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The Politics of the Past: Reconsidering the Socio-Political Tensions of 1950s-1970s Baku

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Abstract. Due to the demise of the Soviet Union and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Karabakh, Azerbaijani history has often been viewed through the lens of ethnic conflict. This lens has also impacted scholarly interpretations of Soviet migration, particularly of rural-urban migration in late Soviet Azerbaijan. As a corrective, this paper examines how rural-to-urban migration shaped Azerbaijani national and social life and the goals and social orientation of rural and urban inhabitants, resulting in tensions and fissures that were *not* necessarily ethnic in nature. To make sense of the reasons for and outcomes of rural-to-urban migration, this paper first undertakes a comprehensive survey of the social conditions prevalent in Azerbaijani villages and cities during the 1950s and 1960s. This opening section explores the state's exploitative wage system and fiscal policies, environmental degradation, and their collective impact on rural gender norms, sex demographics, and power structures. Turning to cities, this study then examines the migratory patterns that brought rural inhabitants to urban areas, where they experienced significant social marginality. Through this, the paper demonstrates that the migration of Azerbaijanis from rural to urban areas during the post-Stalin period was driven by the socio-economic marginalization of the Azerbaijani countryside, coupled with significant shifts in the distribution of industry and opportunity across the Soviet Union as a whole, and that the migration sparked intergenerational tensions in the village and friction between rural migrants and city dwellers.

Keywords: village, Azerbaijan, demography, cities, urbanization, migration.

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Introduction

Due to the break-up of the Soviet Union and the conflict over Karabakh, Azerbaijani history tends to be written and remembered through the lens of ethnic conflict. Historian Audrey Altstadt speaks of Azerbaijanis' "demographic reconquest" of their capital (Altstadt 1992 165, 184). Similarly, many of Azerbaijani's intellectual leaders regard the 1950s as the era of the "Azerbaijani renaissance," something tied in Jamil Hasanli's scholarship to Azerbaijani in-migration (Hasanli 2014, ix, 74, 425-427). These terms – conquest and renaissance – frame post-WWII demographic changes in Baku in anticolonial terms, begging the question of what the popular experience of the era was and what the hurdles to integration and Azerbaijani belonging in the Azerbaijani capital were. In fact, as this study indicates, the movement of people from rural to urban areas often provoked tension within ethnic communities and sparked debates about the compatibility of rural migrants with urban culture and traditions. Lacking any feeling of anti-colonial victory, increased migration by Azerbaijanis into cities deepened class, geographic, and social fissures in Azerbaijanis society.

To explain these dynamics, the following paper examines how rural-to-urban migration impacted both village and city in Soviet Azerbaijan after World War Two. Our method here examines out-migration (push factors) as well as in-migration (pull factors), while highlighting how state policies, particularly the state's non-investment into rural areas, exacerbated geographic and cultural inequalities – not only between city and village, but also between long-term city dwellers and migrant arrivals. To understand the reasons for rural out-migration in Azerbaijan, this paper surveys social conditions in the Azerbaijani village during the 1950s-1960s, discussing exploitative wage system and fiscal policies, environmental degradation, and the impact of both on gender norms, sex demographics, and power. It then turns to migration, highlighting the significance of "stepped migration" and small city growth in Azerbaijan, as well as the role of small cities and urban settlements in migrants' mobility strategy. It outlines the cultural "otherness" of migrants, particularly those in Baku, whose premier cultural goods and education exercised a powerful draw. The paper then deploys survey data to examine former migrants' own assessment of their experience, using this to underscore the complex interrelationship of social processes in the city and the village and the social conflict prompted by migratory processes.

While there is new global scholarship on how internal migration policies have challenged local and native societies both socially and nationally and about how rural out-migration affects the social makeup of the countryside, we lack such literature on Azerbaijan (Caulfield, Bouniol, Fon-

te, and Kessler 2019; Alex de Sherbini et al., 2008; Milbourne 2007; Rybakovskii and Churakov 1978, 96; Perevedentsev 1975; Zaslavskaia and Ryvkina 1980). In general, scholarship on migration in the Soviet Union flourished in the 1970s and then again in the early 2000s, with findings indicating that Soviet migration controls aimed to regulate the labour market, facilitate the planning of production and services, and ensure system-wide surveillance (Light 2012; Zaionchkovskaia 2005; Buckley 1995; Gang and Stuart 1999; Garcelon 2001; Siegelbaum and Moch 2015). Such scholarship has also grappled, by necessity, with exploitative collective and state farm management policies and the impact of migration restrictions imposed on villagers (Stone 2008; Podol'skii and Voloshinova 2019; Bruisch and Gestwa 2016; Bruisch and Mukhamatulin 2017). In the copious literature dating to the late Soviet period, rural-urban migration was largely seen as desirable—in demographic terms, as a way of relocating workers from sites of surplus to sites of need while training and "universalizing" the labour force, though admittedly risking the further impoverishment of the village, and scholars grappled with how best to theorize unplanned migration in a regime that sought to control movement (Stuart and Gregory 1977). Only limited work addresses in-migration from the non-Russian hinterland to formerly Russian-speaking urban centers – a phenomenon widespread across the Soviet South (Sahadeo 2007; Crews 2003; Stronski 2010; Ackermann 2016; Laszczkowski 2016).

The Azerbaijani Village in the post-Stalinist Era

The extant scholarship on the social challenges related to rural-to-urban migration suggests that, in general, urbanization leads to a reduction in farm employment and an increase in the profitability of farm households through the modernization of agriculture (Liu, Fang, and Li 2014; de Haas 2016: Bhandari and Ghimire 2016). This phenomenon is evident in countries with capitalist economies and even in socialist China. However, it was not observed in the Soviet Union, where economic reforms aimed to dissolve the peasantry as a distinct social class. Bearing this in mind, this section assesses the social upheavals faced by rural residents in the context of Soviet agricultural reforms. It explores how these upheavals impacted both the rural residents themselves and the geographic space in which they resided.

Under the Soviet system of governance, the Azerbaijani Republic's central administration regulated all matters concerning the use of land, the allocation of equipment, crop projections, and rural living standards. Despite – or perhaps due to – such state (ir)responsibility, rural areas were

not attractive to young people; they suffered a high rate of unemployment, low salaries, a lack of modern technical equipment, and the widespread use of manual labour (Hasanli 2014, 425-427; Mämmädova 2022, 294-296).

The absence of tap water, hot water, gas, electricity, sewage systems, roads, appropriate educational institutions, and entertainment further contributed to this unattractiveness. As a result, the rural population felt alienated from its land and homes. Those who left the village had no intention of investing in their home region and instead sought to bring their relatives to the city. As young adults – mostly males – departed, inter-generational conflicts emerged, with the village population becoming older and more conservative, which in turn did little to advance the status of women in such village communities.

The roots of such alienation can be traced to Soviet agricultural policy in the 1930s, which destroyed the traditional system of social relations without providing the income, technological support, or facilities that would represent an improvement in socio-economic and cultural life in the Azerbaijani village. In the 1960s, over half of the republic's population lived in rural areas – regions that were often viewed as backwards, illiterate, and deeply religious by the political leadership and the Soviet intelligentsia. State efforts to educate and modernize rural communities through a cultural revolution had little impact. By the end of the 1950s, less than 40% of rural inhabitants had completed secondary school, and half of the younger generation had not even attended primary school (*Itogi* 1963, 12, 18-19). Although the Soviet government implemented a strict anti-religious policy in the 1920s and 30s, it failed to completely eradicate the influence of religious institutions on Azerbaijani peasants. At times, in fact, the Soviet administration manipulated religious belief to its advantage. For example, in 1960, a report prepared by the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR revealed that the head of the District Executive Board encouraged the local population to donate to the burial place of *Imamzadeh* (a holy site) in Barda City. The district head knew that this site, constructed in the 18th century, was a historical landmark with no connection to the Shi'a Imams, as the locals believed. However, he encouraged people to donate to the so-called *"pir"* by appealing to religious sentiments (ARDA, coll. 411, folder 34. file 66, p. 30).

Despite the introduction of new Soviet technology on collective farms, it was still a rare luxury in the post-war period. Only 30% of agrarian specialists trained to work with modern technology returned to rural areas after completing their vocational education due to the abysmal living conditions in the village (ARDA, coll. 2692, folder 2, file 52, pp. 16-17). During party meetings in the late 1960s, Väli Akhundov, the party leader, acknowledged that only 20% of the cotton fields in the republic were mechanized (Akhun-

dov 1969, 6). Meanwhile, highly toxic fertilizers like potassium cyanide and sodium arsenate were widely used to increase the long-term productivity of collective farms' lands (ARDA, coll. 2692, folder 2, file 84, pp. 2-6).

Abuse of the Soviet government's taxation policy in the agricultural sector became a major cause of complaints and protests in Azerbaijani villages. Resolution #102 of the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijan SSR, adopted on January 28, 1954, stated that, in some districts of the republic (namely Gusar, Mir-Bashir [now Terter], Kariagin [now Fuzuli], Gadabay, etc.), peasants were being charged higher taxes than what was legally prescribed. Moreover, the local authorities did not grant the tax breaks provided by government policy (ARDA, coll. 2878, folder 2, file 164, pp. 89-90). The head of the financial department was accused of implementing incorrect and unlawful tax policies towards the agrarian population.

The Second World War left a tragic social impact, leaving over 58,000 Azerbaijani men dead and over 20,000 captured and unable to return home (*Rossiia i SSSR* 2001, 238, 463). In Azerbaijani culture, widowed women were and still are often pressured by their close relatives to remarry. With food in short supply in the post-war years, the children of these post-war widows were typically left in the care of their grandparents or other relatives. However, often, these children were sent to orphanages. The archives do not contain any statistics on the number of workers who grew up in orphanages. However, 10 of the 80 respondents interviewed for this study (see the final section below) confirmed that they grew up in orphanages, though their mothers were alive. All were from the southern Azerbaijani regions, which were the rather poor districts.

Azerbaijani peasants protested and objected to what, in their view, were non-socialist conditions and farm management, expressing their dissent in letters. In 1960, over 22,000 letters of complaints and objections were sent to various parties and government structures in Moscow and Baku (ARDA, coll. 411, folder 48, file 247, pp. 19-22). Corruption, nepotism, tribalism, and the forcible suppression of basic human rights were the main objections of Azerbaijani peasants (ARDA, coll. 411, folder 45, file 10, pp. 35-37). Peasants complained of hunger. Their households were plundered by local authorities in the name of socialism. They stated that they had not received "labour days" (payments for labour on collective farms) for over a year (ARPİİİSSA, coll. 1, folder 52, file 377, pp. 32-38).

Reconstructing the Azerbaijani Village

In September 1953, a few months after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leadership issued a resolution titled, "Measures for the further develop-

ment of agriculture in the USSR" (Khrushchev 1953). Peasants expected the resolution to create a new direction for Soviet agricultural enterprises and provide them with some degree of independence. However, in December 1959, the Soviet government decided that the use of personal plots by collective farmers had lost its significance. As a result, state authorities were obliged to buy livestock from state and collective farm workers within two to three years (Chernenko and Smirtiukov 1968, 92; Zaslavskaya and Korel 1984, 231).[1] In 1965, Gambay Mammadov, the prosecutor of Soviet Azerbaijan, reported that the local administration in the mountainous regions of the republic had confiscated all the livestock from the peasants' subsidiary plots as part of the implementation of this resolution (ARPİİİSSA, coll. 1, folder 52, file 124, pp. 41-43).

The consolidation of farms and villages constituted the next stage of the Soviet authorities' development of the agrarian sector and their modernization of rural settlements. This process involved the liquidation of so-called "unpromising villages." Villages with a small population that lacked developed infrastructure were deemed unprofitable and unattractive. Their liquidation was carried out in two ways. First, the population of these villages was forcibly evicted to larger rural settlements. Second, collective farms were transformed into state farms. Upon resettlement, villagers discovered that they had not been given housing or been permitted to take their "khoziaistvo" (household effects and livestock). Rural settlements with small populations constituted a significant challenge for Azerbaijan. By the 1960s, before the elimination of such small villages, almost 2.5 million people resided in 4,359 settlements and were governed by sixty administrative units in Azerbaijan. The leaders of Azerbaijan declared that mergers would enable economies of scale.

The enlargement policy resulted in long-term, increased social tension in rural areas and deepened inter-village strife and significantly hindered agricultural production. Tensions erupted in 1965 in the Fizuli region, where there was an armed confrontation between government agencies and the villagers. The residents of Gazakhlar and Mirzanaghyly villages demanded that their land, which the state transferred to another kolkhoz (collective farm), be returned to them. When their demands were denied, they attempted to cross into Iran, only to be stopped by border guards. The villagers refused to comply with Soviet laws and rejected their daily food rations. The authorities perceived the peasant protest movement as an attempt to discredit Soviet power on an international scale. An attempt by Soviet peasants to cross the border into capitalist Iran would raise seri-

[1] This went together with the 1958 Soviet state decree that private livestock should be sold within a two-year period.

ous questions about the effectiveness of the socialist system. To prevent a violent conflict, the police units eventually retreated from the villages (ARPİİİSSA, coll. 1, folder 52, file 124, pp. 72-74). The villagers were unable to regain their kolkhoz land. Seven million Soviet people left their villages in the first half of the 1960s because of the policy of consolidating farms and villages (Popov 1994, 35).

Moving to the City in Post-War Azerbaijan

Although Soviet cities suffered from a paucity of sanitary services and quality housing, migration to an urban region promised rural residents a wider selection of jobs, higher pay, and life in a settlement with better food, sanitation, and housing, along with improved medical, education, and cultural provisions (Filtzer 2010; Perevedentsev, 1975, 135, 138). The resulting rural-urban migration changed the ethnic composition of Azerbaijani urbanity, which had largely been defined by the Russians and Russified minorities whom state and economic leaders had deployed as the regional "vanguard" of industrial expansion. Villagers from the Azerbaijani countryside moved to cities, even as Russian and Russian-speaking urban dwellers often left in response to rising regional competition for jobs and new opportunities elsewhere. The outflow of these non-Azerbaijani residents, coupled with rural-urban migration, made Azerbaijanis a majority of the republic's urban population in the 1970s (Khorev and Kiseleva 1982, 41; Clem 1980, 149-150). However, disparities between urban dwellers and rural newcomers lingered, even among members of the same ethnic group, and rural migrants struggled to find optimal housing, work, and a sense of belonging in urban areas.

The Long Legacy of Russian Cultural Dominance in Industry

The Russian colonial heritage made a heavy imprint on urban cultures in Azerbaijan, particularly Baku. From the Russian imperial period until the 1950s, Soviet industrial enterprises preferred to hire Russian or Russian-speaking workers from the European parts of the Soviet Union (Kozlov 1982, 87). Their choices resulted in a highly Russified urban milieu that proved attractive to Russians and other Russian-speaking groups considering migration to the region, while discouraging Azerbaijani migration into cities (Kozlov 1982, 80-81). As a result, in Azerbaijan in 1926, Russians and Armenians constituted 27% and 15.9% of the urban population, respectively, despite being only 9.5% and 12.2% of the popu-

lation in the republic. By contrast, Azerbaijanis constituted only 37.6% of urban dwellers, despite being 62.1% of the republic's total population (Kozlov 1982, 91). Further, in Baku, the best pay and housing (located in the central parts of Baku) typically went to non-indigenous groups, and Azerbaijanis settled in the less desirable outer perimeter of the Baku metropolitan region, which were also home (before the late 1930s) to impoverished, low-skilled and low-paid workers from northern Iran (Baberovski 2010, 362, 365-369; Amiraslanov and Ibadoglu 2009, 190). Heavy investment in technological innovation after 1926 resulted in lowered rates of urbanization in Azerbaijan, reducing available jobs for which the indigenous population might apply (Table 2).

Table 1. National Composition (%) of Total Republic Population and of Urban Dwellers in Azerbaijan (Kozlov 1982, 91, 93, 97, 120).

	1926 Republic	1926 Cities	1959 Republic	1959 Cities	1970 Republic	1970 Cities
Azerbaijani	61.2	37.6	67.4	51.3	73.8	60.8
Russian	9.5	27.0	13.6	24.8	10.0	18.3
Armenian	12.2	15.9	12.0	15.2	9.4	13.4

The post-WWII period initially seemed to replicate these trends of both minimalizing workforce expenditure and available work, while privileging non-native populations (Kozlov 1982, 87). According to Soviet historian El'darov, a mere 76,000 industrial jobs were created from 1940 to 1958, and over 57,000 of these positions were filled by demobilized soldiers, most of whom were not originally from Transcaucasia (El'darov 1971, 29-30, 36-37). For instance, in Sumgait's synthetic rubber factory, which commenced operations in 1952, the workforce was 50% Russian, 22% Azeri, and 20% Armenian. As it grew, Sumgait came to host 40 different nationalities (El'darov 1971, 60). Given these dynamics, by 1957, Azerbaijanis constituted merely 35.8% of workers within their own republic – a number that rises to 43.6% of workers if we exclude women (who were only 24.6% of all women workers and only 21.6% of working women) (El'darov 1971, 49, 62–63). Technological upgrades in these years further diminished the number of available positions and increased the skills required to perform successfully in an industrial workplace (El'darov 1971, 8–11, 37–38). Meanwhile, Baku's oil industry underwent massive restructuring after the war. Despite hosting the first offshore drilling platform in the world (the

Baku "Oil Rocks"), Baku ceased to be the leading site for Soviet oil production, serving instead as a premier location for the education and training of oil workers, as well as the manufacture of oil equipment. The best high-tech jobs in the industry moved elsewhere (Hastings 2020, 214-215, 219-220, 225-226, 229; Blau and Rupnik 2018, 162-163).

These changes prompted a serious debate in Azerbaijan over the potential role of rural recruits in industrialization. At the time, industrial leaders preferred to recruit from within urban areas – both because of this population's greater skill and, after 1954, because of pressures to reduce urban unemployment (El'darov 1971, 32–35, 60). For this reason, state-organized labour recruitment (*orgnabor*), which was particularly important in bringing rural labour into urban enterprises prior to 1954, never exceeded 17.5% of the total new workforce. Further, most rural labour recruited in this fashion worked at large-scale new projects, such as the building of Sumgait (a new city), the Mingechaurskaia Hydro-Electric Station, or one of the other new cities and industrial sites founded to diversify and more broadly distribute Azerbaijani industry (El'darov 1971, 10-12; Ismailov 2006, 127-130).

This phenomenon fostered concern among Azerbaijani cultural and government leaders. Azerbaijani journalist and author Mehdi Huseyn reproduced these leaders' debates in fictionalized form in his 1947 production novel, *Absheron*, whose narrative clearly advocated for greater state support – particularly for improved mentorship systems – for village youths seeking to forge industrial careers (Gusein 1968, 8, 15, 73, 104). While Huseyn's novel critiqued widespread urban disdain for "country bumpkins" (Gusein 1968, 8, 50-51), Azerbaijani policymakers sought to address high urban unemployment and crime among Azerbaijanis. To provide a wider range of job opportunities for Azerbaijanis, while fostering greater respect for their language, republican leaders mounted a campaign to further augment the status and use of the Azerbaijani language in many urban cultural and administrative settings, particularly in Baku (Hasanli 2014, 74, 87-140, 425-427).

New Space for Migrant Labour in Urban Areas: Changes in the Distribution of Soviet Industry

Despite the above-discussed failures in labour recruitment (*orgnabor*), major transformations in urban demographics followed within a decade after WWII – not because of a sudden assertion of the Azerbaijani national rights or affirmative action, as Terry Martin called the Soviet policy of indigenizing republican administrations, but because of massive shifts in

the Soviet economy (Martin 2001). In the 1940s, Soviet authorities needed labour in formerly war-torn regions, recruiting Azerbaijanis to work elsewhere in the Soviet Union. By the 1950s, they were recruiting workers for Khrushchev's Virgin Lands Program and the development of Siberia (Ismailov 2006, 128–129). These dynamics, combined with the restructuring of the Soviet oil sector mentioned above, wrought a slight decline in Azerbaijan's Russian population in the 1950s. Minimal growth among Russian and other "European" groups followed until 1970, after which further decline ensued (Kozlov 1988, 91; Rowland 1982, 559, 566).

Demographic data from Baku indicates that rural migration to urban areas began to expand in the 1950s despite automation, limited industrial growth, and industry's lingering preference for non-local specialists. According to population numbers sent from the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet to the equivalent organ of the Soviet Union in preparation for the 1955 elections, Baku's population surged from 724,700 in 1951 to 850,700 in 1955 – a growth of 126,000 individuals in four years (Ismailov 2006, 127). By 1959, the census counted 993,300 people in the Baksoviet area, including areas deemed "rural" but under the Baku administration (*Chislennost' naseleniia* 1959). Growth rates for Kirovabad (Ganja), Mingechaur, and Sumgait together amounted to just 39,000 people in that same four-year period (Ismailov 2006, 127-128). According to historian El'dar Ismailov, the lack of growth in the 1950s rural population, despite its high birth rate, indicates that Azerbaijani urbanization was driven at least in part by rural-urban in-migration (Ismailov 2006, 127-128).

Several factors would have facilitated such rural-urban migration, despite limited industrial jobs and the historic privilege of Russians in hiring. First, Soviet authorities granted passports to inhabitants of border regions in 1953 – in effect, permitting villagers to migrate without permission from rural community leaders. Soviet leaders also legalized worker-initiated change in place of work (Grandstaff 1980, 119). Although Azerbaijanis cities such as Baku and neighboring Sumgait were "regime" (or closed) cities – that is, locations in which residence was limited to those with a "propiska" (resident permit) – workers creatively found ways to circumvent these restrictions (Buckley 1995, 906). What would have assisted them in this was their eagerness to accept low-paid jobs in transport and construction, positions typically not desired by the established urban population (*Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi* 1973, 96, 201, 527).

Baku's in-migration in the 1970s far outpaced that of Tbilisi and Yerevan (French 1979, 78, 81), yet in Azerbaijan from 1950 to 1970, small cities of fewer than 50,000 people grew more quickly and constituted well over half of the urban population (Khorev and Kiseleva 1982, 39). Rural migrants used such small cities and "settlements of an urban type" as

Table 2. Baku's Population by Nationality[1].

Year	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989
Russian	159,491	343,064	223,242	351,090	337,959	295,500
Azerbaijani	118,737	215,482	211,372	586,052	854,386	1,184,160
Armenian	76,656	118,650	137,111	207,464	215,807	179,950
Jew	22,045	31,050	26,623	29,712	26,442	22,826
Tatar	9,239	24,285	10,745	26,379	26,438	24,331
Lezgin	3,708	12,304	6,913	23,650	28,995	38,100
German	6,357	11,638	626	380	645	506
Ukrainian	7,882	10,494	9,168	14,406	15,042	18,311
Georgian	2,558	3,375	2,634	3,283	3,065	2,870
Poles	1,931	1,643	829	891	742	548
Tat	2,980	---	5,396	7,524	8,620	8,438
Talysh	56	516	49	----	----	284
Total	879,192	787,623	642,507	1,265,515	1,533,235	1,794,874

[1] This table combines different Jewish and Tatar populations into single "Jewish" and "Tatar" categories, and it does not label Azerbaijanis as "Turks" in the 1926 census, as per the original. In assessing these population tallies, readers should note that the 1926 count included foreign nationals (over 27,000 of them) and Baku's factory regions, the 1939 census numbers were inflated across the Soviet Union, and the 1959 Baku city count with nationality data excluded the broader metropolitan region, where Azerbaijanis were concentrated. This artificially deflated their numbers. For details on these various census counts, see Schwartz 1986 and Davies 2018.

places to garner skills and pursue education that would enable them to move to a better-paying position, often in a larger urban center (Rybakovskii and Churakov 1978, 96). Data on migration suggests that this was a common strategy: in 1968-1970, 42% of migration *within* Azerbaijan involved inter-city rather than village-to-city mobility (Korovaeva 1976, 248-249, 258). Given that many villages were, in fact, within metropolitan regions, the volume of city-to-city movement was likely around half of all movement (Rybakovskii and Churakov 1978, 94-95).

Conflicts Between Long-Term City Dwellers and Newcomers

For those moving from villages or small provincial cities to Baku, the premier city in terms of political power and cultural privilege, migration required adjustment to a new way of life. Baku was famed for its multinational identity, which had been strongly shaped by Russian colonialism and the intermingling of its three dominant ethnicities: Russian, Azerbaijanis,

and Armenian. In the 1950s to 1960s, a Russian-speaking, multi-ethnic festiveness defined the core districts of Baku (Mamedov 2019, 1013). In his short memoir essay, artist Tair Salakhov flagged the cultural distance between these multiethnic central regions and the more heavily Azerbaijani oil-working districts on the outskirts of Baku, contrasting the privilege of the former to the hard-working atmosphere of the latter (Salakhov 2012, 57). Despite the influx of rural Azerbaijanis in the 1960s, the Russian language remained the city's lingua franca, and many non-Russians in the capital (particularly those in the central part of the capital) gave up their mother tongue. By 1970, 22,400 (4%) of Azerbaijanis and 66,000 (32%) of Armenians spoke Russian as their first language (*Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi* 1973, 265, 269). Little wonder that, to her surprise, future architectural historian Giul'chokhra Mamedova encountered a Russian-speaking city when she moved to Baku from Yerevan in 1970 (Mamedova 2012, 250-251).

But differences went beyond language alone. As in all Soviet cities, long-term city dwellers retained better jobs, posts, and housing (Perevedentsev 1975, 139, 141; Rybakovskii and Churakov 1978, 93, 100-101, 104, 108). Illegal migrants, on the far end of the spectrum of privilege, lacked stable access to housing, education, healthcare, and work (Buckley 1995, 900, 908). Even legal migrants struggled: for instance, technical terminology tended to be Russian, and Azerbaijani-language students therefore often needed assistance in translation, even when not formally obtaining Russian-language education (Bagirzade 2012, 218; Ibragimov 1993, 46-47). Meanwhile, many city youths spurned rural newcomers because of their awkward manners, different clothing, and alternative leisure preferences and value systems (Khorev and Kiseleva 1982, 183; Gasimov 2018, 253; Mirzoev 2012, 406-407). The places where migrants settled were regarded as stagnant, disordered sites (Roth 2020, 51). Fitting in could involve costs, too: upon arriving in Baku, for instance, Sakit Mamedov pursued the purchase of jeans, a new jacket, suit, and the pursuit of a Finnish Tiklas coat – all things perceived to have a "Bakuvian" flare (Mamedov 2012, 188-189). Integration was further complicated by the workplace, which played an important role in migrants' adaptation to city life; for obvious reasons, migrants' workplaces were relatively marginal, less desired, and separated from elite culture, though even here newcomers would have been exposed to a more diverse and Russian-speaking urban milieu (Khorev and Kiseleva 1982, 194).

Impressions of Leaving the Village

Despite these challenges, many villagers successfully made the transition to the city, including to Baku. Their relocation did not transform the

agricultural policies and administrative principles under which villagers suffered, even though, in the mid-1960s, Soviet authorities altered rural agricultural policy with an eye to stemming the outflow of rural citizens (Zaslavskaia and Korel 1984, 232). Still, city living standards remained superior, and migrants to the city joined a mobile population – one seeking both geographic and socio-economic mobility; by contrast, rural communities remained immobile, and the large-scale and largely male departure from the village left behind a disproportionate number of women (Rybakovskii and Churakov 1978, 96; Khorev and Kiseleva 1982, 124). Meanwhile, despite the loss of the best and most fit young men, rural farm managers did not reduce the area under tillage, the use of harmful fertilizers, or the extent of environmental damage. Instead, as the following interviews with successful migrants show, young people left their hometowns and opted against providing financial support to those who remained in the village. They focused their efforts on assisting relatives who sought to relocate to cities.

To test the sentiments toward this village and the goals of migrants (an understudied subject, even in the Soviet period), Dr. Mammadova conducted interviews with adults who migrated to Baku before the demise of the Soviet Union. Dr. Mammadova chose subjects randomly from among individuals met on Baku Boulevard while playing backgammon or sitting on park benches. She also approached neighbors and individuals in Ganja, Shamkir, and Gazakh during trips to these regions in the summer. By these methods, from 2018 to 2022, she conducted interviews with 80 male (N=80) respondents who were born between 1935-1945 – a sample reflecting how seldom women were permitted by parents to leave their villages and move to cities. Most of the interviews (seventy) were conducted in Baku, while the remaining ten were conducted in Ganja, Shamkir, and Gazakh.

Out of the total number of respondents (eighty), 75% (sixty) had special vocational education while the remaining 25% (twenty) had a university degree. Almost all of them left their homes due to the high level of unemployment and lack of normal wages. However, a few respondents born in the 1940s indicated that they left the village to obtain higher education and access a better social life, including – in their words – "running water, modern bathrooms, passable roads, cinema clubs," and "what they saw on screen." Ten respondents were raised in orphanages and had no connection with their relatives after reaching adulthood, and they therefore decided to stay in the cities where they grew up. One of the respondents stated that his family was forced to leave the village due to bullying from fellow villagers.

All the respondents confirmed that, while they did not provide financial assistance to relatives who remained in the village, they did provide all possible support to help their family members and relatives relocate to

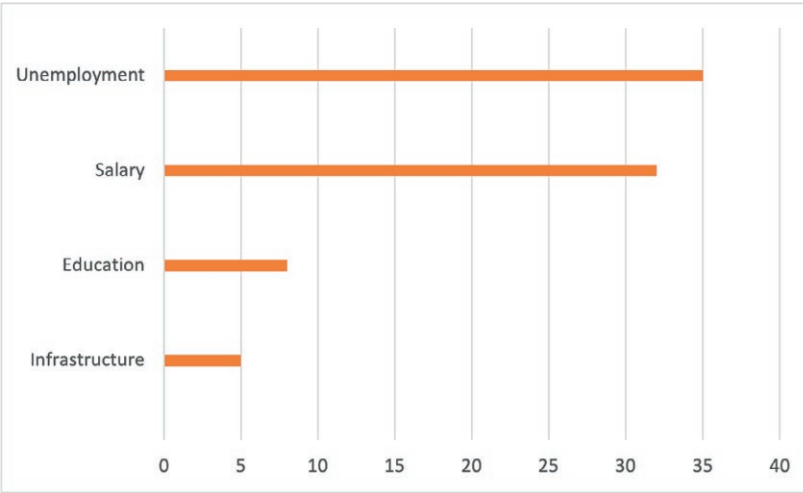

Figure 1. Reasons for Rural Out-Migration in the 1950s-60s.

the cities. Initially, they provided housing and helped them find suitable jobs, and sometimes even supported them financially so that their siblings could pursue higher education. The respondents admitted that they primarily helped the male members of the family; however, if a sister was unable to get married on time or continue her studies, they would assist her in moving to the city as well. A group of respondents (n=37) formed families by marrying women they met in the cities. However, during the 1950s, a considerable number of respondents (n=43) chose to marry either relatives or fellow villagers. Three of the respondents were married to representatives of a different nationality.

The respondents believed that leaving their village was the right decision since, even by the late 1980s, the regions had only undergone minor infrastructure changes. Though good stone houses began to emerge in the villages in the mid-1960s, issues with a shortage of water, gas, and electricity supply, road, transportation, and schooling persisted. Thirty-one respondents stated that the knowledge that they obtained from their rural school was useful and allowed them to obtain professional classification. However, the majority noted the shortage of professional schoolteachers and opportunities for practical training in rural schools, which led to a deficiency in their level of knowledge and limited their options during and after migration to the city.

Meanwhile, village leaders poorly adapted to the changing demographic situation. The annual reports of Soviet enterprises in Azerbaijani villages show that despite a significant outflow of men from rural areas and

labour shortages in the 1950s and 60s, there was no reduction in the cultivated area or in damage to the environment. In fact, from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s, the cultivated area increased by 243 thousand hectares, reaching a total of 1,310,000 hectares (*Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR* 1971, 291). To compensate for a shortage of agricultural labour, officials mobilized educational staff, the staff of medical institutions, students, and even schoolchildren to work in the fields. The rural population regarded this as the exploitation of child labour and a violation of their rights. Village residents sent letters of complaint to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, complaining that their children only attended school for six months, whereas the academic year was nine months long. The peasant children were required to work in cotton fields during the fall and in orchards during the spring (ARPİİİSSA, coll. 1, folder 52, file 118, p. 8).

Conclusion

The migration of Azerbaijanis from rural to urban areas during the post-Stalin period was prompted by the socio-economic marginalization of the Azerbaijani countryside and further enabled by changes in the distribution of industry and opportunity across the Soviet Union. The Soviet government's conflicting agrarian policies alienated villagers, while producing a long-term cultural, income, and value divide between rural and urban communities. Migrants seeking urban opportunities found themselves struggling to overcome their lesser education and lack of urban know-how and Russian-language knowledge, and their departure emptied the village of many of its best young male workers. The migration of the younger generation from the village widened the gap between those who stayed (the old) and those who left (the young), resulting in a more culturally conservative village. For every male who left for the city, there was an unsettled female fate, trapped in a strongly patriarchal rural space. Child labour replaced the work of the grown men who left. Migration was a complex process that generated dramatic social and cultural change in both city and village, resulting in hardship and alienation for many migrants and for the communities that they left behind.

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The Breakup of Civil Society in Post–War Azerbaijan

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Abstract. In the backdrop of devastating war(s) between Armenia and Azerbaijan, rising authoritarianism in the country and the shrinking space for civic participation, Azerbaijan's civil society has undergone various moments of contestation and transformation. In this article, we argue that the 2020 Karabakh war was one of those moments – a turning point which led to the rupture, if not breakup, of civil society from within. Most of the civil society strongly supported the war, exceptionally aligning itself with the autocratic government. A minority – made up of liberals, leftists and feminists – opposed the war, becoming stigmatised as "traitors" by society and the government alike. We argue that the 2020 Karabakh war catalysed disagreements within the civil society regarding its identity, normative role and positionality vis-à-vis the state, eventually leading to its fragmentation into mutually isolated circles. No scholarly article has yet analysed in depth these post–2020 developments of Azerbaijani civil society. The article is based on semi-structured interviews collected from forty-three anti-war activists. Notably, we find that "no–war" civil society actors began to view the pro-war actors as less legitimate, if not illegitimate, members of the society. Having (in)directly supported the autocratic regime and further autocratisation, they failed to play their role *qua* civil society as counterbalance to the state. We conclude by discussing government's recent reaction to these developments, especially in light of the ongoing peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Keywords: civil society, Azerbaijan, autocratisation, war, anti-war.

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Introduction

Azerbaijan's defeat against Armenia in the 1988–1994 first Karabakh war left a deep imprint of national humiliation (Sotieva 2021; Kösen and Erdoğan 2023; Musavi 2024), fostering a psychology of defeat (Ergun 2022). This shared experience of suffering, marked by the traumatic loss, struggles of displacement and perceived unjust occupation of Azerbaijan's *de jure* territories (Samadov 2023), became a unifying force for the Azerbaijani national identity. Armenians were increasingly essentialized in popular discourse with "enemy" images, and depicted as "evil, cunning, and non–negotiable" adversaries (Samadov and Grigoryan 2022, 102). After the first Karabakh war, Azerbaijani government(s) gradually institutionalized these "essentialist and ethnonationalist" conflict narratives – framed by an ethnic-turkic understanding of nationhood and its enemies – rendering them hegemonic throughout society (Gamaghelyan and Huseynova 2024, 269).[1] For example, official government rhetoric became confrontational and dehumanizing toward Armenians (Sahakyan 2023), mass media perpetrated narratives of victimhood and incomplete sovereignty without Karabakh (Rumyantsev 2019), school textbooks portrayed Armenians as historical and existential enemies of the Azerbaijani nation (Abbasov and Rumyantsev 2012; Ghazaryan and M. Huseynli 2022; Akhundov 2025; Georges 2025); and even cultural products – such as films and poetry – dehumanized the "enemy" (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021; Aslanov and Abbasov 2023).

Nonetheless, civil-society driven peace-building initiatives – which sought to foster more reconciliatory narratives and solutions to the conflict – did take place. Professionalised and liberal NGO actors believed that peace could be achieved through democratization. They sought to promote liberal–democratic norms and values, which in turn would help achieve a diplomatic settlement of the Karabakh issue (Gamaghelyan and Huseynova 2024).

However, when in September 2020 the Azerbaijani government launched the second Karabakh war, many from Azerbaijani opposition and civil society – including those who had previously been involved in peace-building efforts – fervently supported the government and its military offensive. It can be argued that these individuals had been caught in the very "essentialist and ethnonationalist" narratives of the conflict they once opposed. This had significant consequences for political contestation

[1] Gamaghelyan and Huseynova (2024) argue that conflict narratives in Armenia too – at least until Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan changed his rhetoric following the 2020 second Karabakh war – could be described as "essentialist and ethnonationalist". However, given the limited space at our disposal, we focus exclusively on Azerbaijan in this article.

within Azerbaijan. Indeed, as Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev (2021, 12) argue, by supporting the war "civil society contributed to the creation of a new source and reserve of legitimacy for authoritarianism".

Nonetheless, a small minority of civil society actors – primarily independent activists unaffiliated with any institutions – openly expressed their anti–war stance on social media (Pfeilschifter and Figari Barberis 2023; Gamaghelyan and Huseynova 2024). As will be discussed in this paper, many of these anti-war activists held strong political-ideological positions and could be categorised into three main groups: feminists; liberals; and leftists (Huseynli 2021a). Notwithstanding their differences, they were collectively recognized as the "no-war movement". Because of their anti-war positions, they faced enormous societal stigmatization, being labelled as 'traitors to the homeland' (vətən xainilər) and 'Armenian lovers' (ermənipərəstlər) (Pfeilschifter and Figari Barberis 2023; Figari Barberis and Huseynli 2025)). Even pro-war civil society members condemned them for their anti-war positions, deepening ruptures within civil society itself.

The 2020 second Karabakh war ultimately marked a turning point for Azerbaijani civil society, reshaping their identities and normative positions. More than four years after the war's end, this anti-war positionality remains relevant, at least for part of civil society and the government. Such that, the government continues to repress and publicly stigmatize as "traitors" and "foreign agents" these anti-war activists, who are pejoratively referred to by the media as "ultra–liberals, radical leftists and radical feminists".[2]

This article, thus, explores the internal ruptures, if not outright breakup, of Azerbaijani civil society during and after the second Karabakh war. It does so within the context of "shrinking" or "closing" space for civil society and democratic forces in the country, as government surveillance and crackdowns continue to operate (Luciani 2023; Kamilsoy 2023, 2025; Balfour et al. 2020; Toepler et al. 2020; Sander 2023). Methodologically, it is based on interviews conducted between 2021-2024 with forty-three anti-war civil society actors. The article tends to analyse the latter developments through the prism of our no–war interviewees' ideological landscape and their normative assessment regarding the purpose of what constitutes "genuine" civil society in authoritarian countries.

There has been several studies unpacking challenges and activities of Azerbaijani civil society actors in the pre-2020 era (Shirinov 2015; Ismayil

[2] See, e.g., "Hrach Topalyanın Bakıda ""no war"çı fabriki" – FAKTLAR". *APA*, January 22, 2025. https://apa.az/iii-sektor/hrach-topalyanin-bakida-no-warci-fabriki-faktlar-885621?fbclid=PAY2xjawH9-9lleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABpmuVJwdxRxMi-VAGe9_ymHlGNH16oIHC7j0CqMZXLdqsoiD-FQ70HQO_dfQ_aem_wPWZjNsTxRPL6mi1HhwvrA. Accessed on January 26, 2025.

and Remezaite 2016; Goyushov and Huseynli 2019; Luciani 2023; Kamilsoy 2023). Nevertheless, little is known about Azerbaijani civil society in its post-war epoch. Indeed, Luciani (2023, 1739) concludes her research by emphasizing a limitation of her analysis, as "it did not take into account developments unfolding during and after the second Karabakh war, though civil society identities shifted significantly over that period". Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev (2021) and Gamaghelyan and Huseynova (2024) do notice that the majority of Azerbaijan's civil society supported the war in 2020, but do not analyse this dynamic any further. Therefore, our article – based on interviews conducted between 2021–2024 with forty-three anti-war civil society interviewees – is novel for its analysis of Azerbaijani civil society's internal ruptures, if not breakup, during and after the 2020 second Karabakh war. We contribute to the Caucasus Studies scholarship by filling this empirical gap.

The article's structure is as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical debate concerning the conceptualization and normative role of civil society. Then we discuss the developments of Azerbaijani civil society in the pre-2020 period. This is followed by the section outlining the methods and sample we used to design our research. Afterwards, in the empirical section of the article, we unpack and analyse Azerbaijani civil society's internal crisis in the backdrop of the 2020 second Karabakh war. We especially explain the rupture along the pro-war and no-war cleavages. Finally, we discuss how the post–war new identities of civil society keep being relevant as we write in 2025, both for intra-civil society debates and the government's propaganda against no-war actors.

Civil Society and Its Role

The idea of civil society has proven very elusive, escaping conceptual grasps and evading sure-footed definitions. Nonetheless, civil society is generally understood as a network of organizations operating between the state, the individual, and the economic production system (Kopecký and Mudde 2003). It serves as a space for voluntary citizen self-organization, distinct from both the government and the market, while maintaining a degree of relative autonomy from the state (Young 2000). Within these "free zones" or spaces, individuals collaborate in various informal associations, fostering horizontal networks of communication and solidarity from below (Spasić 2003; Chandhoke 2007, 609–10).

Scholarly debates persist over whether civil society plays or should play a *normative role*, by (in)directly promoting "good" norms and values – such as democracy, justice, tolerance and trust. This scholarly posi-

tion, known as *Neo–Tocquevillian* approach, argues that the promotion of "good" values serves as a democratic counterbalance to state power (Pishchikova and Izzi 2011). To use Booth and Richard's *dictum* (1998, 780), "civil society may contribute to democratization by mediating between citizen and state, conveying citizens' interests to government, constraining government behaviour by stimulating citizen activism, and inculcating democratic values".

Conversely, the scholarly position known as *Gramscian* approach, rejects the assumption that civil society must serve a normative role. Rather than viewing it as a democratic counterbalance to state power, this approach views civil society as an area of ideological contestation and hegemonic struggle, where ideological conflicts unfold (Lewis 2001; Chandhoke 2007; Shirinov 2015). Civil society, thus, encompasses a broad range of organizations and groups which may not only resist, but also reinforce and legitimise the existing order – even if autocratic and illiberal (Lewis 2013). This is particularly relevant in autocratic states, where "principled" civil society actively opposes the state, while "pragmatic" civil society remains neutral or even collaborates with the state to ensure its survival (Stuvøy 2020). Authoritarian governments can constrain civil society's ability to articulate anti-hegemonic narratives, while simultaneously supporting those civil society organizations that reinforce the legitimacy of the state (Lewis 2013). Moreover, in conflict afflicted countries, civil society can fuel conflict, sustain the status quo or work to promote peace (Marchetti and Tocci 2009)

For our article on Azerbaijan, drawing on Shirinov (2015) and Luciani (2023)'s analyses, we define civil society as an area of hegemonic struggle. We thus make no *a priori* distinction between "principled" (or "genuine") and "pragmatic" (or "co-opted") civil society. Indeed, especially after the Azerbaijani government's crackdown of 2014, various civil society actors have been supportive of government policies and initiatives in both domestic and foreign affairs. This includes GONGOs, co-opted intelligentsia and think tanks, but also moderate and extreme nationalist groups (Goyushov 2021; F. Barberis 2024; Storm 2024). Nonetheless, it is important to note that after the 2014 crackdown, a distinct cleavage was formed between *independent* and *neutral/pro-government* civil society, as the independent side tended to perceive itself as more genuine civil society (Luciani 2023, 1733). Beyond the conceptual disagreements of the academic scholarship, post–2014 Azerbaijani civil society itself was engaged in internal debates about its normative role and position vis-à-vis the state. And the 2020 second Karabakh war would become another turning point for intra–civil society debates about their identity and role *qua* civil society.

Background History of Civil Society in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani civil society emerged as a driving force after serious seatbacks of the traditional opposition political parties in the 2003 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections. Civil society started organizing itself as the new opposition, made of independent youth organizations, student networks and intellectual circles led by young political entrepreneurs, political activists, writers and many diverse groups. Many of them operated through horizontal associations and informal networks, in contrast to more traditional and formal NGOs structures (Altstadt 2017; Goyushov and Huseynli 2019). However, most of early Azerbaijani civil society was organized in formal NGOs. An estimated 150–200 NGOs worked on politically sensitive topics, such as citizens' rights, gender equality, election observation and media freedom (Gahramanova 2009; Namazov 2021). Azerbaijani NGOs were also heavily reliant on western financial support, with over 90% of their funding coming from abroad (Kamilsoy 2023). This structure inevitably resulted in excessive bureaucratization and top-down imposition of agendas by western donors (Gamaghelyan and Huseynova 2024). Peace–building initiatives were also mainly organized and led by the institutionalized, somewhat elitist NGO professionals (Gamaghelyan and Huseynova 2024, Gadimova-Akbulut and Petrosyan 2024). These liberal peacebuilders believed that achieving peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan required a process of liberal democratization.

Overall, many informal movements and formal NGOs became essential supporters of freedom, democratic values and justice in Azerbaijan. They *de facto* acted as a counterbalance to the state and as normative promoters of "good" values and norms. However, in the backdrop of increasing youth activism on the one hand, and sharp decline of oil prices in global markets on the other, the Azerbaijani government decided to launch unprecedented crackdown and large-scale repressions against the civil society in 2013–14. New regulations against NGOs were also introduced, including tougher registration and financial reporting requirements, which made obtaining donations from abroad extremely complicated. In addition to governmental repression and illiberal regulations, the mediatic apparatus also stigmatized oppositional figures as "fifth columns" (Pearce 2024, 4). This became a turning point for youth movements and NGOs alike. The mass arrests pushed many to continue their activism from exile, while remaining actors were confronted with strategic conundrum concerning how to move ahead (Kamilsoy 2023).

Nonetheless, new youth movements (e.g. "Democracy–18", "EcoFront" environmentalists, "Tələbə Tələbi" student movement, "İşçi Masası" trade union, "FEMM Project" feminist movement etc.) continued to emerge in

the post-crackdown period (Figari Barberis and Mammadli 2024). In contrast to the pre-2014 civil society groups which were marked by their ideological shortcomings, the post–2014 period saw the gradual formation of more ideologically-politically radical civil society groups (Kornsten and Kobzeva 2023). Due to strict regulations imposed on NGOs after 2014, these new groups were less formal and less institutionalized than their predecessors. They preferred unstructured, non-hierarchical modes of association, and could not solely rely on foreign donors (Kamilsoy 2023). This situation – known as "shrinking" space for the civil society (Balfour et al. 2020; Toepler et al. 2020; Sander 2023; Luciani 2023, 1721) – reflects Azerbaijan's "deepening authoritarianism" (Delcour and Wolczuk 2021, 12). The post-2014 period also saw the increasing emergence of GONGOs and co-optation by the government, which tried to legitimize itself by moulding the civil arena (Alieva and Aslanov 2018; Goyushov and Huseynli 2019; Huseynli 2021b; Figari Barberis 2024).

Despite the weakened position of liberal civil society organizations following the 2014 crackdown, they continued their normative role by promoting progressive values and norms – such as freedom, democracy, civil rights and gender equality. This normative aspect, however, would be questioned during the 2020 Karabakh war, as most of civil society passionately supported President Aliyev's military actions and war discourse. As mentioned in the introduction, this support contributed to "the creation of a new source and reserve of legitimacy for authoritarianism" (Gamaghelyan and Rumyantsev 2021, 12). The second Karabakh war would thus, like the 2014 crackdown, act as another turning point of contestation and transformation within Azerbaijani civil society. New identities were formed – such as being "no war" – and anti-war actors articulated their own (new) vision of what "genuine" civil society is or should be.

Methodology

The analysis draws upon forty–three semi–structured interviews with "no war" civil society actors. The first people to be interviewed were identified through social media, as many individuals openly expressed their anti–war stance online. Through snowball sampling, less publicly outspoken "no war" individuals were contacted. Thus, the sample includes both outspoken and more cautious (or self-censoring) "no war" civil society actors. In terms of political–ideological affiliation, our interviewees self-categorized as: *leftists*, *liberals*, and *feminists*. These political-ideological groupings were not internally homogenous. The "leftist" group, for example, ranged from progressives to communists. Nonetheless, these three

self-categorizations were recognized as relevant and valid by interviewees themselves. Ten interviewees described themselves as politically non–aligned to any specific ideology. The age of our interviewees ranged from eighteen to sixty, with most being between twenty and thirty-five. As for the gender, the sample is composed of fourteen females, twenty-six males and three non-binary persons.

Interviews were conducted between November 2021 and March 2024, though most were conducted in the year 2022. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani while the remaining thirty in English. Almost all interviews were conducted in one-on-one settings, although two were conducted in group settings at the discretion of participants. Twelve of the interviews were conducted online, while the remaining thirty-one in person in Azerbaijan. The average length of the interviews was forty–five minutes. The semi–structured interviews were designed and conducted by the first author whose research covers civil society activism in Azerbaijan. The discussions addressed both the individual's perception of wars *per se*, and their own positionality in Azerbaijani civil society with regards to the second Karabakh war. The second author complemented with theoretical, contextual and analytical insights due to his positionality as an insider to civil society dynamics. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the repressive character of the Azerbaijani government, interviews were fully anonymized. Therefore, the second author had access solely to fully anonymized and selected extracts of the interviews.

A limitation to the research was focusing solely on the "no war" camp. This constrains the empirical data as the perspectives of the "pro-war" camp are overlooked. Another limitation may also be interviewees' social desirability bias to appear as "genuine" civil society to a European researcher. Nonetheless, even with these limitations, the research offers valuable insights into the breaking up of Azerbaijani civil society seen from the perspective of the "no war" camp.

Empirical Analysis

The Breakup

When the war started in September 2020, many of our interviewees expected it to be akin to the so-called 2016 four-day war, a conflict of relatively small proportions in terms of casualties and duration. However, as the fighting persisted, it became manifest to all interviewees that this was, in fact, "a real war". It was mostly at this point that many individuals of civil society began expressing their position on the war more openly. The

Figure 1. The "no war" logo created by some members of the antiwar campaign. This logo became the main symbol of the antiwar camp. Protest photo accompanying the *Anti-War Statement of Azerbaijani Leftist Youth*, originally published in *LeftEast* (2022). Source: https://lefteast.org/anti-war-statement-of-azerbaijani-leftist-youth/.

articulation of the antiwar position took various forms, from individual posts on social media to collective antiwar statements. For example, in late September a group of seventeen Azerbaijani leftists signed a "no war" manifesto, while in early October other civil society actors published and signed a peace statement calling for the cessation of hostilities. Additionally, members of the anti-war camp designed a new "no war" logo, shown below, specifically for the occasion (Figure 1).

But as the antiwar positions were voiced by only a fringe minority of Azerbaijani civil society, the majority openly expressed the pro-war positions. Thus, many of our interviewees expressed shock and disbelief upon realizing that friends, colleagues and many in the civil society were staunchly supporting the war. This reaction was driven, on the one hand, from the incoherence between the political-ideological belonging of certain civil society actors and their pro-war position. On the other hand, from normative expectations that civil society should serve as a counterbalance to the state and promote liberal-progressive values.

The first case relates especially to pro-war civil society actors who also belonged to certain political-ideological groups. For example, held assumption by the no-war leftists was that their ideological belonging would have refrained them from supporting *this* war effort. While our leftists interviewees did not *a priori* exclude the need for a war under certain circumstances, such as a class war against injustice, they firmly condemned this particular one for: being a capitalist war that instrumentalized nationalism; serving the interests of the autocratic Azerbaijani ruling

elites and imperialist Russia against the real interests of the masses; and that would reinforce, if not perpetuate, further injustice without solving the root causes of the conflict. To exemplify through the words of an interviewee, "This war between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, this ethnic war, was indeed also a bourgeois war. One bourgeois force against another [...] The class war, on the other hand, has as objective the end of all wars, so the class war is the last of wars" (interviewee Y, leftist). Similarly, liberal interviewees did not aprioristically oppose war, but opposed this specific war as it: relied on forced conscription; was not a "just war" since it would gravely violate the rights of Karabakh Armenians; and had been launched in an authoritarian context absent of popular deliberation. In contrast, our feminist interviewees tended to oppose *all* wars, especially on humanitarian grounds, and because wars reinforced patriarchy and gendered norms. Nonetheless, some leftist and liberal members of civil society did support the war, which left many of our interviewees in disbelief, since they perceived this stance as ideologically contradictory. The sense of disbelief can be captured through the words of two interviewees:

> There were a few leftists supporting the war. They said that the war would remove injustice [...] But I don't think this is the case. This war was not about injustice... Opposition had shrunk to such an extent that even people from our side [communists] supported Aliyev. Could you have imagined in Italy communists supporting Mussolini?! (interviewee Z, leftist).

> Vegans and eco-activists, like Fuad [pseudonym], were absurd for being pro–war. Ideologically they cannot be pro-war! I am angry at the government and ordinary people, but I am especially angry at civil society. Because they had responsibility, but [they] were pro-war! (interviewee X, feminist).

The second case relates to to normative expectation regarding the very purpose of civil society *per se*. In a neo-Tocquevillian way, it binds a sense of responsibility to civil society as a democratizing force. As discussed in earlier paragraphs, with post-independent Azerbaijan having been ruled under a consolidated authoritarian regime for more than two decades, civil society has, indeed, been historically formed as a democratizing force in the country, and as "watchdogs" of good governance (Goyushov and Huseynli 2019; Kamilsoy 2025, 8). Hence, many of our interviewees expressed a sense of disbelief and shock with regards to various civil society individuals and actors aligning with a war effort launched by the authoritarian government, as it was seen as reinforcing the current president's reign, leading to further autocratisation. Many interviewees feared that President Aliyev would have exploited the war to his advantage, by gaining increased popularity through victory. Supporting the war, there-

fore, was equivalent to (in)directly contributing to the further autocratisation of the country and tightening of his hold on power. And since civil society is expected to function as a counterbalance to the (authoritarian) state, this (in)direct support to the regime was perceived as irreconcilable with their role *qua* civil society. This concern was widely shared by leftists, feminists and liberals alike. Ex-post, their fears about increased autocratisation because of war would prove to be true. This sense of fear and disbelief are exemplified in the words of two of our respondents:

> I had friends and acquaintances in the civil society, but many of them became militaristic [...] They thought that after victory, Azerbaijan could have democratized. Us No-War people, on the other hand, knew that this war and victory would make Aliyev even stronger. And we were right! (interviewee F, liberal).

> The president simply used the war to be perceived as amazing. People criticized me, but I told them: how can you not see what Aliyev gains from the war?! Even people in opposition started talking about how amazing the president is! I was shocked, I could not believe my eyes. (interviewee V, feminist).

Beyond their disbelief for (the majority of) civil society's support for the war, many interviewees expressed even greater disappointment toward prominent civil society figures. Names of opposition figures and activists like Khadija Ismayilova, Tofig Yagublu and Ilgar Mammadov were frequently repeated during our interviews. These public figures had been seen as role models for their investigative journalism, political activism, and political opposition respectively. All three had already served political arrests, for sentences based on arbitrary charges, either due to their political advocacy or their stance against the autocratic rule. Ismaliyova as one of the few middle-aged women in a patriarchal society like Azerbaijan venturing into investigative journalism against such a repressive government, had been heralded as a symbolic role model by some female interviewees. As spearheads of civil society, according to many of our interviewees, these figures shared a larger responsibility in taking a righteous position, if not action, vis-à-vis the authoritarian government. Since the war would have inevitably reinforced the regime, it was their ethical duty to stand up against the war and the regime. Despite the expectations, all three of the public figures were straightforward in their pro-war positions. Ismayilova even voiced utter solidarity with the president by saying "We [the president and her] are in solidarity" during the 2020 war, a position that sparked a heated debate on social media.[3] This sense of disbelief and

[3] Full statement written by Khadija Ismayilova on Facebook: "I don't know if he (President Aliyev) is in solidarity with me, or if I am with him, but we are in solidarity". Original:

disappointment with prominent civil society members, such as Ismayilova, can be captured through one of our interviewees:

> I was super disappointed by Khadija. As a woman, she was, for me, a symbol of courage and bravery. She was a strong female voice challenging the patriarchy and the autocracy... But she shared [on social media] a photo of Aliyev! [...] I look at her now differently. She lost respect also from other people. So many people showed their true colours, that they are full of hatred. (interviewee U, feminist).

The results of our interviews also reveal that ruptures within the civil society led to many of our interviewees breaking ties with friends, acquaintances and alike. The breakup occurred in both directions, while in some cases our interviewees initiated them, in others, it was the pro–war individuals who distanced themselves. For both camps (pro-war and anti-war) each position was simply deemed unacceptable. Some of our interviewees were even branded as "traitors to the homeland" (vətən xaini) by their friends or acquaintances for their anti-war position. This breakup seems to have particularly affected the leftist and feminist political–ideological groupings, while it was less so in the case of the liberals. Despite some ties being eventually restored in later periods, the interviews demonstrate that the war marked a turning point for civil society, where even close friendship ties were severed owing to irreconcilable positions vis-à-vis the war.

Breakups Within the Breakup

Aside from the general rupture of Azerbaijani civil society along no-war/pro-war lines, we also observed cleavages within the no–war camp. Indeed, the no–war camp was by no means a united movement with some form of leadership Far from this, some interviewees emphasized the political-ideological variety within the no-war movement. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the latter included individuals from mainly three political-ideological groupings – leftists, liberals, and feminists – which didn't necessarily get along well.

But besides from internal ideological diversity, two forms of self-criticism emerged within the no-war camp. The first one was related to the perceived disinterest towards Azerbaijani IDPs from Karabakh. As per one of our interviewees, "I also started self–distancing from the no-war movement [...] And I'm not sure if they cared about, for instance, the trauma of

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"Bilmirəm, o mənlə həmrəydir, ya mən onunla, amma həmrəyik". https://www.facebook.com/khadija.ismayil/posts/pfbid031Yfyh993rZCERJC9DJgKAFMXXyvmHDZeZDN2EHyyXomzJPm2xWrsusxejTueH7sql. Accessed on February 09, 2025.

internally displaced persons. "No war" rather became a figure or discourse in whose name many conducted their activism . While people were literally dying in the war. I don't think this was ethical" (interviewee T, leftist). This criticism was further articulated by a few interviewees who voiced discontent against certain no-war activists for their self-centred indulgence, if not for self-proclaimed righteous opposition to authoritarian rule. This indulgence, according to some critical interviewees, was also evident in the fact that some anti-war activists focused their advocacy primarily on western audiences, while neglecting their own domestic society. In other cases, marginalized activists found refuge in safe bubbles, which, in return, generated a sense of condescension vis-à-vis the "ignorant" Azerbaijani mass. The no-war bubbles, according to internal critiques, should have moderated their radical positionality when engaging with ordinary people, particularly Azerbaijani IDPs who were certainly the real victims (rather than marginalized anti-war activists).

The second form of self-criticism revolved around civil society's failures in properly addressing the Karabakh conflict, let alone coming up with viable solutions. In fact, many of our interviewees acknowledged that they had never publicly articulated workable diplomatic solutions to the Karabakh conflict. In the words of one of our interviewees: "People who joined the "no war" party, previously had no good alternative for solving the NK issue. We didn't talk about this issue so much [...] We said that our main objective was democracy and human rights, we'll talk about Karabakh later" (interviewee J, liberal). On the one hand, they did not believe in a diplomatic solution, since both the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments were conducting talks in closed doors. On the other hand, the Karabakh conflict was not civil society's priority, since issues of democracy, civil rights and equality took precedence over it. The assumption, especially held by liberals, was that it would have been possible to reach a diplomatic and peaceful solution over Karabakh only once Azerbaijan (and Armenia) had democratized. Therefore, civil society had to focus on normatively promoting progressive values and norms – such as democracy and civil rights. This prioritisation of progressive values over finding solutions to the Karabakh conflict can be exemplified by another of our interviewees: "Civil society was saying that the government is using the Karabakh topic to manipulate people, so we should not talk about that. Let's talk about human rights because we have much bigger problems like democracy. That is how we totally put aside the Karabakh issue" (interviewee K, liberal).[4]

[4] Notwithstanding this second form of self-criticism over civil society's lack of interest in finding a solution to the Karabakh issue, peace-building activities between Azerbaijanis and Armenians did take place prior to 2020. However, they mainly operated within the closed-

Conclusion

To conclude, our analysis – generated from semi–structured interviews with forty-three anti–war Azerbaijani civil society actors – substantiates how the 2020 Karabakh war was yet another turning point for Azerbaijani civil society. It created new identities – that of "no war" – as well as new internal cleavages and breakups. Compared to post-2014 civil society, however, post-2020 civil society underwent a greater wave of fragmentation, if not outright atomization, from within. This fragmentation was conditioned chiefly upon two factors. First, civil society's political action which was expected to correspond to their political-ideological positions. Especially for leftist and feminists, the pro-war positions of much of civil society contradicted their stated political ideologies. Second, the expectations about the normative role that civil society actors – as a democratizing force and counterbalance to the state – were supposed to play but failed to do so. These failures are exemplified not only by the pro-war stance of civil society individuals – which *de facto* legitimized the autocratic government – but also by the co-optation and even U–turn of some civil society actors, who after the war aligned themselves with the government's political discourse. Five years after the 2020 Karabakh war and the breakup of Azerbaijani civil society, heated debates over who constitutes "genuine" civil society continue to persist.

Discussion

Even though anti-war activism may be regarded as a thing of the past by some of the remaining civil society, the Azerbaijani government appears not to have forgotten it. The post-2020 period proceeded with even increased government surveillance and crackdowns. Events of the last years demonstrated that the government utilized the anti-war identity to delegitimize these ideological groupings through a smear campaign aimed at the Azerbaijani public (Meydan TV 2023). The smear campaign became most apparent in 2023 when the government-sponsored media outlets singled out participants of a public discussion on peace in the region (Yeni Musavat 2023). The government-sponsored media especially resorts to public stigmatization by branding civil society activists as "traitors" and "foreign agents" or using pejorative epithets such as "ultra-liber-

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doors confines of professionalized and elitist NGO structures, with donor-dependent seasonal projects, which arguably stripped them of their local agency (Gadimova-Akbulut and Petrosyan 2024).

als, radical leftists and radical feminists" (APA 2025). Between 2024-2025, as part of a larger crackdown against critical voices, the government even arrested civil society members engaged in peace dialogues with Armenians (Amnesty International 2024; Voice of America 2024a, 2024b; Baku Tv 2024). Participating in independent peace talks with Armenians can now cost 15 years of jail under the charge of "treason" (UNHR 2025). In bitter irony, as official peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan develop, it is mostly government affiliated organisations that are now conducting peace talks with Armenians counterparts.

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Becoming a Memory Activist: The Encounters with the Documents at the KGB MIA Archive in Tbilisi, Georgia[1]

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Abstract. This article explores the transformative process of becoming a memory activist in Tbilisi, Georgia, through the case of Ms. Nestan, who first encountered archival documents related to her great-uncle's arrest and death during the so-called "Great Terror" (1936–38) in 2018. Her engagement with these formerly classified KGB records emerged amidst the authoritarian turn of the Georgian Dream government, prompting a profound shift in her perception of the past and its implications for the future. This article examines how reading these documents through a post-socialist lens generated an urgent need for action, as Ms. Nestan sought to prevent a return to a coercive and violent past akin to what her family endured. Building on this individual trajectory, the paper further investigates how archival materials serve as catalysts for memory activism, shaping both personal and collective engagements with the past and the future. By tracing Ms. Nestan's journey from archival discovery to activism, this study sheds light on the broader implications of memory activism in post-Soviet Georgia, contributing to ongoing discussions on the role of memory activism in shaping collective remembrance and political agency in contexts of authoritarian resurgence.

Keywords: Epistemic anxiety, memory activism, archival research, Georgia.

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Introduction

Ms. Nestan's eyes were wide open as she went through the documents regarding the arrest and death of her great-uncle, Vladimir, at the former KGB archive - now the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) archive – at the State Police in Tbilisi.[2]

> My family was told by members of the Soviet secret police that Vladimir had died of liver inflammation in 1943 in the place where he was deported. And instead, he was not deported at all! He was shot in Tbilisi on the 26th of December 1937, only five months after his arrest! Look at how they used to lie to everybody!

She whispered to me in an indignant and surprised tone. That day, we were at the KGB archive together after she had learned just a few days earlier that she could access Vladimir's file for the first time.

For many families in Georgia and other post-Soviet countries, discovering KGB documents about relatives decades after their arrests and executions is not uncommon (Javakhishvili 2016). In the specific Georgian case, archival policies have shifted over the years, and access to certain documents has only become available in the past decades. Ms. Nestan was one of many interlocutors who recently uncovered files detailing the arrests and deaths of their relatives during the so-called "Great Terror" in Georgia (1936–1938). Vladimir was arrested in Tbilisi on 17 July 1937, accused of being a member of a secret German organisation. He was sentenced under Articles 58-a, 10, and 11, which was the worst possible combination at the time, as it signalled an immediate death sentence: enemy of the people (58-a), anti-Soviet agitation (10), and counter-revolutionary activities (11).

For the first time, Ms. Nestan was able to piece together the fragmented knowledge she had carried throughout her life about Vladimir and fill some gaps in her family history. Realising that her great-uncle had not died in 1943 from liver inflammation and actually had been executed the same year he was arrested had a profound impact on her understanding

[2] It is important to note that the KGB (Russian: *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*), or Committee for State Security, operated from 1954 until 1991 and was the successor to the Cheka and the NKVD. The Cheka (Russian: *Chrezvychainaia Komissiia*) was the Soviet secret police, established shortly after the October 1917 Revolution. It functioned until 1922, when it was succeeded by the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU, 1923–1934), which later became a section of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). The NKVD (Russian: *Narodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del*), or People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, served as both the Soviet police and secret police. It was established in 1934 and lasted until 1943, after which its functions were gradually transferred to the KGB.

of the Soviet state's repressive system. It also prompted her to respond to decades of silence. She wanted to copy all the documents, not only as evidence of Vladimir's fate but also as proof of the deception that had shaped her family's past. During our day at the archive, she meticulously transcribed every page of the documents that revealed fragments of Vladimir's story and personality. At the end of the day, exhausted in the car, she whispered that she did not know how she would afford to obtain copies of all the documents we had listed. The file contained more than 200 pages, with a copy of each page costing between 3 and 5 lari – approximately 1.5 euros per page. The total cost would be 800 lari, nearly an entire month's salary. When I asked when she planned to collect the documents, she replied that she wanted to do so as soon as possible, even if it was expensive, fearing that archive policies might change and she would lose access to the materials again.

This article examines how an "ordinary person", under specific circumstances and historical contingencies, becomes a memory activist. By exploring how encounters with archival documents shape this transformation, the article situates itself at the intersection of anthropology and memory activism. Sociological and anthropological approaches to activism have significantly contributed to classical studies on social movements and social change by framing activists as subjects with distinct political agency, whose praxis aims to reshape the world (Berger et al. 2021). In post-socialist contexts, activism can be understood as a historically situated practice (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019) that seeks to redefine political identities (Channel-Justice 2018). Similarly, within memory studies, activism has received increasing scholarly attention, moving beyond the well-established idea that memory is contested (Assmann 2023) to examine the role of memory activists in shaping the public sphere beyond mnemonic change (Gutman and Wüsternberg 2021). This also includes a focus on activists' memory work and memory as a form of activism (Merril and Rigney 2024).

Arguably, memory activism is precarious (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023), and the political and historical contingencies empower the activists' activities and trainings, reminding them of their role in society and orienting them towards the past and the future (Lee 2016, 29). Yet, understanding the interplay of the political, historical, and social processes that shape "ordinary people" and turn them into memory activists is equally important to understanding the intensity of their work and the strategies they use to commemorate the past and intervene in the public sphere. Weld (2014), for instance, explores the process of becoming an activist amongst a youth group in post-war Guatemala. Only a few of these young people had direct experience of the conflict - the majority had no

direct knowledge of the war nor of family members who were *desaparecidos* (English: forcefully disappeared), or they had grown up in exile. Weld describes beautifully how, for the young activists, the reading of the documents in the archive was transformative in the sense that "the archives exposed them to new knowledge … providing them with new perspectives on political engagement and the responsibility of truth-telling" (193).

Unlike Weld's interlocutors, whose reflections were reconstructed after the fact, I witnessed Ms. Nestan's transformation firsthand. Her encounters with the KGB documents revealed her political subjectivity and positioning, shaped by epistemic anxieties: simultaneously a desire to uncover Soviet-era fabrications, a curiosity about Vladimir's past, and a fear of Georgia's political future.

In this context, activism becomes not only morally charged but also an act of cultivating democracy and political subjectivity (Kunreuther 2013). Ms. Nestan not only gained a sense of coherence regarding her family history but also found her voice, an authority that is the foundation of liberal democracy as well as a medium of political representation. Her commitment to memory activism, rooted in her engagement with the archive, takes on even greater significance in light of recent political developments in Georgia, where state restrictions on archival access have intensified.

At the end of November 2023, both the MIA-KGB and the National Archives were closed, and they have remained inaccessible to the public. The official explanation has been vague: initially, authorities cited issues with the internal computer system, claiming it was vulnerable and required reconstruction. Subsequently, they attributed the closure to an inventory process, though the exact nature of this process remains unclear. However, no official explanation has been provided for why the archives remain closed or when they are expected to reopen (Civil.ge 2024). Initially, this appeared to be a temporary measure, yet as of the time of writing this article, there are no indications of reopening (Blauvelt 2025). Looking back, the concerns that Ms. Nestan shared with me in 2018 – that the archive might once again be closed – have now materialised. At the time, her fears also spoke to a broader anxiety about a state that would gradually strip its citizens of access to the historical truth.

This article argues that understanding Ms. Nestan's transformation requires situating it in two overlapping contexts. The first is theoretical: I bring into dialogue scholarship on the affective materialities of archives and objects (Stoler 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2007) with work on memory activism and the emergence of new political subjectivities (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2022). By tracing how Nestan's archival encounter catalysed her activism, I demonstrate how affective engagements with documents can carry transformative political potential. The second context is politi-

cal: Nestan's archival discovery unfolded against Georgia's recent autocratic resurgence under the Georgian Dream government (GD hereafter), when archival closures and authoritarian policies intensified. Bringing this context forward illustrates her epistemic anxieties not only as personal but also as historically and politically situated, linking her experience to broader struggles over memory, statecraft, and democracy in post-Soviet Georgia.

I first examine the complex history of the MIA-KGB archive and post-socialist archival policies. I then present Ms. Nestan's story, tracing the key moments that led to her transformation into a memory activist. Finally, I show how the Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet states materialise in the interplay between uncovering information secreted in the archival documents and epistemic anxieties.

The MIA-KGB Archive: A Brief History

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, anti-Soviet demonstrations erupted in Tbilisi, and some demonstrators entered the KGB archive to get hold of the secret police documents without much success. The explanation I obtained, through rumours and unofficial sources, was that right after the fall of state socialism, some Georgian KGB members took the documents regarding the agency operations, destroying some and sending others to the KGB archive in Smolensk, Russia. The amount and type of this disappeared material is still unknown and attempts to recover these documents have failed over time. Moreover, in 1991, during the civil war that led to Gamsakhurdia's defeat, the KGB building caught on fire.[3] The building was damaged, and the thousands of files kept there were either burnt or compromised by the water used to extinguish the fire. According to official sources (cf. Khvadagiani 2017; Vacharadze 2018), 210 000 of 230 000 files were destroyed.

In the newly independent Georgia, what was left of the KGB archive was moved to the National Archives of Georgia and then to the Ministry of State Security in 1995. During Shevardnadze's rule (1992–2003), the archives were largely inaccessible due to economic and political constraints. It was only after the 2003 Rose Revolution, under Saakashvili's new political agenda that promoted democratic values, Europeanization policies, and anti-Soviet, anti-Russian narratives, that the archive's structure changed. Transparency and access were officially promoted, though these changes were neither widely known nor publicly announced

[3] Zviad Gamsakhurdia was the first President of the newly independent Georgia. His mandate lasted only one year as, after the civil war, Eduard Shevardnadze became President.

(Khvadagiani 2017, 30).[4] In 2005, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) established an office encompassing both the KGB archives and the MELI archives (Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute). However, as Georgian politics shifted once again, so did the status of the archives.

The billionaire and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili founded the GD party in 2011, entering politics in response to his disillusionment with Saakashvili's increasingly autocratic governance. His stated goal was to prevent constitutional and electoral manipulation by Saakashvili's regime (Aprasidze and Siroky 2020, 582). Upon GD's rise to power, alongside its "pragmatic" politics that aimed to moderate Georgia's relationship with Russia while still advocating for NATO and EU integration, the administration also altered archival policies. In 2017, most documents were relocated to the MIA Archives, although some files remained under the jurisdiction of the National Archives, where separate legislation and restricted access made it unclear how much material was available to researchers.

The paradox is that the MIA granted access to the KGB and the CP (Communist Party) archives, whereas the National Archives do not allow researchers to access determined files, even if the government officially guarantees transparency and access to the KGB and CP's documents from 1921–1991.[5] The MIA Archives are located in two separate buildings that are 1 km apart from each other. The state security files are stored in the first building, which is also home to the Police Academy. The CP file records are stored in the second building. The MIA is responsible for access to and the openness and transparency of the KGB and the CP archives, while the National Archives have their own legislation and separate charters.[6]

The lack of a single set of regulations for the archival institutions consequently causes problems of access and transparency as well as problems in consultation, since the documents are scattered in different institutions that do not communicate with each other – something which also slows down the research process (cf. Corrigan 2019). The death of the former KGB archive became a rebirth for a new post-socialist archive, with the documents stored in the MIA and the National Archives. The dismantling, dispersing, rebuilding and reassembling of the former KGB archive in post-socialist Georgia shows that archival power does not evade historical and political conjunctures and that the archive is a "lively" institution:

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[4] Mikheil Saakashvili was the third President of Georgia. He assumed office after the peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003, and his mandate marked a clear break from the policies of his predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze. Saakashvili promoted a pro-European and pro-Western narrative and policies that set the country on a path toward Europeanisation.

[5] Parliament of Georgia (2011). Law of Personal Data Protection. https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1561437?publication=33.

[6] For more information about the Georgian Democratic Republic, see Lee (2017).

it dies and is reborn. It changes and therefore is incomplete and imperfect (Basu and De Jong 2016, 6).

The fragmentation of these documents, scattered between different archives, mirrors the fragmented memory of the Great Terror period, also encapsulated in Ms. Nestan's family history: scattered, fragmented, and at times inaccessible. In Georgia, the Great Terror is known mostly by the name of "Shinsakhkomi's mass operations": punitive "classified" operations carried out between 1936–1938 that remained a hidden phenomenon until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Junge and Bonwetsch (2015) divided these operations into three types: the "Kulakur operation", the "National operation", and the "Militia operation". The most extensive of these mass operations was the so-called "Kulakur operation", which was carried out on the basis of operational order No. 000447 of the Internal Affairs Committee of the USSR: the Soviet state took repressive action against former 'kulaks' (Russian: healthy peasants), criminals and other "anti-Soviet elements" (former political opponents of the Bolsheviks: Mensheviks, socialist revolutionaries, anarchists, priests, officers and soldiers of the White Army, employees of the royal administration). Despite the ending of the Great Terror, repressions continued in the Soviet Union, including the November 14th, 1944, deportation of approximately 100,000 Meskhetian Turks from Georgia to Central Asia under the order of Lavrenty Beria (Swerdlow 2006, 1834). Hundreds died during the journey, and the operation served as part of the Soviet Union's national policies for ethno-consolidation (Kaiser 2023, 87–89).

After Stalin's death, Khrushchev initiated de-stalinisation and the rehabilitation of those who were killed, deported, or imprisoned during the Great Terror. Although families of the victims of Soviet repression received letters of rehabilitation, the criteria for rehabilitation were unclear and arbitrary. The lack of transparency and understanding of the truth behind these rehabilitations creates additional suspicion in post-socialist societies and their histories as it is unclear whether those rehabilitated were guilty or whether it was just another manipulation of truth that characterised the Soviet state's logic of condemning and redeeming (Barnes 2011). Moreover, the paradox outlined above whereby, despite the transparency and the openness of the archives, not all the documents are accessible to researchers and the rest of society, shows how the post-socialist archive becomes both a technology of neoliberal governmentality (Kurtović 2019, 21) and a new political site for negotiating historical narratives of the Soviet period.[7]

[7] See Karaia (2023) for a detailed account on the different phases the archive went through since its creation in the 1920s.

Becoming a Memory Activist

Ms. Nestan is a calm, well-educated woman in her 60s. She is an architect and lives in Saburtalo, one of the largest commercial and residential districts in central Tbilisi. Her family history is like that of many middle-class Georgian families who were part of the First Democratic Republic (1918–1921) and later persecuted during the Great Terror as part of Stalin's campaign to exterminate the "petty bourgeoisie". Ms. Nestan not only lost her great-uncle Vladimir but also her grandfather Konstantine, Vladimir's brother, who was arrested and killed in 1937. Ms. Nestan's grandmother (Konstantine's wife), Elene, was sentenced to 10 years in the ALZHIR (Kazakhstan) corrective colony in October 1937. The children (Ms. Nestan's mother and uncle) were left with their grandmother, and only their father's sisters had the courage to maintain contact with them. The rest of the family cut all contact, and they grew up isolated as the children of the "enemy of the people". Ms. Nestan repeatedly told me that her mother, who was 84 years old during my fieldwork, does not remember a lot about that period and, out of fear, did not talk about her experience, nor did her grandmother when she finally came back from the ALZHIR colony.

When Ms. Nestan was younger, she did not ask many questions about her family's story. She only became interested in it after her grandmother had passed away, and she regretted not being more curious at the time. Ms. Nestan recalled that her grandmother used to meet with other Georgian women who had been imprisoned in ALZHIR, and she wished that she had listened to their stories and asked questions about their experiences. Because of the changes to the archive and the lack of communication regarding access, Ms. Nestan only discovered that the archives were open after talking with members of the local NGO Sovlab in 2017, which was when she started research to find out more information about her grandfather's life and her family history.[8] It was there, when she was searching for some material about her grandfather Konstantine, that she realised that there was a file full of documents about Vladimir, her great-uncle who she thought had died in a labour camp of liver inflammation and whose life she did not know much about.

That morning in December 2018, Ms. Nestan came to pick me up in her car, excited and anxious. She was anxious because she did not know

[8] Sovlab (Soviet Past Research Laboratory) is a Georgian NGO founded in 2010. It is the main NGO in Georgia which deals with the Soviet past. Alongside Sovlab, it is important to notice that other organisations have also been working on the history and memory of the Soviet repressions. For example, the IDFI (Institute for the Development of Freedom and Information) developed the project "Stalin's Lists on Georgia" (https://idfi.ge/en/stalins-lists-on-georgia). See also: https://ge.boell.org/en/2014/01/16/rethinking-soviet-past.

if the archival staff would allow us access to Vladimir's file. She was also excited about discovering what information the documents might contain while at the same time curious about what she would find. These affective dimensions arose from her desire and impulse to know her family's past, a dynamic that mirrors the affective dimensions described by Stoler (2009) in her work on the Dutch colonial archive. Stoler (2009) reveals how epistemic anxieties are psychic and affective spaces that combine "both ways of not knowing and obliquely knowing" (253) at once. Stoler's analysis highlights how such anxieties are not just intellectual but also tied to emotional and social power structures, where the desire for knowledge is simultaneously coupled with anxiety about what can or should be known. In this way, Ms. Nestan's simultaneous fear and desire to know, expressed in her anticipation of what could happen (the archival staff avoiding access to the file), mirror this epistemic anxiety. This tension is not just personal but also deeply tied to historical power dynamics, like the colonial context Stoler (2009) explores. The KGB documents Ms. Nestan was about to engage with were far from obsolete or abandoned; they held agentive power to sharpen future stories and narratives by carrying, charting, and containing affective energies when "put to use in specific webs of social relations" (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 81). The encounter with the files also had a social effect on Ms. Nestan's life trajectory, ultimately leading her to become a memory activist.

From Ordinary People to Memory Activists

The day in the secret police archive was very emotional on many levels for both of us. While Ms. Nestan got the chance to finally see her great-uncle's file and gain a sense of intimacy with her family's past, I was witnessing the process of Ms. Nestan's making sense of Soviet state terror through her reading of the dry logic of the former secret police, concealed in documents that, according to the national narrative, were filed by the enemy (the Soviet regime) of the post-socialist Georgian state. The knowledge she had about her family history was fragmented, incomplete, and filled with silences - made up of unspoken words and tacit memories from her childhood. For Ms. Nestan, the documents served as a lens to help see through this fragmentation and clearly identify the (il)logic of Soviet state terror. Reading the documents filed by the institutional perpetrators (Weld 2014) of the past has arguably unexpected effects that span from fragmented identities, new desires, and hopes to revisionist projects. In Ms. Nestan's case, the reading of the documents empowered her understanding of the Soviet state as evil:

> For me, each document was important, to look at and to read, what, why, how, what for, and what guilt they had. I knew that these people were killed for nothing, I knew they were not guilty. I knew this from my family. However, to see this information in the documents, showed me what it really was like. How aggressive and brutal this regime was. These documents helped me to make more sense of the communist regime; I acknowledged this brutality. I was looking at the list of the people who were shot, and it was so powerful and breath-taking. All these people were killed for nothing.

The peculiarities of accessing the secret police archives in post-socialist Georgia unfold in the tension between concealing and revealing historical truths and in subverting categories of enemy/perpetrators and victims of the former Soviet state in the post-socialist state. On one hand, the meticulous work of the secret police in Soviet times was to craft the category of the enemy, and the documents they compiled and stored in the archives served to validate their accusations (Verdery 2014, 2018). This archive, in the logic of its makers, should have never been discovered. On the other hand, in present-day Georgia, Ms. Nestan was looking at the documents through the lens of the Georgian post-socialist state and therefore engaged with them from a different perspective - one which corresponded to her present reality.

Gutman and Wüstenberg (2022) define memory activists as non-state actors that work as individuals or within organisations. This premise opens space to address one aspect of memory activism (and activism more broadly) that has not been explored by anthropologists and memory scholars consistently: namely, how a person *becomes* a (memory) activist. The vast literature on memory activists and activism has focused on the people activists choose to become the subject of their praxis. Nonetheless, if the literature on memory activism and activism in general agrees on the special intensity of the activists' political agency in shaping political imaginaries, looking at the process of *becoming* an activist becomes imperative to understand the logics through which activists intervene and try to shape people's horizons. Ms. Nestan's process of becoming a memory activist in Tbilisi was affectively charged by moments of revelation and intentionality.

When Ms. Nestan opened the file on her great-uncle's confiscated objects, she experienced moments of surprise that were followed by expressions of joy, excitement, and sadness as well as anger. She read through the 500 documents, sometimes speaking up loudly and sometimes whispering. Ms. Nestan would look at me with sparkling eyes when she discovered that Vladimir had almost 2000 books, an excitement that would soon be stifled from the realisation that these books had vanished after his arrest. She smiled when reading about the cigarettes

Vladimir used to smoke, and her eyes sweetly caressed the archives' computer screen, filling a void that had been kept silent for so many years. In that small room, the consistent yet cold and formal language of the KGB archives transported us into a warm domestic sphere: a record of Vladimir's last day in his house right before his arrest. Ms. Nestan was in the process of discovering some of her great-uncle's habits, and I accompanied her in witnessing and trying to make sense of the violence deployed by the secret police as Vladimir was branded an enemy of the people. In reading the documents, it felt as if the punitive Soviet state apparatus made itself "evident to the persons who inhabit [its] domains in the form of materialities" (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 82). The affective re-enactment of the past through reading the documents became the driving force for Ms. Nestan's self-reflexion (Lee 2016), which led to her becoming a memory activist. These moments of revelation of Soviet state repressive practices were important as they were not only part of Ms. Nestan's process of knowledge production, but also part of her self-training in becoming an activist (Houston 2020).

Lectures, tours, walking, books, long talks, and conferences were only some of the multiple ways that memory activists have engaged with the public and helped encourage some of the people they engage with to become fellow activists (Burchianti 2004; Bonilla 2011). All of these public engagements have some sort of material evidence in common, be it documents, books, or audio-visual materials. In the literature listed above, how activists' praxis is incommensurably linked with evidence to generate an epistemological shift is often taken for granted - that is, that (historic) materials become central to the recognition and the legitimacy of the activist as a social actor and not only for their validation of the past. Without evidence their claims would be considered suspicious. Hence, Ms. Nestan's encounter with the hundreds of documents she analysed and selected also became a self-training practice. Ms. Nestan was able to educate herself and fill in the gaps of her fragmented knowledge of the past through the documents that brought forth self-evident truths (Lee 2016, 30). Once she found coherence in the story she was producing, Ms. Nestan was ready to share it actively.

Ms. Nestan's self-awareness went hand in hand with a feeling of liberation, of breathing out a past that she felt was not only hidden but also not really shared. After our day in the MIA archive, she told me:

> I want people from my circle, my friends, to know about my story and ask me all about it. I will tell them what happened, how everything started, the material I gathered. Generally, they are interested. But the problem is that only people who had families who experienced this suffering really understand. I

> have friends who had *repressirebuli* grandmothers,[9] for them this is a known topic, and they understand more. They themselves try to speak about their own family histories and share their stories. You know, it was difficult to keep everything inside, it was boiling inside me, I needed to share and talk about it with other people.

She shows how the embodied memory of the violent past she shared with other families who had similar experiences did not necessarily need articulating because there was a tacit understanding of what those experiences entailed. Nonetheless, when Ms. Nestan found evidence of and coherence in her family's past, she was able to produce a story that she wanted to share with people who had not experienced repression so that they might learn and understand about why the past was so important for the present and the future. Ms. Nestan's encounter with the documents showed how the archive is not only a subject and site of knowledge production but also a generator of social relationships (Verdery 2014, 5). In fact, the agentive power of the documents concerning Vladimir's life, combined with Ms. Nestan's post-socialist awareness of their makers and their use in Soviet times, shaped her political subjectivity and prompted Ms. Nestan to take action not only for her family, but also for society at large, by becoming a memory activist:

> I was thinking about some publication, for instance, now that I know all the dates, how it was... At a societal level, I could make a sort of publication that everyone could see. Their remembrance has not to be lost. I think it is important because there are many people that are waiting for their stories to be shared.

Knowing the State(s)

Ms. Nestan's encounter with Soviet-era deception reveals both an engagement with discomfort and a way of knowing the Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet state. The Soviet state created and rehabilitated enemies according to undisclosed rules; the post-Soviet state, meanwhile, limits access to certain documents through contentious laws that create unease about what can be known, how it can be repeated, and how it can be shared. These epistemic formations - ways of knowing the world - shape what people assume to know and how they contest knowledge through emotions (Stoler 2009). Through the KGB documents, Ms. Nestan

[9] *Repressirebuli* in Georgian language means "repressed". In this case, it can be translated as deported, arrested, or executed.

engaged in a mode of knowing both the Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet state. Determined to share her story, she began speaking about her family's past on local TV, radio, and a podcast. I suspect our frequent meetings were also part of her activist commitment to making history public. She once told me:

> It's our debt [as descendants] to push this knowledge to the front line. The state will always try to hide its crimes. Maybe this government won't, but in general, the state was criminal for killing these people, right? The state will always try to push this topic back.

This claim is significant on multiple levels. Ms. Nestan's act of revealing her family's history aligns with a "fantasy" (Aretxaga 2003) of a state that would acknowledge its crimes. Yet Ms. Nestan also recognises that the state, in the past, was criminal, and even if the current government is not, the state as an entity "will always try to hide its crimes". Her fear that the state will always try to hide its crimes brings into focus Jansen's (2015) distinction between statehood and statecraft: statehood foregrounds questions of "what the state is, claims to be, and should be", whereas statecraft foregrounded questions of "what the state does, claims to do, and should do" (12). The former foregrounds questions of essence; the latter foregrounds questions of practice.

Of course, epistemologically these two reasonings are closely related, but this analytical distinction makes it useful to further our focus on practices to understand our interlocutors' investments and engagements with the state. Using this analytical distinction, Ms. Nestan's statements become very clear: the state was a criminal (reasoning of statehood) and will always hide its secrets (reasoning of statecraft). Thus, focussing our attention on the question of what the state does for Ms. Nestan, namely that it always tries to hide its secrets, we get hints of a reasoning of what the state could be again in the future: a criminal. Thus, Ms. Nestan sees her present morally charged: her debt to the memory of her ancestors demands active engagement in the present because the memory of the future is still uncertain. For Ms. Nestan, the secret police archive documents become a technology (Lee 2016) that enables a way of knowing the Soviet and post-Soviet states, unfolding in epistemic anxieties and prompting her to become a memory activist to intervene in collective memory. The fear of a future deceptive state became particularly salient during my fieldwork in 2018, which coincided with a moment of political crisis.

This crisis unfolded against the backdrop of Bidzina Ivanishvili's so-called "pragmatic" politics, which, in practice, clashed with the sentiments of many in Georgia. When I first visited the country in 2013, there

was widespread optimism about the new government. However, by 2018, most people I talked to were very disappointed. These "pragmatic" politics towards Russia had, over the years, softened the relationship with the Federation. At the same time, they fostered anti-European and anti-Western sentiments and paved the way for a major resurgence of Russian propaganda in Georgian society. From 2012, any state-led orientation toward the Soviet past has been completely absent. Likewise, the GD does not take any position on how to commemorate or remember the repressions of the Great Terror. There is a great degree of indifference towards the Soviet past that is used by the different political elites just to shame the political opposition. The GD party officially calls itself centre-left, but it is in fact made up of a mixture of differing ideologies, and it has been ruling alone without a coalition since the 2016 elections. Ivanishvili personally chose and nominated political candidates without consulting his colleagues and has accused his political allies of cooperating with the opposition (UNM), consequently creating negative images of potential political adversaries.

Following GD's re-election in 2016, political tensions escalated. Frustration mounted as GD's ambiguous stance on Russia and its failure to deliver on EU membership promises alienated a growing portion of the population. This discontent culminated in the fiercely contested 2018 presidential elections between Salome Zurabishvili (GD-backed) and Grigol Vashadze (UNM-backed). In the first round, Zurabishvili secured 38.6 percent of the vote, while Vashadze won 37.7 percent. However, in the second round, Zurabishvili's sudden victory with 60 percent of the vote fuelled allegations of electoral fraud from the UNM, further deepening political polarisation. It was in the aftermath of these elections that Ms. Nestan and I went to the former KGB archive. Her epistemic anxieties - the desire to know the past while simultaneously grasping, in an oblique yet certain way, what the state could do in the future –, were informed by the unfolding political crisis.

Conclusion

Although memory activism is precarious, its praxis of intervening in the public sphere and shaping political subjectivities and collective remembrance continues to be important in reasserting agency in the present. Following Gutman and Wüstenberg's (2022) definition of a memory activist, I analysed Ms. Nestan's story as a case study to examine what leads an ordinary person to become a memory activist, thus reinstating political subjectivity within the resurgence of an authoritarian government. Her experience highlights how archives are not neutral repositories

of the past but contested sites where power, knowledge, and political agency are negotiated.

The epistemic anxieties that emerged from her reading of KGB documents, her simultaneous desire to know the past and her fear of what the state might do with it in the future, illustrate the logic of her activism: uncovering state secrets. These concerns were especially pronounced during my fieldwork in 2018, a period marked by political crisis and growing disillusionment with the ruling GD party. Their consequences are evident today in the GD government's repressive and illiberal policies following the contested elections of October 2024 (Schiffers 2024). Restrictions on archival access, described by many of my interlocutors as "Soviet" and regressive, reinforce parallels between contemporary actions and past authoritarian practices. Meanwhile, contemporary protests explicitly invoke the Soviet/Russian legacy of repression and totalitarianism, situating it within the broader context of the oligarchic, illiberal democratic turn that is unfolding globally.

This article has thus shown how Nestan's transformation was prompted by affective encounters with archival documents that materialised both Soviet and post-Soviet state practices. By situating her experience within broader political developments, it becomes clear that her epistemic anxieties were not only personal but historically and politically grounded. While her trajectory is distinctive, it resonates with wider practices of memory activism in Georgia, where families, NGOs, and individuals mobilise family histories to challenge silences and resist revisionist state narratives. Ms. Nestan's story therefore exemplifies both the urgency and fragility of memory activism in post-Soviet contexts, demonstrating its role in shaping collective memory and sustaining political subjectivity in times of authoritarian resurgence.

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Terra, acqua, oro: interazioni economiche e culturali tra nomadi e sedentari nel bacino del Kuban tra VII e V sec. a.C.

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Abstract. Starting in the 7th century BCE, north-western Caucasia - centred on the basin of the Kuban River - witnessed the nearly simultaneous arrival of two distinct migratory movements. The first consisted of Greek colonists, who established a series of important coastal settlements; the second of nomadic Scythian groups, who, returning from their Mesopotamian campaigns, occupied the hinterland along the middle and upper reaches of the Kuban. Both came into contact with the native sedentary population, the Meotians. By exploiting the region's abundant resources - chiefly cereals, but also commodities from the Eurasian hinterland such as slaves and metals - nomads and sedentary peoples developed not only a profitable economic relationship but also a remarkable cultural and artistic symbiosis, most clearly reflected in the rich assemblages of elite Meotian and Scythian tombs.

Keywords: Scythians, Meotians, economic and cultural interactions, kurgans, Koban, nomadism.

La Caucasia è sicuramente una delle regioni euroasiatiche più affascinanti e allo stesso tempo complesse: marcata da imponenti catene montuose, da una grande varietà ambientale e da un ricchissimo panorama etnolinguistico, ha, sin dalle prime fasi dell'età del bronzo, rappresentato non solo un punto di incontro tra orizzonti culturali differenti – da quelli vicino-orientali al mondo greco-romano – ma ha soprattutto manifestato una pluralità di significative e peculiari evidenze, dalle culture di Kura-Arasse e Majkop dell'Antico Bronzo per arrivare fino ai regni di Urartu, di Iberia e della Colchide nel I millennio a.C.

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Uno degli elementi che maggiormente caratterizzano questa regione, amplificandone l'importanza storica, è la convergenza di numerosi e diversificati asset economici: abbondanti risorse minerarie nella Caucasia meridionale (dall'ossidiana all'oro), ampie distese pianeggianti e fertili nella zona settentrionale, ricchi pascoli estivi nelle aree montuose e invernali lungo la costa caspica. Altrettanto significativa è la fitta rete di vie di comunicazione terrestri, fluviali e marittime che collegavano l'entroterra euroasiatico con i porti mediterranei, permettendo quindi di accedere anche ai beni tipici del mondo delle steppe e delle foreste euroasiatiche, quali pellicce, schiavi e metalli.

Il controllo di queste variegate risorse ha da sempre suscitato l'interesse dei principali soggetti politici operanti nel contesto euroasiatico. Se la Caucasia meridionale, attigua territorialmente al Vicino e Medio Oriente, ha subito diverse dominazioni esterne, tra cui si possono annoverare gli imperi achemenide, romano, bizantino, sasanide, per arrivare infine ai califfati musulmani, la parte settentrionale è stata da sempre più esposta alle ondate nomadiche provenienti dal corridoio euroasiatico tra Caspio e Urali. Solo per brevi fasi storiche nell'antichità e nel Medioevo ci furono formazioni politiche sufficientemente forti per resistere alle pressioni esterne e a sviluppare un'autorità politica stabile, come, ad esempio, il Regno del Bosforo o la Rus' di Kyiv; più raramente, furono gli stessi nomadi a creare delle formazioni politiche coese, caso ben rappresentato dal khanato khazaro.

La Caucasia settentrionale fu pertanto maggiormente interessata da una penetrazione economica piuttosto che politica: la volontà di accedere alle ricche e variegate risorse della regione del Mar Nero spinse numerosi soggetti economici del mondo mediterraneo, dalle colonie greche dell'Antichità fino ai fondaci genovesi e veneziani nel Medioevo, a stabilire dei punti di appoggio lungo la costa attraverso cui creare delle sinergie commerciali con le comunità locali e le tribù nomadiche.

Nel presente lavoro intendiamo concentrarci sulla fase compresa tra l'VII e il V secolo a.C., poiché si tratta del primo periodo in cui fu particolarmente significativa l'interazione, sia economica che culturale, tra il mondo nomadico e quello sedentario: il primo è rappresentato dagli Sciti e il secondo dalle colonie greche e dalle popolazioni native della Caucasia.

Mancando totalmente fonti storiche che permettano di tracciare l'emergere di popolazioni nomadiche nelle steppe euroasiatiche, solo un'attenta (e moderna) analisi del contesto archeologico permette di delineare i passaggi cronologici principali. A differenza dell'abbondante corpus di datazione al C^{14} per i contesti siberiani, l'evidenza nomadica nelle steppe europee ha fornito purtroppo poche datazioni al carbonio (Alekseev 2003, 33-35). Ad oggi, i contesti apparentemente più antichi sono il tumulo di

Steblev, nell'Ucraina orientale e datato intorno alla metà dell'VIII secolo (Kločko and Skorij 1993) e le sepolture di Slobodzeja, in prossimità del basso corso del fiume Dniester (Jarovoj et al. 2002), a cavallo tra fine IX e inizio VIII a.C.

I primi gruppi nomadici arrivarono nella Caucasia settentrionale probabilmente già nella prima metà dell'VIII secolo a.C. (Alekseev 2003, 129-152; Guljaev 2018, 388-457), benché le evidenze storiche e archeologiche del periodo siano principalmente collegate alle azioni nel Vicino Oriente, dove, a partire dalla metà dell'VIII secolo, le fonti mesopotamiche registrano la penetrazione di Cimmeri prima e Sciti poi (Ivantchik 2001). A queste menzioni si accompagna un buon corpus di ritrovamenti, specialmente oggettistica bellica ritrovata soprattutto in contesti funerari nella Caucasia meridionale (Mehnert 2008; Makhortykh 2022). Molto probabilmente Cimmeri e Sciti rappresentavano due distinti gruppi nomadici, fortemente affini culturalmente e, forse, anche etnicamente. Oggigiorno è difficile stabilire un confine netto tra i due: innanzitutto, i Cimmeri non possono essere differenziati archeologicamente dagli Sciti viste le forti somiglianze nell'oggettistica. Inoltre, nei testi neobabilonesi i termini *Gamir/Gimir* (=Cimmeri) e forme simili designano sia gli Sciti europei che i Saka dell'Asia centrale, riflettendo la percezione, diffusa tra gli abitanti della Mesopotamia, che Cimmeri e Sciti rappresentassero un unico gruppo culturale ed economico (Dandamayev 1979, 95–105). La stessa associazione è presente nelle fonti achemenidi, dove il termine *Saka* persiano è tradotto come *Gamir* nella versione babilonese.

Nella Caucasia settentrionale questi gruppi nomadici incontrarono un ambiente intensamente antropizzato, espressione di tre orizzonti culturali chiave: la cultura meotica nella zona più occidentale e lungo il bacino del Kuban; la cultura Koban diffusa nella zona centrale e, nella zona più orientale, la cultura Mugergan.

Il presente lavoro sarà incentrato principalmente sulla regione del Kuban per una serie di fattori concomitanti: innanzitutto è quella che offre la più abbondante documentazione storica e archeologica, grazie soprattutto alle importanti colonie greche ivi presenti, che successivamente daranno origine al Regno del Bosforo. Inoltre, le evidenze relative agli Sciti sono maggiormente concentrate nel bacino del fiume Kuban stesso, dove si registra altresì l'ampia evidenza relativa alla popolazione nativa dei Meoti.

Non è possibile in questa sede affrontare modalità ed evidenze della presenza greca nella regione del Mar Nero, sulla quale esiste una pluralità di studi[1], mentre si rende necessario tracciare brevemente le caratteristiche

[1] Tra l'enorme bibliografia sul tema, si segnalano i seguenti volumi editi: Tsetskhladze 1998, Kozlovskaya 2017, Tsetskhladze et al. 2021.

principali dell'elemento scita e meotico. Queste due entità culturali sono parzialmente differenziate da alcune precise evidenze archeologiche quali, ad esempio, le zone di occupazione, la cultura materiale e le caratteristiche di siti abitati e funerari. Esistono però anche molti punti in comune, specialmente nell'evidenza elitaria, che rendono a volte difficile tracciare un confine netto tra le due comunità. Queste evidenze verranno trattate più dettagliatamente nelle pagine a seguire.

I Meoti

All'inizio del I millennio a.C., la popolazione principale stanziata nel Kuban era costituita dai Meoti, un concetto geografico collettivo sotto il quale inserire tutte le comunità che vivevano sulla costa orientale del Mar Nero e nella regione del basso e medio Kuban. Non è possibile proporre valide interpretazioni relativamente alla loro etnia, benché alcune informazioni presenti nelle fonti lascino intendere dei labili legami sia con l'universo linguistico iranico sia con quello circasso/caucasico (Chandrasekaran 2013, 100-102).

I Meoti sono ampiamente attestati nelle fonti greche e romane. Quella verosimilmente più antica risale tra VI e V secolo, quando Ecateo di Mileto riporta il nome di una tribù meotica, i Dandari[2]. L'etnonimo Meoti appare per la prima volta in Erodoto in riferimento alla campagna di Dario in Scizia (Erodoto IV.123). La descrizione più dettagliata è però quella, molto più tarda, di Strabone, il quale riporta la presenza di diverse tribù (Strabone, Geo. XI.2.11). La prima menzione delle comunità meotiche nei monumenti epigrafici del Regno del Bosforo risale invece al IV sec. a.C. sotto il regno di Levkon I (KBN 6, 6a, 1037, 1038).

Lo studio della cultura meotica è piuttosto recente e tendenzialmente confinato all'ambito accademico russo (Erlich 1994, 2007; Kameneckij 2011).

Benché la cultura meotica copra un arco cronologico dall'VIII secolo a.C. fino al III d.C., nei limiti del presente lavoro verrà posta attenzione soltanto alla fase arcaica, ossia il periodo compreso grossomodo tra VII e V secolo a.C.

Attualmente, l'evidenza archeologica del periodo può essere suddivisa in tre varianti regionali principali (costiera, centrale e pedemontana) e comprende una trentina di necropoli con oltre 500 tombe ed almeno una decina di insediamenti (Figura 1).

L'evidenza funeraria principale è rappresentata da necropoli con semplici tombe a fossa o a cista, soprattutto singole, prive di segnacoli o altri ele-

[2] Testo perduto, ma vari nomi sono riportati da Stefano di Bisanzio.

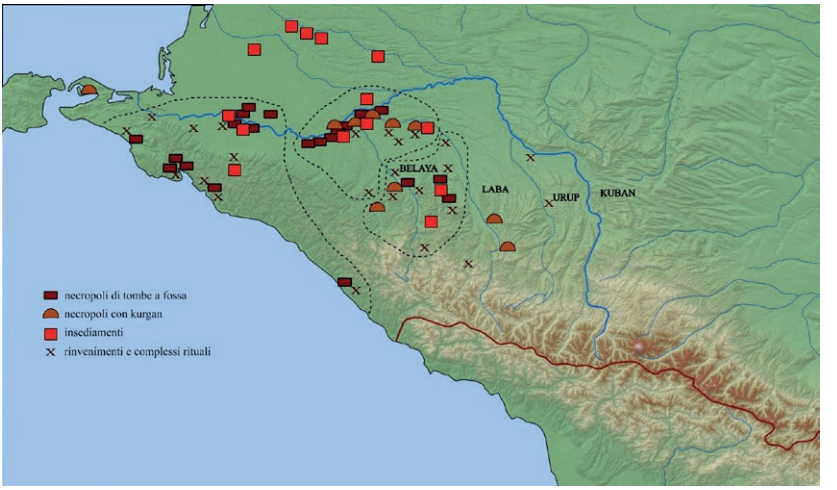

Figura 1. Mappa dei principali siti meotici della fase arcaica e varianti regionali.

menti esterni. Le sepolture delle élite, invece, sono caratterizzate da tumuli con ricchi corredi, a volte realizzati rioccupando strutture funerarie delle epoche precedenti. Per la fase arcaica è particolarmente significativo il kurgan 1 di Uaščitu (Erlich 1994). Scoperto nel 1988, il tumulo racchiudeva una fossa sepolcrale di 13 x 7 m a una profondità di ca. 2 m, a sua volta coperta da una struttura in legno a forma di tenda. Sfortunatamente, la tomba venne saccheggiata già in antico, tuttavia furono recuperate placchette di bronzo e lamine d'oro; nella zona meridionale non toccata dai saccheggiatori vennero ritrovati i resti di un carro cerimoniale e quattro cavalli.

Altrettanto importante è la necropoli di Fars (Leskov and Erlich 1999), verosimilmente riservata a una comunità militarizzata, in quanto tutte le tombe sono maschili e con corredi di armi. Particolarmente importante è l'alta presenza di sepolture elitarie: circa il 40% delle tombe presenta infatti deposizioni di cavalli interi, mentre il restante 60% è riservato a guerrieri ordinari armati di lancia e spada.

La presenza di cavalleria nel mondo meotico è abbastanza comune. Nella fase arcaica le tombe hanno fornito soprattutto morsi e altri elementi delle briglie e ossa equine, soprattutto arti e crani. La presenza di cavalli interi, rara nella fase arcaica, aumenta sensibilmente a partire dal IV secolo a.C., quando sono attestati diversi casi in cui più cavalli sono deposti per un singolo defunto, che può essere anche di sesso femminile.

Un'evidenza peculiare del mondo meotico sono i complessi cultuali, ossia dei peculiari santuari all'aria aperta rappresentati principalmente da

piattaforme di terra o pavimentate con ciottoli di fiume, sulle quali venivano compiuti sacrifici e altre azioni rituali. Particolarmente ricchi sono i complessi del VI-IV secolo, come quelli di Uljap, in cui sono stati rinvenuti numerosi oggetti in metallo prezioso, oppure di Tengin (Erlich 2011), dove sono stati documentati sacrifici di cavalli e di altri animali domestici e selvatici, nonché umani.

Benché i contesti funerari siano la più ricca fonte di informazioni sulla cultura meotica, importanti evidenze provengono anche dalla struttura insediamentale, per quanto questa sia indagata in misura minore. Attualmente sono conosciuti più di 200 insediamenti, ma solo una trentina riferibili alla fase arcaica. Si tratta principalmente di piccoli villaggi non fortificati situati sulla riva sinistra del Kuban o lungo la zona costiera (Kameneckij 2011, 221-235). A partire dal VI secolo inizia anche l'allargamento meotico sulla riva destra del basso e medio Kuban, dove, dal IV secolo in poi, i siti sono tutti fortificati e di dimensioni notevoli (Limberis, Marčenko 2010, 191). La diffusione di strutture difensive è probabilmente da ricondurre alla prima penetrazione sarmata.

La cultura materiale meotica è molto ricca e variegata. Nella fase arcaica la ceramica è principalmente ordinaria, modellata a mano e spesso con decorazioni geometriche. La metallurgia invece si caratterizza per una ricca oggettistica bellica, la quale comprende soprattutto un ampio repertorio di armi offensive in bronzo e ferro. Numerose sono le attestazioni di oggettistica scita nelle tombe, specialmente morsi di cavallo, armi e oggetti in stile animalistico, mentre sono più scarse le importazioni dal mondo greco, le quali appariranno progressivamente solo dalla fine del V secolo in poi.

La cultura materiale meotica raggiunge il suo massimo splendore nel IV secolo a.C. quando l'influenza ellenica del nascente Regno del Bosforo si fa via via più marcata. La ceramica è realizzata al tornio e spesso dipinta, mentre sono numerose anche le importazioni di vasellame greco. Altrettanto importante è l'influenza sulla metallurgia, la quale aumenta sensibilmente sia in qualità che in quantità, con numerosi oggetti in metallo prezioso realizzati da botteghe localizzate nelle città del Bosforo o della Grecia stessa. Anche l'oggettistica bellica ne è influenzata: diminuisce quella scita, ma aumentano panoplie ed elmi di tipo greco.

Gli Sciti

Ad esclusione di qualche vago riferimento in Erodoto (Erodoto IV.11), l'arrivo degli Sciti nella Caucasia settentrionale non è documentato nelle fonti.

La presenza scita e le sue fasi di sviluppo possono pertanto essere ricostruite solo a partire dallo studio dei contesti archeologici, principal-

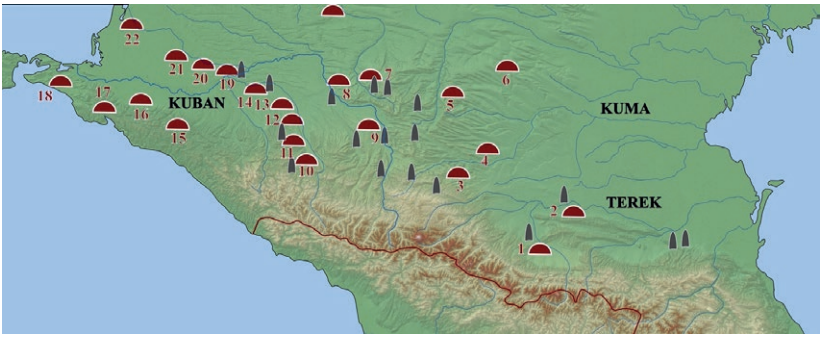

Figura 2. Carta dei principali siti sciti del periodo arcaico. 1. Nartan; 2. Gvardeiskoe; 3. Lermontovskij; 4. Novozavedennoe; 5. Krasnoe Znamija; 6. Sotnikovskoe; 7. Stavropol'; 8. Kovalevskoe; 9. Besskorbnaja; 10. Novosvabodnaja; 11. Kostromskaja; 12. Mochoshevskaja; 13. Kelermes; 14. Uljap e Ul'; 15. Cholmskij; 16. Krimskij; 17. Novorossijsk; 18. Cukur-Liman; 19. Ust'-Labinskij; 20. Razdol'naja; 21. Novokorsunskij; 22. Lebedi.

mente tumuli appartenenti all'aristocrazia. Ulteriori importanti evidenze sono rappresentate dalla diffusione di oggettistica tipicamente scita (armi, morsi di cavallo, oggetti in stile animalistico) e dalla presenza di steli antropomorfe.

Nella regione del Kuban possiamo distinguere tre grandi zone di distribuzione dei monumenti funerari sciti: la riva sinistra e la zona pedemontana; la riva destra e la zona steppica fino al delta del Don; la penisola di Taman e la zona costiera (Figura 2).

Il primo gruppo comprende i monumenti più significativi, la maggior parte dei quali però fu indagata tra fine '800 e inizio '900, purtroppo spesso con metodologie approssimative. La necropoli più famosa è sicuramente quella di Kelermes, formata da una trentina di kurgan di epoche differenti e da una necropoli di tombe a fossa, espressione di una comunità locale di Meoti (Galanina 1997). Sei kurgan datano intorno alla metà del VII secolo e si caratterizzano per la deposizione di numerosi cavalli sacrificati e ampia oggettistica in bronzo e oro, tra cui si segnalano diversi oggetti con raffigurazioni di ispirazione mesopotamica. Sono generalmente considerati come sepolture di membri dell'élite scita. Altrettanto importante è il coevo tumulo di Kostromskoj (Ol'chovskij 1995), purtroppo saccheggiato già in antico, ma nel quale fu rinvenuta la famosa placca aurea raffigurante un cervo nella tipica posa scitica. Di alcuni decenni posteriori sono i tumuli di Ul' (Ivantchik and Leskov 2015), forse dei santuari più che delle sepolture, in quanto nelle undici strutture indagate non furono rinvenute ossa umane, bensì significative deposizioni di cavalli sacrificati, il cui numero arriva addirittura a 400 nel kurgan 1.

Altri tumuli elitari della fase arcaica, come Krasnoe Znamja (Petrenko 2006) e Novozavedennoe-II (Petrenko et al. 2000), sono invece localizzati più a oriente, nella Caucasia centrale, dove si trovano anche diverse necropoli scite con tombe ordinarie, tra cui spiccano senz'altro i cimiteri di Nartan I-II (Batačaev 1985; Kerefov, Karmov 2009).

Il secondo gruppo territoriale, ossia la regione steppica della riva destra tra Kuban e Don, oltre ai tumuli sciti posteriori di Voronežskaja (OAK 1903, 71–75) e Ust–Labinskaja (OAK, 1903, 69–70), presenta decine di complessi funerari (Alekseev and Rjabkova 2010, 246-249); nella fase più arcaica, nella prima metà del VII secolo, i corredi sono piuttosto poveri, con scarse armi e nessuna briglia di cavallo. Dalla seconda metà del VII invece si registra un aumento dei corredi, soprattutto dell'oggettistica bellica.

Il terzo gruppo comprende le evidenze localizzate lungo la zona costiera (Alekseev and Rjabkova 2010, 249). Quelle della fase arcaica sono poche e malamente documentate, mentre ben più significative saranno le evidenze del V e del IV secolo, tra cui si segnalano i kurgan di Bol'šaja Bliznica, alcuni del gruppo "Sette Fratelli", Karagodeuašch e, sulla riva opposta, Kul'Oba (Artamonov 1966, 62-73).

Per tracciare l'area di diffusione dei gruppi sciti, un altro elemento importante sono le sculture in pietra antropomorfe e le "pietre cervo", la cui comparsa nell'Europa orientale e nel Caucaso settentrionale è senza dubbio associata a gruppi di popolazioni che migrarono dalla regione dell'Asia centrale dal X secolo agli inizi del VIII (Ol'chovskij 2005, 92-93). È interessante evidenziare come la diffusione delle steli mostri una parziale discrepanza territoriale con la localizzazione dei tumuli funerari, soprattutto quelli aristocratici. Secondo alcuni studiosi, le steli apparentemente segnavano il confine territoriale dei gruppi nomadici e il fatto che non ne siano state recuperate a ovest del fiume Belaja potrebbe suggerire una mancanza di gruppi stabili sciti nel bacino del basso Kuban; infatti, sulla stessa appartenenza dei famosi tumuli di Kelermes agli Sciti è stato avanzato qualche dubbio (Erlich 1994, 44).

Vista la forte interazione tra i due gruppi, non è sempre facile stabilire un confine netto tra la cultura scita e quella meotica. Ampia e variegata oggettistica scita è stata rinvenuta in contesti meotici, così come importazioni meotiche, soprattutto ceramica, provengono da contesti funerari chiaramente sciti. Data la stretta contiguità territoriale tra contesti funerari, è possibile che esistesse una forte collaborazione, se non addirittura un'alleanza militare, tra le élite scite e meotiche, che diverrà poi ancora più marcata nelle fasi successive. A partire dalla fine del VI secolo, infatti, per la regione del Kuban è più appropriato parlare di fase "meotico-scitica", la quale raggiungerà il massimo splendore nei due secoli successivi.

Un esempio importante di simbiosi è dato dai kurgan dei "Sette Fratelli", nei pressi di Anapa, e datati dalla metà del V secolo alla fine del III (Artamonov 1966, 36-38; Gorončarovskij 2014). Scavati purtroppo nel 1875-1876 – epoca in cui le metodologie di indagine erano piuttosto approssimative – hanno rivelato ricchi corredi funerari, tra cui oggetti in metallo prezioso di ispirazione greca, meotico-scitica e achemenide. Molto probabilmente questi erano i luoghi di sepoltura dell'aristocrazia dei Sindi, una tribù meotica particolarmente attiva nelle interazioni tra colonie greche della costa e gruppi nomadici dell'entroterra (Gorončarovskij, Ivantchik 2010). Oltre che nell'oggettistica ritrovata nei tumuli elitari, la forte influenza greca e scita si manifesta anche nell'onomastica dei re sindi a noi noti dalle fonti: Ecateo, che portava un nome greco, diede a suo figlio il nome scita di Oktamasad (Tokhtas'ev 2006, 5).

La fine della presenza scitica nella regione di Kuban non si può determinare con chiarezza: già a partire dal V secolo il baricentro dell'interesse dei gruppi nomadici si sposta progressivamente dalla Caucasia alla costa settentrionale del Mar Nero, soprattutto nell'area compresa tra i fiumi Don e Buh, da cui proviene la maggioranza dell'evidenza scita del cosiddetto periodo classico. È infatti proprio a quest'epoca che risale la stragrande maggioranza dei monumenti sciti conosciuti: dei 2.300 monumenti registrati nelle steppe scitiche all'inizio degli anni '80, circa 2.000 sono stati datati al IV secolo a.C. (Černenko et al. 1986, 345).

Nella Caucasia settentrionale l'evidenza artistica e archeologica suggerisce invece una progressiva fusione tra l'elemento scita e quello meotico, con una finale prevalenza di quest'ultimo. A poco a poco i gruppi sciti furono assorbiti dai Meoti per dissolversi definitivamente intorno al IV secolo, periodo in cui la cultura meotica acquisì il suo aspetto classico (Kantorovič, Erlich 2006, 13).

Terra

Il primo aspetto da prendere in esame per definire le interazioni economiche riguarda il territorio e le risorse che esso può offrire.

Il fiume Kuban divide essenzialmente due grandi eco-regioni. La parte settentrionale è una zona principalmente pianeggiante e steppica, che rappresenta la propaggine meridionale della vasta prateria Pontico-Caspica. La parte meridionale, invece, presenta un ambiente più variegato: la zona montuosa è caratterizzata da ampi pascoli alpini, strette vallate e pendii ricoperti di vasti boschi di conifere, mentre nella parte centrale le vallate si allargano e ampi boschi di latifoglie si estendono su un ambiente perlopiù collinare. A est di Krasnodar il fiume vira verso occidente, creando

un'ampia zona pianeggiante e particolarmente fertile grazie alla presenza di un suolo ricco di sostanze organiche, il chernozem (=terra nera).

L'area più occidentale rientra storicamente nella regione del Bosforo, la quale si estende lungo la costa orientale del Mar Nero, grossomodo dallo stretto di Kerch fino alla città di Adler. Una parte della fascia costiera si snoda in contiguità con la catena del Caucaso maggiore, la quale protegge la costa dai venti freddi settentrionali, garantisce abbondanti precipitazioni e offre numerosi e brevi corsi d'acqua che dalle montagne si gettano nel mare.

L'ambiente geografico antico era sostanzialmente simile a quello odierno, ma con alcune importanti differenze: la prima era l'assenza della penisola di Taman, in quanto in antico era presente solo un arcipelago di basse isole; la seconda era la posizione della linea costiera, probabilmente cinque o sei metri al di sotto di quella moderna (Lozovoj and Dobrovol'skaja 2010).

La diffusione e il sostentamento di gruppi pastorali sempre più numerosi fu probabilmente agevolato da un favorevole cambiamento climatico occorso sul finire del II millennio in Caucasia, Anatolia orientale e zona Caspica (Issar and Zohar 2007, 165; Özfırat 2005; Ökse 2017). Questa evidenza si ricollega a una tendenza simile già messa in luce per l'Asia centrale che potrebbe spiegare, almeno in parte, l'emergere del nomadismo euroasiatico all'inizio del I millennio a.C. (van Geel et al. 2004).

Combinando dati storici e archeologici sappiamo però che, sul finire del I millennio a.C., nell'area del Kuban si è accentuato un processo regressivo dell'ecosistema locale a causa di una serie di concomitanti fenomeni naturali e antropici (terremoti, regressione del mare, aumento dell'abrasione costiera, disboscamento), il quale portò a una significativa steppificazione dei territori dell'area, alla salinizzazione del suolo e alla quasi completa distruzione delle aree boschive.

La risorsa principale del Kuban è l'ampio terreno fertile e perlopiù pianeggiante, presente soprattutto lungo la riva destra e il suo più grande affluente, il Laba. Grazie a delle precipitazioni sostanzialmente regolari e a una popolazione perlopiù sedentaria, la regione poteva offrire rese elevate di cereali con un livello relativamente basso di sviluppo infrastrutturale. Le principali colture erano frumento, orzo, miglio e varie tipologie di legumi (Garbuzov 2010).

Evidenze di attività agricole sono ampiamente attestate nelle comunità meotiche, anche per le fasi più arcaiche, benché l'aumento esponenziale avvenga dal V secolo in poi (Kameneckij 2011, 248-254). Anche i villaggi della cultura Koban, nella Caucasia centrale, praticavano l'agricoltura, principalmente terrazzata (Korobov, Borisov 2013). Con la fondazione delle colonie greche, la *chora* venne intensamente sfruttata, con ampi investimenti e allargamento delle superfici coltivabili. La produzione cerealicola

crebbe sensibilmente, anche per soddisfare il netto aumento della popolazione locale.

Oltre ai prodotti agricoli, il Kuban offriva altri asset economici, primo fra tutti l'allevamento: sia la zona steppica sulla riva destra del fiume sia i pascoli nelle zone collinari e montane erano luoghi adatti a sostenere varie e diversificate mandrie di animali, molte delle quali erano verosimilmente gestite dai gruppi nomadici. Oltre ai cavalli, erano sfruttate anche altre risorse: pelli conciate, lana, carne e latticini potevano trovare facili sbocchi nei mercati della costa o negli insediamenti meotici.

Inoltre, tutto il Mar Nero orientale e la Caucasia potevano offrire legname e altri prodotti forestali, come resine e pece. Secondo Strabone (XI.2.15) tutto il Caucaso era ricco di foreste e legname di ogni tipo, in particolare quello utilizzato nelle costruzioni navali, e i fiumi permettevano il trasporto del legname fino alla costa (XI.2.17). Quando Mitridate VI Eupatore conquistò la zona, è proprio da qui che ricevette "la maggior parte degli aiuti per la sua flotta" (XI.2.18). Il commercio del legname sembra però aver avuto un orizzonte principalmente locale e regionale, in quanto molte altre zone del Mediterraneo, dall'Italia alla Macedonia e dalla Ionia al Levante, erano ricche di foreste di conifere (Meiggs 1982; Hannestad 2007).

Scarse sono invece le risorse minerarie locali, con solo qualche deposito aurifero e piccoli depositi di ferro di scarsa qualità nella zona centrale (Košelenko and Kuznecov 2010, 221). Ricchi e variegati sono invece i depositi minerari della Caucasia meridionale, sia sul versante georgiano del Caucaso maggiore sia in tutto il Caucaso minore, soprattutto nella zona di confine tra Armenia e Azerbaijan, dove si trovano abbondanti giacimenti di oro, rame e ferro. Diversi passi montani permettevano il collegamento con la regione della Colchide (Raev 2006), mentre un'altra importante via di comunicazione collegava la zona centrale tramite il passo di Darial, lungo il medesimo percorso della famosa "Strada Militare Georgiana".

Altrettanto importante è il ruolo dei materiali da costruzione. L'ampia disponibilità di argilla garantiva una produzione di mattoni a basso costo in tutta la regione del Mar Nero. Più problematico era invece l'approvvigionamento delle pietre da costruzione necessarie alla realizzazione degli edifici monumentali delle città del Bosforo, per le quali esistono numerose attestazioni nell'evidenza storica e archeologica. Alcune città come Gorgippa, Torikos e Dioscurias, localizzate in prossimità della catena del Caucaso, potevano accedere facilmente a depositi di pietre varie, ma quelle nella penisola di Taman o nel basso Don dovevano per forza importare il materiale da costruzione dalla Crimea o dal Caucaso. Una dimensione internazionale del commercio era rappresentata invece dal marmo, assente nel Mar Nero settentrionale e orientale (Košelenko and Kuznecov 2010, 210-213).

Acqua

L'acqua della regione è fondamentale per una molteplicità di aspetti, a partire dalle precipitazioni, tendenzialmente abbondanti e ben distribuite: esse permettono uno sfruttamento agricolo abbastanza regolare e contribuiscono a creare un ricchissimo sistema idrografico incentrato sul Kuban e i suoi numerosi affluenti. Altrettanto importanti sono i numerosi e brevi corsi d'acqua che dal versante meridionale del Caucaso maggiore si gettano nel Mar Nero, in quanto è lungo questi assi fluviali che si snodano le principali vie di comunicazione tra Colchide e Caucasia (Raev 2006, Figura 1). Numerosi passi montani e rotte fluviali permettevano di collegare i due versanti del Caucaso maggiore, dove le città costiere della Colchide fungevano da ulteriori poli economici. Le tre poleis principali erano Phasis, Gyenos e Dioscurias, che si identificano con le moderne Poti, Ochamchire e Sokhumi. La rotta principale seguiva verosimilmente il fiume Phasis, parzialmente navigabile, e l'omonima città era il porto di entrata principale per tutti i numerosi oggetti greci importati e diffusi nell'attuale Georgia (Lordkipanidze 2002).

Fondamentali sono pure i distanti bacini del Don e del Volga, ai quali era però possibile accedere facilmente vista la contiguità territoriale tra questi fiumi e l'ampia distesa steppica che si dipana verso settentrione a partire dalla riva destra del Kuban.

Oltre ai fiumi, è ovviamente il mare a offrire i collegamenti più significativi. La fondazione di varie colonie greche nella regione orientale del Mar Nero permise di stabilire un collegamento diretto tra la Caucasia e tutto l'ecumene ellenico. I primi contatti sporadici risalgono già alla fine del VII secolo, quando nel Kuban, così come in tutta la regione del Mar Nero settentrionale, appaiono le prime importazioni greche, principalmente di anfore da Clazomene (Monachov 2003).

Con la fondazione di varie colonie tra VI e V secolo gli scambi diverranno più intensi e regolari, coinvolgendo sia le comunità meotiche del medio e basso Kuban sia i gruppi nomadici.

Per ricostruire il fitto sistema di scambi tra i vari gruppi della Caucasia bisogna innanzitutto suddividerlo in tre ambiti territoriali: commercio locale, regionale e internazionale.

Il commercio locale avveniva su brevi distanze tra comunità abitanti le medesime nicchie ecologiche. È principalmente rappresentato dagli scambi tra le città greche e il loro immediato entroterra, oppure dalle interazioni tra gli insediamenti meotici e i gruppi nomadici nel medio Kuban. Essendo rappresentato soprattutto da beni primari, in particolar modo cibo e prodotti di artigianato non elitario, ha lasciato poche impronte sia nelle fonti che nel contesto archeologico. Particolarmente significativo è

però lo stretto rapporto tra Meoti e Sciti. I primi fornivano prodotti agricoli e artigianali ai gruppi nomadici, evidenza ben espressa dall'abbondante ceramica meotica rinvenuta in tombe scite. I secondi, invece, pare abbiano condiviso soprattutto oggettistica bellica, forse anche cavalli, visto l'alto numero di armi scite e briglie rinvenute in tombe meotiche.

Il commercio regionale coinvolge più direttamente tutti i soggetti. Per il periodo arcaico generalmente mancano prove di scambi commerciali tra le diverse colonie del Mar Nero. L'unica evidenza significativa è una placca di piombo inscritta del 530–510 a.C. proveniente da Fanagoria sulla penisola di Taman, che dimostra l'esistenza di un commercio di schiavi con Olbia (Vinogradov 1998, 160–163).

I gruppi sciti acquisivano materiale prodotto o importato nelle colonie greche della costa, mentre gestivano l'afflusso di prodotti provenienti dal bacino del Volga e dell'Ural, soprattutto metalli, che venivano poi reindirizzati verso le zone a maggiore antropizzazione, ossia il delta del Don e del Kuban.

Il commercio internazionale è quello più significativo e maggiormente attestato, sia nelle fonti sia nei rinvenimenti. Il ruolo principale è ricoperto dalle colonie greche della costa, sia per l'esportazione che per l'importazione di beni.

Le merci importate dai gruppi dell'entroterra, nomadi inclusi, comprendevano soprattutto vino e olio d'oliva. Le prime anfore della regione di Kuban trovate nei tumuli sciti risalgono tra VI e V secolo. Un altro bene importato sono gli oggetti di lusso, dall'oreficeria ai tessuti. Alcuni sembrano realizzati da artigiani locali seguendo modelli greci o da artigiani greci residenti, ma i migliori furono verosimilmente prodotti in Grecia, molto probabilmente ad Atene (Sokol'skij 1971). A partire dal V secolo anche le armi di tipo greco vengono importate, soprattutto elmi e corazze.

I cereali sono probabilmente il principale prodotto esportato, benché fonti e dato archeologico suggeriscano che le esportazioni di grano dalle colonie greche del Mar Nero settentrionale iniziarono solo nel V secolo a.C. (Noonan 1973, 232). La più antica menzione di commercio del grano è infatti presente in Erodoto in riferimento alla campagna di Serse in Grecia, dove è indicato un generico "Ponto" come luogo di provenienza delle navi frumentarie (Er. VII.147). Bisogna sottolineare come il ruolo e l'importanza del Mar Nero nel commercio cerealicolo mediterraneo sia un tema ancora discusso, e secondo alcuni anche troppo sopravvalutato (Braund 2007). Sarebbe un errore supporre che tutta la regione fosse orientata allo scambio con il mondo egeo, e con Atene in particolare, alla quale veniva dedicato un costante surplus cerealicolo.

Le stesse fonti greche del V e IV secolo menzionano solo brevemente l'importanza del grano del Mar Nero e non riportano la presenza di significativi e

costanti carichi dalla regione. Mancano inoltre precisi riferimenti alle colonie della zona orientale. L'esportazione di grandi e costanti carichi di cerali era parzialmente limitata da diversi fattori, poiché la produzione effettiva era ben lungi dall'essere sicura, con eccedenze commerciabili, al riparo da siccità, epidemie o precipitazioni irregolari. Non va nemmeno tralasciata l'ipotesi di possibili impatti negativi derivanti da conflitti con le tribù meotiche e scitiche. Ad esempio, ci sono possibili evidenze di una distruzione di Panticapeo da parte degli Sciti a metà del VI secolo a.C. (Tolstikov et al. 2017, 14).

Oltre ai cereali, avevano un grande peso anche i prodotti ittici. Fiumi come il Don e il Kuban creavano grandi delta abbondanti di pesce, il quale non solo veniva esportato dal Mar Nero al Mediterraneo, ma costituiva una parte piuttosto importante della dieta degli Sciti (Gavriljuk 2005). Diversi autori greci fanno precisi riferimenti al pesce proveniente dal Mare d'Azov e dallo stretto di Kerch, soprattutto lo storione, come un bene prezioso per l'esportazione (Erodoto IV.53; Strabone VII.3.18; VII.6.2; XI.2.4). Inoltre, sono state portate alla luce numerose cisterne per lo stoccaggio di pesce salato nelle città della costa (Košelenko and Kuznecov 2010, 209-210). Un'ulteriore risorsa connessa allo sfruttamento ittico è lo sviluppo delle saline e la vendita del sale (Baladié 1994).

Un ruolo economico significativo era poi ricoperto dal commercio di schiavi, attività su cui apparentemente detenevano il monopolio i Meoti, i quali vendevano anche membri della loro stessa comunità (Blavatskij 1969; Avram 2007). In Erodoto ci sono precise menzioni dell'esistenza di fiorenti mercati di schiavi nel mondo meotico; la città di Dioscurias, in particolare, fu descritta da Strabone come il maggiore mercato per molti beni, comprese grandi quantità dei migliori schiavi (Strab. Geo. XI.2.16; XI.5.6). Inoltre, recenti studi hanno sottolineato il ruolo della Colchide (Braud, Tsetskhladze 1989); in alcune ricerche si è appunto posto l'accento sulla rilevanza del commercio di schiavi, visto come il bene principale esportato dagli Sciti (Gavriljuk 2003).

Nell'epoca arcaica gli scambi aumentarono in maniera significativa solo con la fondazione di Hermonassa e Fanagoria nella seconda metà del VI secolo. Le principali relazioni commerciali si dipanavano sull'asse del Kuban e i suoi numerosi affluenti della riva sinistra, combinando rotte fluviali e terrestri. Lungo questo percorso, i primi mercanti greci o intermediari locali cominciarono a spostarsi sempre più verso l'interno, seguendo forse le direttrici utilizzate anche dai nomadi durante le migrazioni. I beni portati dai mercanti erano soprattutto vino e olio in anfore, nonché ceramica elitaria a figure nere, il cui trasporto era certamente più agevole lungo i corsi d'acqua. Difficile è invece tracciare il verosimile scambio di prodotti con scarsa o nulla attestazione archeologica, come tutti i beni ricavabili dall'allevamento animale: latticini, pelli conciate, lana e carne secca.

Il commercio fluviale richiedeva però la presenza di una logistica funzionante, che comprendeva ormeggi, strutture di stoccaggio, imbarcazioni a basso pescaggio servite da squadre di piloti, marinai e guardie. Lungo il corso del Kuban vi erano sicuramente degli empori che fungevano da catalizzatori per i collegamenti con le zone più interne della steppa o delle montagne. Nonostante la ramificazione del sistema fluviale, la consegna delle merci nelle zone più interne veniva effettuata solo su carri trainati da animali. Rinvenimenti di ceramica greca sono attestati in siti meotici e sciti, anche in ambito montano, sin dalla fine del VI secolo (Figure 3-4).

A partire dalla fine del V e soprattutto nel IV secolo gli scambi si fanno più intensi ed è a questa fase che datano la maggior parte delle evidenze greche in contesti meotici. Cambiano anche i luoghi di provenienza della ceramica. Nella fase arcaica essa proveniva principalmente dal Mediterraneo, mentre dall'inizio del IV secolo acquisiscono più importanza i centri del Ponto meridionale, come Eraclea (25% della ceramica del Kuban) e Sinope (20%) (Košelenko et al 2010, 273).

La prima parte del fitto sistema di scambi era gestita dalle autorità delle città del Bosforo. Le navi mercantili arrivavano nelle città della costa portando soprattutto vino e olio. Nei porti venivano effettuate tutte le operazioni doganali necessarie e, successivamente, i mercanti greci trasportavano i prodotti ai vari empori delle tribù locali. A questo punto erano le élite scite e meotiche a gestire le fasi successive, poiché erano interes-

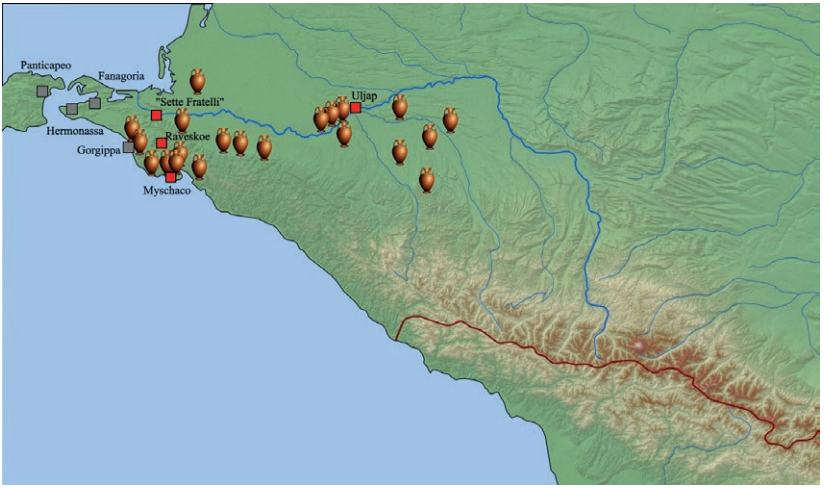

Figura 3. Carta di distribuzione di ceramica greca con principali siti meotici e colonie greche.

Figura 4. A: Ceramica greca in tombe meotiche (Limberis, Marčenko 2010, 205, Figura 28-29); B: Ceramica greca da Ul' (Ivantchik, Leskov 2015, tav. 27, 28).

sate ad aggiudicarsi un profitto partecipando attivamente all'organizzazione e al controllo delle operazioni commerciali. Esse non solo garantivano la sicurezza ai mercanti greci che si spostavano nell'entroterra, ma convogliavano e redistribuivano parte dei beni nei centri sotto il loro controllo, i quali fungevano da veri e propri empori commerciali per le comunità native della Caucasia. Probabilmente il più importante di questi empori si trovava nell'insediamento di Elizavetinskij, nei pressi dei kurgan dei "Sette Fratelli", nella zona controllata dai Sindi.

Oro

Il solido sistema di scambi tra VI e IV secolo portò a un sostanziale aumento della ricchezza sia per le colonie greche sia per le élite nomadiche e meotiche che gestivano il commercio nell'entroterra. Parte di questa ricchezza veniva reinvestita nell'acquisto di oggetti elitari, il cui possesso ed esibizione era un aspetto fondamentale della manifestazione di autorità dei leader tribali. Pertanto, non solo è possibile segnalare un aumento dell'oggettistica di pregio nelle tombe aristocratiche, ma molti di questi oggetti sono realizzati sia da botteghe greche secondo il tipico stile ellenico sia da artigiani locali capaci di ibridare tradizioni artistiche differenti.

L'evidenza artistica propriamente scita è principalmente rappresentata da oggetti realizzati secondo i canoni del cosiddetto "stile animalistico", uno degli elementi che maggiormente connotano tutto l'universo nomadico euroasiatico dalla Siberia all'Ungheria del I millennio a.C., con diversi sottogruppi su base territoriale.

Lo stile animalistico decora quasi sempre parte di un oggetto, probabilmente non solo per ragioni estetiche, ma anche con lo scopo di conferire magicamente all'artefatto e al suo proprietario le proprietà degli animali raffigurati. La bronzistica è la categoria rappresentata più di frequente, ma ai fini del presente studio si farà riferimento solo all'oggettistica in metallo prezioso.

La variante del Caucaso settentrionale è rappresentata principalmente da oggetti rinvenuti nel Kuban, indipendentemente dal fatto che gli artigiani fossero Meoti, Sciti o di altra origine (Kantorovič 2010, 290), poiché non è facile tracciare un confine netto tra le due tradizioni artistiche. La stragrande maggioranza delle immagini dell'arte meotica del Kuban dell'epoca scitica sono zoomorfe. Lo zoomorfismo fu influenzato non solo dalle tradizioni scite: un ruolo fu giocato anche dallo sviluppo della tradizione proto-meotica, in cui temi geometrici coesistevano con singole immagini zoomorfe.

Nella fase più arcaica, l'oggettistica in metallo prezioso è rappresentata da pochi oggetti provenienti da alcuni tumuli elitari. Vi sono diversi esempi di una chiara influenza od origine mesopotamica risultante dalle attività dei gruppi sciti nel Vicino Oriente (Kisel' 2003). Oltre ad oggetti direttamente acquisiti durante le campagne mesopotamiche, è possibile che artisti provenienti dall'Anatolia, dalla Ionia, dall'Assiria, dall'Urartu e dall'Iran lavorassero per i loro committenti sciti in qualche centro produttivo della Caucasia settentrionale (Il'inskaja and Terenožkin 1983, 62, 67). Gli esempi più famosi sono costituiti dai set aurei di Kelermes (Figura 5), da varie placchette in oro da Ul' e dal kurgan distrutto di Semikolennye (Figura 6c). Altrettanto importante è la massiccia placca aurea raffigurante un cervo: essa proviene da Kostromskoj e ci offre una delle più antiche raffigurazioni della tipica posa scita-siberiana del cervo (Figura 6b). Alcuni lo considerano "volante", sebbene la disposizione delle zampe sia più simile alla fase di riposo. In effetti, tale cervo può essere considerato "giacente", tenendo conto della posizione del corpo e del collo. Questo ed altri oggetti testimoniano chiaramente la presenza di botteghe artigiane altamente specializzate tra gli Sciti stessi, come tra l'altro testimoniato dall'evidenza archeologica, soprattutto per i secoli successivi (Lifantii 2023).

Dall'inizio del VI secolo l'influenza mesopotamica scompare e si forma gradualmente lo stile tipicamente locale della fase meotico-scitica. Inoltre, parallelamente alla penetrazione greca, si registra l'influenza artistica ellenica, sia con copie locali sia con importazioni.

L'arte meoto-scita è caratterizzata da un repertorio figurativo limitato a quattro gruppi principali: ungulati, animali da preda, uccelli e animali sincretici. Questi elementi zoomorfi vanno a decorare soprattutto oggettistica in bronzo, come morsi di cavalli, armi e piccola gioielleria. Gli ogget-

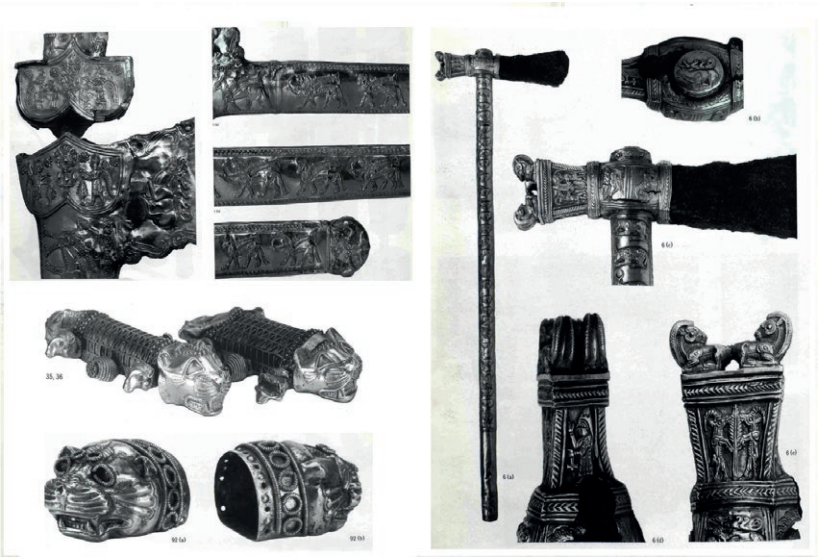

Figura 5. Oggetti in oro da Kelermes (Galanina 1997, tav. 8, 9, 10, 27, 42)

ti in oro non sono numerosi: si tratta principalmente di placchette usate per decorare vestiti (Figura 7).

Durante il V secolo, le caratteristiche della cultura scitica nel Kuban scompaiono gradualmente a causa dello spostamento di gruppi nomadi nella zona del Mar Nero settentrionale o della loro assimilazione da parte dei Meoti. Di conseguenza, nel IV secolo l'arte zoomorfa del Kuban è significativamente isolata dalle altre varianti locali dello stile animalistico scita (Kantorovič 2010, 290), che ormai vede come centro propulsivo principale la regione del Mar Nero settentrionale.

Perdura però la rappresentazione del cervo nella sua tipica posa. Se nella regione settentrionale del Mar Nero i cervi sono mostrati con il collo verticale e la testa orizzontale rivolta in avanti, nell'arte meotico-scita sono raffigurati principalmente con la testa girata all'indietro, con il collo piegato e il palco aperto frontalmente. Sono inoltre rappresentati tori, cavalli, alci, cinghiali; ci sono poi numerose immagini di animali predatori, tra cui dominano i felini, ma figurano anche riproduzioni isolate di lupi. Tra gli uccelli, i più comuni sono i rapaci, soprattutto aquile e avvoltoi, ma nel IV secolo l'influenza greca e achemenide porterà rappresentazioni di grifoni come leoni alati con testa d'aquila.

Il culmine dell'influenza straniera, soprattutto ellenica, si registra nel IV secolo. Particolarmente importanti sono i rinvenimenti dai tumuli dei

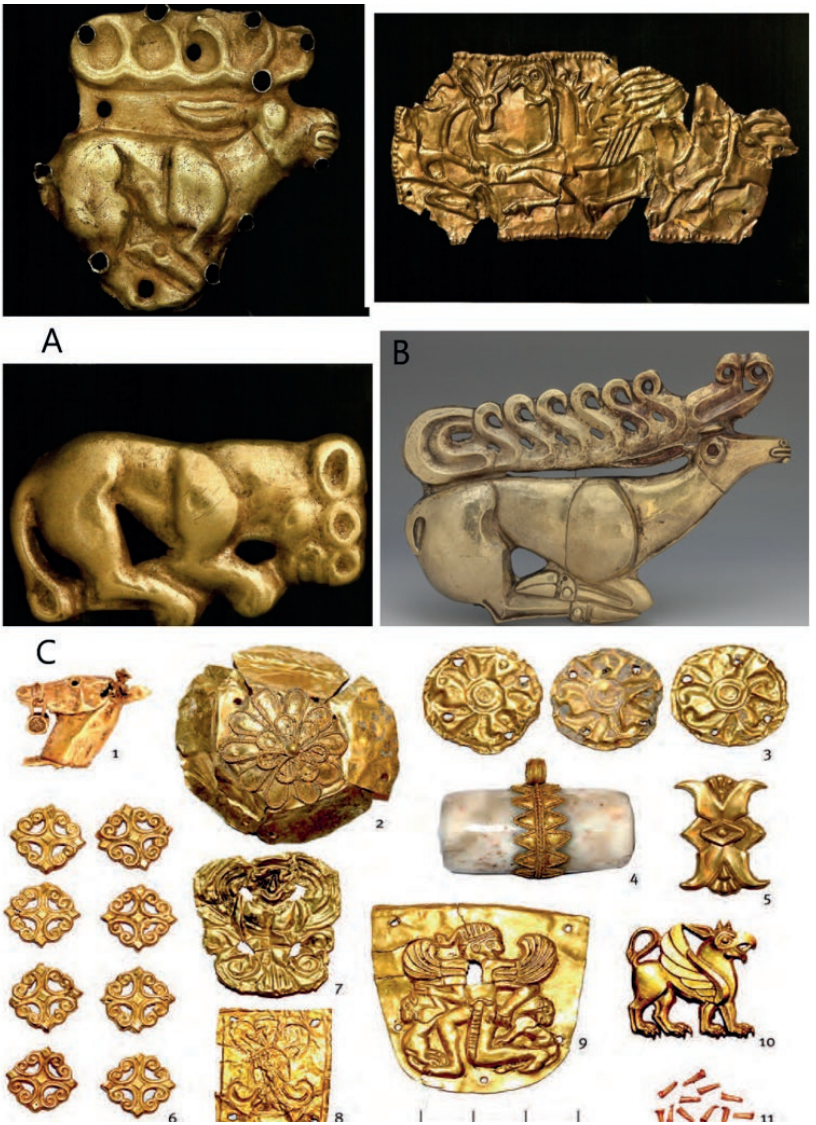

Figura 6. Varie placchette decorative in oro. A: Ul' (Ivantchik, Leskov 2015, tav. 4, 5, 9, 29); B: Kostromskoj (31,7x19 cm; ©The State Hermitage Museum); C: Semikolennye (Rjabkova 2020, Figura 1).

"Sette Fratelli" con un ampio set di oggetti in oro e argento (Figura 8); tra di essi spiccano certamente cinque *rhytà* in argento (Vlasova 2001), uno

Figura 7. Placchette in oro in stile meotico-scita (Kantorovič 2010, Figura 11, 22).

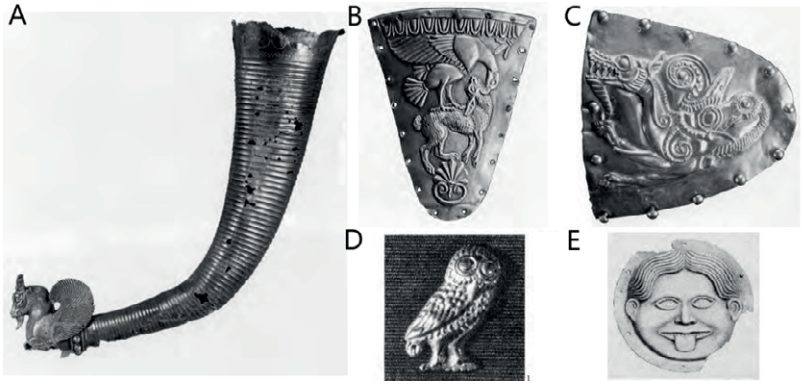

Figura 8. A-C: Oggetti in oro e argento dai kurgan dei "Sette Fratelli"; D: placchetta decorativa per tessuti; E: elemento per corazza (Gorončarovskij 2014, Figura 15, 16, 18, 19).

dei quali di produzione o influenza achemenide. Altrettanto importante è il santuario di Uljap, da cui proviene un rhyton d'argento e oro con un fregio con scene di gigantomachia e un vaso in argento con decorazione geometrica e zoomorfa (Figura 9).

Nel IV secolo si fanno più marcate le importazioni di oggetti realizzati da artigiani greci, verosimilmente operanti in botteghe nel Regno del Bosforo, che rappresentano ormai il grosso dell'evidenza elitaria, come ben dimostrato dai rinvenimenti nei kurgan di Karagodeuašch e Kurdžip.

Figura 9. Oggetti in oro e argento da Uljap e "Sette Fratelli" (AA VV 1990, cat. 110; Tresiter 2010, Figura 14-16).

Nel medesimo periodo l'influenza ellenica si fa più forte anche nell'architettura funeraria: la camera sepolcrale dei tumuli è realizzata in blocchi di pietra (Figura 10), seguendo il medesimo stile delle tombe a camera greche, probabilmente emanato da Panticapeo.

La variante Kuban dello stile animalistico scompare alla fine del IV-inizio del III secolo a.C. Non è chiaro se ciò sia dipeso dall'influsso culturale esterno, principalmente greco, dalla pressione sarmata o, semplicemente, da una scomparsa inaspettata insieme all'intera cultura propriamente scita.

Conclusioni

Sin dalla fase arcaica, grossomodo dal VII secolo a.C. in poi, la regione del Kuban ha testimoniato uno stretto legame tra elementi sedentari e nomadici, con forti scambi commerciali, influenze culturali, religiose e artistiche.

La fondazione del Regno del Bosforo, ormai entità autonoma e non più lontana periferia dell'ecumene ellenico, contribuì fortemente ai processi di interazione locale e allo sviluppo del commercio internazionale. La forte attrattività economica e culturale delle città sulla costa finirà per esercitare un'influenza significativa sulle comunità meotiche e scite. A partire dalla fine del V secolo a.C. il numero dei kurgan sciti nella Caucasia diminuisce sensibilmente, così come i caratteri propri dell'elemento noma-

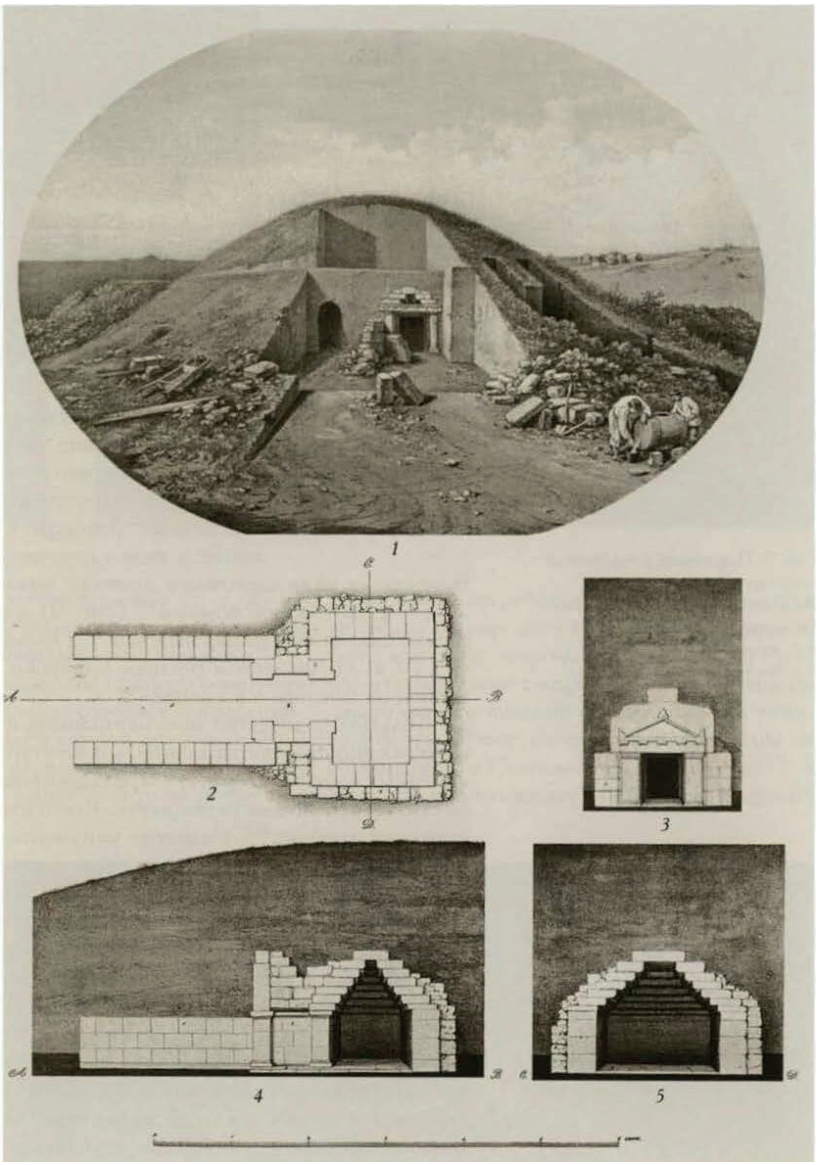

Figura 10. Schizzo e planimetria del kurgan di Tarasov, presso Anapa (Sudarev 2010, 434, Figura 10).

dico. Apparentemente, si registra una più forte simbiosi tra l'elemento scita e quello meotico, con una finale prevalenza di quest'ultimo. I Meoti, infatti, manterranno anche per i secoli a venire un'impronta culturale propria, mentre saranno i gruppi nomadici ad essere via via assimilati, o dai Meoti stessi o dai Greci. Un fenomeno simile si registrò anche nel Mar Nero settentrionale e in Crimea nel IV e III secolo a.C.

All'elemento scita subentrò una nuova ondata nomadica rappresentata dai Sarmati, i quali andranno ad occupare le nicchie ecologiche e gli spazi commerciali precedentemente appannaggio dei gruppi sciti, ravvivando l'intensa interazione tra le varie comunità del Kuban, almeno fino al II-III secolo d.C., quando il Regno del Bosforo e le comunità meotiche non avranno più la forza militare, economica e culturale per opporsi alle continue pressioni esterne di Goti, Alani e Unni.

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The Evolving Integration of Environmental, Traditional, and Moral Themes in Three Works by Chingiz Aitmatov

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Abstract. This article looks at ecological themes in three novels by the Soviet Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov. The three works are *The White Steamship* (1970), *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980), and *The Executioner's Block* or *Plakha* (1987). Within and between the three works there is a complex and changing interplay between environmental, moral, and cultural concerns relating primarily to Central Asian society but also indirectly to the Soviet Union. Aitmatov's ability to critique the Soviet system and its literary theory evolved over time, from the stagnation of Brezhnev's stabilisation to the optimism of Gorbachev's *perestroika*. Within the political constraints of the day and as a minority author within a Russian-dominated literary edifice, Aitmatov argued for greater concern for the environment as well as the need to respect the worldviews of indigenous peoples. The social imaginaries he constructed initially emphasised the role of Central Asian cultures as guardians of sacred lands and ecosystems, but these later gave way to a moral and cultural ecological imperative applicable to all people in the Soviet Union. In *The White Steamship*, Aitmatov draws on traditional Kyrgyz myths to stress the importance of the forest and the animals within it, reminding his readers of the danger of losing their roots in the face of Soviet communism. His focus in *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* is the seizing of traditional sacred Kazakh lands and marginalisation of Kazakh cultural values by the Soviets. Finally, in *Plakha*, sensitive and intelligent wolves are juxtaposed with destructive human beings, who hunt vast numbers of animals to fulfil Soviet production quotas. The inclusion of a Russian hero confirms the broadened scope of Aitmatov's notion of ecologically and morally responsible traditions. For Aitmatov, respect for the environment, the rights of minorities, and pride in non-Russian cultures and traditions formed an integrated whole which critiqued communist materialism and its modernist emphasis on human agency and power. From *The White Steamship to Plakha* Aitmatov's interest shifts from a narrow ethnic scope to a broader interrogation of

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Soviet civilisation. While Aitmatov's works were focused on the Soviet state's attitude to the natural world and its non-Russian peoples, his combination of ethnic moralities and ecological concern remains relevant for today.

Keywords: Aitmatov, ecocriticism, social imaginary, Central Asia, tradition, environment, postcolonialism.

Introduction

The works of Chingiz Aitmatov are a window into the lives of Central Asian peoples in the Soviet Union over a period of around half a century. As a non-Russian author and enthusiast for his own Kyrgyz culture, Aitmatov played a unique role in the literary world of the USSR. He was also a social commentator and his novels provide insights into a changing Central Asia in the Brezhnev and Gorbachev periods. Aitmatov wrote on sensitive issues of ethnic identity within a Soviet system whose dominant language and culture were Russian. He also paid particular attention to the natural world and its vulnerability to Soviet modernisation and materialism.

In three of his most famous works, *The White Steamship* (1972), *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1983), and *The Place of the Skull* (1989) (also known as *Plakha* or *The Executioner's Block*), there exists a quadrilateral relationship between moral goodness, religious tradition in a broad sense, a positive attitude to nature, and affirmation of one's ethnic culture. The scope of the four elements increases from *The White Steamship* to *Plakha*, with the developing freedom for Soviet authors as Brezhnev's stagnation gave way to Gorbachev's *glasnost'* and Aitmatov's growing appreciation of cultural diversity and the growing environmental crisis. In *The White Steamship*, Aitmatov's focus is the culture and activities of a small group of people in a corner of the Kyrgyz republic, yet *Plakha* is concerned with a larger area of Soviet Central Asia and the moral and ecological attitudes of Soviet citizens in general, irrespective of ethnicity and religious tradition.

The study employs ideas from ecocriticism, supplementing them with the social imaginary and postcolonial theory. After introducing Aitmatov and locating him within the Soviet literary tradition, the article traces the expanding cultural and spatial scope of the complex elements mentioned above. Within this governing theme, the paper looks at the three works in turn, before bringing the conclusions together in an integrative commentary.

Chingiz Aitmatov

The celebrated Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov was born in 1928 in Kyrgyzstan. He grew up in a large family and was familiar with his own ethnic legends and traditions, yet his parents also taught him Russian language and literature as an investment for the future. When he was only nine years old his father, a loyal communist, was arrested and shot during a Stalinist purge of Central Asians suspected of politically deviant tendencies (Djagolov 2009).

Before becoming an author, Aitmatov trained for a career in agriculture and then became a journalist for Pravda. He was steeped in the culture and daily life of the Kyrgyz people, and familiar with the successes and failings of the Soviet system. He eventually became an adviser to Gorbachev and ambassador to Belgium. His dual Kyrgyz and Soviet persona, a 'hybrid' (Djagalov 2009, 29), was popular in a country whose leadership seemed very Russian after Stalin (Haber 2003, 109). Igmen (2012, 3) describes the strong influence of Russian language and administrators in the Kyrgyz SSR and Djagalov (2009, 29) argues that there was a dichotomy between Moscow as the 'metropole' and non-Russian regions in the East.

Aitmatov's relationship with the Soviet centre was complex and has been the subject of much debate. For Haber, he was a 'faithful and highly visible member of the Soviet establishment' (2003, 109). Some Kyrgyz saw him as betraying his people and culture for his own ends, while Soviet literary theorists accused him of infidelity to socialist realism (Haber 2003). Other Central Asians praised him for promoting their culture and giving the region a voice in a Soviet Union which to minority peoples seemed very Russian; Kyrgyz intellectuals felt their heritage affirmed in an environment which characterised progress as Russian. Haber (2003) notes the artful weaving of ethnic themes and Soviet ideas in Aitmatov's work, allowing him to skirt controversy while remaining politically orthodox. Olcott (1989) is less charitable, claiming that at a time when the USSR presented itself as a harmonious melting pot of cultures, Aitmatov's position on ethnicity in *The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years* (1980) would have caused an ethnic Russian to be silenced or even jailed.

Aitmatov within Soviet Literary Theory

Aitmatov functioned within the Soviet system's political constraints and needs to be located within the flow of Soviet literary theory. After the Second World War, socialist realism was criticised because authors described the world around them but did not project the idealised soci-

ety required by political propagandists (Shneidman 1979). Although no one dared question the theory openly, a diversity of approaches to literature began to develop (Haber 2003), including a gradual division between the countryside and urban life (Shneidman 1979). It was easier to portray rural life positively, compared with the complexity and alienation of city life. In addition, under Brezhnev, socialist realism tended to elevate Russian culture, at a time when fault lines between a majority Russian population who saw the Soviet Union as a mono-ethnic state and ethnic minorities who feared russification caused the Party to promote the idea of a *Soviet* people (Haber 2003).

The village prose movement was a response to the multiple crises of war, economic difficulty, and Stalinism. It appealed to the alienated population of the Soviet cities by combining nostalgia and traditional (Russian) values and lifestyles in its portrayals of life in the countryside (Haber 2003). The genre was popular in the 60s and early 70s (Shneidman 1979), and although some critics hoped for stronger engagement with social issues, this Russian cultural framework was used to criticise environmental problems caused by Soviet policies, such as the destruction of villages by dams (Haber 2003, 29). Where socialist realism sought to show the wonders of the Soviet system, village prose revealed the reality of a countryside mismanaged by it (Haber 2003).

In a political space which advocated a supra-ethnic Soviet rather than Russian civilisation, the affirmation of traditional (Russian) heritage made it possible for Aitmatov to adapt Russian village prose for his own purposes (Goncharov 2024). Nostalgia and concern for the environment were as powerful among Central Asians as among Russians, and spoke powerfully to marginalised minorities. Aitmatov infused village prose with magical realism (Sigman 1998), including Central Asian myth, legend, and harmony with the environment. In the Soviet period, large numbers of Russians lived in Central Asia's urban centres while most Central Asians were rural dwellers (Guillot, Gavrilova, & Pudrovska 2011). By emphasising ethnic culture, Aitmatov subtly amended the local opposition of Russian village prose to an ethnic one of Central Asian versus Russian.

Three Works from Central Asia

The *povest'* or novella, *The White Steamship* (hereafter *Steamship*) was published in Russian in 1970, roughly halfway through the Brezhnev era. The main character is a sensitive, lonely Kyrgyz boy who lives with a group of relatives who disdain him. His only positive relationship is with his grandfather, and the boy believes in and derives comfort from Kyrgyz

creation myths about the horned mother deer which the old man shares with him. Towards the end of the story, his extended family, including his grandfather, kill and eat a group of deer which the boy identifies with the mother deer. The shocking event precipitates the boy's mental collapse due to betrayal and sadness. The story is both a warning against the loss of Kyrgyz heritage and values and a call to appreciate nature.

The Day Lasts More Than 100 Years (hereafter *The Day*) appeared in 1980, towards the end of Brezhnev's leadership. After the death of their colleague Kazangap, a group of Kazakhs seeks to bury him in accordance with their Islamic and traditional beliefs but cannot enter their ancestral burial grounds because they have become part of a cosmodrome. The man's own son prefers the Russian culture of the Soviet centre, disdaining his Kazakh heritage and seeing no need for a traditional burial, and a Russian-speaking Kazakh army officer turns the burial party away. The novel is complex, with a number of subplots and only relevant aspects are discussed here.

Finally, *The Place of the Skull* or *Plakha* was completed in 1987, a short time into the Gorbachev period. This complicated novel set in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan describes the mass culling of antelope for meat in order to fulfil Soviet quotas, the illegal drug trade in the USSR, and the unethical treatment of wolves by people. In this more nuanced work, there are honourable people among both Russians and Central Asians.

In *Steamship*, Aitmatov's maturing style moves away from socialist realism as he blends ethnic myths with 'Soviet' themes (Haber, 2003), causing the novella to be criticised and censored. By contrast, *The Day* was praised as an example of socialist realism *and* an ethnic minority interpretation of (Russian) village prose (Haber 2003, 112). Ukubayeva (2016) comments that *Steamship* appeared during a period of strong censorship of Soviet literature and contrasts that with Gorbachev's openness, noting the broad range of social issues mentioned in *Plakha*.

Relevant Literature on Aitmatov

The corpus of secondary literature on Aitmatov and his works is vast and this review is selective. According to Bakashova and Sukhomlinova, nature is a central character in all of his novels (2019, 407). For Akmataliev (2009), the heart of Aitmatov's philosophy is the notion that there is no humankind without nature and no nature without humankind. In their comments on *Plakha*, Sharyafetdinov, Khairullin, and Tairova (2023, 151) see the relationship as a polarity between a cosmos which is wise and spiritual and a chaos caused by human actions. Sydykbekov

and Ibraev take the more positive view that Aitmatov locates this unity not only in specific cultural contexts, but also in the epic-mythological layer (2021, 99), addressing ecological issues by appealing to spiritual and moral values (2021, 98). Concerning our responsibility to the environment, Ashenova and Velitchenko (2021, 82) comment that in Aitmatov's work 'the bright national identity of the characters of the writer's works is organically projected on a multicultural space, where everyone, regardless of ethnicity, must conform with the rules of world peace'.

While such studies helpfully identify Aitmatov's concerns and his way of addressing them, there is neither consideration of ethnic culture or religion as elements of morality nor treatment of the Soviet values and atheist materialism that clearly appear in his works. There is also no sense of progression from the earlier *Steamship* to the later *Plakha*; Aitmatov's positions and the characters through which he represented them are presented as static.

While Smirnova's commentary on Aitmatov does sketch a general movement from an earlier emphasis on Kyrgyz language and cultural motifs to the 'formation of a transcultural polylogue space' (2024, 123) and describes his anxiety about the future of human civilisation, she does not link the changing scope of Aitmatov's concerns about cultural loss with increasingly serious environmental degradation. In addition, there is no explicit acknowledgement of Aitmatov's focus on the relationship between morality and spirituality within an atheistic political space.

In the absence of any single four-way analysis of ecological, cultural, moral, and religious or faith themes in Aitmatov, I propose ecocriticism as a framework to examine the three works.

Ecocriticism as a Principal Lens

Glotfelty tells us that 'ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996, xviii), within which the portrayal of nature, the role of 'physical setting', and other factors such as race (1996, xix) may be significant. Ecocriticism acknowledges the fundamental interconnectedness between the natural world and human cultures, its inherent interdisciplinarity lending itself to this study of Aitmatov's works. In Aitmatov's work, nature is 'never just a background or a stage where the action takes place; it always has a much more important ethical, psychological and mythical role' (Rumpler and Kleimenova 1986, quoted in Roksandic 2002, 93). Brown goes further, asserting that understanding Aitmatov means grasping his 'observant affection for the landscape of Central Asia and its folk tradition' (1993, 53). Although each novel contains characters who respect nature and see

themselves as part of it, there also is a recurring theme of 'environmental plundering' (Haber 2003, 113).

According to Glotfelty (1996), ecocriticism can use various critical theories, such as psychoanalysis and feminism; the content and aims of Aitmatov's works and the cultural and political context of Soviet Central Asia suggest the social imaginary and postcolonial theory as supplemental theories. Rueckert's (1978) initial 'experiment in ecocriticism' sought to understand the role of literature 'in the biosphere' (Glotfelty 1996, xxxviii), yet his contemporary Annette Kolodny was already thinking more broadly. Her study of colonial era American literature produced the 'land-as-woman' metaphor, encapsulating the devaluing of the cultures and lands of ethnic 'others' and the consequent conquest and exploitation (1975, n.p.). This anticipates Loomba's (1998, 152) concept of the feminisation of subordinate cultures as well as physical territory under colonialism. In the post-Soviet context, the term 'colonised' can be controversial. While some Central Asian scholars condemn the Russian and Soviet presence in their region as colonialism, some western commentators would prefer a word which does not evoke western imperialists in Africa and Asia (Ferrari, personal communication, 16 Dec 2023). Indeed, the Kyrgyz scholar Igmen argues that Kyrgyz intellectuals strongly opposed the idea that the 'Soviet state represented a colonial power' (2012, 6).

In his seminal paper on colonialism in the Russian and Soviet context, Moore claims that Central Asia and other parts of the post-Soviet space are 'extraordinarily postcolonial' (2001, 114), even though postcolonial studies are rarely applied to the region. He views Moscow's activities in Central Asia as 'brutal Russian domination' (2001, 115), arguing that imperial Russian and Soviet policies were coherent with settler and neighbour colonisation. The first refers to the movement of significant numbers of people from a powerful, colonising nation into a sparsely populated land; consider the westward expansions of the United States and Australia. In neighbour colonisation a powerful country encroaches upon and expands into the territory of a weaker country with which it shares a border. Moore's overall conclusion is that 'Russia and then the Soviet Union exercised powerful colonial control over much of the earth for from fifty to two hundred years' (2001, 123). For Yusupova, 'the violent history of Russian/Soviet colonialism' (2023, 683) and its attitudes of superiority and exploitation echo the practices and policies of the north Atlantic imperial powers. A generation after Rueckert and Kolodny, Huggan and Tiffin's monograph on the coming together of postcolonialism and ecocriticism describes the powerful combination of 'environmental imperialism' and marginalisation of 'indigenous cultures, philosophies and worldviews' (2010, 7) among settler colonists.

The term *social imaginary* is defined simply by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor: 'the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society (2007, 156). Social imaginaries go beyond the primarily intellectual and include the 'deeper normative notions and images' (Taylor 2007, 171) and shared cultural heritage (Taylor 2004, 23) which connect people in a given society. Steger agrees that social imaginaries explain how people, 'members of a community – fit together' (2009, p.6) and claims that they are normative in that they represent and convey certain expectations. Taylor (2007, 172) adds that they contain a shared sense of how things should be. Social practices not only help form the social imaginary but are also influenced by it; in Taylor and Steger, ideas and practices of the past continue to shape present social imaginaries (James 2017, 41). Steger (2009) explores the tension between past and present and concludes that social imaginaries are far from permanent and can change quickly. In addition, Steger's (2009) discussion of what he calls the *global imaginary* argues that modern imaginaries work in diverse and extended cultural spaces and at different social levels, uniting on the one hand the rich elites who drive and benefit from globalisation and on the other impoverished migrants.

The study looks at each book in turn through an ecocritical lens informed by the idea of the social imaginary and postcolonial theory. In terms of environment and elements in the social imaginary the scope of the three works expands as we move from *Steamship* to *Plakha*. Contemporary ecocriticism's ideas of 'scale' and 'complex geographical imaginaries' (LeMenager, Shewry & Hiltner 2011, p.1) allow us to move beyond the spatial or natural environment and consider politics, economics, and even time and memory, as factors in ecocritical analysis (LeMenager, Shewry, & Hiltner 2011, p.10).

In this study, *environment* refers to three separate, interrelated concepts. The first is the spatial settings for sequences of a novel. Aitmatov chooses small, rural settlements, with some reference to urban centres. *Environment* can also indicate physical or natural surroundings, and each novel describes the negative effects of human beings on their immediate ecosystems. The final referent is political and cultural location, the three works' shared focus on Soviet Central Asia highlighting the self-understanding of its people as neo-colonised vis-à-vis the dominant Soviet mainstream. In each work Aitmatov creates a similar social imaginary, a combination of moral character, cultural belonging, some kind of faith tradition, and attitude to nature. These overlapping themes constitute a 'good person' and also allow the construction of characters who fall short in some way. There is a clear evolution of the social imaginary across the works. These twin themes are now applied to the three works, beginning with *Steamship*.

Steamship

The novella is set in a small forest station (a 'cordon', *Steamship*, 7) and surrounding woodland in Kyrgyzstan's San-Tash valley. The tragic hero divides his time between the idyllic forest and countryside and an unloving extended family homestead. He has a powerful imagination and gives nicknames to animals, plants, and even rocks.

The men work at the station and in the forest, while the women are occupied primarily in the home. The forest is both environment and livelihood, and local Kyrgyz people run the station with no immediate Russian colonising or dominating presence. Caspian red deer or *marals* are important both as a source of meat and as part of the ancestral beliefs of traditionally minded Kyrgyz.

The boys' grandfather, Momun, tells him the Kyrgyz creation story and its traditional values (Shneidman 1979). In his loneliness, the boy's attachment to the legend brings him solace and he appeals to the horned mother deer for guidance and protection. He is captivated by the traditional sense of harmony between people and nature (Shneidman 1979, 37), which for Sigman (1998) is the foundation of the whole story.

The men at the forest station chop down and sell trees illegally. At the end of the story they kill and eat many *marals* in an orgy of hunting, killing, and butchering. The boy and his grandfather are the only ones with a positive and integrated view of nature. By contrast, the evil Orozkul, whose work is to maintain the forest as a source of sustainable timber, sees the natural world purely in terms of resources (Muratov 2018, 30); rather than protecting nature, he and his friends destroy it (Shneidman 1979). The scale of environmental damage in *Steamship* is small, yet from a tale about a few people in a remote forest location Aitmatov links ecology and culture strongly. For Roksandic (2002, 93), Aitmatov's use of the horned deer myth – and Orozkul's dismissal of it – is an appeal for peaceful coexistence between people and nature and a warning that hurting nature means hurting ourselves.

While Aitmatov spends a whole chapter recounting the Kyrgyz origin myth and their journey from their ancestral home in Siberia, there is nothing in *Steamship* about their Islamic heritage. Commenting on this, Roksandic believes that Aitmatov's use of animistic tradition reflects his view that humanity is part of nature while his apparent indifference to Islam suggests an antipathy to 'ideological essentialism with totalitarian pretensions of possessing the final truth' (2002, 99).

The characters in the novella are almost all Kyrgyz and there are no Russians. Within this narrow ethnic frame, two characters represent different attitudes to their culture. The grandfather, Momun, is steeped in

tradition, decent but weak. He is a non-Russian village prose hero (Haber 2003). The boy and his grandfather stand in contrast with the selfish people at the forest station, but particularly Momun's son-in-law Orozkul, who is violent and dismissive of his own culture, a 'product of the October revolution…one whom the Soviet system has failed with regard to his moral development (Shneidman 1979, 32). Orozkul, whose name can be translated 'slave of the Russians', is head of the forest station but dreams of a Russian-like life in the city. He envies those whose children 'speak only Russian at home, instead of stuffing their heads with village lingo' (*Steamship*, 77). This deeply unhappy and angry man beats his wife and treats Momun poorly; he represents the failure of a system with brutality rather than progress at its heart (Ozdek 2008, 101) and the danger of losing one's ethnic identity. When the boy comes across a young Kazakh lorry driver who does not know the generations of his ancestors, he warns him that such ignorance causes moral corruption. The response is that the nation is 'marching to Communism [and] flying in space' (*Steamship*, 113).

It is unclear whether the boy's relationship with the horned mother deer is real, his imagination, or the result of fever. The boy sees 'the old man…lying in the dust near Horned Deer-Mother's severed horns' (*Steamship* , 163) after the residents of the cordon kill and eat some deer, which triggers an emotional collapse from which he never recovers. The mass killing of the deer is a violation of traditional Kyrgyz values about humanity's place in nature. Here, Sigman (1998) observes that Orozkul personifies the evil which comes from devaluing life; this is a veiled critique of Soviet materialism rather than Russian culture. Shneidman (1979, 38) sees in *Steamship* negative portrayal of the entry of modern civilisation into a remote Kyrgyz region, However, in his article on 'ethno-pedagogy' in *Steamship,* Muratov (2018) describes the importance that Aitmatov attaches to the Kyrgyz tradition, including its 'moral-ecological norms', while only obliquely mentioning globalisation and never once Russian or Soviet culture. Aitmatov's social imaginary contains a postcolonial warning not about becoming more Russian, but less Kyrgyz.

The Day

The principal location of the second novel is the Boranly-Burannyi railway junction in the vast Sarozek steppe region of the Kazakh SSR. The main protagonists of the story are two families and various others who live and work at the junction, which is a larger physical location than the cordon in *Steamship*. The junction is connected to the rest of Kazakhstan and the USSR by trains, a classic symbol of Soviet progress and integra-

tion (Maltseva 2022). Away from the railway, the people see the steppe as their home and spend time in it, some having moved there from the Aral Sea, due to ecological damage caused by Soviet policies (*The Day,* 49). They understand and respect the harsh climate of the steppe.

Unlike *Steamship*, *The Day* makes use of other, secondary locations. The central character, Yedigei, seeks to bury his deceased friend Kazangap at a traditional Kazakh cemetery. The environment includes the steppe (an undefined *space*) and the burial ground (a delineated *place* with a specific function); for the distinction between *space* and *place* see Tuan (1977). Both spatial entities represent Kazakh culture and tradition. The burial party finds that it is denied access to the cemetery, as it has become part of a Soviet cosmodrome and thus 'russified' (Caffee 2013, 197). The repurposed *place* symbolises the unilateral imposition of Soviet control over Kazakh people and their land (Shneidman 1989, 197) and a contestation of identity and territory more intense than anything in *Steamship*. If we understand the cosmodrome to be Baikonur, then an area of 6800 square kilometres was carved out of the Kazakh steppe which caused Yedigei to wonder, *Perhaps it [the fence] ran for ever!* (*The Day,* 300).

Possibly because the cosmodrome was a sensitive part of the Soviet military-industrial complex, it is not named and there is no discussion of the environmental damage caused by rocket launches. However, at the beginning of the novel, a fox is terrified by the noise, size, and speed of a passing train (*The Day,* 9-11) and later Yedigei is similarly alarmed by the launch of a Soviet space rocket from the cosmodrome (*The Day,* 25-26). Both suffer the ecological effects of technology imposed from outside.

Between *Steamship* and *The Day* the scale of environmental exploitation increases. Rather than a small group of individuals acting almost in defiance of Soviet forestry and wildlife policies, the principal agent of ecological damage is that self-same state. As Nemutlu (2018, 252) puts it in his commentary on Aitmatov: nature has become the object of totalitarian desires. Loomba (1998) would view this as the feminisation of a colonised people and their land.

As before, Aitmatov creates a social imaginary through his characters. In *The Day*, Aitmatov uses a larger group of people than in *Steamship* to characterise the tension between local Central Asian and Soviet-Russian cultures and worldviews, although he remains within the genre of village prose (Goncharov 2024, 121). The protagonists are mostly Kazakh, although a couple of Russians symbolise the power of Moscow, the metropole. Yedigei, the leader at the railway junction, is an old man who respects traditional Kazakh Islam and values. Unlike Momun in *Steamship*, he is influential and appreciated by his family and colleagues. When the 'lonely old man' (*The Day,* 13) Kazangap dies, Yedigei puts together

a funeral party, but is the only one who can perform the correct Islamic burial rituals 'after [...] sixty years of Soviet rule' (*The Day*, 21).

The only person not supportive of a traditional burial is Sabitzhan; the son of the dead man is a strong believer in the Soviet system and his faith in Moscow's technology and progressive mind-set make him antagonistic towards his own heritage. When talking with Yedigei, he proclaims that (traditional) gods were the invention of people and that the real 'gods live right beside us, here, at the cosmodrome, on our Sarozek land' (*The Day,* 45). Sabitzhan is an urbane professional with a deeper understanding of and commitment to the Soviet way than the abusive forest worker Orozkul. While Orozkul only dreams of a 'Russian life', Sabitzhan actually lives in a regional town a day's journey from the junction. The russified urban dweller Sabitzhan represents a tragedy of passivity because men such as Kazangap 'produced successful Soviet children' with no knowledge of or appreciation for their own culture (Haber 2003, 134).

The Russian theme is evident when the burial party are prevented from entering their erstwhile cemetery first by an ethnic Russian soldier. However, while the first denial of ethnic rights occurs at the hands of a Russian representative of the Soviet metropole, the prohibition is confirmed by an ethnic Kazakh lieutenant who insists on speaking Russian to his own people because he is 'on duty' (*The Day,* 328). For Banerjee (2018) this is the use of language to make citizens into outsiders. The Central Asian-Soviet tension in *Steamship* is illustrated by the loss of traditional Kyrgyz values within a very small community and in the absence of Russian cultural influence, but in *The Day* Aitmatov constructs a Russian-Kazakh clash of civilisations on the personal, group, and even official levels.

This asymmetric, neo-colonial relationship is the background to Aitmatov's use of the ancient Central Asian 'mankurt' myth (*The Day,* 124-133). A mankurt is a person who has been physically and mentally tortured to the extent that he or she has forgotten their own roots and identity, becoming a sort of empty shell or zombie, and carrying out their master's instructions. Within Aitmatov social imaginary, the concept is a warning that people who lose their heritage risk 'subjugation and enslavement' (Haber 2003, 135). In *Steamship*, indifference to the horned mother deer myth and the resulting killing of deer show the danger of a self-subalternising neglect of one's own heritage, while in *The Day*, Central Asians who turn away from their own tradition and towards Moscow's Russian-based Soviet culture are considered 'mankurts'. In a state of hatred and pity, Yedigei silently applies the label to Sabitzhan (*The Day,* 348).

There is also a significant development in faith traditions in *The Day*. Although Haber (2003) believes that the heart of the story is the contrast

between Kazakh tradition and the Soviet space programme, and Shneidman (1989, 196) claims that 'Kazakh mythology shapes the worldview' of Yedigei, Aitmatov repeatedly and unapologetically mentions Islam in a book published in the Brezhnev period. The railway junction community wishes to inter Kazangap at a traditional Kazakh cemetery in accordance with Islamic rituals, Yedigei insisting on the correct position for the coffin and appropriate prayers and gestures of supplication before God. The simple Islamic faith of the men stands in marked contrast to the Soviet atheism of Sabitzhan.

In the same way, Yedigei and the community at the junction are presented as decent, moral people, in opposition to Sabitzhan. Yedigei's urge to do 'what is right' sees him serve faithfully at the railway junction, insist on burying Kazangap according to tradition, and deal with first a Russian soldier and then a Kazakh officer at the cosmodrome fence with courtesy. Sabitzhan is weak and contemptuous of his own culture, and in the Central Asian context his most obvious moral failures are lack of respect for his father and indifference about how he is buried. However, the most serious moral questions are associated with the Soviet state's confiscation of Kazakh lands, especially ancestral burial grounds, and their integration into the cosmodrome. If wrongdoing is personal in *Steamship*, it is state-sanctioned in *The Day*. The centrality of morality to Aitmatov's endeavour is proven by Brown's criticism of his 'authorial preaching' as a repudiation of Stalinist values (1993, 55).

The social imaginary of *The Day* thus builds on that of *Steamship*. There is a stronger opposition between Central Asian traditions and Soviet values, morality, and concern for the environment.

Plakha

The third novel involves a much broader environmental scope than the previous two. Most of the narrative is set in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, although some sequences are located in Moscow. There are large tracts of mountain, forest, and steppe, as well as hunting grounds for *saigak* antelopes and expanses of *anusha*, a Central Asian relative of marijuana. In this more varied environment, significant numbers of Russians rub shoulders with Central Asians and there is a mixture of herders, scientists, hunters, and drug runners. The protagonists in this large space devastate antelope populations, facilitate trade in drugs, and cause wolves to take revenge for humanity's cruelty.

The killing of antelope in *Plakha* connects back to *Steamship*, yet whereas in the earlier story a relatively small number of deer are killed by

hunters for personal pleasure and consumption, the opening pages of the third novel contain terrifying imagery of helicopters swooping over forest valleys, their passengers shooting hundreds of animals with machine guns (*Plakha*, 3). Again, personal agency, however distasteful, has been replaced by state-sanctioned violence in order to meet quotas established by central planners. There is also a slow but steady process of neo-colonial domestication of the (feminised) virgin lands by 'ordinary men doing ordinary things' (*Plakha*, 13). As in *The Day*, state intervention affects vast areas of territory and those who live near them.

The social imaginary of Plakha is quite distinct from those of the two earlier works. The primary geographical setting and cultural locus remain Central Asia, but among the characters we find many more Russians. Although Central Asians who parrot Soviet ideas remain, the binary opposition between Central Asians and Russians seems to have disappeared. Although in *Steamship* Momun influences his own immediate family and in *The Day* Yedigei impacts a small settlement and its workers, the symbolism of the Russian Avdii as the principal moral figure in *Plakha* extends the location of moral goodness beyond Central Asians. Aitmatov affirms that righteousness can be found anywhere among the Soviet people. Sharshenalieva and Kalieva agree, seeing 'good people' across humanity in the novel (2023, 694).

The failed seminarian goes to Central Asia as an undercover investigator to research the drug trade which links the region with Moscow and Leningrad. He takes a stand against this and the mass killing of antelope by the Soviet state. A secondary character, who condemns the stealing of wolf cubs, is the Kyrgyz man Boston. The two men, one Russian and one Kyrgyz, are upright people whose opposition to the exploitation of nature costs them their lives. Their behaviour and fate fit with Aitmatov's assertion that a person's level of humanity can be assessed by how he or she relates to nature (Shneidman 1979) and Sharshenalieva and Kalieva's analysis that the central issue in *Plakha* is humanity's alienation from nature (2023, 694).

The range of religious tradition increases as we move from *The Day* to *Plakha*. For a book written in the Soviet Union, albeit under Gorbachev, *Plakha* is rich in non-secular, traditional imagery. One important subplot concerns the interaction of people and wolves, the latter functioning almost as the conscience and wisdom of the natural world. The wolves appeal to the wolf god, Byuri-Ana (*Plakha,* 305) and there are mentions of the pre-Islamic 'blue Tengri' (*Plakha,* 299). Shneidman sees a distinction between the mutuality of the wolves, who only kill to eat, and the individualism of people, who 'indiscriminately destroy nature' (1989, 205). For the first time in Aitmatov, Christianity appears in the form of the theolog-

ical student Avdii and his religious morality in opposing the *anusha* trade and the antelope hunting. *Plakha* includes a fictitious extended discussion between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate which contributes to Aitmatov's 'moral construction of a good person' (Shneidman 1989, 203). Shneidman argues that this non-secular response to social issues reflects Aitmatov's conviction that human ideologies cannot deal with the evil in the human heart; this 'most moralistic of Aitmatov's works' (1989, 207) is a veiled critique of Marxist orthodoxy. Maryniak (1991) differs slightly, seeing Aitmatov's emphasis on the totemic and animistic as a claim that only a group-oriented or collective worldview can respond to society's complex problems. According to Shevchugova (2019, 196), Aitmatov's sense of the sheer scale of human destruction of the natural world led him to search as widely as possible for spiritual (in the broadest sense) answers. In summary, *Plakha* is a 'critique of the lack of spirituality and moral decline of the Soviet system' (Sigman 1998, 4) within which many of Aitmatov's characters are lonely because their society has 'no regard for tradition' (1998, 25).

Integration and commentary

Across the three works, Aitmatov crafts a consistent link between concern for nature and the environment with 'religion', tradition, and moral goodness in the broadest sense. In the first two books, his ecological social imaginary connects environmental awareness, Central Asian tradition and religion, and moral or upright behaviour. With *Plakha*, care for the environment and morality remain strongly linked, but the narrow association with Central Asian culture and beliefs is expanded to include Russians and the Christian religion. The social imaginary retains its environmental focus but moves from cultural affiliation to individual character, Aitmatov implicitly rejecting the atheistic worldview of the Soviet system.

I wish to bring Aitmatov's fourfold integration of culture, concern for nature, non-atheistic belief system, and morality into dialogue with existing scholarship on the author and his work, which never combines the four factors nor acknowledges Aitmatov's journey from advocate for Central Asian culture and tradition to activist for environmental concern in the USSR and beyond, based on a broad non-atheistic or religious awareness. This aspect of Aitmatov's work has attracted most criticism among scholars, Haber complaining that 'overwhelming moral tone' (2003, 125) affects the quality of his work.

Discussing *Steamship*, Shneidman claims that 'the evil in the story is embodied in the actions of the representatives of the Soviet state, while goodness is personified in those who adhere to old patriarchal values'

(1989, 39). While we may agree with the point about old values – although the word 'patriarchal' is problematic – Orozkul is an employee of the Soviet state without being its representative. In fact, Aitmatov constructs him as morally deficient partly because of his anger and frustration at not having children, but primarily because he has abandoned his own heritage. The cause of the problem is thus not the *presence* of Soviet thinking but the *absence* of Kyrgyz values. Sigman's (1998, 33) similar 'critical connection between legend and moral consciousness' does not include concern for the natural world, despite Aitmatov's virtuous inculcation of the horned mother deer creation myth into the boy and his grandfather.

In *The Day*, Aitmatov's thoughts are evolving. The emphasis on belief and morality remain, with the inclusion of Central Asian Islam, and Aitmatov makes his point more by the presence of tradition and virtue than by their absence. Yedigei, the main character, combines Kazakh values and Islamic belief in his attitude to work and the burial of his friend. The mankurt Sabitzhan is morally suspect like his earlier analogue Orozkul, and both are alcoholics, interpreted as a sign of moral decadence in the latter Soviet period (Chapple 1992). In this story, environmental issues are highlighted by the actions not of Central Asian people but of the Soviet state. The atheistic, neo-colonial materialism of Moscow takes Kazakh territory, and its launching of massive rockets affects the steppe and its residents. Central Asians who combine virtue and belief can do nothing for the environment in the face of the power and resources of the Russian-dominated USSR. Compared to *Steamship*, the situation is reversed; people and their environment suffer not due to the *absence* of Kazakh thought but the *presence* of Soviet ideas. Aitmatov's use of the mankurt is a reminder to Central Asians to retain their values in the face of neo-colonial Soviet hegemony.

In *Plakha*, Aitmatov retains his commitment to belief, morality, and regard for nature, but shifts from his earlier exclusively Central Asian emphasis. Aitmatov includes Christianity in *Plakha* not to commend any particular faith to his readers, but as an appeal to 'universal cultural heritage' (Shneidman 1989, 207). Comparing *Steamship* and *Plakha*, Sigman believes that 'native myths and Christianity' belong to the same category of spirituality and can help in the 'reclaiming [of] moral values of the past' (1998, 61). Although morality and spirituality are inextricably linked in Aitmatov (Sigman 1998, 72), Sigman does not make the connection to environmental issues. The tension between Central Asian and Soviet values of the first two novels, which warns against neglecting ethnic heritage, has been transformed into the affirmation of faith in a general sense which can supplement and challenge Soviet atheistic and materialistic ideology.

The development of Aitmatov's social imaginary reflects his appreciation of diverse cultures and belief systems, partly due to his travel abroad

(Kalmakiev, personal communication) and the ability to discuss them in the relative fresh air of Gorbachev's *perestroika*. It is as if his passion for his subaltern people and their environment has evolved into a concern for the moral and spiritual lives of people all over the Soviet Union and beyond. There are resonances with the broad understanding of ecology advocated by the late-Soviet philosopher Dmitrii Likhachev (1979), who saw humanity and nature as deeply integrated and argued that human and cultural ecologies should be preserved. Perkiömäki (2020) reminds us that such a mindset was strong in traditional Russian thought but neglected in the Soviet period.

The ecological emphases of the three novels and the evolving social imaginary within them show a broadening awareness and sympathy for all traditions which Aitmatov felt could encourage moral behaviour among people and towards the environment in a time of unprecedented openness in a Soviet Union in moral, cultural, and ecological crisis.

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Pursuing Accountability for Crimes against Humanity in Tajikistan: International Criminal Court and Germany's National Courts[1]

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Abstract. Examining the human rights crisis currently unfolding in Tajikistan and highlighting the crimes against humanity committed against the Pamiri minority in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) between 2021 and the present by President Emomali Rahmon and senior officials, this article offers victims a roadmap for seeking accountability at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Germany's national courts using universal jurisdiction. The article argues that Dushanbe's abuses directed against Pamiris, which include extrajudicial killings, imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearances, and other violations meets the definition of a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute. Reviewing precedent in both venues, such as Germany's recent prosecutions of Syrian government perpetrators of torture, the article outlines practical steps for activists and victims seeking justice. The authors argue that recent human rights victories in Germany and important ICC reforms centring victims demonstrate the potential for prosecuting perpetrators of egregious rights abuses in Tajikistan. These promising avenues for holding Tajik officials accountable require strategic litigation, witness protection, and sustained advocacy efforts.

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Introduction

"We want justice and the truth about why our children's blood was spilt", agonised Pevistamo Abdulmuminova in a *Guardian* interview, struggling to comprehend the death of her twenty-nine-year-old son, Gulbiddin Ziyobekov. His murder by Tajikistan's security services on November 25, 2021 in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO)—a region in the remote Pamir mountains of eastern Tajikistan home to ethno-linguistic, religious groups—would spark a crackdown on an entire ethnic group more brutal and consequential than any of the crackdowns that had come before (Tondo 2022).[2] Together, the peoples of GBAO form the Pamiri ethnic minority, whose distinct identity, language, and culture Tajikistan's authoritarian government has systematically repressed. Authorities would claim unconvincingly that Ziyobekov was shot while resisting arrest during a criminal investigation. But eyewitness and mobile phone footage demonstrated the opposite: an extrajudicial killing that led to widespread demonstrations across GBAO that prompted government forces to fire on dozens of unarmed protesters, at first killing two and injuring seventeen. The pattern of extrajudicial killings escalated in May and June 2022, when government forces on the orders of authoritarian President Emomali Rahmon and top officials, shot and killed dozens more peaceful Pamiri protesters and unleashed a campaign of arrests, imprisonment and torture.

Amchigul Amirshoeva, another Pamiri resident, described her despair at the authorities' increasing intimidation of the local population: "There is no justice here. People no longer trust the authorities [and] have lost faith in the institutions" (Tondo 2022). Following the killings, authorities imprisoned hundreds of Pamiri civil society, cultural, political and reli-

[2] GBAO is an autonomous region that makes up 45% of Tajikistan's territory in the east. Unlike other areas of Tajikistan, GBAO is home to a distinct ethnolinguistic and religious minority, the Pamiri people, who speak languages distinct from Tojiki and whose Ismaili faith forms a subset of Shiite Islam – separating them from most Tajiks, who are Sunnis. While it occupies almost half of the country's territory, its population is a mere 250,000 – a fraction of the 10 million inhabiting the rest of the nation. The region's mountainous terrain makes travel difficult, while its economy suffers from unemployment, difficult living conditions, and high food prices. While a discussion of the central authorities' many attempts to suppress GBAO's civil society is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to mention that armed incursions by the central authorities happened on numerous occasions, including in 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021 and, finally, 2022.

gious leaders, forcibly kidnapped or extradited dozens of Pamiris from Russia, suppressed broadcasts in Pamiri language, and shuttered over 500 NGOs, businesses, and religious institutions, including those of the Pamiri's spiritual leader abroad, the Aga Khan (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The GBAO crackdown was so severe that by June 2022, the NGO Genocide Watch said that Tajikistan was witnessing the early stages of a Pamiri genocide, "preparation" and "active persecution" on the way to a full-blown genocide (Hill 2022). As of 2025, the repression against ethnic Pamiris continues unabated, with five Pamiri prisoners detained after the events of 2022 dying within months of each other in custody, in some cases after being denied medical care. Human rights groups and Pamiri journalistic outlets abroad called on Tajikistan's authorities to immediately and transparently investigate the deaths and provide clear explanations to their families. (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The campaign against Pamiris prosecuted by President Rahmon, who has ruled the country with increasing repression since 1992, is but one aspect of an abysmal rights situation that has worsened starkly over the course of more than a decade. Early 2024 witnessed two opposition activists, Nasimjon Sharifov and Suhrob Zafar, suspiciously vanish off the streets of Istanbul, Turkey, where they had lived for years following the government's designation of their Group 24 political movement as "extremist" (Swerdlow 2024). Months later they reappeared in handcuffs on the tarmac of Dushanbe's airport before being sentenced on bogus terrorism charges to 20 and 30-year sentences, respectively (Swerdlow 2023). The transnational kidnapping added the two men to a rapidly growing list of hundreds of Tajikistan's political prisoners, including journalists, political activists, rights defenders, and others, who systematically experience torture (Swerdlow 2023).

Despite the highlighting of Tajikistan's atrocious rights record by human rights groups, United Nations bodies, the State Department, and multiple European Parliament resolutions[3] over the past several years, the government's abuses have continued with impunity, leaving victims and relatives of those killed, disappeared, or tortured with no recourse.

Arguing that the Tajik government's abuses during the crackdown in GBAO constitute crimes against humanity under international criminal law, this article endeavours to put an end to President Rahmon and his officials' long-standing lack of accountability and offers a roadmap to obtain justice in international courts. Specifically, this article advances two options for pursuing justice: first, at the International Criminal Court

[3] European Parliament resolution of 7 July 2022 on the situation in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (2022/2753(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0293_EN.html.

(ICC), which Tajikistan acceded to upon signing and ratifying the Rome Statute in 1998 and 2000, respectively; and second, in Germany's national courts, where a substantial Tajik diaspora and population of victims live, using the concept of universal jurisdiction.

The authors first seek to prove that the Tajik government's actions in GBAO (2021-present) meet the threshold of a crime against humanity before discussing jurisdictional options. Germany's use of universal jurisdiction in landmark trials in recent years to prosecute crimes against humanity for torture in Syria, as well as slavery and genocide by ISIS against the Yazidi minority, in addition to investigations concerning Ukraine, Belarus, and elsewhere, has made it a hub for the robust prosecution of atrocity crimes. This article examines relevant precedent used to investigate or prosecute perpetrators in analogous cases, outlines practical steps potential plaintiffs should consider in either venue, and explores potential challenges. Finally, the article argues that the ICC and Germany's national courts could make a powerful contribution to global justice by issuing arrest warrants, offering witness protection, and seeking the extradition of Tajik officials responsible for crimes against humanity.

Factual Background

While Tajikistan remained poor and its infrastructure devastated at the end of its civil war in 1997, the country's vibrant NGO sector, creative journalists, and an active opposition helped Tajikistan's society remain decidedly more open than its neighbouring Uzbekistan, which had become a hardcore authoritarian regime.[4] But this changed as President Rahmon amassed personal power, introducing his children into positions of authority and giving them key levers of control over the country's fledgling economy. As Rahmon grew paranoid of losing his grip on pow-

[4] This article has greatly benefited from the work of other scholars who explain how Tajikistan's emergence from the bloody civil war of 1992-1997 and the ethnic/regional divisions that defined it, in some ways, set the stage for the present crimes against humanity committed against Pamiris. Nourzhanov and Bleuer, for example, explore how after the war Rahmon erected a nationalist ideology by promoting an "ethno-centric approach to national consolidation since 1997, focusing on the historical exceptionalism of the Tajiks, their moderate Muslim sensibilities, and the 'othering' of Turkic neighbours" (Nourzhanov & Bleuer 2013). Driscoll also notes that Rahmon appointed warlords to key government positions during the peacebuilding process. For example, he appointed Yakub Salimov, the head of the Dushanbe mafia as the Minister of the Interior, and Ghaffor Mirzoyeva, a twice-convicted rapist, as the Deputy Minister of the Interior. Driscoll's account emphasises "the ability of domestic actors in a civil war zone to anticipate and frustrate the desires of foreign development professionals to make politics open and transparent", creating a government rife with corruption (Driscoll 2015).

er, Tajikistan's human rights record took a precipitous turn for the worse between 2012-2015 (Swerdlow 2023).

Dushanbe intensified its pressure on all manifestations of perceived criticism, in particular, on opposition activists in and outside the country, including in GBAO where it launched a limited but lethal incursion in 2012. In this period, authorities used enforced disappearances, incommunicado detention, and transnational repression in a systematic and widespread fashion. The main targets were members of Group 24, an opposition movement based outside Tajikistan led by businessman Umarali Kuvvatov and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Kuvvatov was assassinated in Istanbul in March 2015 in circumstances organised by Tajikistan's security services. The ensuing years would be defined by an aggressive campaign of politically motivated imprisonment and extend to Tajik opposition figures living in Russia, Turkey, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.[5]

By 2021, after the imprisonment of hundreds of political prisoners, the Tajik government had effectively cleared the political space of all actual or perceived opponents and consolidated power across all regions with one major exception: GBAO. As mentioned above, the government's May 2022 crackdown began in response to peaceful protests by Pamiris over the death in November 2021 in police custody of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov and the lack of any meaningful investigation. They were also inspired by the refusal of authorities to consider the resignation of regional Governor Alisher Mirzonabot and Khorog Mayor Rizo Nazarzoda. Rallies intensified after police killed one of the protesters, 29-year-old Zamir Nazrishoev, on May 16, 2022, prompting the launch of what authorities called a "counterterrorist operation". The violence included at least twenty-five but likely many more extrajudicial killings and even sparked a call for restraint from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in addition to Western diplomatic missions in Tajikistan, and human rights groups (HRW 2023; State Department 2023). But the violence metastasised, leading to the extraditions or forced kidnappings of dozens of Pamiri activists abroad, such as

[5] When forcibly returned to the country, authorities have often subjected peaceful activists to prolonged periods of incommunicado detention and sentenced them to lengthy prison sentences on politically motivated charges. Those targeted are largely members of now outlawed peaceful opposition parties, including ordinary citizens who have criticised the government or President Rahmon via social media. Tajikistan's security services, operating alongside local authorities abroad, have targeted activists and perceived critics inside Russia, Within the country, authorities banned the IRPT, jailing its entire leadership, and hundreds of its up to 43,000 members (Swerdlow 2016). Lemon and Thibault also detail other methods the government uses to control the population, including a policy of "assertive secularism" that has involved beard-shaving campaigns of up to 13,000 young men in a single year (Lemon & Thibault 2018).

Oraz and Ramzi Vazirbekov, two Moscow-based activists, who were forcibly returned in July 2022 after organising peaceful protests in Moscow.[6]

Tajikistan Subject to the International Criminal Court's Jurisdiction

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is a critically important venue for vindicating the rights of those targeted as part of Tajikistan's long-running human rights crisis, including for extrajudicial killings, systematic torture, enforced disappearances and other atrocity crimes. Tajikistan signed and ratified the Rome Statute in 1998 and 2000, respectively, making it subject to the ICC's jurisdiction (ICC 2003).

Just a year following the close of Tajikistan's bloody civil war (1992-1997), responding to the atrocities that had defined the twentieth century, a conference of 160 states adopted the treaty known as the Rome Statute on July 17, 1998,[7] which established the ICC – a permanent court whose mandate is to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of the most heinous atrocity crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.[8] The Rome Statute emphasises the fundamental principle of complementarity, ensuring that the ICC can intervene when states are "unable or unwilling genuinely to carry out the investigation and prosecute the perpetrators", which reflects the case here.[9]

Tajikistan is the first country in Central Asia to have formally aligned with the ICC's framework, but its implementation of the Statute's provisions into domestic law is far from complete (Birkett 2019, 355). While

[6] According to civil society sources, within GBAO itself, authorities have decimated civilian populations by imprisoning thousands of protesters and sympathisers on lengthy prison sentences for their peaceful activism. Pamiri businesses have been systematically expropriated, and NGOs liquidated. Sources report that the government constructed an entirely new facility in Tajikistan's northern Sughd region to account for the influx of Pamiri prisoners, including journalists who covered the protests, convincing many that the current crackdown is aimed at entirely suppressing the Pamiri identity (Collet 2022). Among the numerous forced returns from abroad, mainly Russia, and the hundreds of Pamiris arrested inside Tajikistan, many cases have featured enforced disappearances or incommunicado detention. The cases of imprisoned human rights defender Manuchehr Kholiqnazarov, journalist Ulfathonim Mamadshoeva, lawyer Faromuz Irgashev or Pamiri athlete Chorshanbe Chorshanbiyev and Komron Mamadnazarov, along with other journalists outside of GBAO arrested in 2022, all included periods of incommunicado detention, involving denial of contact with relatives, independent lawyers, and torture (OMCT 2022).

[7] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998, July 17). United Nations - Office of Legal Affairs, https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99_corr/cstatute.htm; *see also* IHL (n.d.). https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/icc-statute-1998.

[8] Id.

[9] Rome statute (n.d.-a). https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf.

Tajikistan's criminal code includes the crimes of genocide and war crimes, it has yet to incorporate provisions regarding crimes against humanity, the crime at issue here (ICC Project 2024).

The ICC can initiate an investigation in one of three ways: by the ICC Prosecutor, by referral of the UN Security Council, or by referral of a signatory to the Rome Statute. Chapter 3, Section I, Rules 44 and 45 of the Rules of Procedure and Evidence of the ICC state that the Prosecutor is empowered to personally investigate potential crimes, and that state parties may refer themselves or others to an investigation by the court (ICC 2013). Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute, any individual, group, or organisation can send information on alleged or potential ICC crimes to the Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) of the ICC. Before an OTP investigation can open, the ICC prosecutor must determine whether a situation meets the legal criteria laid out by the Rome Statute. The OTP analyses all situations brought to its attention based on statutory criteria and available information.[10]

At the time of writing this article, the authors became aware that Tajik civil society activists at home and abroad were involved in collecting evidence and submitting an official communication with the Office of the ICC Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court relating to crimes committed by the Tajik government over a period of 2002 to 2024, in particular the authorities' "coordinated state policy to eradicate political opposition, in particular against members, sympathisers and associates of the IRPT" and which included murders and extrajudicial executions; enslavement in penal institutions; torture, sexual violence, forced deportations; disappearances, persecution for political or religious reasons; and arbitrary detentions without a fair trial (Freedom for Eurasia 2025). The filing of the official complaint in April 2025 on related but distinct human rights abuses from the Pamiri case was a landmark achievement, further evidence of the importance Tajikistan's embattled civil society has placed on the ICC as a venue for prosecuting crimes against humanity committed in GBAO and beyond.

Crimes against Humanity in the GBAO Crackdown

As provided in Article 7 of the 1998 Rome Statute, a "crime against humanity means any of the following acts when committed as part of a

[10] In addition to the OTP opening an investigation, another potential path would be for a third State party, such as Lithuania, Germany or another state potentially where Tajik activists reside, to refer the case to the ICC, as Tajikistan is unlikely to ever self-refer its own officials for prosecution.

widespread or systematic attack directed against civilian population, with knowledge of the attack".[11]

While space limits fully elucidating all the evidence required for an Article 15 Communication, this article contends that many of the government's actions taken during the GBAO crackdown (November 2021 through the present) amount to crimes against humanity. This specifically includes acts of murder, imprisonment, torture, persecution, enforced disappearance, and other inhumane acts that have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population, namely Pamiris and other citizens of Tajikistan, who peacefully exercise their rights to expression, assembly, association, religion and others.

Contextual elements of the crime

Examining the contextual elements (*chapeau* elements) necessary for findings of crimes against humanity in light of international jurisprudence, an attack is a prerequisite. For such an attack to occur, an armed conflict is not necessary.[12] The term attack is defined as "a course of conduct involving the commission of acts of violence" and encompasses circumstances where there is mistreatment of the civilian population.[13] An attack must entail at least one of the prohibited underlying acts.[14] As detailed above, many of the serious human rights violations and violence found in the GBAO crackdown constitute underlying acts of a crime against humanity.

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[11] Rome Statute, art. 7(1)

[12] See e.g. ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 35. The Rome Statute and the Elements of Crimes of the International Criminal Court do not require the existence of an armed conflict. On the Rome Statute reflecting the latest consensus among the international community and thus being an expression of international customary law, see UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. See also ICC, ICC-01/04-01/07, *Prosecutor v. Germain Katanga*, Judgement pursuant to article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 7 March 2014, para. 1100.

[13] See e.g. ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 35; ICTY, IT-03-69-T, *Prosecutor v. Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 30 May 2013, para. 962; ICTY, IT-95-5/18-T, *Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić*, Public Redacted Version of Judgement Issued on 24 March 2016 – Volume I of IV (TC), 24 March 2016, para. 473; ICTR, ICTR-00-56-T, *Prosecutor v. Ndindiliyimana et al.*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 17 May 2011, para. 2087.

[14] ICTR, ICTR-96-4-T, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Akayesu*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 2 September 1998, para. 581; ICTR, ICTR-97-20-T, *Prosecutor v. Laurent Semanza*, Judgment and Sentence, Trial Chamber, 15 May 2003, para. 327. As such it means that the mistreatment has to reach the threshold of one of the underlying acts of crimes against humanity. See ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 151.

Turning now to the element of a civilian population, the term comprises "all persons who are civilians as opposed to members of the armed forces and other legitimate combatants".[15] A population is considered as 'civilian' if predominantly civilian in nature.[16] The term population "does not mean that the entire population of the geographical entity in which the attack is taking place (a state, a municipality or another circumscribed area) must be subject to the attack".[17] The population element "is intended to imply crimes of collective nature and thus exclude single or isolated acts which [...] do not rise to the level of crimes against humanity".[18] Based on the civilian nature of the victims, the collective nature of the crimes, and the high number of victims targeted, it is clear that the attack that occurred in the GBAO crackdown was directed against a civilian population.

The attack was "widespread", based on the high number of victims,[19] the wide range of locations (Khorog, and the Rushan District) in which

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[15] ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 425.

[16] ICTY, IT-95-14/2-T, *Prosecutor v. Kordić and Cerkez*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 26 February 2001, para. 180. See also ICTY, IT-95-16-T, *Prosecutor v. Kupreškić et al.*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 14 January 2000, para. 549; ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 425.

[17] ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 424. See also ICTY, IT-94-1-T, *Prosecutor v. Tadić* (alias "Dule"), Judgement, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, para. 644.

[18] ICTY, IT-94-1-T, *Prosecutor v. Tadić* (alias "Dule"), Judgement, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, para. 644. "It is sufficient to show that enough individuals were targeted in the course of the attack, or that they were targeted in such a way as to satisfy the Chamber that the attack was in fact directed against a civilian 'population', rather than against a limited and randomly selected number of individuals".*See* ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-A, Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vukovic, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 12 June 2001, para. 90; ICTY, IT-97-24-T, Prosecutor v. Stakić, Judgement, 31 July 2003, para. 623. See also ICTY, IT-03-69-T, Prosecutor v. Jovica Stanišić and Franko Simatović, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 30 May 2013, paras. 964-965.

[19] While the government might contend that the overall number of extrajudicial killings involved in the GBAO crackdown are smaller in size than some of the better known cases (Syria, Yazidis, Philippines), it is crucial to recognise both the relative small size of the overall group (approx. 200,000) as well as the devastating toll the killings and crimes took on the entirety of the group. The authors have particularly benefited from the work of Suzanne-Levi Sanchez who explains that Pamiris' social networks work to "limit outside control and foreign influences to preserve the languages, culture, and religion as well as for their own security" (Levi-Sanchez 2018), which further highlights how the killing of just one member of the group is a profound event. Shared history and culture profoundly bind Pamiris to each other and their leaders, further increasing the social, safety, and cultural loss that occurs when activists are targeted. One example was that of Alisher Kimatshoev, 47-year-old, a driver who was violently detained in front of his 9-year-old son when police barged into his home brandishing machine guns (Radio Ozodi 2022). His body was later found in a hospital morgue without explanation. Khovar Gulobshoev, who was 45 and a married father of two, was killed under mysterious circumstances after being deported back to Tajikistan from Russia. Relatives state

victims were found and, in particular, the prevalence across GBAO and Tajikistan of the recurring patterns of violations amounting to crimes (International Partnership for Human Rights 2022).[20] The attack was "systematic", because of the organised nature of the crimes and the improbability of their random occurrence. As shown above, the commission of crimes by agents of the Tajik government was not random, spontaneous, or isolated. Rather, the crimes were committed as part of a pattern of organised conduct, following instructions, encouragement and endorsement by high-level Tajik state authorities and senior members of state institutions, and implemented by many physical perpetrators.[21]

Considering the requirement that the violations were committed pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organisational policy, the Rome Statute states that the State or organisation must "actively promote or encourage" the attack against the civilian population.[22]

The conduct of Tajik authorities demonstrates that the underlying acts were committed in furtherance of a state policy. This conduct includes

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that "he was not a member of any terrorist group", so there was no justification for his detention. Gulobshoev lived in various places and never fulfilled his dream of "finally living with his family in his own home" (Radio Ozodi 2022).

[20] On the definition of "widespread", see ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 41; ICTY, IT-95-14-T, Prosecutor v. Blaškić, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 3 March 2000, para. 206; ICTR, ICTR-00-56-A, Prosecutor v. Augustin Ndindiliyimana, François-Xavier *Nzuwonemeye and Innocent Sagahutu*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 11 February 2014, para. 260; ICTR, ICTR-2000-61-T, *Prosecutor v. Gatete*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 31 March 2011, para. 631; ICC, ICC-01/09-01/11, *Prosecutor v. Ruto, Kosghey and Sang*, "Decision on the confirmation of charges", Pre-Trial Chamber, 23 January 2012, para. 176-177; ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 163.

[21] On the definition of "systematic", see ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 41; ICTY, IT-95-5/18-T, *Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić*, Public Redacted Version of Judgement Issued on 24 March 2016 – Volume I, Trial Chamber, 24 March 2016, para. 477; ICTR, ICTR-00-56-A, *Prosecutor v. Augustin Ndindiliyimana, François-Xavier Nzuwonemeye and Innocent Sagahutu*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 11 February 2014, para. 260; ICTR, ICTR-2000-61-T, *Prosecutor v. Gatete*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 31 March 2011, para. 631; ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovač and Vuković*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 22 February 2001, para. 429; ICTY, IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-A, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovač and Vuković*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 12 June 2001, para. 94; ICC, ICC-01/09-01/11, *Prosecutor v. Ruto, Kosghey and Sang*, "Decision on the confirmation of charges", Pre-Trial Chamber, 23 January 2012, para. 210.

[22] ICC, Elements of Crimes, p. 3. Relevant jurisprudence further provides that "an attack which is 'planned, directed, organised', as opposed to 'spontaneous or [consisting of] isolated acts,' satisfies the policy requirement". See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/09-01/11, Prosecutor v. Ruto, Koshey and Sang, "Decision on the confirmation of charges", Pre-Trial Chamber, 23 January 2012, para. 210. *See e.g.* ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 160; ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 674; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1063.

statements by its officials encouraging or condoning the commission of abuses. Indeed, immediately following the May 2022 violence, President Rahmon admitted giving the order to "neutralise persons armed with weapons" because, he said, "there was no other way out" and "they provoked the latest events, we already had information. They were taken over by foreign masters. In a short period of time, they were financed with 26 million somoni (more than $2.3 million). And they were led from abroad. That same terrorist Islamic Revival Party and its masters. The goal is to carry out a coup" (Radio Ozodi 2022).

The ICC has looked at the following factors as evidence that violations are committed as part of a State policy: planning and preparations;[23] the involvement of State officials and institutions in the commission of violations;[24] the coordination of different intelligence and security entities;[25] and the use of State resources.[26] Rights violations that occurred as part of the GBAO crackdown were planned, directed and organised by, and involved the coordinated action of different Tajik government entities and the investment of a considerable amount of state resources (Novastan 2022).

The recurrent patterns of violence, including in multiple locations,[27] and similar patterns of violations also indicate a policy.[28] The use of force patterns identified could be found in multiple locations, with specific pat-

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[23] See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trail Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 686; ICC, ICC-01/04-01/07, *Prosecutor v. Germain* Katanga, Judgment pursuant to article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 7 March 2014, para. 1147; ICC, ICC-01/09, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Kenya, 31 March 2010, Pre-Trial Chamber, para. 118.

[24] See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 160; ICC, ICC-02/04-01/15, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 4 February 2021, para. 2679; ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda, Judgment*, Trial Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 674; A/HRC/28/69, para. 49.

[25] ICC, ICC-01/19, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the People's Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Pre-Trial Chamber, 14 November 2019, para. 92; A/HRC/S-17/2/Add.1, para. 105.

[26] See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, *Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo*, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 160; ICC, ICC-01/04-02/06-2359, *Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda*, Judgment, Trial, Chamber, 8 July 2019, para. 674; A/HRC/28/69, para. 674; ICC, ICC-02/04-01/15, *Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen*, Judgment, Trial Chamber, 4 February 2021, para. 2679.

[27] See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08, Prosecutor v. Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo, Judgment pursuant to Article 74 of the Statute, Trial Chamber, 21 March 2016, para. 677; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1062; A/HRC/39/CRP.2, para. 1480.

[28] See e.g. A/HRC/30/CRP.2, para. 591; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1084.

terns found across GBAO. Mass arrests, as well as targeted arrest operations, almost exclusively directed at Pamiris, were also conducted in a similar fashion across different locations, including inside Pamiri communities in Russia, with victims across multiple detention facilities operated by State entities describing similar patterns of torture, ill-treatment, and even sexual violence.

Another indicator of the existence of a policy is the systematic identification of victims.[29] The patterns of targeting Pamiris as a group are conduct indicating policy. As extensively demonstrated in a variety of sources, Tajik state entities made a concerted effort to adopt and violently enforce strict rules, prohibitions on language and penalties that targeted especially Pamiris, particularly with respect to the use of Pamiri languages (Amnesty International 2024a). They also targeted Pamiri human rights defenders and Pamiris demanding equality, such as Faromuz Irgashev, and the end to institutionalised discrimination, including those defying restrictions on the right to assembly.

The systematic failure of the Tajik government State to condemn violations, and to prevent, investigate, prosecute and punish them, and the impunity enjoyed by alleged perpetrators,[30] is further evidence of a policy. As shown here, there is a clear pattern of impunity, in particular in relation to, but not limited to, unlawful deaths, extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, and persecution.[31]

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[29] See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/21, Decision on the Prosecutor's request for authorisation of an investigation pursuant to Article 15(3) of the Statute on the Philippines, Pre-Trial Chamber, 15 September 2021, para. 99; A/HRC/51/CRP.3, para. 431. As established by various eyewitness accounts and human rights reports, the identification and targeting of the victims of repression was the result of a concerted and coordinated effort by security and intelligence forces and the judicial system, including prosecutors. It is straightforward to establish a pattern of instrumentalisation of the judicial system to suppress acts of protest and solidarity that culminated in systematic impunity in relation to violations.

[30] *See e.g.* A/HRC/32/CRP.1, para. 260; A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1085.

[31] This article also considers the organised concealing of violations. This includes a pattern of authorities blaming "extremists", "criminal groups", or "terrorists" for all of the deaths and injuries caused by the unnecessary or disproportionate use of force by security forces, as well as of forcing individuals to confess to crimes they did not commit to absolve the State of responsibility, the victims to withdraw their allegations of violations, and families of victims to blame "opposition groups" for violations by Tajik security forces or confess to crimes they did not commit. Other efforts to conceal violations included withholding bodies of those killed because of the use of force by or in the custody of State security and intelligence forces. Authorities also pressured families to return death certificates or simply denied issuing them. State officials denied reports of injuries caused by weapons and ammunition used by the security forces. The strategy of concealing violations by State authorities was accompanied by misinformation and disinformation by Tajik state media (RFE/RL 2022).

Underlying acts

Murder

Murder is defined under international criminal law as the unlawful and intentional killing of a human being.[32] The death of the victim must result from an act or omission of the perpetrator, who possessed the intent to kill, or the intent to cause serious bodily harm which the perpetrator should reasonably have known might lead to death.[33]

A pattern of violations of the right to life in GBAO are easily established. Victims were killed because of the use of unnecessary force, extrajudicial executions, and deaths in custody in violation of international human rights law (Eurasianet 2022). Deaths were the result of intentional use of lethal force against persons posing no imminent threat of death or serious injury. Further, victims who died in custody were subjected to torture or ill-treatment with the intent to cause serious bodily harm, which the perpetrator should reasonably have known might lead to death.

Imprisonment, Torture and Enforced Disappearance

Imprisonment as a crime against humanity is defined as the imprisonment or otherwise severe deprivation of liberty of one or more persons by the perpetrator, who is aware of the factual circumstances that established the gravity of the conduct.[34] The imprisonment must be in violation of fundamental rules of international law.[35] This includes arbitrary deprivation of liberty.[36] On assessing the arbitrary nature, jurisprudence considered following factors: whether there was a valid warrant of arrest; the detainee was informed of the reason for their arrest; the detainee was formally charged; and the detainee was informed of any procedural rights.[37]

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[32] ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(a); ICTR, ICTR-96-4-T, *Prosecutor v. Akayesu,* Judgment, Trial Chamber, 5 September 1998, para. 589.
[33] *Prosecutor v. Akayesu,* Judgment, Trial Chamber, 5 September 1998, para. 589.
[34] ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(e).
[35] ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(e).
[36] See e.g. ICTY, IT-00-39-T, *Prosecutor v. Krajisnik*, Judgment and Sentence, Trial Chamber, 27 September 2006, para. 752.
[37] See e.g. ICTR, ICTR-99-46-T, *Prosecutor v. Ntagerura et al.*, Judgment, 25 February 2004, para. 702. Based on international human rights law, whether an arrest was based on a legitimate ground for deprivation of liberty is also considered. The duration of a detention does not lessen its severity. ICC, ICC-01/17-9-Red 09-11-2017, Public Redacted Version of "Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Burundi", ICC-01/17-X-9-US-Exp, 25 October 2017, Pre-Trial Chamber, 25 October 2017, para. 86 ("The brevity of detention alone cannot be brought

Based on international human rights law, whether an arrest was based on a legitimate ground for deprivation of liberty is also considered. The duration of a detention does not lessen its severity.

Protesters have been arbitrarily arrested and detained by members of Tajikistan's state entities, who were aware that their acts constituted violations. Many victims were arbitrarily arrested, detained, and convicted and some were sentenced to long prison terms solely for exercising rights protected under international human rights law, including the rights to belief and religion, to freedom of expression, and of peaceful assembly. Victims were also convicted and sentenced following unfair trials before courts lacking independence and impartiality. There is a pattern of prison sentences imposed after trials involving, inter alia, the denial of the right to a lawyer of one's choice, torture and forced confessions (Sorokina 2023).

Based on the evidence, there are reasonable grounds to believe that imprisonment as an underlying act of crimes against humanity was committed as part of the widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population.

Torture is the intentional infliction of severe physical or mental pain or suffering upon one or more persons, upon a person in the custody or under the control of a perpetrator.[38] For an act to amount to the crime of torture a severe degree of pain and suffering must be reached.[39]

Victims, including protesters, members of ethnic and religious minorities, activists challenging institutionalised discrimination, lawyers, journalists, family members of victims, public and religious figures have been subjected to severe physical or mental pain and suffering inflicted intentionally during their arrest, transfer to, and detention at facilities operated by different State entities, including unofficial sites, and during interrogation (Amnesty International 2024a). Moreover, prosecutorial officials

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forward as an argument to deny the severity of the deprivation of physical liberty".); ICC, ICC-01/14-01/18-403-Corr-Red, Prosecutor v. Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona, Corrected version of 'Decision on the confirmation of charges against Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona', Pre-Trial Chamber, 11 December 2019, para. 119 ("[N]either the duration of the imprisonment nor the number of persons imprisoned denies, as such, the severity of the deprivation of liberty".)

[38] ICC, Elements of Crimes, art. 7(1)(f). It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions under international law. *See* Rome Statute, art. 7(2)(e).

[39] Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Art. 1; ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08-424, *Prosecutor v. Bemba*, Decision Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute on the Charges of the Prosecutor, Pre-Trial Chamber, 15 June 2009, para. 194. The perpetrator must have intended the conduct and that the victim endured severe pain or suffering. ICC, ICC-01/05-01/08-424, Prosecutor v. Bemba, Decision Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute on the Charges of the Prosecutor, Pre-Trial Chamber, 15 June 2009, para. 193.

and judges dismissed reports of torture, while courts used confessions obtained under torture to convict persons in connection with the protests.

Enforced disappearance means the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorisation, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organisation, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of liberty or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law.[40]

Tajik authorities routinely held detainees incommunicado and/or in solitary confinement,[41] refusing to inform their families of their whereabouts and, in some cases, placing them outside the protection of the law and amounting to enforced disappearance. The lack of compliance with procedural safeguards for detention which should protect against disappearance, meant that in many cases, families were unaware of the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones until they were released, or were transferred to official places of detention. These periods lasted days, weeks and sometimes more than a month. These practices were intentional.[42]

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that there are reasonable grounds to believe that enforced disappearance as an underlying act of crimes against humanity was committed as part of the widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population in the context of the GBAO crackdown.

Mental Element

Under the Rome Statute, a perpetrator must have known that the conduct was part of, or have intended the conduct to be part of, a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population. The perpetrator must have acted with knowledge of the broader context of the attack, and with knowledge that his acts (or omissions) formed part of the widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population.[43]

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[40] Rome Statute, art. 7(2)(i).

[41] On inhumane conditions of detention as under inhumane acts, see e.g. IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 80.

[42] Ibid.

[43] ICTR, ICTR-00-56-A, *Prosecutor v. Ndindiliyimana, Nzuwonemeye and Sagahutu*, Judgement, Appeals Chamber, 11 February 2014, para. 260. However, it is not necessary that the perpetrator be informed of the details of the attack, or that he approves its purpose or the goal behind it. It is irrelevant whether the perpetrator participated in the attack for purely personal reasons. *See* ICTY, IT-04-74-T, *Prosecutor v. Jadranko Prlić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 May 2013, para. 45. It is sufficient that, through his acts or the function which he willingly accepted, he knowingly took the risk of participating in the implementation of that attack.

Members of Tajikistan's state security and intelligence forces, as well as members of the judiciary and prosecutors were involved in the commission of the underlying acts of crimes against humanity listed throughout this article.

High-level State authorities publicly commented on the attack directed against the civilian population and encouraged, sanctioned, and endorsed underlying acts through statements justifying them. Different Tajik state entities planned, directed, and organised their action and invested a considerable amount of State resources. Official statements were publicly issued. There were recurring patterns of violence in different locations over a prolonged period by the same entities and patterns of targeting certain groups of victims across all entities and of impunity. Representatives of different Tajik government entities used the same terminology to describe, denigrate and delegitimise victims. Authorities across the system were involved in misinformation and disinformation campaigns, as well as campaigns of harassment, intimidation and reprisals against victims, their families and supporters.

*Persecution_*

International criminal law recognises persecution as a crime against humanity, where the necessary contextual elements are met. The Rome Statute, Article 7(2)(g) describes persecution as a severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity.[44] The jurisprudence of international criminal courts and tribunals has recognised a wide variety of fundamental rights that come within this notion. These include the right to life, liberty and the security of person, the right not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention,[45] as well as the rights to freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, freedom of association, of peaceful assembly, freedom of move-

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ICTY, IT-97-25-T, *Prosecutor v. Krnojelac*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 15 March 2002, para. 59; ICTY, IT-95-14-T, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 3 March 2000, para. 251; ICTY, IT-96-23/1-A, *Prosecutor v. Kunarac, Kovac and Vuković*, Judgement", Appeals Chamber, 12 June 2001, para. 102-103.

[44] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, art. 7(2)(g).

[45] ICTY, IT-95-14-T, *Prosecutor v. Blaškić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 3 March 2000, para. 220. See also ICTY, IT-97-25-T, *Prosecutor v. Krnojelac*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 15 March 2002, para. 433; ICTY, IT-98-30/1-T, *Prosecutor v. Kvočka*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 2 November 2001, para. 186; ICTY, IT-94-1-T, *Prosecutor v. Tadić*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 7 May 1997, para. 710.

ment, equality, education, privacy, personal dignity, work, security and property.[46]

In the context of the GBAO crackdown, the Tajik government has actively repressed ethnic Pamiris, who face constant discrimination and subjugation with reports of torture, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests at the hands of Tajik security forces (Amnesty International 2024b). Instances like those of the violent kidnapping and subsequent execution of Gulbiddin Ziyobekov in 2021, as well as the gunning down of local Pamiri activist Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov in 2022 highlight the injustices perpetrated on the people of GBAO (Amnesty International, 2024b). In addition to extrajudicial killings, religious and cultural leaders are frequently imprisoned at the hands of security services. Ulfathonim Mamadshoeva, a prominent journalist and human rights champion, was arbitrarily arrested in her home in May of 2022 and was sentenced to 21 years in prison, on the basis that she was responsible for attempting to organise a coup and was allegedly incentivised by a foreign government to do so (OMCT 2022). Pamiris in GBAO are additionally often subject to racist abuse from Tajik authorities, alongside the suppression of traditional customs and religion (Eurasianet 2022).

Limitations of the International Criminal Court

While the ICC presents a viable option for prosecuting the Tajik government's crimes against humanity, many victims of abuses have often felt let down by or stymied by the ICC's various shortcomings, politicised proceedings, and exceedingly slow pace of prosecution. Indeed, the ICC is only able to prosecute a handful of cases in any given investigation, and it tends to focus on senior officials or others responsible for crimes at a high level.

As of July 2024, the ICC had charged a total of 54 different individuals with war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide, and an addi-

[46] See e.g. ICC, ICC-01/12-01/18-461-Corr-Red, *Prosecutor v. Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud,* Decision on Confirmation of Charges against Al Hassan, Pre-Trial Chamber, 13 November 2019, para. 664; ICC-01/12-01/18, *Prosecutor v. Al Hassan*, Decision on the Prosecutor's Application for the Issuance of a Warrant of Arrest, Pre-Trial Chamber, 22 May 2018, para. 88; ICC, ICC-01/17-X, Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Burundi, Pre-Trial Chamber, 9 November 2017, para. 132. See ICTY, IT-95-16-T, *Prosecutor v. Kupreškić et al.*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 14 January 2000, para. 615 (physical acts, and other discriminatory acts involving attacks on political, social and economic rights); ICTY, IT-98-32-T, *Prosecutor v. Vasiljević*, Judgement, Trial Chamber, 29 November 2002, para. 246 (physical and mental harm, as well as cultural and property destruction); Office of the Prosecutor, Policy on the Crime of Gender Persecution, International Criminal Court (ICC), 7 December 2022, para. 23.

tional eight for related offenses such as witness intimidation (Human Rights First 2024). Eleven defendants have been convicted and 24 are still at large. The first nine investigations that the ICC opened were in sub-Saharan or north African countries. Since 2015, though, new investigations have covered a broader geographical range, including countries in Europe (Georgia, Ukraine), Latin America (Venezuela), Asia (Bangladesh/Myanmar, Afghanistan, the Philippines), the Middle East (Palestine), and sub-Saharan Africa (Burundi). Most of the court's current fugitives are accused of crimes in Ukraine, Darfur, Georgia, and Libya (Human Rights First 2024).

Some of the limitations the ICC faces are enforcement of its decrees.[47] The ICC's authority has also more recently been challenged by its own member states, such as Mongolia and Hungary. Both countries have allowed ICC fugitives entry and ignored arrest warrants when Vladimir Putin visited Mongolia in 2024 and Benjamin Netanyahu visited Hungary in 2025 (Autin 2024, Spike 2025). Hungary displayed its determination to further erode the ICC's legitimacy by announcing in June 2025 that it would withdraw officially from the ICC completely (Spike, 2025).[48] In October 2025, another ICC member, Tajikistan also hosted Putin on its territory without so much as a passing reference to its obligation to arrest pursuant to the Rome Statute. (Associated Press, October 2025).

Another obstacle the ICC could face is gaining access to GBAO for investigation and collecting testimony. Recently, it faced a similar situation regarding evidence collection in Russian-occupied Sevastopol and Donetsk, where ICC investigators have had to rely on the testimonies from individuals who have fled to gather evidence to prove war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Germany: Using Universal Jurisdiction

Given the difficulty of proceeding to a prosecution at the ICC, a more promising avenue for pursuing accountability may be in Germany's national courts, utilising *universal jurisdiction*. Universal jurisdiction is based on the notion that "certain crimes are so serious that the duty to

[47] Franziska Boehme points to the fact that in 2009, the African Union (AU) passed a "non-cooperation decision" that declared AU members should not cooperate with the ICC on the arrest of president Al Bashir of Sudan and later passed an ICC non-cooperation policy that targeted any AU head of state in 2013 (Boehme 2022).

[48] These recent controversies buttress Bohme's argument that collaboration with the ICC has now become a calculated political move for states and how they decide to protect their regional institutions and interests (Bohme 2022).

prosecute them transcends all borders", effectively enabling states to claim jurisdiction over alleged perpetrators – regardless of where the offenses took place or the nationality of those involved (CJA 2024).[49]

Universal jurisdiction is one of the key principles codified in the German Code of Crimes Against International Law (CCAIL) (*Völkerstrafgesetzbuch*, VStGB). The CCAIL regulates crimes against public international law, including the offenses of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. It came into force in Germany on June 30, 2002, to bring the German criminal law into accordance with the Rome Statute and supplement the German Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuch, StGB) (CCAIL, art. 2).

In June 2025, Germany passed a landmark legislative reform entitled: the Law for the Development of International Criminal law, which significantly strengthened universal jurisdiction in Germany. (Fibgar, 2024).

Currently, there are estimated to be around 30,000 Tajiks living in Germany, many of whom themselves are victims who have fled Tajikistan as a direct result of political repression.[50] Centred around Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Austria, many in this community have mobilised to form civil society organisations. As evidenced by the April 2025 ICC filing, some have collected evidence of abuses in Tajikistan that could be used to petition Germany's courts to initiate an investigation and prosecution.

Seeking prosecution for crimes against humanity in Tajikistan through universal jurisdiction would require cooperation with international bodies and other countries due to jurisdictional challenges. Plaintiffs, represented by human rights organisations or lawyers, would gather evidence to support their case, including witness testimony and documentary evidence. Defendants would require representation to defend themselves against the allegations. Victims of the alleged crimes may have the opportunity to participate in the proceedings, seeking legal representation to protect their rights. Defendants would have the right to a fair trial with procedural safeguards in place. If the accused individuals are not present in Germany, extradition may be sought from Tajikistan or other countries where they are located, which can involve legal procedures and diplomatic

[49] Over the last 15 years, Germany and other nations such as Spain, Belgium, and Argentina have used universal jurisdiction to prosecute criminals in their domestic legal systems, convicting those who have committed serious crimes in foreign nations.

[50] See, e.g., Dr. Olga Gulina, "Diaspora Engagement Mapping: TAJIKISTAN", EU Global Diaspora Facility, October 2020, https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CF_Tajikistan-v.5.pdf; "Tajikistan", Migration Data Platform for Evidence-Based Regional Development - IOM: UN Migration, 2024, https://seeecadata.iom.int/msite/seeecadata/country/tajikistan; "Tajik Refugees in Europe: In Search of a Better Life", Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, November 2, 2020, https://cabar.asia/en/tajik-refugees-in-europe-in-search-of-a-better-life-2.

negotiations. Judicial proceedings would follow, with the court evaluating evidence and determining guilt or innocence, leading to potential convictions. Challenges may arise due to complexities related to international law, diplomatic relations, and evidence gathering in Tajikistan.

Case of Anwar Raslan

There are many examples of Germany exercising universal jurisdiction and securing convictions or prominent investigations. One of the most notable examples was the trial and conviction of Anwar Raslan, a Syrian colonel under the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who was accused of 4,000 counts of torture and a further 58 counts of murder, rape, and sexual assault (Cornish 2020). Under the al-Assad regime, Raslan leads a unit of the General Intelligence Directorate responsible for the operation of al-Khatib prison, which held demonstrators, rights activists, and political opponents of al-Assad in appalling conditions, where they were regularly subjected to torture, beatings, and sexual assault (SJAC 2024). In 2022, Raslan was sentenced to life in prison for his crimes against humanity, one of the most significant examples in the fight to secure justice for those harmed at the hands of the al-Assad regime, and a major step in the development of trials utilising universal jurisdiction (Amnesty International 2022).

Case of Taha al-Jumailly

Another case is that of Taha al-Jumailly, an Iraqi man accused of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity who went to trial in April 2020. Remarkably, al-Jumailly was the first member of the Islamic State to be convicted of genocide for his role in the death and torture of a Yazidi woman and her young daughter (Williams 2024). In many important respects comparable to the Pamiris, the Yazidi people are a religious minority whose case presents hope for prosecuting the crimes of the Tajik government.[51] Al-Jumailly was married to a German national living in Iraq, and together in 2015 they purchased a Yazidi woman and her daughter as slaves, holding them in appalling conditions and at one point forcing them to remain outside in the Iraqi sun during the middle of summer (Koller 2023). As a result, the Yazidi girl died, and al-Jumailly fled the country to

[51] Native to Iraq and Syria, the Yazidis were violently persecuted by ISIS for their religious differences, with the massacre of 5,000 Yazidis occurring in 2014 and continued abuses thereafter have included kidnapping and sex-trafficking (Alaca 2020).

be eventually arrested in Greece and extradited to Germany on grounds of universal jurisdiction (BBC News 2020). He was tried and found guilty on all counts in 2021, with the judge sentencing him to life for crimes against humanity and genocide, detailing al-Jumailly's actions were committed "with the intent to eliminate the Yazidi religious minority" (Yönt 2021).

Prosecutions grounded on universal jurisdiction, however, are not limited to Iraq and Syria, but have been used to pursue the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide.[52] Another case regards Myanmar and the events preceding and following the coup in 2021. In 2023, a case was established in Germany to investigate the actions of Myanmar's military regarding crimes against humanity and other charges (Pelliconi 2023).

Germany's use of universal jurisdiction is particularly helpful when red tape regulations curtail the ICC's jurisdiction. This can be seen in the investigation of Russia's war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine (Reuters 2023). Germany is currently laying the groundwork to begin prosecution. Finally, German courts are also being asked to take on a case regarding Belarus and President Lukashenko's roles in committing crimes against humanity (Al Jazeera 2021). In each of these cases, the case has no relation to Germany – neither the defendants nor the victims are German or living in Germany– however, Germany has declared its duty to protect human rights and fill in gaps for accountability, making it the ideal avenue for justice for the Pamiris.

As these cases exhibit, there is an established path for prosecuting those who commit serious offenses that bear a striking similarity to those committed in Tajikistan, where impunity remains the norm. Extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, arbitrary imprisonment and torture form the heart of the Raslan, al-Jumaily cases tried using universal jurisdiction in Germany. The Tajik government's crimes against humanity in GBAO deserve international attention and the exercise of universal jurisdiction to bring perpetrators to justice.

However, there are a variety of obstacles in prosecuting Tajik officials responsible for crimes against humanity. One of the primary challenges

[52] In Germany, Onesphore Rwabukombe was convicted of crimes against humanity and sentenced to fourteen years for his role in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, which was responsible for the death of around 800,000 members of the Tutsi minority group (Chambers 2015). Rwabukombe was mayor of the town of Kiziguo during the violent ethnic cleansing and was found to have ordered the killing of hundreds of Tutsis, who were taking refuge in a local church at the time (VOA 2011). Living in Germany since 2002, the case was originally brought to trial in 2014 (where the former mayor was found guilty), but judges were "unable to determine whether Rwabukombe had acted with the specific intention to commit genocide" (Karuhanga 2015). In a retrial the following year, it was established that his actions *were* in fact directed at the entire population and the Federal Court of Justice increased his punishment to life in prison without parole, as they felt the original sentence was too lenient (Welle 2015).

is the difficulty of obtaining credible evidence (Trial International 2019, 9). Gathering reliable evidence from witnesses who have experienced or are still present in a conflict zone or areas under surveillance, and gaining access to documentation and forensic evidence that can withstand scrutiny in court is a major challenge. Further barriers to trial include the discretion of the prosecutor. Since neither party is a German national and the accused is not expected to be in Germany, a federal prosecutor could decline to investigate (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similar obstacles make it difficult to convict those who are brought to trial. Other cases have resulted in the overturning of rulings, like Congolese military commander Jean-Pierre Bemba, accused of overseeing crimes against humanity in the Central African Republic through the early 2000s. He was originally found guilty by the ICC in 2016 and sentenced to 18 years in prison, but his conviction was overturned on appeal in 2018 and he was acquitted (ICC 2019, 3). Uhuru Kenyatta, former President of Kenya, was similarly charged by the ICC for crimes against humanity for his role in the violence that followed the 2007 presidential election (Coalition for the ICC 2024). The charges were eventually dropped after much controversy, as key prosecution witnesses withdrew from the trial, in what the ICC has claimed is witness tampering, intimidation, and non-cooperation from the Kenyatta government (Dawson 2014). These examples demonstrate the difficulties in gathering evidence sufficient to prosecute those who commit offenses abroad and highlight how crucial the support of like-minded governments, institutions and human rights groups would be in a Tajik case (ICC 2020, 14).

The key driver for a case in either the ICC or Germany's national courts will be Pamiri and Tajik activists living outside the country, especially in Germany, Austria, Poland, and Lithuania who petition Germany's courts. A similar dynamic was on display in Austria and Germany in 2018, when Syrian nationals lobbied for the filing of charges against officials for crimes against humanity carried out under al-Assad.[53]

Similarly here, the German Federal Public Prosecutor should investigate the crimes committed in Tajikistan, by focusing on officials who bear the overall responsibility for the crimes, such as Saimumin Yatimov, the head of the Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security and Colonel General Ramazon Rahimov, also known as Ramazon Rahimzoda, Tajik-

[53] This led to filings by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights and the Centre for the Enforcement of Human Rights International in Germany and Austria. The judiciaries in both countries have the power to issue international arrest warrants if deemed fit (ECCHR n.d.). Former leader of the Syrian Air Force, Jamil Hassan, who was issued an international arrest warrant in Germany in 2018, was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia in France during May 2024 (Ayad 2024).

istan's Minister of Internal Affairs. These two officials have been the eyes and ears of President Rahmon since 2010 and 2012, respectively, overseeing the most repressive stretches of a three-decade-long reign. Other key officials include Shohruh Saidzoda, deputy head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Yusuf Rahmon, the Prosecutor-General of Tajikistan, and Imomiddin Sattorov, the Ambassador of Tajikistan to Germany and a former Ambassador of Tajikistan to the Russian Federation. As senior ministers, deputies, and diplomats these five officials are responsible for the various crimes against humanity listed above, including facilitating and aiding and abetting transnational repression, the abuse and misuse of INTERPOL, and other transnational abuses of Pamiri rights defenders, journalists, and peaceful opposition figures.

Even though these officials are still in Tajikistan, certain steps can be taken to expedite the path to justice, such as issuing international arrest warrants. To take these steps, the Federal Public Prosecutor and the courts should be provided with additional resources by the state. The survivors of abuses and witnesses who live in Germany, Austria, Lithuania and Poland should receive appropriate legal support, witness protection, and the chance to see a measure of justice.

Some Tajik and Pamiri activists are already working to see that an investigation into the crimes against humanity detailed here will lead to the issuing of charges and international arrest warrants against relevant officials. Such action would raise public awareness about human rights violations in Tajikistan and increase pressure to prosecute the crimes through international criminal justice mechanisms. Moreover, human rights groups can advocate for greater diplomatic pressure on countries harbouring perpetrators or enabling human rights violations. By collaborating with governments willing to exercise universal jurisdiction, such groups can facilitate legal action in states with a strong track record of prosecuting such cases. Additionally, these organisations can push for international bodies like the ICC to open investigations and, when appropriate, file indictments, while also providing critical support for victims and witnesses involved in these proceedings.

Conclusion

The Tajik government's crimes against humanity against Pamiris, human rights defenders and political dissidents demand urgent international attention. Both the ICC and universal jurisdiction offer a promising tool for addressing these atrocities. In particular, Germany's track record in applying the principle to cases involving crimes against human-

ity provides a framework that can be adapted to the transgressions occurring in Tajikistan. As seen in the cases of Raslan, al-Jumailly, and Rwabukombe, international prosecution has proven effective in securing justice for victims and holding perpetrators accountable. Despite the challenges in gathering evidence and navigating political obstacles, the international community has a responsibility to respond to these crimes that shock the conscience of humanity, transcending borders and national interests. The above-mentioned examples, coupled with Germany's commitment to use universal jurisdiction makes the pursuit of justice for Tajikistan's victims possible. Ultimately, addressing the human rights crisis in Tajikistan through universal jurisdiction would not only afford accountability, but also would reaffirm a global commitment to justice.

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Natural Resource Fund (NRF) in a Developing Society: Insights from the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ)

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Abstract. This paper examines the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ), analysing its evolution and performance as a Natural Resource Fund (NRF) in an institutionally developing society. The analysis highlights SOFAZ's initial challenges in curbing overspending of oil revenues, attributed to weak oversight and socio-economic pressures. The 2015 oil price decline prompted the government to shift its strategy by focusing on reducing budget transfers from SOFAZ, a goal that was achieved to a certain degree. The paper examines the role of transparency and the public availability of financial information about the fund as political incentives in this shift. However, it cautions that such transparency should not be equated with full public accountability, especially since significant economic challenges remain. While SOFAZ's transparency measures have contributed to its relative stability, the fund's long-term sustainability depends on continued efforts to reduce budget transfers from the fund. As Azerbaijan navigates its transition to a post-oil economy, the future of SOFAZ's accumulated assets hinges on maintaining these policy shifts.

Keywords: Natural Resource Fund (NRF), Azerbaijan, resource revenues management, economic policy, transparency.

1. Introduction

It is well recognized that nations relying heavily on revenue from exporting non-renewable natural resources – particularly oil and gas – are forced to confront certain economic challenges. These challenges primarily arise due to the volatility, substantial size, and finite nature of

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the resource revenues. The situation is often exacerbated by governments' tendency to rapidly spend these revenues without considering the ability of their economies to absorb them effectively. Establishing a *Natural Resource Fund (NRF)*[1] is one way to respond to these challenges. NRFs are institutions designed to collect surplus natural resource revenues, preventing them from flowing directly into the government budget.

Numerous research-rich countries have adopted this strategy with differing levels of success. For example, the Government Pension Fund of Norway (GPFN), frequently referred to as the Norwegian Oil Fund, is widely regarded as one of the most successful examples of an NRF. As the largest NRF globally in terms of assets under management (AUM), it plays an important role in Norway's fiscal system (Moses 2021). In contrast, Venezuela has faced significant challenges in managing its NRFs, largely due to political instability and a lack of adequate oversight mechanisms, which allowed the governments to deplete the funds (Di Bonaventura Altuve 2024).

The success of any NRF depends significantly on its fiscal policies, such as the rules governing deposits and withdrawals. However, it is also crucial that politicians adhere to these rules. This is particularly important in developing societies, where institutional robustness, oversight, and accountability may not yet meet optimal standards. In such contexts, it could become difficult to prevent the government from mismanaging the fund when it has the incentive to do so. As a result, government may change or ignore NRF regulations, leading to overspending of resource revenues, which undermines the fund's primary objective of achieving long-term economic stability. In such cases, transparency in terms of the availability of information regarding the fund finances is often seen as one of the critical factors, since "publicizing financial reports, could contribute in countering unauthorized use of funds" (Sanchez and Lamchek 2023, 4). However, while transparency can improve accountability and strengthen government capacity, it is also possible that it may not be sufficient on its own to guarantee the sustainability of NRFs in weak governance settings.

The State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ) provides a compelling case study of how an NRF operates within the framework of a developing,

[1] In literature and media, NRFs are also often referred to as Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs). SWFs are state-owned investment funds (comprised of bonds, stocks, properties etc.) that are funded by government surplus revenues. This surplus can emerge because of the excess natural resource revenues (which would make the SWF a commodity-based fund) or might arise due to some other reasons (e.g. fiscal surplus). In this article, to differentiate them from non-commodity-based SWFs, the term NRF will be used for commodity-based SWFs, a designation also adopted by other researchers (e.g. Humphreys and Sandbu 2007, Okpanachi and Tremblay 2021)

post-Soviet, society. The fund became operational just before significant oil revenues began entering the Azerbaijani economy in the early 2000s. It was designated that the revenues accumulated in SOFAZ would be saved for future generations and used to ensure macroeconomic stability. The fund's success in achieving these objectives, however, has been mixed. While SOFAZ has been crucial in stabilizing the economy by providing annual transfers to the state budget, this has also contributed to a growing dependence on the use of oil revenues for public spending, rather than leading to broader economic diversification. Ideally, a well-functioning NRF should help mitigate such dependence.

On the other hand, the fund has also managed to accumulate relatively substantial revenues over the years, with its assets as of 31 March 2025, surpassing sixty-two billion US dollars (SOFAZ Recent figures 2025). This is quite a significant amount for a small country like Azerbaijan, evidenced by the fact that at the end of 2023, SOFAZ's assets represented 77.5 percent of Azerbaijani GDP, demonstrating the fund's impressive size relative to the national economy (SOFAZ Annual Report 2023, 44). Moreover, in general, SOFAZ has been recognized for its transparency (Frynas 2017, 137), especially in terms of the public availability of information regarding its financial flows and operations, which are subject to external audits (SOFAZ Annual Report 2023, 63). It is arguably the most transparent institution in the country in this aspect, and this has been achieved despite the fund operating in a political environment with limited oversight.

Notably, in some other cases of NRFs established in institutionally developing societies (e.g. Angola), even the adoption of transparency guidelines ultimately failed to help preserve oil revenues in a sustainable manner due to weak oversight mechanisms and political factors. In contrast to such NRFs in comparable developing societies, SOFAZ has managed to maintain consistent growth of its assets so far. This paper, therefore, seeks to address the following question: *What role has transparency played in the long-term sustainability of SOFAZ assets?* By analysing SOFAZ's performance since its establishment, the paper also attempts to offer insights into the extent to which transparency can help sustain NRF assets in a context where formal oversight mechanisms remain weak.

To answer this question paper analyses the performance of the fund before and after 2015 fall of the oil prices, while also evaluating its outlook in light of the expected decline in Azerbaijan's oil reserves and revenues in the near future. To examine these issues, a qualitative analysis is conducted using official documents such as SOFAZ's annual reports and government decrees. This is complemented by a review of secondary sources, including academic research and media sources, to provide context and assess SOFAZ's overall performance. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2

provides an overview of NRFs, including their functions and related literature. Section 3 examines the operation and performance of SOFAZ since its inception. Section 4 delves into role of transparency. Section 5 provides an analysis of the future prospects of the fund and concludes.

2. NRFs

2.1 Functions of NRFs

NRFs have existed since the 1950s.[2] Over the years, many resource-rich countries have established such funds with the hope of better managing their large and highly volatile resource revenues. The NRFs may differ from each other in structure. Some are independent legal entities (e.g. Qatar), while others are managed within central banks (e.g. Kazakhstan). Despite these differences in structure, all NRFs are usually established to address the two major problems faced by the countries where resource revenues constitute bulk of the income: *the volatility of these revenues* and *their finite nature*. The NRFs tackle these issues by performing their two main functions: *stabilization* and *saving*. There is also an additional supplementary function called *sterilization*, which is closely linked to both of these main functions.

The *volatility* of resource revenues primarily stems from the fact that market prices for resources fluctuate and often follow a boom-and-bust cycle. If a government does not implement measures to manage this volatility, public spending may also become volatile. NRFs can help mitigate this volatility by performing *stabilization*. Stabilization occurs when the fund accumulates excess resource revenues during periods of higher-than-average prices and then uses them to support (stabilize) budget expenditures when prices are lower than average or during recession period. This results in a *countercyclical spending pattern,*[3] which is considered fiscally more viable for resource-exporting countries (Snudden 2016).

Alongside being volatile, the revenues derived from non-renewable natural resources are also *finite* and will eventually be exhausted. This raises concerns about intergenerational equity – the right of future generations to also benefit from the revenues. The *savings* function of an NRF addresses this question by saving the excess revenues for the ben-

[2] Founded in 1953, the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) is the oldest such fund in the world.

[3] The practice in resource-rich countries of reducing public spending during periods of high revenues or economic booms. Its opposite is *procyclical spending*, where governments increase spending during boom periods.

efit of future generations, who are expected to live in times when natural resources will be depleted. These saved revenues can also be invested, preferably abroad, so that the fund's assets would continue to grow through the returns on this investment, even after the non-renewable resources have been exhausted (Bauer 2014, 14).

The third function NRFs perform (usually integrated with the first two) is sterilization. This process involves managing the appreciation of the national currency's real exchange rate, which can occur when large amounts of foreign currency flood the economy due to large inflows of resource revenues. This appreciation can harm the competitiveness of the non-resource tradable sector, a phenomenon known as "Dutch disease" (Corden and Neary 1982, Corden 1984). The appreciation of the real exchange rate creates inflationary pressures by boosting domestic spending during a resource price boom. This makes non-resource exports (e.g. manufacturing) more expensive and less competitive abroad, while imports become cheaper. In the 1970s, following the discovery of large gas fields in the North Sea, this led to the decline of the Dutch manufacturing sector (Roy *et al.* 2013). Since then, many resource-exporting nations, particularly in developing countries, have experienced similar effects (Mien and Goujon 2022). Dutch disease can also contribute to overreliance on the resource sector and make the economy more vulnerable to resource price volatility. By removing (sterilizing) the foreign currency from the economy and using an NRF to invest in assets abroad, the adverse effects of Dutch disease can be mitigated.

While countries may opt to establish two separate funds to address stabilization and savings separately, most exporters usually prefer to establish one single fund that addresses both issues simultaneously, since a unified fund can reduce financing costs and optimize investment returns (Frynas 2017, 127). However, the specific rules governing stabilization and savings vary across NRFs.

2.2 Literature on NRFs

The literature on Natural Resource Funds (NRFs) is closely tied to the broader discourse on how natural resource wealth affects the economic outcomes of exporting countries. Many studies highlight the negative effects of natural resource abundance – the so-called "resource curse" – which has been linked to poor economic growth, especially in developing countries (Auty 1993, Sachs and Warner 1995, Karl 1997, Ross 2012, Venables 2016). Similarly, the "rentier state" theory, which looks at the political effects of resource abundance, argues that resource revenues (rents) allow govern-

ments to gain an alternative income source to taxation of the population. Such governments become fiscally independent and autonomous from accountability to their population (Mahdavy 1970, Beblawi 1987). Moreover, mismanagement of the resource revenues has been linked to a number of other governance-related issues, including rent-seeking, increasing levels of corruption, patronage politics, deterioration of governance institutions (Karl 1997, Mehlum *et al.* 2006, Ross 2012, Prichard *et al.* 2018).

Properly managed NRFs can act as a check on such mismanagement by isolating the resource revenues from the general budget income, thereby supporting the fiscal sustainability in resource-exporting countries. In light with this, research on NRFs often focuses on the analysis of the elements crucial for optimal design within the context of economic management – such as the most effective deposit and withdrawal rules, the degree of alignment of the fund with the country's broader fiscal policy, or government's ability to maintain budget surpluses (Davis *et al.* 2003, Segura 2006, van der Ploeg and Venables 2011, Deléchat *et al.* 2017).

These fiscal issues aim to enhance NRF sustainability and are undeniably important. However, their effectiveness can be undermined by political dynamics and weak institutional oversight. In practice, NRFs are not only governed by economic policies; political decisions also play a significant role. Governments often face incentives to spend rather than save resource revenues, particularly in weaker institutional settings where even well-designed fiscal rules can be easily bypassed due to weak oversight, which also allow political leaders to take a direct role in the fund management, thus reducing its general effectiveness (Humphreys and Sandbu 2007, Collier *et al.* 2010, Bernstein *et al.* 2013, Bauer 2014). As a result, either a very small portion of the revenues is saved, or the saved revenues are eventually depleted, as seen in Venezuela's FIEM and FONDEN funds (Di Bonaventura Altuve 2024, 292).

The tendency to spend rather than save in developing societies is influenced by more objective, factors as well. First, saving must occur during periods of high resource prices when there is surplus revenue, and the population is least likely to accept low public spending. In developing countries, such as Ghana, directing revenues to an NRF polarized various segments of society, who questioned the choice to save for future generations while facing economic and developmental challenges today (Ackah and Gyeyir 2021, 134). Developing countries are also usually capital-scarce and require investment in building up such capital. Therefore, using resource revenues for such spending (at least in the early period of the revenue influx) is expected and hard to avoid (Collier *et al.* 2010). In Timor-Leste, for example, the withdrawals from the NRF exceeded the fiscal rules, partly because the rules were too restrictive for a country that

required large public spending (Bauer 2014, 21). All these factors can further encourage governments to bypass NRF regulations

Therefore, it is important, when designing economic policies for the management of NRFs (e.g. fiscal rules), to "create political incentives (or at least mitigate political disincentives) for abiding by that policy" (Humphreys and Sandbu, 2007, 226). The role of transparency is particularly emphasized as a crucial element in this discussion (Humphreys and Sandbu 2007, Bauer 2014, Okpanachi and Tremblay 2021, Sanchez and Lamchek 2023). At a minimum, such transparency means that an NRF should, in a timely and constant manner, publicly provide full information about its financial flows. Humphreys and Sandbu (2007, 214) see this as the informational role of NRFs and argue that "when information is scarce and asymmetric, efficient outcomes are more difficult to sustain. An NRF could alleviate this problem by facilitating the flow of information within the government system and between it and the population or the international public". They also suggest that this transparency could enhance the government's technical capabilities and potentially encourage greater transparency in other areas. Not surprisingly, the International Forum of Sovereign Wealth Funds (IFSWF)[4] and the Truman Scoreboard Index[5] view transparency as a key factor for NRF effectiveness and assess it based on factors like public reporting, external audits, and governance structures.

However, it is debatable whether transparency alone is enough to effectively prevent NRF mismanagement, particularly in institutionally weak and developing contexts. Even when a fund is designed with transparency mechanisms and scores highly on international transparency ratings, overall bad governance in the country can override these efforts and lead to fund mismanagement, as seen in examples like Angola (Frynas 2017, Markowitz 2020, Ambe-Uva and Martin 2021). In most cases, such NRFs become unsustainable and save very little or are depleted within the first signs of economic troubles.

Azerbaijani SOFAZ is an intriguing case study for examining the effectiveness of NRF in a developing society. The fund combines stabilization and savings functions and, as an extra-budgetary, separate legal institution has a degree of autonomy from other national financial institutions. SOFAZ is recognized (Luong and Weinthal 2010, Guliyev 2013,

[4] The IFSWF was founded in 2008 as a voluntary association of sovereign wealth funds worldwide. Incidentally, its first meeting, held in 2009, was hosted by SOFAZ in Baku. Santiago Principles adopted by IFSWF consist of 24 voluntary principles (called Generally Accepted Principles and Practices – GAPP), relating to transparency, governance, and accountability.

[5] The Truman Scoreboard Index developed by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), uses 33 individually weighted indicators covering four key categories: structure, governance, transparency/accountability and behaviour.

Frynas 2017) for its transparency, particularly in terms of publicly (and timely) releasing information about its operations. It is also very highly ranked (scoring 92 out of 100) by the Truman Scoreboard Index (Maire *et al.* 2021). However, the fund also functions in a society where common oversight mechanisms and wider societal governance are weak (Franke *et al.* 2009, Guliyev 2020, Umudov 2021).[6] This raises an important question for SOFAZ: to what extent has transparency played a meaningful role in fund's long-term sustainability, or does it merely serve as a symbolic measure? The next two sections of the paper attempt to analyse this dynamic by assessing SOFAZ's performance since its inception and focusing on the role of transparency.

3. SOFAZ and its operation

3.1 Background

SOFAZ was established in 1999 and became operational in 2001, making Azerbaijan the first of the post-Soviet oil and gas rich countries to create an NRF. The fund has three main goals: (1) ensuring macroeconomic stability; (2) achieving intergenerational equity; (3) financing major projects to support socio-economic development (SOFAZ Mission and Objectives 2025). While these objectives are typical for most NRFs, it has been argued that in the case of SOFAZ they need to be more detailed, particularly in terms of the connection to the operational rules (Bauer 2014, 20).

The primary revenue source of the fund is the income generated by the sale of Azerbaijan's oil and gas shares by foreign oil companies (FOCs). Other sources of income include bonus payments, acreage fees, transportation fees paid to Azerbaijan for the transit of oil and gas through its territory, and revenues from the investment returns (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). It should be noted that revenue from the state oil

[6] Notably, post-Soviet states, including Azerbaijan, have been described as neopatrimonial in number of studies (Robinson 2012, Gel'man 2016, Fisun 2019, Shkel 2019, Izquierdo-Brichs and Serra-Massansalvador 2021). In the Weberian framework, patrimonialism is seen as a form of traditional authority, where a political and economic system is built on the use of public power for personal gain (Gel'man 2016). Neopatrimonialism extends this logic into modern societies. It is characterized by "informal institutional "core," or de facto constitution, of the neopatrimonial politico-economic order, around which the ruling groups build the shell of formal institutions (such as official constitutions or electoral systems)" (Gel'man, 2016, 459). However, these formal institutions are functional rather than merely symbolic, even though informal practices significantly influence their operation (Erdmann and Engel 2006, Shkel 2019). Other features of neopatrimonialism include personalism, rent-seeking, corruption, and prebendalism (Shkel 2019).

company SOCAR's own onshore oil fields is not directed to the fund. FOCs also pay their taxes directly to the state budget. Nevertheless, the greatest portion of the oil wealth is still managed by SOFAZ.

SOFAZ is an extra-budgetary, legally independent institution. However, in terms of oversight, the fund is much more accountable to the executive branch. For example, the president appoints the fund CEO, their deputy and the members of the fund's seven-member supervisory board. Theoretically, the board has several powers, including, the review and evaluation of the fund's draft annual budget, financial statements, annual reports, and other related documents (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). The current board consists of the prime minister, the chair of the central bank, the deputy chair of the parliament, two ministers, and two assistants to the president (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). This means that six out of the seven members are affiliated with the government, with only one representative from the legislature and no members from civil society. Such structure grants considerable discretion to the executive in managing SOFAZ assets.

The fund's annual budget is also approved and signed by the president without requiring legislative consent. However, majority of SOFAZ expenditures, particularly budget transfers, are incorporated into the annual national budget, which is debated and approved by parliament (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). Thus, parliament does exercise certain oversight over the fund withdrawals through the consolidated government budget, although this oversight remains indirect. However, it should be noted that in general, the parliament in Azerbaijan is not regarded as strong, with the members of the ruling party and its affiliates holding the majority of seats (Guliyev 2020, Umudov 2021).

3.2 Stabilization function

Annual transfers to the state budget are the primary method through which the fund can claim to have achieved its first objective – ensuring macroeconomic stability. These transfers also constitute the bulk of SOFAZ's annual expenditure. Overall, the fund has transferred $125.1 billion to the state budget between 2003 and 2023 (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). Before 2019, there were no specific guidelines for determining the annual transfer amounts. The only existing document in this regard was the "Long-Term Strategy on the Management of Oil and Gas Revenues"[7]

[7] Since the document was repealed, it is no longer available on the SOFAZ website but can still be accessed through: https://web.archive.org/web/20161213073848/https://www.oilfund.az/uploads/5-eng-long-term.pdf.

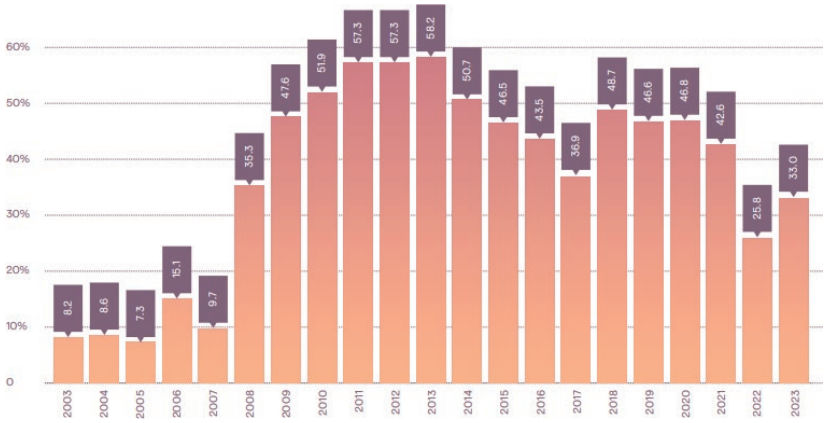

Figure 1. Share of the SOFAZ transfers within state budget revenues (SOFAZ Annual Report 2023, 45).

for the period 2005-2025, adopted in 2004 and repealed in 2019 (following the adoption of a new budget rule).

Although this strategy envisioned using the non-oil deficit limit[8] to guide medium-term oil revenue spending, this approach was rarely consistently applied. Therefore, evaluating the impact of budget transfers – particularly in the early years of the fund – can be challenging. Figure 1 shows the share of SOFAZ transfers in the state budget revenues from 2003 to 2023, while Figure 2 presents the average annual oil prices during the same period.

As can be seen, the significant rise in the share of transfers within the budget revenues started in 2008, coinciding with the global financial crisis and the decline of oil prices after the mid-2000s oil boom. This period effectively was the first test of SOFAZ's stabilization function, and it could be argued that it passed this test successfully by shielding the state budget from oil price fluctuations. However, even after oil prices stabilized and rebounded by the end of 2010, the transfers did not decrease, and spending did not become countercyclical. Instead, the share of transfers within budget revenues reached 58.2 percent by 2013, which meant that the government spent around 90 percent ($15.7 billion) of the annual revenues received by the fund (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). Additionally, these years marked peak Azerbaijani oil production, with the fund receiving

[8] The deficit of the national budget once the revenues from oil and gas exports are excluded. Setting a limit on non-oil deficit restricts the extent to which oil revenues can be used to finance the non-oil deficit, ensuring it does not exceed a specified threshold.

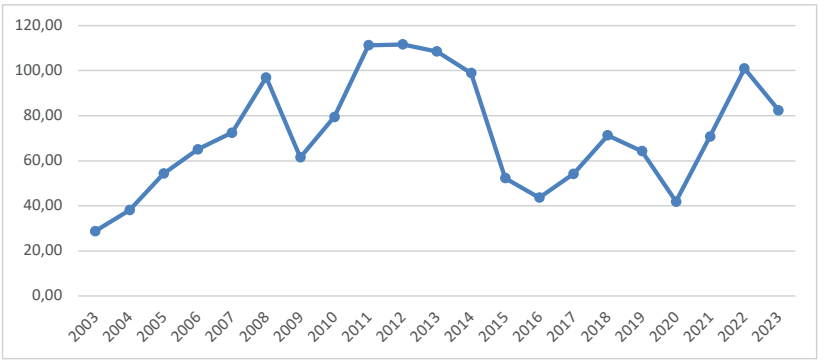

Figure 2. Average oil price from 2001 to 2023, in U.S. dollars per barrel (statista.com 2025).

more than $16 billion in each of these four years – something that has not been repeated. In summary, during this period, the government was both receiving substantial oil revenues and spending them rapidly, indicating that SOFAZ was not effectively stabilizing or curbing government overspending of oil revenues. It is possible that the large transfers during this period may have also been motivated by political considerations to maintain public spending and political stability.

The change in this strategy began with the sharp drop in oil prices in 2015. This led the government, for the first time, to withdraw more from SOFAZ for a budget transfer than the fund's total revenue for that year (SOFAZ Annual Report 2023, 2). As a result, the fund's assets were reduced compared to 2014. This might have been a concerning indicator that the government was beginning to deplete SOFAZ's assets. Not surprisingly, there were views (Altstadt 2017, 221) that questioned the ability of the fund to survive in such environment.

However, instead, the government enacted several measures, including the devaluation of the national currency, the manat and some optimization of public spending. This led to the gradual reduction of budget transfers, as illustrated in Figure 1. Additionally, there was some economic liberalization aimed at boosting non-oil sectors, and the country introduced several "strategic road maps" to further develop these sectors (President.az 2016). While the effectiveness of these measures can be debated, by 2017, the proportion of budget transfers fell below 40 percent for the first time in nearly a decade. Despite a subsequent rise in transfers after 2017, the 2015-16 period clearly influenced the government, which, in 2019, finally adopted a budget rule that linked transfer calculations to specific guidelines. Although the intro-

duction of the rule was a positive step, its overall complexity was seen as an obstacle to successful implementation (Aghayev 2021).

Once, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the use of the budget rule was suspended. After the pandemic, government adopted a revised, simpler budget rule at the end of 2021. The new revised rule restricts how large the non-oil budget deficit can be compared to the non-oil GDP. To put it simply: if the limit is 20 percent and the non-oil GDP is expected to be $40 billion, then the maximum allowable non-oil deficit would be $8 billion.[9] Since the non-oil deficit is funded by oil revenues (mainly through budget transfers) the limit in theory forces government to stay disciplined and not to overspend from SOFAZ.

Following the adoption of the rule, as Figure 1 illustrates, budget transfers dropped to about a third of budget revenues in 2022 and 2023. However, this is likely due to the rise in energy prices caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which led to higher-than-expected revenues. Thus, the full impact of the new rule remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the decision not to dramatically increase the budget transfers (from 2022 to 2023) during this new boom period can be viewed as a tentative positive development.

3.3 Savings function

There never were definitive rules specifying how much of the oil revenues should be saved by SOFAZ. The only ambiguous guideline in the "Long-Term Strategy" discussed earlier indicated that, when oil and gas revenues peaked, at least 25 percent should be saved. The document did not clarify whether this 25 percent should be saved annually or define the peak period. The early 2010s seem to be the most likely option, and during that time, the rule (if intended as an annual savings rate) appears to have been ignored. Nonetheless, as shown in Figure 3, the growth of SOFAZ's assets (which includes both saved oil revenues and investment returns) from 2013 to 2023 was notably positive.

As seen, excluding 2015 and 2016, SOFAZ has always had growth in its assets. Although the positive trend in savings was not always guided by a consistent strategy – as evidenced by the absence of rules governing the savings rate – it still indicates that the government acknowledges the importance of accumulating these assets. By the beginning of 2025, the fund's assets had reached sixty billion US dollars, which is substantial for a country the size of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ Recent figures 2025).

[9] For more in-depth explanation of the rule see Aghayev (2021).

Figure 3. Increase in SOFAZ assets from 2013 to 2023, in USD (SOFAZ Annual Report 2023, 2).

SOFAZ's ability to accumulate reserves, even in the periods of economic downturns, distinguishes it from NRFs in other similar resource-rich developing countries. For example, the assets of the National Fund of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NFRK), which have generally fluctuated since 2015, equalled around $59.1 billion by the end of April 2024 (Time.kz 2024). Given Azerbaijan's much smaller oil reserves and the similar establishment timing of the funds, SOFAZ's closeness to NRFK in terms of the size of its assets is impressive.

While the newly adopted budget rule does not explicitly address the savings rate, it may indirectly influence asset growth by potentially reducing budget transfers. The decree signed in October 2023 (E-qanun.az 2023), aims to decrease the limit on the ratio of the non-oil base deficit to the non-oil GDP, lowering it from 24 percent in 2024 to 17.5 percent in the medium term. If implemented, this should lead to a reduction in budget transfers and a further increase in the share of saved revenues.

3.3 Socio-economic projects and investment policy

The revenues transferred from the fund to the state budget through the annual transfers were already used to finance the socio-economic projects via traditional public spending channels. However, from 2001 to 2023, the fund also spent an additional $11.8 billion to directly finance certain key projects (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). In these cases, SOFAZ provided funding to state entities responsible for implementing the projects directly, bypassing the centralized state budget.

One of the principal areas where SOFAZ funds were used was the improvement of the living conditions of refugees and IDPs from the war with Armenia. Other directly financed projects include improvements to the water supply system of Baku, the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, energy-related projects (e.g. the Southern Gas Corridor), education-related projects and others (SOFAZ Recent figures 2025). Many of these are already completed. Generally, such direct investments from an NRF are undesirable (Humphreys and Sandbu 2007) and SOFAZ has been criticized for engaging in it (Bauer 2014, 5). It is more efficient and transparent to have one single expenditure source, namely the national budget. Therefore, the gradual winding down of such spending recent years is a positive development.

Finally, the investment policy of SOFAZ also deserves attention. The fund's investment portfolio is managed based on the annual guidelines approved by the president (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). The fund invests in fixed-income instruments, equities, gold, and real estate. Its investment policy has always been defined by conservatism. Low-risk, low-yield fixed income makes up the majority of the fund's portfolio. This is not surprising. While equities offer the potential for higher returns, they also come with greater risk, which is unacceptable given the critical role of the fund's assets in budgetary transfers. In this conservatism, SOFAZ is not so different from other relatively smaller NRFs. Usually, only the largest NRFs (e.g. Norway) are in position to pursue riskier investments. Overall, since its inception, SOFAZ has generated $11.5 billion in investment revenue, which accounts for 5.8 percent of the fund's total revenues until 2023 (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023).

4. Transparency and SOFAZ

4.1 Evolution: Before and After 2015

The previous section evaluated the stabilization and saving functions of SOFAZ. However, as this paper has argued, simply analysing economic policies is not enough to evaluate an NRF. The institutional and political context is also important. In this respect, it may be helpful to divide the operation of SOFAZ into two phases: before and after 2015.

Before 2015, the fund exhibited many of the limitations typical of an NRF in a developing society. During this period, the government tended to spend heavily and was inconsistent in applying what were, in effect, very ambiguous fiscal rules. Insufficient oversight mechanisms, coupled with strong, centralized executive control over the fund and a weak leg-

islature, were clearly important contributory factors. It is also evident that spending acted as a tool for the government's political consolidation, by, for example, financing expenditures ahead of elections (Kendall-Taylor 2012, Guliyev 2013).

However, understanding the broader context behind this spending is also important. Azerbaijan faced a severe economic decline in the early years of its independence as the country's GDP fell from $8.8 billion in 1990 to $1.9 billion in 1994 (Data.worldbank.org 2023). Moreover, as a capital-scarce country, it required substantial investment in infrastructure. The economic situation in the country was exacerbated by the dire social conditions caused by war and the subsequent occupation of its territory by Armenia which led to a catastrophic rise in number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Additionally, as a post-Soviet state, there was a widespread expectation among the population, which was accustomed to the Soviet welfare state model, that the state would take a leading role in alleviating these socio-economic issues (Luong and Weinthal 2010, 246). Thus, it is not surprising that oil revenues were spent heavily in the early 2000s, and the "Long-Term Strategy" mentioned above also envisioned using oil revenues to develop non-oil sectors.

Analysis of the economic effectiveness of this spending is beyond this article's scope, although there are views that in general, it was not always prudent (e.g. Gurbanov et al. 2017). It is also evident that, by 2013, there was a noticeable trend toward overspending from the fund. Additionally, given that Azerbaijan's peak oil production period was brief, and it was anticipated that production would face a structural decline by the decade's end, the country had less time to indulge in capital investment. There was clearly an urgent need for a change in strategy to begin at least partial reduction of the budget transfers. This became evident in 2015 when the decline in global oil prices plunged Azerbaijan's economy into crisis, exposing the vulnerabilities of its heavy reliance on the oil revenues. In response, the government, facing mounting pressure to stabilize the economy, initiated certain reforms aimed at reducing budget transfers from the fund (i.e. the budget rule), which were discussed earlier.

It would be difficult to argue that reforms enacted after 2015 were not largely triggered by the sharp decline in oil prices. But it is also important to consider the role of transparency in influencing the adoption changes specifically related to the fund. As SOFAZ's assets had become a widely reported indicator of economic stability, the government did face a certain pressure to protect them. Additionally, considering SOFAZ's important role as a symbol of economic stability, ensuring the sustainable growth of fund's assets may have also been important for reinforcing the government's credibility as well. Below these dynamics will be explored further.

4.2 Role of transparency: incentives and limitations

As discussed earlier, transparency is often regarded as a crucial mechanism for ensuring good governance in NRFs. However, its effectiveness also depends on the broader institutional context of the country. In institutionally strong societies, such as Norway, transparency adds to the existing oversight mechanisms over government spending. But in institutionally developing societies it is expected to compensate for the weakness of other oversight mechanisms. This means that, in developing societies with weaker institutional oversight, such as Azerbaijan, the impact of transparency is less unequivocal.

SOFAZ is frequently recognized for its transparency. For example, the Truman Scoreboard Index ranked it sixth among all evaluated funds, which makes it the top fund outside the OECD (Maire *et al.* 2021). Additionally, SOFAZ is a member of the International Forum of Sovereign Wealth Funds (IFSWF) and adheres to the Santiago Principles. Key details about the fund's investment portfolio and transactions, including its full annual reports, both in Azerbaijani and English languages, are publicly accessible on its website. This means that financial information is available to any citizen of Azerbaijan or anyone from around the world. Moreover, SOFAZ's financial statements are audited by reputable international firms, with PricewaterhouseCoopers handling the 2023 audit (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023, 9). Overall, there is a widespread agreement that, as far as collection and accumulation of revenue from the FOCs is concerned, SOFAZ is very transparent (Luong and Weinthal 2010). The roots of fund's transparency can also be linked to its structure. It is isolated from rest of the government bureaucracy and primarily employs technocrats who have been educated overseas (Guliyev 2013). This allows SOFAZ to keep its internal transparency intact.

However, it should again be made clear that in this context, transparency specifically refers to the availability of public information about SOFAZ's finances – that is, to the informational role of the NRFs mentioned earlier. Such transparency does not necessarily create actual legal constraints on the government's ability to make withdrawals from the fund. However, it is also not purely symbolic, as it has played some role in shaping the policies regarding the fund.

The role of transparency in shaping SOFAZ's fiscal policies becomes particularly evident after 2015. While the sharp decline in oil prices created immediate economic pressures, transparency mechanisms increased the political costs of solving these pressures through fund depletion. First, the fund (and notably its transparency) was usually mentioned and praised even before 2015 in speeches by officials (President.az 2011, Presi-

dent.az 2013). Over the years, regular public disclosures of SOFAZ's financial figures meant that any reduction in assets would have to be reported. Such a reduction could be problematic for the government especially, since the local media typically covers these updates positively, highlighting the growth of assets as a notable achievement (Apa.az 2024a, Oxu.az 2024a). In fact, SOFAZ's growth and sustainability of its assets have become a key indicator of the government's effective management of oil revenues and is as such mentioned by the press editorials (Apa.az 2024b), government officials (Oxu.az 2024b), and even the president himself who has specifically emphasized the importance of growing the fund's assets even during the crisis years, linking SOFAZ's stability to broader economic credibility (President.az 2019).[10]

Therefore, a potential continuous decline in the fund's assets would indicate a failure in managing oil revenues. Moreover, there is also relatively open discussion in the media about the importance of safeguarding the fund's assets and the risks of relying too heavily on budget transfers (Mammadov 2023). Even the government's flagship initiative "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development" explicitly mentions the need to lower the share of budget transfers (President.az 2021). It is difficult to imagine the government depleting the fund in such an environment. Thus in Azerbaijan, unlike other developing resource-exporting states where NRF depletion occurred with little or no public awareness (e.g. Venezuela), public availability of information regarding fund finances makes depletion politically costly. Particularly given that SOFAZ's success and growth have been closely linked to political legitimacy at the highest level (President.az 2019).[11]

All of the above suggests that in the case of SOFAZ, transparency functions as an important informational tool that provides certain incen-

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[10] See the following quote from the speech given by President during the meeting with the new SOFAZ CEO: "*The main thing is that over the 20 years we have not lost funds and have increased the Fund's resources every year. Even in the crisis years, when we were faced with devaluation, the Fund's savings did not decrease. I did not allow that to happen. We reduced costs, resorted to major saving measures, maintained our strategic foreign exchange reserves and increased them. I can say that this happens very rarely, because at a time when oil prices fell sharply, fourfold, all sovereign funds lost a lot of money. They lost billions, tens of billions of dollars, but we did not lose anything because we are pursuing a very thoughtful policy.*" (Para. 6).

[11] See the following quote from the speech given by President during the meeting with the new SOFAZ CEO: "*I must also say that the proposal to establish the Oil Fund was submitted to the great leader by me. At that time, there were different opinions in the government, and some members of the government opposed the idea. Their suggestion was that all oil revenues should go into the state budget and be spent annually. If that approach had been chosen, there would be no money in our State Oil Fund today. I opposed the idea, tried to prove that in order to store the funds in a transparent manner, channel them into strategic areas of our country and save them for future generations, there must be a State Oil Fund, and I achieved this*" (Para. 4).

tives for the government to protect the sustainability of the fund. Without public disclosure of information on the fund's finances, this outcome would likely not have been achieved. However, it should also be stressed that this transparency is selective. It applies, for the most part, to the oil revenues coming into the fund, while expenditures once transferred to the state budget are less transparent. The government also retains considerable control over the fund's budget transfers, and oversight mechanisms are still limited, especially considering the absence of independent members in the supervisory board. Therefore, while transparency has undoubtedly contributed to the sustainability of the fund, it should not be mistaken for true accountability

In broader terms, the case of SOFAZ indicates that the role of transparency within NRFs in developing countries is complex. One on hand, availability of public information has contributed to the sustainability of SOFAZ. In contrast, the Kazakhstani NFRK, is less transparent in terms of the availability of public information. Its annual reports are not made public in full (Kalyuzhnova 2011), and its relatively opaque nature – being managed by the National Bank rather than operating as an independent entity – means that it is not rated on the Truman Scoreboard Index. This lack of transparency could have contributed to the fluctuating size of the fund, as assets between 2014 and 2023 fell by 15 billion US dollars.

However, the SOFAZ case also shows that transparency alone is not a straightforward solution to challenges faced by NRFs due to weak oversight. While transparency has supported SOFAZ's sustainability, it has not been effective in addressing other related issues. For example, an analysis of the Dutch disease effects in Azerbaijan would likely suggest the country suffers from it, pointing to the fund's limited effectiveness in this area. Therefore, while having an NRF with transparency is beneficial, other factors like oversight are also critical for ensuring broader fund effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

There are concerns that NRFs in developing societies may struggle to effectively stabilize budget or save resource revenues due to weak oversight and various spending pressures, both objective and self-serving. Although it would be inaccurate to claim that Azerbaijan's NRF completely disproves these concerns, it does demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, NRFs can help save resource revenues in developing societies. Clearly, the establishment of an NRF in Azerbaijan – particularly at such an early stage of oil production – was a crucial choice. Without this fund, the country would almost certainly be facing the post-oil period without

any savings. Although SOFAZ has its limitations, it has managed to accumulate substantial assets for a nation of Azerbaijan's size.

However, it is widely recognized that Azerbaijan has passed the peak of its oil revenues and faces a structural decline in terms of its oil production (IMF 2024). While the exploitation of the remaining reserves will continue and there are signed and operational agreements with the FOCs, it is anticipated that revenues from these will decrease. Azerbaijan does have gas reserves, and gas production is increasing but these will only partially compensate for the losses from the decreasing oil production (IMF 2024). While post-2015 reforms have introduced some budgetary discipline, the ability to sustain these measures in an environment where oil revenues will decline remains uncertain.

As oil revenues decline, the government may rely more heavily on SOFAZ to finance budget deficits. Without strict enforcement of fiscal rules, this could lead to depletion of fund assets over time. SOFAZ's transparency mechanisms – regular financial reports, independent audits, and public disclosures – have helped create political incentives for the government to protect the fund assets. Whether this still continues to be the case in a post-oil era remains to be seen, especially given some concerning signs on the matter. For example, Azerbaijan was one of the first three Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) pilot cases in 2002 and was designated as an EITI-compliant country in 2009 (Frynas 2017). However, in 2017 the country decided to withdraw from the EITI (Eiti.org 2017). While so far this has not affected the availability of public information regarding the fund, if revenues were to fall significantly as reserves decline, the government may seek greater flexibility in fund withdrawals. In such a case, the existing transparency mechanisms may be curbed.

While transparency is one factor in SOFAZ's sustainability, the effectiveness of fiscal policies is also important. In this context, the newly adopted budget rule is a positive development. But it has been criticised for not setting a strict limit on the amount of an annual transfer from SOFAZ (Aghayev 2021). Moreover, the rule is not directly linked to the size of the fund's assets but rather to the non-oil deficit. The guidelines allowing the government to suspend or alter the budget rule are also relatively soft (Aghayev 2021). While theoretically, this may be beneficial, in emergencies like pandemics that require urgent transfers, it is important to reduce this flexibility as oil revenues decline. In practice, this means adhering to the October 2023 decree discussed above and gradually lowering the ratio of the non-oil base deficit to the non-oil GDP. At a minimum, it is crucial to keep the share of budget transfers at its current level of one-third of budget revenues and not to increase it.

Perhaps the most economically viable way of protecting the fund's assets is to expand the non-oil related budget revenues. In recent years, the non-oil related taxation revenue (excluding the taxes paid by the FOCs) has been growing. By the end of 2023 it accounted for 27.6 percent of the budget revenues, up from 22.1 percent in 2018 (Maliyye.gov.az 2023, 7). This rise is promising. The government has also adopted a strategy for socio-economic growth for the period of 2022-2026 (President.az 2022) in another attempt to boost the non-oil sector which currently contributes, a very small share to the country's exports. The effectiveness of this is currently difficult to predict.

In terms of SOFAZ itself there are also possibilities of increasing the income through sources other than oil revenues. There are signs indicating that the fund may gradually shift away from its conservative investment approach. For instance, in 2019, equities made up 14.1 percent of the SOFAZ investment portfolio (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). By 2023, this share had risen to 24.3 percent, approaching the upper threshold of 25 percent set by the fund's Investment Guidelines (*SOFAZ Annual Report* 2023). It remains to be seen whether this threshold will be increased. The gradual increase in equity holdings might be an effort to boost investment returns in response to declining oil revenues. However, it is unlikely that the fund will fully abandon its conservative investment policy, as the risks of potential losses from equity investments would be too great.

Finally, Azerbaijan's ability to sustain SOFAZ in the post-oil era will depend not just on economic policies, but on the strength of its institutional and transparency mechanisms. If transparency remains intact, political incentives may discourage excessive withdrawals, ensuring fund sustainability. If transparency weakens, economic pressures could lead to increased SOFAZ withdrawals, as has been the case in other developing societies. However, reforms – such as stricter fiscal rules and greater oversight – will also be necessary to ensure long-term fiscal discipline. Therefore, as oil revenues decline over the next decade, choices made by the government will decide if SOFAZ can successfully transition into a sustainable, long-term NRF or whether it will face depletion.

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