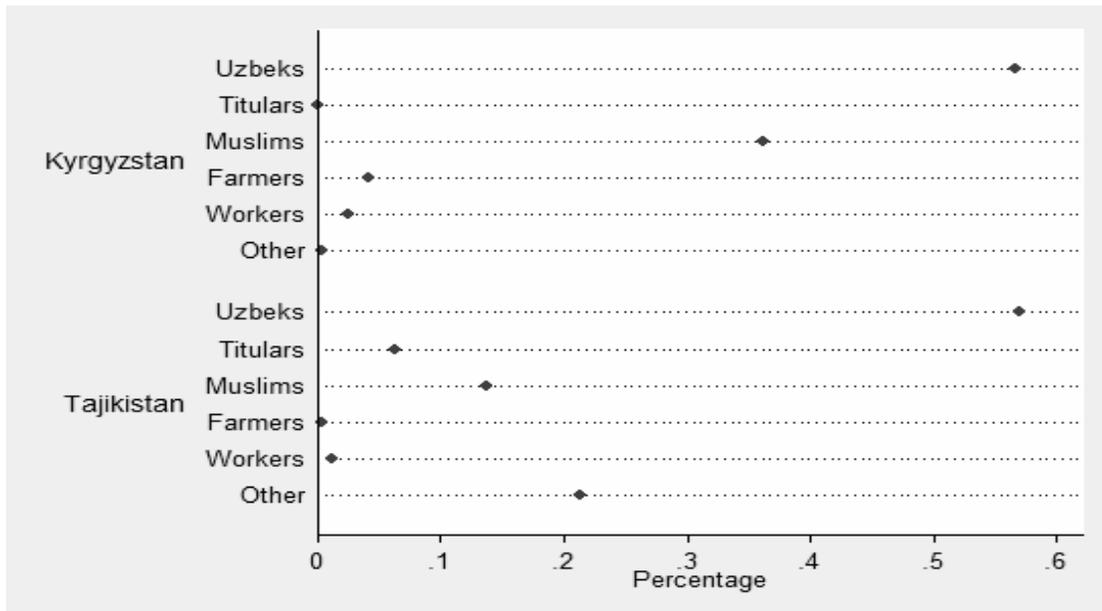
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Figure 2: Percentage Agreeing/Disagreeing that they are Personally Insulted when Uzbeks are Criticized, by State and Community Type



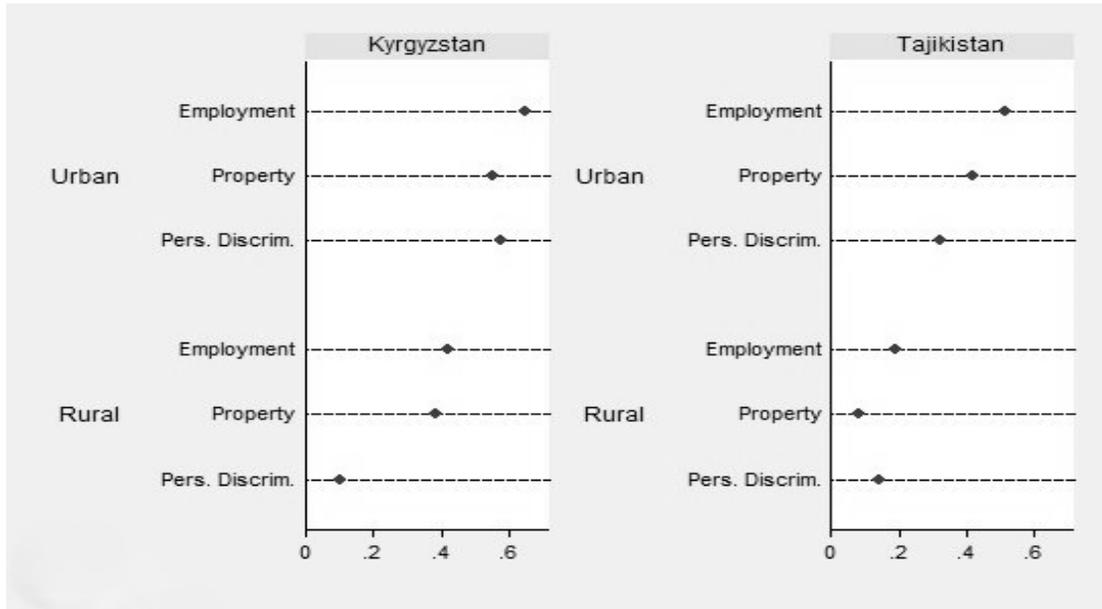
N=477

Figure 3: What is the Most Important Group in your Daily Life Shown in Percentages, by State



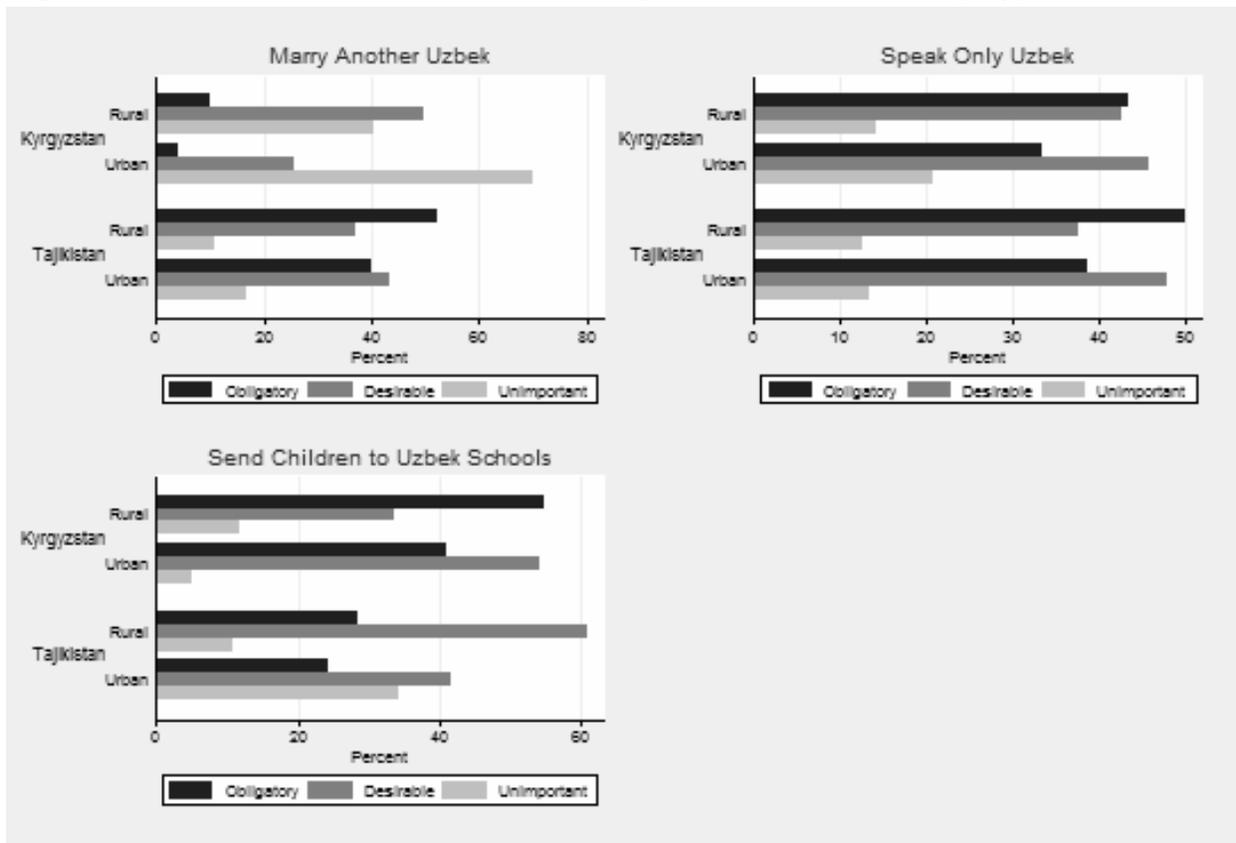
N=479

Figure 4: Percentages Affirming Ethnicity Affects Access to Employment, Access to Property, and Personal Experience with Discrimination, by State and Community Type



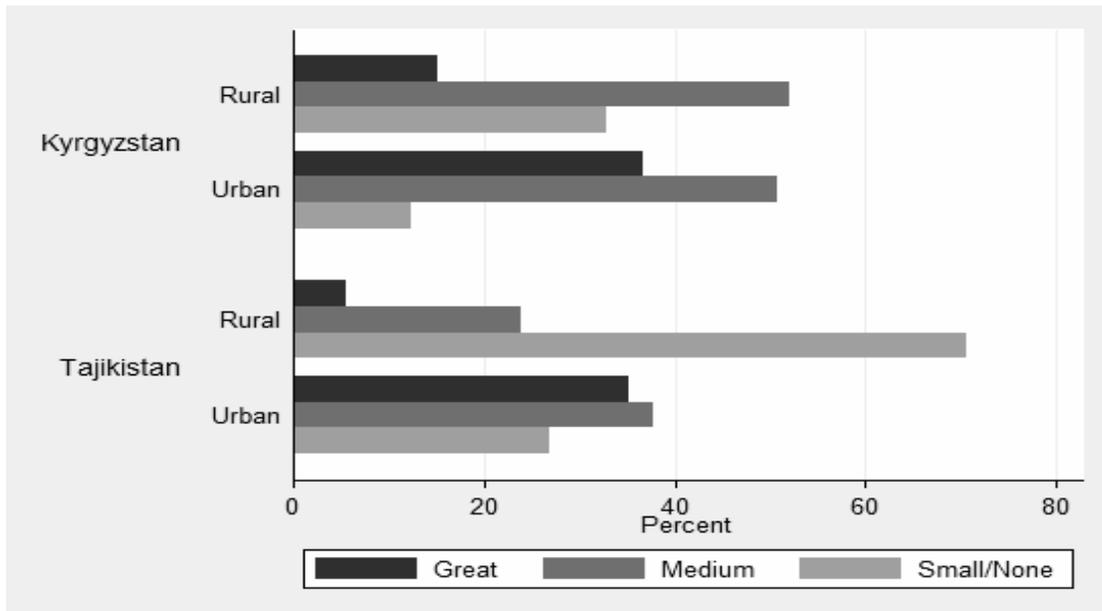
N=480 (Employment and Property), 466 (Pers. Discrimination)

Figure 5: Measures of Norms of Exclusion, by State and Community Type



N= 476 (Marry another Uzbek), 479 (Speak only Uzbek and Send Children to Uzbek School)

Figure 6: Perceived Magnitude of Differences between Uzbeks and Titulars, by State and Community Type



N=467

Table 1: Data from Qurghonteppa: Cross-Tabulation of Responses to Questions Regarding How Much in Common Respondents Have with Uzbeks and Urguts

		How much do you have in common with Uzbeks?		
		Great Deal	Some	Little
How much do you have in common with Urguts?	Great Deal	66.66%	18.33%	0%
	Some	6.66%	3.33%	3.33%
	Little	1.67%	0%	0%

N=60. Fisher's exact test yields $p=.025$

Table 2: Number of Members of Titular Group Seen in a Typical Day, by State and Community Type

In a typical day, how many members of the titular group do you see?				
	<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>		<i>Tajikistan</i>	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
0	11.92%	5.83%	13.72%	33.33%
1-5	33.94%	40.83%	60.78%	66.66%
More Than 5	54.12%	53.33%	25.49%	0%

N=424, $\chi^2 = (6, N = 424) = 100.88, p = 0.00.$