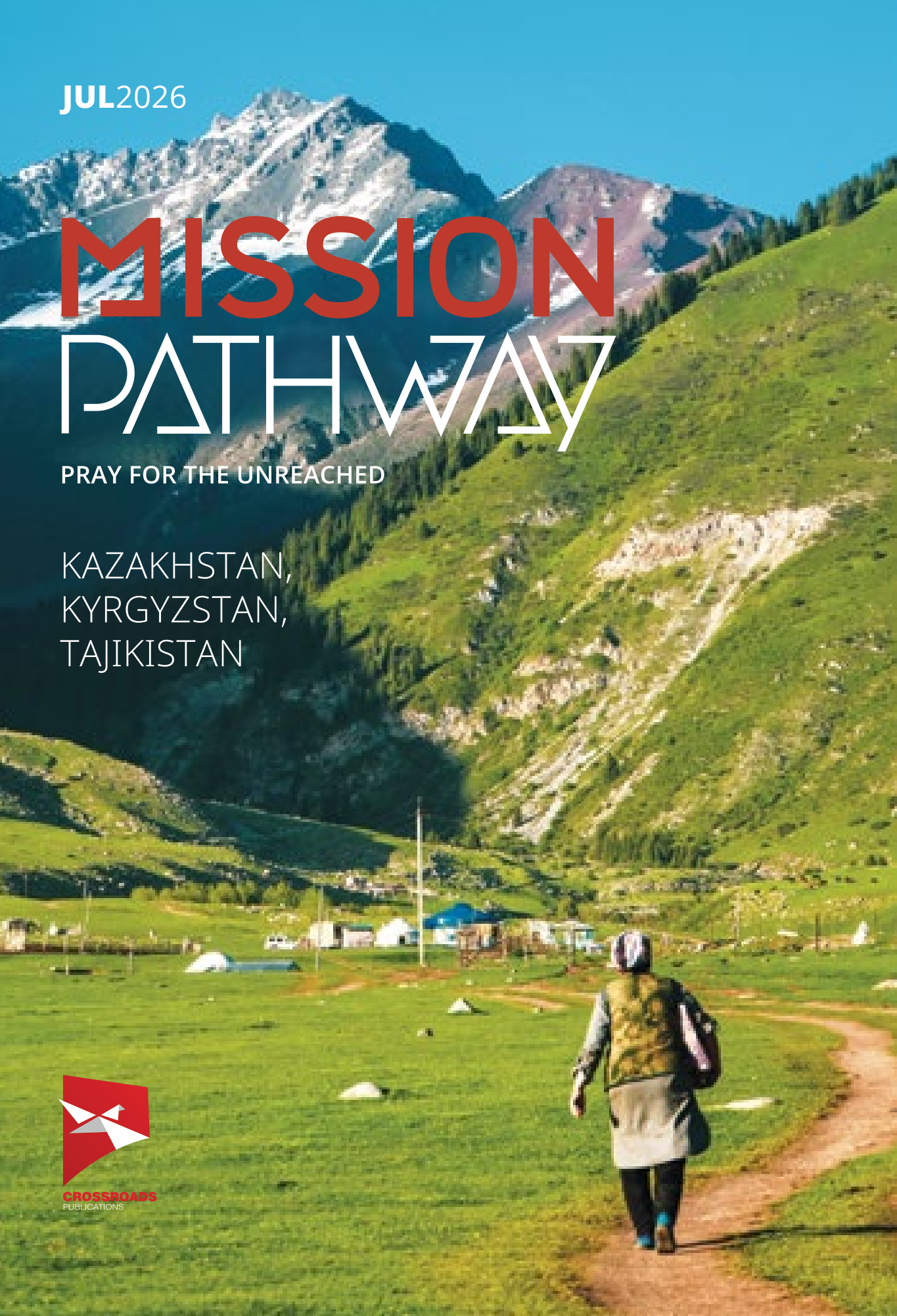
JUL2026

MISSION PATHWAY

PRAY FOR THE UNREACHED

KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN, TAJIKISTAN



CROSSROADS
PUBLICATIONS

THE FIVE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES I

KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN, TAJIKISTAN

A LIFE OF SILENCE, ENDURANCE, AND NO RIGHT TO PROTEST

Written by Joan

The Symbiosis of Nomads and Farmers

Before the nineteenth century, if you had asked someone living in Samarkand what ethnic group they belonged to, they might have answered: "I am a Muslim," “I am from Samarkand,” "I am a herder," or "I am a farmer."

In Central Asia at that time, identity was shaped less by ethnicity than by one's way of life, religion, and place.

In the summer, nomadic herders drove their livestock up into the mountains. In the winter, they came down to the oasis towns to trade. In ancient cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand, people often knew several languages, including Persian, the language from which Tajik developed, and Chagatai, the literary Turkic language that preceded modern Uzbek.

Over time, herders and farmers formed a deeply interdependent way of life. Without one another, neither group could easily survive. Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other herding peoples would arrive at the edge of the oasis settlements with cattle and sheep, bringing abundant meat, fermented mare's milk, leather for boots and harnesses, and wool for blankets and carpets. Tajik, Uzbek, and other farming peoples traded in return with wheat, rice, tea, fine silk textiles, and metal goods.

It was a world marked by movement, many languages, and mutual dependence.

Photo by Charlotte Venema on Unsplash


Photo by OSPAN ALI on Unsplash

The Soviet Drawing of National Borders

Yet the twentieth century brought a profound transformation under Soviet rule.

Heavily influenced by nineteenth-century European nationalism, Soviet theorists believed that a “true nation” had to possess four defining features: a common language, a shared territory, a common economic life, and a distinct national character. Beginning in the 1920s, the Soviet state launched a sweeping program of ethnic classification and nation-building across Central Asia.

Language became a tool of division. The Soviet state used it to separate Uzbeks and Tajiks, who had long lived in close interdependence. It also used subtle differences in dialect and pronunciation to classify Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, forcibly dividing these “relatives on horseback.” The Turkmens, meanwhile, were gathered from tribes that had often been at war with one another.

The Soviet state then promoted standardized national languages, imposed Cyrillic alphabets, drew the borders of national republics, and created unified cultural and historical narratives for each people. Identities that had once been fluid, ambiguous, and interwoven were transformed into fixed, standardized nationalities. This also severed Central Asia's long "dialect continuum,"[1] so that people could no longer define themselves primarily by tribe, region, or way of life.

Ethnic identity became an administrative classification rather than a form of cultural self-understanding. This is why many scholars say that the nations of Central Asia were not "discovered" but "manufactured."

Cross-Cutting Borders

The Soviet Union also used a strategy of cross-cutting boundaries when drawing internal borders. For example, Samarkand, with its large Tajik population, was assigned to Uzbekistan, while Kyrgyz enclaves[2] were left inside Uzbek territory. The result was a complex pattern of mixed settlement: "you within me, and I within you."

During the Soviet period, this kind of cross-cutting arrangement did reduce the possibility of local groups uniting against the central government, creating an appearance of political stability. But after the Soviet Union collapsed, these complicated borders became a source of conflict between the newly independent states.

The Fergana Valley is a classic example. The Soviets assigned the fertile plain to Uzbekistan, the foothills and water sources along the edge of the valley to Kyrgyzstan, and the narrow entrance corridor to Tajikistan. Because these borders were not drawn around mountain ranges or ethnic settlements, the result was a highly impractical arrangement: farming depended on Uzbekistan, irrigation depended on Kyrgyzstan, and freight transport had to pass through Tajik checkpoints.

Under the Soviet system, these areas were integrated into a single economic structure, so the arrangement could still function. But after the republics became independent in 1991, administrative borders became international borders. This deeply interwoven spatial structure began to trigger frequent border conflicts.

Photo by Evgeny Matveev on Unsplash

Photo by Salohiddin Kamolov on Unsplash

The Five Central Asian Countries Today

Today, the five Central Asian countries remain deeply shaped by the institutional framework and worldview left behind by the Soviet Union. In other words, the effects of the colonial system have not fully disappeared. To this day, people across Central Asia, along with scholars who study the region, continue to wrestle with what it would mean to truly move beyond this colonial history.

The countries of Central Asia share similar patterns of ethnic composition and have all undergone a process of sedentarization. Nomadic life is no longer their way of life. Ethnic culture is no longer primarily expressed through daily social structures and ways of living; instead, it has been reduced to symbols displayed through festivals, stage performances, and cultural exhibitions.

At the same time, each country has followed a different path since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan developed a highly centralized political system, and society remained quiet, compliant, and stable until signs of resistance began to emerge in 2020. Kyrgyzstan has retained space for popular mobilization and the overthrow of governments, but it has lacked the capacity to build new institutions. As a result, it has repeatedly cycled through revolution, only for power to return to the hands of the elite. Tajikistan, meanwhile, is the only Central Asian country to have experienced civil war. The war has become a history that people cannot openly discuss or commemorate, drifting like a ghost in the depths of collective memory.

For this reason, this issue of Mission Pathway will focus more on how the Soviet Union has shaped Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as the social issues these countries face today. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan will be covered in a future issue.

1 A dialect continuum refers to a situation in which language changes gradually across a large geographic area. Neighboring communities can understand one another, but the farther apart two communities are, the greater the differences become, until people at opposite ends may no

longer understand each other at all. In other words, languages do not always divide along sharp boundaries; sometimes they shift gradually, like colors fading from one shade into another.

2 An enclave is a territory of one country or region that is geographically surrounded or isolated by another country, such that it can only be reached by passing through foreign territory.

Major Ethnic Groups and Notable Figures in Central Asia

The five Central Asian countries share a broadly similar ethnic makeup. Uzbeks can be found in Kyrgyzstan, and Kyrgyz in Kazakhstan. The region is also home to Dungan, Koryo-saram, and German communities, whose presence reflects different waves of historical migration.

This land where peoples meet may seem remote and unfamiliar, yet it has given the world an extraordinary range of figures who have left their mark on the global stage.

2

Mixed martial artist — Valentina Shevchenko

1

World-renowned singer — Dimash Kudaibergen

4

World chess champion
— Nodirbek Abdusattorov

3

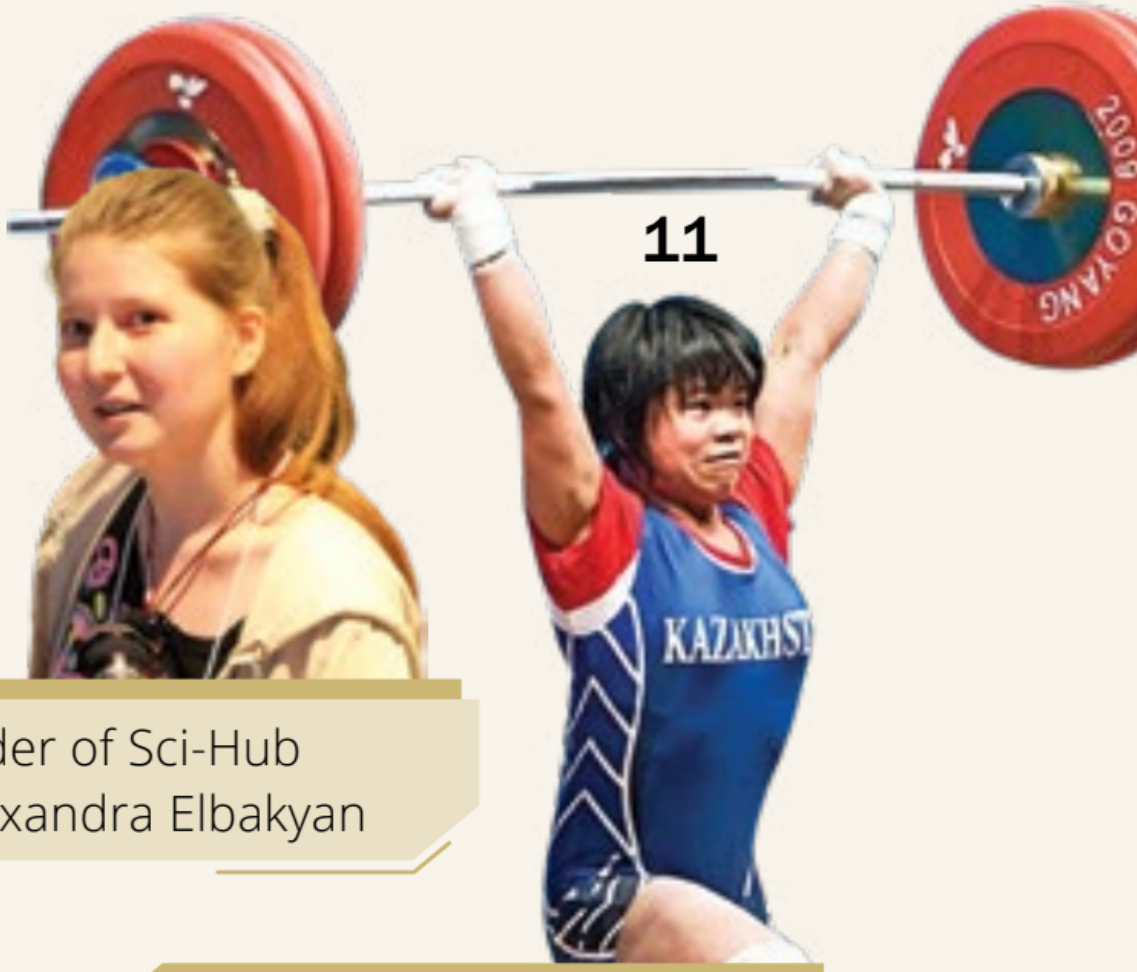
President of Tajikistan
— Emomali Rahmon

6

Internationally
acclaimed opera singer

— Maria Mudryak

Turkmen professional footballer
— Ruslan Mingazov



11

8

Founder of Sci-Hub
— Alexandra Elbakyan

Kazakh women's weightlifter
— Zulfiya Chinshanlo

9

CEO of Sberbank
— Herman Gref

7

Kazakh pop singer and actress
— Dilnaz Akhmadieva

10

Founder of fintech company Kaspi.kz — Vyacheslav Kim

12

Hollywood director and producer of Tatar origin — Timur Bekmambetov

13

Bashkir folk-pop group — Ay Yola

Uzbek art historian
— Marinika Babanazarova

1 Kazakhs

An ethnic identity that emerged through Soviet classification, the Kazakhs are now the dominant people group of Kazakhstan and the largest ethnic group in Central Asia.

Photo by tedxgateway on Flickr

2 Kyrgyz

Most Kyrgyz are Sunni Muslims, but their faith is also interwoven with pre-Islamic animist traditions — a reverence for natural elements such as mountains, water, and fire, and a deep sense of spiritual connection to the natural world.

Photo by ElisaQualizza on Wikimedia Commons

3 Tajiks

Tajik culture is a continuation of Persian civilization. In 1930, however, the Soviet Union forcibly changed the Tajik language to the Cyrillic alphabet, cutting off its written connection to the broader Persian cultural world.

Photo by Kristina Kormilitsyna on Wikimedia Commons

4 Uzbeks

Uzbeks are Sunni Muslims, and their historic centers include Bukhara, one of the great centers of Islamic learning, which produced many renowned Muslim scholars.

Photo by Husniddin Ato on Wikimedia Commons

5 Turkmens

Turkmen society is organized more as a confederation of tribes than as a single unified national society. In practice, the more meaningful question has often been not "What nationality are you?" but "Which tribe do you belong to?"

Photo by Isaac Yeung on Wikimedia Commons

6 Russians

After the Russian Empire conquered Central Asia, large numbers of Russians migrated into the region. After the Soviet collapse, many returned to Russia, while others remained, with the largest concentration staying in Kazakhstan.

Photo by Мария Мудряк on Wikimedia Commons

7 Uyghurs

The Hui Muslim rebellions of the 1860s and the Chinese Civil War brought large numbers of Uyghurs into Central Asia. They are concentrated mainly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with a population of about 300,000.

Photo by DilnazFan on Wikimedia Commons

8 Ukrainians

Ukrainian communities gradually formed across Central Asia through Russian imperial colonization,* Soviet agricultural and industrial policies, war, and exile.

*Ukraine was incorporated into Russia at several points in history: after the Treaty of Pereyaslav in 1654, eastern Ukraine was gradually absorbed into the Russian Empire, and in 1922 Ukraine joined the Soviet Union.

Photo by Apneet Jolly on Wikimedia Commons

9 Germans

After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Soviet government suspected that ethnic Germans within Soviet territory might collaborate with Germany. About 800,000 Germans were therefore deported to Central Asia and Siberia.

Photo by President of Russia on Wikimedia Commons

10 Koryo-saram

In the early twentieth century, famine, natural disasters, exploitation, loss of land ownership, and later repression under Japanese occupation of Korea forced many Koreans to migrate to the Russian Far East.

Photo by Daniyar on Wikimedia Commons

11 Dungans

During the Dungan Revolt in the 1860s, the Dungans fled into Russian Imperial territory. They are a Muslim people who speak a form of Chinese closely related to the dialects of Shaanxi and Gansu, and write it in the Cyrillic alphabet.

Photo by Rob Macklem Victoria BC on Wikimedia Commons

12 Tatars

The Tatars embraced Islam as early as the tenth century and are often regarded as pioneers of Muslim modernity in Central Asia. Many Central Asian intellectuals were influenced by Tatar thought.

Photo by Gage Skidmore from Peoria, AZ on Wikimedia Commons

13 Bashkirs

When the Russian Empire conquered Central Asia, Bashkirs were often used as cavalry and interpreters. Because they spoke a Turkic language, understood steppe culture, and practiced Islam, they were able to communicate with Muslim Central Asian societies.

Photo on Правда.Ру

14 Karakalpaks

The Karakalpaks live in the region surrounding the Aral Sea, and their culture has been deeply shaped by it. The Aral Sea was once the world's fourth-largest inland saltwater lake, but Soviet irrigation projects diverted its waters to grow cotton, causing the sea to shrink by more than 90 percent.

Photo by ChatGPT

From Nomads to Soviet Citizens

The Kazakhs

Across the boundless steppe, the Kazakhs rode on horseback, moving with their herds in search of water and pasture. Their way of life was mobile and self-sufficient.

Yet nomadic society was also vulnerable. Without a standing army and with limited military technology, it was easily exposed to invasion by outside powers. In the nineteenth century, the Kazakhs were gradually brought under the rule of Tsarist Russia.[1] Russian authorities established administrative units across the steppe, fixed clan boundaries, and disrupted the stable migration patterns that had long sustained Kazakh society.

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union[2] imposed agricultural collectivization,[3] confiscating Kazakh livestock on a massive scale and forcing people into collective farms. This violent institutional transformation triggered a devastating famine,[4] in which roughly one-third of the population died. It also severed the Kazakhs' connection to nomadic life, oral tradition, and ethnic identity.

Though deeply wounded, the Kazakhs had to integrate into the Soviet system in order to survive. They sought work in factories, mining areas, and newly built cities. The Soviet state destroyed the structure of Kazakh nomadic society and defined the Kazakhs as a backward people, yet it also offered a path of upward mobility: those who learned Russian well and identified themselves as Soviet citizens could gain access to better jobs and living conditions.

The Kazakh nomad who could recite the genealogy of at least seven generations of ancestors disappeared. In his place emerged a people cut off from their own past, with a fractured sense of history and identity.

1 The Russian Empire, which existed from 1721 to 1917.
2 The federal socialist state that succeeded the Russian Empire and existed across Eurasia from 1922 to 1991.
3 A state-led, coercive transformation of rural society in which small, family-run farms and privately held livestock were merged into state-run or collective farms. Farmers were no longer landowners or independent cultivators, but collective laborers, while food production and distribution came under centralized state control.
4 Grain quotas had to be fulfilled regardless of the actual harvest. When harvests were poor, the state still collected the required quota, resulting in famine.

Heavenly Father, may Your mighty power come upon the Kazakh people and heal the deep wounds they endured under Tsarist Russian and Soviet rule. Language forms the foundation of a person's thought, reasoning, and way of life. Through the learning of the Kazakh language, lead them to recover their worldview, collective memory, cultural roots, and ethnic identity. Grant wisdom to the government to establish fitting policies that preserve the Kazakh oral tradition, so that the younger generation may know their own history, reconnect with their ancestors, and understand where they come from. May the Kazakh people have the opportunity to know the Savior, Jesus Christ, who understands the historical suffering they have endured. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Was Kazakhstan Colonized by the Soviet Union?

The Question of Colonialism

Concert hall in the capital city of Astana

The Central Asian political scientist Bhavna Dave once compared the colonial experiences of Central Asia and India, a comparison that helps us better understand the deep impact Soviet rule had on the region.

India was once ruled by the British Empire. Under that colonial system, a class of English-educated Indian elites emerged. They upheld ideals such as freedom, democracy, and universal values, and through a long anti-colonial movement gradually formed a strong national consciousness through conflict, debate, and resistance. Kazakhstan's historical path, however, was entirely different.

Kazakhstan never experienced an anti-Soviet national movement. Its national identity was not formed through resistance, but it was constructed by the Soviet state itself. On the one hand, the Soviet Union gave the Kazakhs a national name, borders, cultural space for display, and even a prescribed national character. On the other hand, it deprived the people of the power to define their own nationhood, debate their own history, or imagine their own future.

The Kazakhs were brought into the framework of the nation-state before they had time to slowly work out for themselves the questions, "Who are we?" and "Who are they?" This historical rupture deeply damaged the Kazakh people's ability to define their own identity. For this reason, even after leaving the Soviet Union, this country—shaped by Soviet hands from the beginning—remains deeply influenced by the Soviet framework.

Heavenly Father, because the Kazakh people's national identity was shaped by state design, restore what was taken from them: the slow, necessary process of discerning "who we are" and "who they are." Restore their ability to define themselves. Let this land speak of its past and imagine its future in its own language. May the Kazakhs no longer be merely a people to be managed, but a people who listen to one another, carry one another's burdens, and speak in their own voice. May they come to know You more deeply and recognize You as the God of creation. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Beneficiaries Within the Nation

Kazakhstan's Ethnic Elites

Kazakhs sometimes say with a wry smile that although their land is rich in minerals, control over those resources was always in Soviet hands. Their ecology was damaged, their land was sacrificed, and the benefits created by that sacrifice flowed not only to Russians, but also into the pockets of Kazakhstan's own local ethnic elites.

These Kazakh elites were loyal to Moscow. They helped the central government suppress public discontent and maintain the appearance of local stability. They did not organize national movements or challenge central authority. Instead, they made skillful use of the Soviet system, placing relatives, people from their own hometowns, and trusted insiders in key positions. Over time, they built local networks of power and secured the greatest possible benefits for their own circles.

Kazakhstan's local ethnic elites were neither helpless victims with no choice nor heroes who sacrificed themselves for their people. They were beneficiaries, deeply embedded in the Soviet system and selected by that system as key collaborators. It was this kind of collaboration that allowed the Soviet Union to maintain stable rule for nearly seventy years. After the Soviet Union collapsed, their rise to power allowed the post-Soviet state to continue the same logic of power: loyalty in exchange for benefits, and stability at the expense of participation.[1]

1 A governing approach that treats "social order and local stability" as the highest priority. It deliberately restricts space for political participation, public debate, and collective action, placing obedience and administrative control above expression and civic engagement.

Heavenly Father, heal the political culture left behind by the Soviet Union. May power no longer circulate only among a small group of vested interests. May capable leaders enter key positions and seek the welfare of the people. Lord, help local elites not only to manage the public, but also to listen to the voices of the people. Even as they value political stability, may they also open channels for communication with society, so that people can express their needs and receive a response. May the gospel enter this land and restore the right to tell one's own story, as well as the civic rights that have been suppressed. May the people no longer treat silence as a collective memory of safety, but learn in Your light to work together and listen to one another. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Unspoken Social Rules (I)

Depoliticization

On paper, Kazakhstan has a constitution, a parliament, elections, a national narrative of multiethnic inclusion, and a framework of civil rights. Yet in political participation, ethnic relations, language policy, and everyday interaction, what truly governs people's actions and choices is often not the written system, but a set of social rules that are never openly stated yet widely understood.

These invisible rules shape who gets promoted, which positions people stake out publicly, how people protect themselves, and how the boundaries of acceptable behavior is understood. They are not accidental cultural habits, but social operating mechanisms internalized over time, rooted in the survival experiences of the Soviet period.

One of the Soviet state's most central rules was this: do not let anything become a political issue. Ethnic inequality, language rights, resource distribution, and historical justice were often reframed by the government as administrative or managerial problems,[1] leaving little room for public discussion or political debate.

For example, in 2006, when the government forcibly demolished the homes of poor families on the outskirts of Almaty, the official reasons given were illegal land use, incomplete documents, and the needs of urban planning. The issue was not framed as a failure to provide institutional support for rural Kazakh migrants, an unequal distribution of urban resources, or the failure of national economic gains to reach those at the bottom. Housing became a management problem; poverty became an individual's responsibility.

In this framework, rights are "space granted by the state," not something people may claim, fight for, or expect to be protected by institutions. People have long since learned to censor themselves, adjust their language, and choose silence.

1 An approach that avoids discussing power, responsibility, or institutions, and focuses only on what is administratively convenient.

Heavenly Father, we pray for the families who lost their homes on the outskirts of Almaty. When structural poverty was translated into missing documents and land-use violations, and when unequal access to urban resources was framed as individuals failing to keep up with regulations, we ask You to redirect that displaced responsibility back to the state system itself. May You work in this land, raising up capable and virtuous people to improve its institutions, so that the nation's land, resources, and economic benefits may be distributed more fairly to every person. May the love of Jesus Christ bring freedom to the Kazakh people, so that they are no longer merely objects to be managed, but people who are allowed to speak, express themselves, and rebuild the time and space for public political life in Kazakhstan. While change has not yet come, may people pour out their hearts before You and not lose hope as they endure. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Unspoken Social Rules (II)

Silence, Stability, and Compliance

Photo by Mycroyance on Flickr

Kazakhs may use a few phrases of Kazakh in formal settings to comply with national language policy, while continuing to communicate in Russian or English in daily life and at work. This culture—where outward compliance matters more than genuine identification—allows policy to appear successful on the surface without bringing real change to everyday life. It reduces the risk of conflict and minimizes the resources the state must spend on enforcement. But the cost is a chronic and deepening disconnect between official institutions and lived reality.

Anyone who pushes further—demanding that public services be fully available in Kazakh, criticizing the dominance of Russian, or arguing that language rights should be protected by law—may quickly be labeled a "radical nationalist," a "threat to ethnic harmony," or a "danger to stability." The consequences may include lawsuits or forced exile. Language is permitted as a cultural symbol, but not as a civil right.

In Kazakhstan, the government's priority is national stability, and any social issue that could turn into political mobilization is subject to preemptive control. Within this system, only those who remain silent, stable, and compliant are able to survive.

Heavenly Father, watch over those who have paid a price for speaking the truth. Help the nation reflect honestly and find the courage to give its people channels to express their views. When people speak with honesty and courage, protect them. May their concerns be heard by those in power and lead to wise, practical, and good social policies. Release people from the fear in their hearts, so that honesty may become possible again. May the Kazakh people one day recover their mother tongue in Your love, rediscover the Kazakh worldview and the dignity of their life as a people, and come to know the beautiful way You created them in the beginning. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

History Is Watching You — How Will You Live?

The Oral Epic Tradition

Kazakh oral epic tradition

"Alpamysh was a hero of miraculous birth. He set out on a distant journey to protect his fiancée, Gulibairsen, but was imprisoned for seven years. In the end, he returned home on a divine steed, punished the usurper, and restored justice to the land…"

In Kazakhstan, heroic epics of this kind are remarkably long, ranging from several thousand to tens of thousands of lines. For an experienced epic singer, or zhyrau, performing a single work may take ten to fifteen hours. Listening to a Kazakh epic performance feels like being swept across the threshold into another world. There is no clear chorus, and the sense of time stretches out, like the open steppe slowly darkening before sunset. It is not an art form that depends on vocal techniques of soaring highs or deep lows. Rather, it feels like someone speaking to the land and to the people. Some epics tell of war, loss, heroes, or love. They stir deep emotion, yet also carry a restrained sorrow. Though marked by many wounds, dignity remains.

These epics also preserve a remarkable sense of time. They draw Kazakhs into a kind of tunnel in which ancestors and history stand behind them, while descendants and the future lie ahead. They are not alone, but part of a larger story, a link in the middle of history. It is as though the epics are asking the Kazakh people: "History is watching you—how will you live?"

Heavenly Father, reveal to the Kazakh people that they are not mere bystanders in history, but glorious vessels to be used by You. Help them see that their lives and choices matter, and that You can use every small decision and every change they make to shape the future and affect the generations to come. Lead them to walk with You and to seek Your wisdom in every choice, so that they may leave a rich and beautiful legacy for the next generation. Heal the grief the Kazakh people have had to carry in silence, and restore their sense of responsibility—not only to the nation, but also to their ancestors, their descendants, and one another. We pray for Kazakh poets: may they help their people better understand their own culture and history. In a time when morality and justice have become blurred, may these epics help the Kazakh people recognize the beautiful form in which You first created them, and guide them to live with integrity, goodness, justice, and courage, so that they may know that You are the source of all that is good. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Kazakh Becomes the Official Language

Language Policy

Photo by www.david baxendale.co.uk on Flickr

During the Soviet era, learning Russian opened doors for Kazakhs that had never existed before: access to education, material comfort, and social mobility. Yet it also came at a cost. Over time, they began to forget their mother tongue. They were alive, but no longer able to understand the world or participate in political life through Kazakh.

After the Soviet Union collapsed and Kazakhstan became independent, the anxiety of rootlessness became a matter of public concern and helped spark a movement to revive the mother tongue. To appease the public and suppress nationalist protests, the Kazakh government passed a Language Law, making Kazakh the country's official language. A language once confined to the home and dismissed as having no future suddenly became the highest symbol of national honor, giving Kazakhs a powerful sense of restored dignity and collective pride.

However, Kazakhstan's language policy was mainly a way to display national sovereignty and sever its many lingering ties with Russia. In reality, Russian continued to be widely used in bureaucracy, business, academia, and everyday life. Kazakhstan's political families, Russified Kazakhs, and middle-class elites were also more inclined to invest in their children's English education than in Kazakh. Those who speak only Kazakh may be praised as bearers of authentic culture, but in society they remain disadvantaged. Their language has not brought them real economic or cultural capital, nor has it opened a path to social mobility.

Heavenly Father, You are the God who raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. Lead the government to truly see those who are celebrated as guardians of Kazakh culture, yet remain vulnerable in everyday life because they speak only Kazakh. May this lead to real institutional reform, so that every person may share fairly in the nation's resources and have opportunities for social mobility. Grant Kazakh-only speakers greater access to Russian-language education, so that they may be able to adapt to a bilingual society. May language become part of the art of living together, allowing people from different backgrounds to understand one another, coexist, and flourish. May all people find their ultimate identity in Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The Oppressed "Colonizers"

Russians

Photo by Sam Greenhalgh on Flickr

As Kazakhs voiced their grievances over being marginalized during the Soviet era and called for the restoration of their place in society, Russians in Kazakhstan also lamented their own situation:

"Who built the buildings, the streets, the schools, and the hospitals? Who built up this city (Almaty)? We did, of course! Back then it was called Vernyi, a thoroughly Russian name. And now we Russians are called 'colonizers.' Where have you ever seen 'colonizers' work the land, labor hard, and turn a wild place into somewhere livable? Have you ever heard of Europeans taking orders from Black people? Now they come in and want to change every document and rename every street. Who taught them to write in the first place?"

During the Soviet period, Russians were the empire's dominant ethnic group: native speakers of the state language and central to the system itself. But after Kazakhstan became independent, the land was redefined as the ancestral home of the Kazakh people, and Kazakhs became the founding nation. Russians were not driven out of Kazakhstan, but they were pushed out of the central role in the national story. They had no legal political party to represent them and no clear institutional structure through which the Russian community could participate steadily in public political life.

As more and more Kazakhs advanced in their careers and entered the centers of power, Russians began to feel an invisible glass ceiling above them. Many chose, with a sense of loss, to emigrate and return to what they considered their homeland.

Heavenly Father, You see the loss Russians in Kazakhstan have felt since independence as they were displaced from the center. May both Kazakhs and Russians find in Christ the truth of who You created them to be, and recover in Your love their human dignity and identity. Lord, we place the complex relationship between Kazakhs and Russians into Your hands. Heal the cycle that turns history into a simple story of opposing sides, and turns deep structural wounds into mutual blame. Open space in Kazakh society for people to listen to one another, make sense of the past, and discuss the future together. May this land learn to bear its history together and move toward true restoration. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Allowed to Exist, Not Allowed to Speak

Minority Peoples

Tatar women

Beyond the Russian community, Kazakhstan is also home to Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Uyghurs, Germans, Tatars, Koreans, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Dungans, and other minority groups. Their situation is not one of open oppression or exclusion from the nation. Quite the opposite: they have been highly institutionalized within the national framework. They are allowed to exist, but not allowed to speak.

The institution most often used to showcase Kazakhstan's multiethnic harmony is the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan. On the surface, it appears to be a platform where different ethnic groups can participate together in national affairs. In reality, it is far from that.

Seats in the Assembly are not filled through ethnic elections or community authorization. They are appointed directly by the President and presented as an "honor" that cannot be refused. This means that the legitimacy of ethnic representatives comes not from the communities themselves, but from the highest authority in the state. In other words, the Assembly shows who the state permits to speak; it does not show which communities have the right to voice their own needs.

Perhaps the shadow of the Soviet collapse still lingers in the minds of those in power, leading the government to treat minority issues as matters of national security. To prevent ethnic groups from slipping out of control or the nation from falling apart, stopping minority communities from mobilizing collectively becomes more important than almost anything else.

Heavenly Father, in the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, which appears diverse yet remains closed in practice, open a true space for public participation—one that responds to the real needs of ethnic communities. Let excluded voices be heard, and let marginalized experiences become part of the public conversation. We pray for those in power who carry a deep fear of losing control, division, and collapse. Heal the collective memory that has learned to prevent disaster through suppression and to seek safety through silence. May fear no longer shape the way this nation imagines its future. May honesty, trust, and dialogue become possible again. May Kazakhstan's minority peoples be seen not merely as part of a cultural display, but as communities whose rights, resources, institutions, and future must be taken seriously. May this reflect Your justice and the rich diversity of Your creation. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A Bubble Ready to Burst

The 2022 Kazakhstan Protests

Protesters in Aktobe on January 4, 2022

Kazakhstan is rich in oil and mineral resources, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it quickly became Central Asia's strongest economy. Yet the benefits of that wealth were enjoyed almost exclusively by Kazakhstan's elite. For ordinary Kazakhs, the minimum wage was less than 100 US dollars a month.

Rising fuel prices, economic inequality, the COVID-19 pandemic, and long-standing resentment over former President Nazarbayev and his family's control of national resources finally pushed Kazakhstan's normally quiet, stable, and compliant public into the streets. A week of violent unrest and government crackdown left more than a hundred people dead and nearly ten thousand arrested.

The unrest began in Zhanaozen, the oil heartland of western Kazakhstan, which contributes a large share of the country's export revenue. Yet local infrastructure remained underdeveloped, and unemployment was high. For years, the Kazakh government had maintained social stability through costly energy subsidies, keeping gas and fuel prices artificially low. When the government lifted price caps and moved toward market pricing, it directly affected the cost of survival for ordinary people.

Would the newly empowered President Tokayev use this moment to weaken the influence of the former president's "Nazarbayev circle"? Or would this simply mark the beginning of another chapter in the struggle for power?

Kazakhstan's authoritarian system, with its excessive emphasis on "stability," had long refused to allow people to define their own needs or participate in politics. In 2022, that system finally faced a challenge. Whether the challenge has truly changed the system remains to be seen.

Heavenly Father, may Zhanaozen no longer be treated merely as a source of oil and wealth, but become a place where people can live and work in peace. Change the government's long-standing strategy of using cheap energy as a substitute for institutional reform and political participation, and give the people space to exercise their civic rights. We pray for families whose cost of living suddenly spiraled out of control. May the government be willing to open democratic discussion, establish transition mechanisms, and provide adequate social protection, so that people are not left to bear alone the burden of policy change. Grant authority to honest and upright leaders who can guide Kazakhstan toward becoming a society where citizens can define their own needs and where public protest is permitted. May faithful voices be heard, and may justice take root. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Healing in the Midst of Grief

The Kyrgyz

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

A video recording of 30 Kyrgyz funeral laments

My throat felt as if something had caught in it. I could not understand Kyrgyz, yet I could hear the sorrow in the song.

There were no instruments—only the human voice: a drawn-out cry, an unsteady pitch, a trembling sound somewhere between speech and song. This is the Kyrgyz lament.

Kyrgyz laments are sung at weddings. They express the emotional rupture of a bride leaving her birth family: her farewell to her mother, her sisters, and her village. In a nomadic society where travel was difficult and a daughter might not return home for a long time, this farewell carried real weight. The lament gives voice to fear and uncertainty about an unknown marriage and an unknown life. It is like a funeral held for the living, marking the end of her identity as a member of her original family.

Laments are also sung at funerals, mainly by women. They recount the deceased person's good deeds, character, courage, contributions to family and clan, and the life they lived. The lament refuses to let death be dealt with too quickly. It allows people to sit with sorrow slowly, say a proper goodbye, and heal their loss together as a community.

In the past, laments were seen as an "encyclopedia of nomadic culture," filled with images of nomadic life. As the Kyrgyz have become more urbanized, these traditional images have gradually grown distant from modern life. A language of lament for contemporary life is gradually taking shape.

Heavenly Father, You are the Creator of heaven and earth and all things. You created the Kyrgyz people, and over time they developed a unique culture of lament, rich with the experiences of nomadic life and carrying deep insight into the rituals of life and death. Thank You for giving the Kyrgyz people the wisdom to face death honestly, to sit with grief, to say goodbye well, and to support one another as a community in healing the pain of loss. May they develop words for lament that speak to life in this generation, so that this precious and distinctive cultural heritage may continue to be preserved. Please also show grace to Kyrgyz believers. May they sing laments that carry the hope of the gospel, so that more people may come to know the Savior, Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

When Daily Life Is No Longer Ordinary

The Fergana Valley

A market in the Fergana Valley

The Fergana Valley is one of the most ethnically complex and politically sensitive regions in Central Asia. It spans the borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—a geographically continuous basin cut apart by national borders.

For Uzbekistan, Fergana is a demographic and agricultural center, the nation's breadbasket, and the government tends to rule it through strong central control and strict border management. For Kyrgyzstan, the valley is home to both urban Uzbeks and Kyrgyz farmers and herders, making it a place of deep ethnic tension. The 2010 Osh conflict began here.[1] For Tajikistan, Fergana contains several enclaves,[2] such as Lolazor and Vorukh, where villagers may cross an international border simply by stepping outside their homes. "Whose road is this? Who has the right to use this water? Does my child have to pass through border control to go to school? Can I cross the border to go to the market?" Negotiating these questions is not an occasional inconvenience; it is part of daily life.

The roots of the Fergana Valley's difficulties lie in the Soviet project of national delimitation. For the sake of easier administration, population registration, and taxation, the Soviet state forcibly sorted people whose lives had long been ethnically mixed and culturally intertwined into separate national categories. When the Soviet Union collapsed, a world people had once shared was divided by international borders. Daily life was no longer ordinary, as people were repeatedly pulled into conflicts over nationhood and borders.

1 See July 14.

2 An enclave is a territory of one country or region that is geographically surrounded by another country or separated from the rest of its own territory, so that it can only be reached by passing through another jurisdiction.

Heavenly Father, in an age when nations are marked by opposition and mutual labeling, help us make room for difference. Teach people to listen instead of rushing to strike back, to understand instead of quickly condemning, so that respect may remain even in conflict, and people may still see one another's dignity even across difference. May Your Spirit lead people toward dialogue, repair, and rebuilding, so that broken relationships may have the possibility of being restored. We pray for the governments of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. May they make policies that truly reflect the needs of the people living in the Fergana Valley, so that the people may live in stability and peace. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Crossing the Border

The Tajiks

Photo by slowther on Flickr

Rustam's grandfather was originally from a small Tajik village within the Uzbek Soviet Republic. As a young man, he moved to the Kyrgyz Soviet Republic. Before he died, he repeated one request again and again: he wanted to be buried in his homeland, in what is now independent Uzbekistan. So Rustam and his family loaded his body into a vehicle and set out on a journey of a thousand kilometers.

"We reached the Uzbek checkpoint in the Fergana Valley," Rustam said angrily. "We had carried the body by hand, traveling all that way in the blazing heat, but the guards would not let us enter. Can you imagine?"

"We explained to them that the deceased was from a Tajik village in Uzbekistan, that his ancestors were buried there, that he belonged to such-and-such a family, and that he had contributed to the community. Do you know what the guards said? They were Uzbek, and they said to us, a group of grieving relatives, 'What do we need Tajik corpses for? Don't we already have enough corpses of our own?'"

Rustam said, "It was blatant racism. We had even prepared money for a bribe. But when I saw government vehicles loaded with smuggled goods crossing the border without inspection, I could only think how unfair it was."

Muslims emphasize swift burial: the dead should be buried within hours, and the body should return to God as quickly as possible. Family and friends usually work together to complete the funeral rites, fulfilling their duty to the deceased and allowing the soul to rest. They believe that every minute before burial, the soul of the deceased is suffering.

Heavenly Father, when Tajik families struggle, negotiate, and plead for the chance to bury their loved ones properly, may You open a way for them. Comfort Rustam and his family. Even if the burial could not take place as they had hoped, You have kept every tear they shed. May Tajik families like Rustam's entrust to You their fear and anxiety over not being able to bury loved ones quickly. May the peace and assurance of the Holy Spirit come upon their hearts. Grant the Tajik people wisdom to develop funeral practices suited to their local circumstances. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Social Inequality

The Uzbeks

Buildings burned during the conflict

In 2010, while people in northern Kyrgyzstan were rising up in political revolt—calling for the overthrow of President Bakiyev's corrupt and nepotistic government and protesting the country's dire economic conditions—the southern city of Osh was also falling into crisis.

In southern Kyrgyzstan, resources had long been concentrated in the hands of the Uzbek community. Uzbeks tended to live in urban centers, where they played a leading role in commerce and agricultural markets and generally had higher levels of education and economic capital. The Kyrgyz, though the country's majority people, were economically disadvantaged in the south. Many lived on the outskirts of cities or in rural areas. They had entered urban life in large numbers only in recent generations and now faced unemployment and limited prospects for advancement.

Resentment among Kyrgyz communities gradually built up. Scattered conflicts and rumors soon escalated into organized arson and attacks targeting Uzbeks. Police and military forces selectively failed to act, allowing Kyrgyz civilians to seize weapons from armored vehicles. In the aftermath, most of those prosecuted were Uzbeks, and reports confirmed that authorities widely used torture during detention to extract confessions.

The 2010 Osh conflict destroyed the earlier possibility of mixed ethnic coexistence. Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents became unwilling to enter one another's neighborhoods. The unequal handling of justice that followed built an invisible but deeply felt ethnic boundary within the city of Osh.

Heavenly Father, through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. May the Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples also come to know You and be made one in Christ. Grant wisdom to the Kyrgyz government to make fitting policies, so that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz may have equal opportunities in economic and political life. May the government uphold justice and mercy in its judicial process, responding to the wounded Uzbek community in a way that honors their dignity. May the peace brought by the Holy Spirit come upon this land once again. Heal the relationships that have been torn apart, teach these peoples to live alongside one another again, and slowly rebuild trust. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

When Dignity Must Be Earned Abroad

The Ritual Economy

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

In Ak-Tatyr, a village in southern Kyrgyzstan, villagers were celebrating a large ceremony. Salkynai told me it was the circumcision feast for her brother's two young sons. "The 9,000 rubles I worked so hard to save as a cleaner in Moscow all went to help my brother prepare this banquet," she said.

In Ak-Tatyr, land is scarce, cross-border trade is obstructed,[1] and local jobs are hard to find. Many people go to Russia to work illegally. These jobs usually come with no contract, no protection, long hours, and the constant risk of deportation. But in order to cover family expenses and fulfill social obligations—weddings, circumcisions, and other rites of passage known collectively as toi[2] —Kyrgyz people often feel they have no other choice.

Not holding a ceremony, or holding one that seems too modest, brings shame and the contempt of the village. Even in recent years, as the global economy has struggled, the cost of ceremonies has continued to rise, with families competing over who can host the larger event. Families would rather cut back elsewhere, or even go into debt, than lose face by failing to hold a proper ceremony.

The Kyrgyz are not naturally wasteful or extravagant. Rather, with high unemployment at home and many forced into illegal work in Russia, ceremony has become one of the few ways people can maintain dignity, status, and their place within the village community.

1 Cross-border trade usually passes through Kazakhstan, where farmers often encounter police who demand bribes. Only the wealthiest farmers, with enough capital, can sell their crops beyond nearby border markets.

2 The expenses for a wedding may include the bride price, the bride's dowry or trousseau—such as clothing and furniture— sheep, meat, rice, oil, flour, gifts and return gifts, music, singers, and a wedding procession.

Heavenly Father, when dignity can only be maintained through ceremony, and when shame becomes a pressure people cannot refuse, hold the Kyrgyz people in Your hands and say to them, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." May Your gospel transform Kyrgyz communities, so that in the love of Christ, people learn to support and make room for one another. Release them from burdens of responsibility driven by pressure and shame. Let them know they are already accepted, and that they do not need outward forms to prove their worth or belonging. May they recover the freedom of love: the freedom to give willingly, and also to gently see and protect one another's needs and boundaries. Work in Kyrgyzstan, Lord. Give the government the resources and wisdom to develop social welfare, create jobs, and rebuild local economies, so that livelihood, care, and dignity no longer depend solely on the sacrifice of migrant workers. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The Kidnapped Bride

The Practice of Bride Kidnapping

Photo by CharlesFred on Flickr

The practice of bride kidnapping

Gulmira was a nineteen-year-old civil servant. One evening, while having dinner with colleagues, several male coworkers tricked her into getting into a taxi. The man who had arranged her abduction was Bakyt, a man who had once passed her on the street and fallen in love with her at first sight. Gulmira fought back fiercely. She screamed and refused to put on the headscarf that would signal her acceptance of the marriage. But the groom's female relatives—his mother, aunts, and other women in the family—took turns persuading her. In the end, Gulmira gave in through tears.

Bride kidnapping is a practice that developed in modern Kyrgyz society. As unemployment and poverty spread, many men found themselves unable to afford weddings and bride prices. Weak enforcement of national law, together with renewed ideas of nationalism and male dignity, also contributed to the growing prevalence of non-consensual bride kidnapping.

Why did Gulmira not resist? Because resistance came at a high cost. In Kyrgyz society, a kidnapped bride who returns home may be seen as shameful and defiled, bringing disgrace on her entire family. She may be labeled stubborn, aggressive, or troublesome. She may even find it difficult to marry in the future.

Gulmira's mother, aunts, and female relatives had all once been kidnapped brides themselves. For them, putting on the white headscarf that signaled acceptance of marriage had been the only way to survive. Now, as they pleaded with Gulmira to accept the marriage, it was as though they were also trying, again and again, to convince themselves that what they had done back then was right.

Heavenly Father, when Kyrgyz women accept bride kidnapping out of fear of social isolation and stigma, draw near to girls like Gulmira. When they lose the right to choose what happens to their bodies and their futures, and when their voices are difficult to hear, reveal to them Your comfort, love, and healing. Protect them from being destroyed by their pain, and rebuild their identity and dignity in Your love. We entrust to You the women who have entered marriage through bride kidnapping. Work in their families. May they be treated with kindness and protection by their husbands, and may they have the opportunity to know You and discover the true meaning of love in the gospel. Grant wisdom to the Kyrgyz government to address unemployment effectively, so that bride kidnapping no longer becomes a widespread practice in the country. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The Cycle of Revolution

The Tulip Revolution

Former Kyrgyz President Akayev

"Akayev, get out!" "A Kyrgyzstan without Akayev!"

Askar Akayev, once praised by the West as Central Asia's most enlightened leader, gradually lost public support over his long years in power. His family controlled the commanding heights of the economy, his children became entangled in political and business interests, the media and opposition were suppressed, and elections were manipulated. Against a backdrop of poverty and high unemployment, public anger continued to build. In 2005, that anger spread from the cities of southern Kyrgyzstan northward, eventually reaching the presidential palace in the capital, Bishkek.

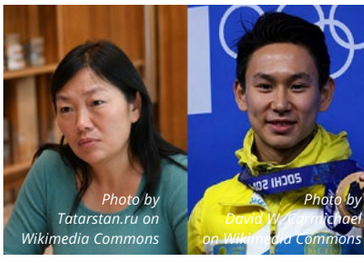
The mass movement known as the Tulip Revolution did bring short-term changes to the political order, but it failed to change the deeper way power worked in Kyrgyzstan. Corruption, family rule, and the privatization of public resources remained. Key reforms—constitutional design, checks and balances, and electoral reform—never took root. Almost immediately after the revolution ended, political power returned to the hands of another group of elites. This helps explain why Kyrgyzstan has found itself trapped in a cycle of revolution, as seen in 2005, 2010, and 2020.

The Soviet system trained people to obey the state, not to participate in public politics. Even after independence, Kyrgyz society retained the ability to mobilize and overthrow governments, but lacked the capacity to build new institutions afterward. When a revolution ends with the removal of a leader but leaves no lasting mechanism for public participation, the country has little choice but to fall back into the same pattern and begin the cycle again.

Heavenly Father, when revolutions erupt again and again without leaving behind stable institutions marked by justice and mercy, break this downward spiral and open a new way forward for Kyrgyzstan. Transform this nation. Help it establish new political institutions, long-term mechanisms for public participation, and channels through which people can continue to make their voices heard. May Kyrgyzstan become a healthier, more inclusive, and more livable country, where every person has a place in political life. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Russian-Speaking Kore

Koryo-saram



Left: Tatyana Kim, a Koryo-saram businesswoman in Russia. Right: Denis Ten, a Koryo-saram figure skater from Kazakhstan.

The Koryo-saram of Kyrgyzstan are neither South Korean nor North Korean. They are a distinct Korean identity shaped by Soviet history.

In the early twentieth century, famine, natural disasters, exploitation, loss of land ownership, and later the repression that followed Japan's occupation of Korea forced many Koreans to migrate to the Russian Far East. In 1937, Stalin feared that Koreans might spy for Japan and ordered their forced relocation to Central Asia. Around 170,000 to 180,000 Koreans were loaded onto freight trains and sent within weeks to different parts of Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan. They farmed diligently, learned Russian quickly, kept a low profile, and did not organize resistance. For this, the Soviet Union praised them as a "model minority."

Because the Koryo-saram spoke a nineteenth-century Korean dialect mixed with many Russian words, their language differed greatly from modern standard Korean. After Kyrgyzstan became independent and ethnic nationalism began to rise, they did not emigrate in large numbers to an ancestral homeland, as many Germans and Russians did. Instead, they stayed and survived in the margins, adopting a practical strategy: they gave up pursuing jobs in state-owned enterprises and government departments, moved into small and medium-sized businesses and the private sector, and kept their distance from the center of political power. As the state gradually defined who counted as a "true citizen," political non-participation became the safest way for minorities to survive.

Heavenly Father, as the Koryo-saram keep their distance from politics in order to survive, may they still have space to speak, make decisions, and be heard. Even if they can only live in the margins of Kyrgyz society, guard their hearts and preserve their desire to understand who they are. May they find a whole and secure identity before You. Grant them healing, courage, and hope, so that they may freely participate in public life, knowing that they are not merely part of the economy, but citizens with rights and responsibilities. May the next generation of Koryo-saram enjoy greater freedom in political participation and civil rights. May God send more Russian missionaries to Kyrgyzstan to build meaningful relationships with the Koryo-saram and share with them the wonderful story of Jesus. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A People of Many Belongings

The Dungans (I)


Photo by CUI HAOXIN

"We are a small minority in Kyrgyzstan."

"Our ancestors left China. Does that still make us Chinese? One thing is certain: we are Muslims."

"In Kyrgyzstan, people treat us like outsiders."

"I would rather sing old Soviet songs than songs in the Shaanxi dialect."

The Dungans are a Muslim people who speak a form of Chinese close to Shaanxi Mandarin and Gansu dialects, and who write it in the Cyrillic alphabet—a result of Soviet language policy. In the 1860s, during the Hui Muslim uprisings in Shaanxi and Gansu,[1] the Dungans migrated into the Russian Empire.

Dungan identity is layered and complex. Their sense of home is plural. Shaanxi and Gansu represent cultural and ancestral connection, giving them their language, food traditions, and earliest historical narrative. The Soviet Union shaped their worldview, since much of Dungan life was formed through the Russian language, Soviet education, and Soviet social institutions. Central Asia represents survival, law, and the protection of a place to live: this land has sustained them, given them citizenship, and granted them the right to remain.

Out of these three identities, the Dungans have woven something uniquely their own: a distinct "Dunganness." Their life experience is not one of being lost between three worlds, but of richly belonging to several worlds at once.

1 A large-scale Hui Muslim uprising in Shaanxi and Gansu, marked by mass violence among Hui, Han, and other ethnic communities, and affecting Qinghai, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Outer Mongolia.

Heavenly Father, the Dungans are like third-culture people, carrying multiple and complex identities. Open the door of the gospel to them. Send missionaries into their communities to tell them of the salvation found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps the pain of being seen as outsiders in Kyrgyzstan can help the Dungans understand more deeply what Scripture means when it says we are strangers and sojourners on the earth. May this experience lead them to turn to You and find true belonging in Christ. Use this seemingly insignificant minority as holy and precious vessels that glorify You. May their place between many cultures become a witness to the power and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Violence on the Border

The Dungans (II)

Photo by Professor Hai Feng on Wikimedia Commons

In February 2020, ethnic violence broke out in the Korday district of southern Kazakhstan, shocking Central Asia. Large numbers of Dungans fled across the border into Kyrgyzstan.

The immediate trigger appeared to be an ordinary personal dispute and traffic incident. But how did it turn into ethnic violence?

In Kazakhstan's rural border regions, competition over resources, economic instability, and resentment over state distribution had long been simmering. When people have no way to direct their grievances upward toward the state, their grievances often shift sideways, landing on those nearby who are easiest to single out. After independence, Kazakhstan sought to build a strong national identity by promoting a simple binary useful for governance: Kazakhs are the hosts of the nation, while everyone else is "other." In this framework, the Dungans became an easy group to cast as "other."

Photos and short videos also spread rapidly on social media, creating a public space where emotion moved faster than facts and events were stripped of context. Complex social problems were reduced to a simple moral binary, and violence came to be seen as a justified response.

For the Dungans, February 2020 became a collective wound they would not easily forget.

Heavenly Father, do not let the Dungans become a convenient outlet for other people's anger. Be their rock, their fortress, and their refuge—the God in whom they take shelter. Heal their collective memory, especially the fear that they may once again be singled out, labeled, and driven away. Work along the Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan border. Give people ways to hold those in power accountable. Make public life spacious enough for complex conversations. Lead national governance away from simplistic divisions, and cultivate media literacy among the public, so that people are more willing to understand the full context behind what happens. May the Lord lead the Dungans toward a future where they can live in safety, express themselves freely, and be received with acceptance. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The Only Central Asian People to Experience Civil War

The Tajiks

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

The Tajiks are a Persian-speaking Sunni Muslim people of Central Asia. Before the twentieth century, however, there was no distinct Tajik national consciousness. People understood their identity more through their place of birth—their region, town, or community.

The name "Tajik" was officially established only after the Soviet national delimitation of 1924.[1] Yet Tajik traditional social structures did not collapse under Soviet modernization.[2] On the contrary, for the sake of easier governance, the Soviet state made direct use of existing family and community ties when designing the collective farm system, distributing resources and power according to region. Local identity and family connections, which had once been part of everyday life, were drawn into the state system and became part of how politics functioned. As a result, they became even more deeply entrenched and difficult to change.

In September 1991, as the Soviet Union rapidly collapsed, Tajikistan was forced into independence. Before the new country had found its footing, long-hidden factions quickly surfaced and formed opposing political camps. What mattered most was not being "Tajik," but where a person came from and which family network they belonged to. When these local loyalties were drawn into the struggle for state power, competing groups clashed with one another and eventually ignited the Tajik Civil War in 1992.

1 In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union reorganized administrative boundaries according to ethnicity, standardizing ethnic identities that had previously been fluid, overlapping, and ambiguous. In this process, many ethnic names were created, including Tajik, Kazakh, and Karakalpak.

2 A state-led process of modernization that used highly centralized power to transform a largely agrarian society into an industrial power within a very short period of time. This transformation reached its height under Stalin, from the late 1920s through the 1930s.

Heavenly Father, may Your face shine upon Tajikistan, a land marked by deep wounds—the history of civil war and the imprint of Soviet rule. Bind up the wounds of the Tajik people in the love of Christ, and grant them the grace of Your healing. Lord, bring peace to the Tajik people. Through Your body on the cross, You broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles and made them one people. Today, we also cry out to You. Break down the walls between the different factions among the Tajiks, for they belong to one country and live together on one land. May the Holy Spirit move in the hearts of the Tajik people and draw them before You, so that they may be reconciled not only with one another and with all creation, but also with You. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A Ghost Drifting in the Depths of Memory

The Tajik Civil War

Photo by Daniel Harrington Spier on Wikimedia Commons

Mining infrastructure destroyed during the civil war

"It was the summer of 1992, in Kulob in the south," a woman recalled. "They told us to get into the trucks. It was only an inspection, they said. There were no windows in the cargo hold. I held my child and smelled the diesel. When the truck began to move, someone started crying."

"They were not military vehicles. They were agricultural trucks. Along the way, people were dragged off never to be seen again. No one dared ask, 'Why him?'" She paused. "That was when I learned that it was not about what you had done. It was about where you had been born."

In the Tajik Civil War, regional identity proved more deadly than political position. The war killed more than 60,000 people and displaced over one million. The Kulobi faction[1] ultimately prevailed, took control of the state, eliminated its opponents, placed its own people throughout the bureaucracy, and suppressed religious activity to prevent any future political mobilization.

"We have lived through hard times, so we must treasure stability." For the Tajik people, this sentence has become almost like a binding spell. The 1992 civil war became a ghost: an event that cannot be openly discussed or publicly commemorated, drifting in the depths of people's memory in the form of fear. Since then, politics has no longer been a subject for public conversation. It has become a topic families deliberately avoid.

1 The Kulobi faction later formed the core of what is now the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, which remains central to the country's governing structure. It is also the party of President Emomali Rahmon, who has led Tajikistan since 1992 and has served as president since 1994.

Heavenly Father, we pray for the Tajik people who cannot sleep, who carry trauma, and who live with a deep fear of politics. Soothe their spirits and heal their wounds. May the Holy Spirit work in the hearts of the Tajik people, giving them discernment to know when silence is necessary and when it is right to stand for the rights that belong to them. For those who are not allowed to speak, may You first listen to their stories. Lord, You know the price Tajikistan has paid for stability. Do not let the government use stability as an excuse to cover injustice. Restore people's trust in public political life. May the young people born after the war, though they have inherited its fear, have the opportunity to participate in politics. May Tajikistan become a freer and more inclusive country. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

When the Seasons Fall Out of Order

Climate Change

The Rogun Dam

"The snow doesn't fall the way it used to. It no longer comes when it should." "Spring comes too quickly, before the seeds are ready." "The rivers suddenly turn violent and swallow the bridges." "We have not been lazy, but the land no longer responds to us." At the foot of the Pamir Mountains, people speak with a deep sense that the seasons have fallen out of order.

More than 93 percent of Tajikistan's territory is mountainous highland, and its glaciers have long served as natural reservoirs. But since the 1950s, about 35 percent of those glaciers have melted away. Snow and ice now melt earlier in the summer, while autumn and winter bring water shortages, leaving farmers without enough water for irrigation. Sudden floods also trigger mudslides, washing away farmland and roads.

As climate change intensifies, water sources become more unstable, farmland becomes harder to cultivate, and aging power infrastructure struggles to meet people's needs. Many are forced to go to Russia in search of work simply to make a living. At the same time, the government has issued bonds to its own people to help fund construction of the Rogun Dam, the tallest dam in the world.

The dam brings electricity to Tajikistan, and its reservoir can provide water for irrigation. Yet its benefits can also come into conflict with the interests of local communities. Beyond its practical function, the dam has become a display of authoritarian governing capacity, a symbol of national dignity, and a marker of social progress. More importantly, it is a project that was interrupted by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the turmoil of civil war—a symbol of a future that had been put on hold. For this reason, when the project was restarted, the dam was no longer merely a piece of infrastructure. It had become a way to repair a broken national history.

Yet local communities still live each day with disrupted seasons, unstable weather, and unreliable energy.

Heavenly Father, open the eyes of the Tajik government to see the true needs of the people: electricity that does not fail, homes that are warm in winter, stable water sources, and farmland that can be cultivated again. Raise up leaders in Tajikistan who are gifted, humble, decisive, and compassionate toward the people. May they guide the government in building the infrastructure the Pamir region needs and improving the long-standing hardship of those who live there. We pray that the government would respond wisely and effectively to climate change. Lead them to make long-term, responsible plans, with sufficient budgets and strong systems in place to help people face climate disasters that are becoming more frequent. May the benefits of the Rogun Dam be shared fairly with the people. Do not let the land and communities of the Pamir region bear an excessive sacrifice, and do not allow the local environment to become even more fragile and vulnerable. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

No Orchestra Needed Beneath a Crane

Transnational Labor Migration

Photo by Shimmerx Lyan on Unsplash

Farhod is a professional wedding singer, and everything about him reflects the elegance of that calling. He speaks fluent Russian and dresses with care: cologne, hand cream, perfectly pressed trousers, a crisply ironed shirt, sunglasses, and shoes polished to a shine. He was born in 1977. Even through Tajikistan's civil war and years of poverty, Farhod has continued to hold on to the image of what a Soviet man should be.

Then, in 2017, the Law on the Regulation of Traditions and Ceremonies limited the scale of celebrations. Farhod's income dropped sharply. Facing the heavy costs of his children's education, a wedding, and repairs to the family home, he had no choice but to go to Russia to find work.

"The boss asked whether I had any professional qualifications," Farhod said. "I told him I had studied at a music conservatory. He laughed and said there was no need for an orchestra beneath a crane. To him, I was just another migrant worker."

"Ten people slept on the floor of one room. There was always a line for the toilet. Someone's socks always smelled. Insects kept you awake at night. You got up at five in the morning and worked until midnight. Then you lay down to sleep, and the next day you did it all over again."

To preserve some sense of his humanity, Farhod sometimes used his days off to visit historical sites and museums in nearby towns. But his family back home began to question whether he was sending enough money. Before long, he gave in to the punishing rhythm of the work and stopped going anywhere at all.

Heavenly Father, examine the systems we live under. Expose how structures praised as rational, efficient, progressive, and professional can strip people of the right to speak and be understood, just as Farhod was stripped of that dignity in Russian society. Teach us not to rush to manage people, but first to learn how to be present with them; not to rush to define what is right or wrong in a situation, but first to listen to each person's story. Raise up Russian Christians who will use their professional skills to improve the systems that govern Central Asian migrant workers in Russia. May these workers be able to live with ordinary human dignity: to rest on their days off, pursue their interests, build relationships, and return home with better lives for their families, their children, and their communities. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Love Without Freedom

Courtship and Marriage

Photo on Canva

"I will absolutely not marry him!" Gulbahor said firmly to her father, Farhod. A few days earlier, a man had stared at her from a distance at the market. Today, he had come to ask for her hand in marriage.

"Are you joking?" Farhod shouted. "He is educated, his family is wealthy, and he does not have to go to Russia for work. You have no reason to refuse."

Gulbahor's face fell. She compromised and agreed to meet him.

"He promised he would let me finish my studies before we get married," she told me later, her eyes bright. "He said I would not have to wear a headscarf, that I could wear modern clothes. And I do not want to stay at home. I want to study and work!"

Yet everyone in the Tajik community knows that a man's promises before marriage are often empty promises. In this patriarchal society, once a woman is married, neither the bride nor her birth family has much say anymore. She will be pressured to give up her studies in order to carry the heavy responsibilities of family life. And if she does not become pregnant soon enough, the community's judgment can fall on her entire family.

After the engagement, Gulbahor's fiancé began taking her out on dates, and they stayed up late talking on the phone night after night. Even so, she began waking earlier and earlier each morning, practicing how to become a proper daughter-in-law. She entered a kind of voluntary confinement, yielding to her fiancé's expectations: she left school, quit her job, and stopped going out unless it was necessary.

Heavenly Father, may the gospel enter this land and loosen the structures of Tajikistan's patriarchal society. May many women be free to embrace their dreams, choose whom they marry, and have space after marriage to express their own needs. May missionaries become companions to Tajik women who have been isolated by society. Teach them to listen without rushing to correct what is right or wrong, and without rushing to teach proper Christian doctrine. Instead, may they walk with these women as they experience the restoration and healing of Jesus Christ. Remember these lives that have been put on hold. See the dignity Tajik women continue to hold on to, even when their choices are limited. Until the structures of Tajik society change, may the love of God gently hold every Tajik girl. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Tradition Will Crush Us

When Law and Custom Collide

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

His daughter's upcoming marriage plunged Farhod into months of anxiety. What he feared most was that he would not be able to afford a respectable wedding—the kind that lasts for several days and gathers hundreds, even thousands, of guests. Not only did he need to show his community that he honored tradition, he needed to fulfill his duty as a father. He also had to prepare a generous dowry and build a good relationship with his daughter's future in-laws, so that she would not be mistreated after marriage.

In Tajikistan, holding a proper wedding is one of the most important ways a family gains social recognition, much as in Kyrgyzstan (see July 15). Even when the government passes laws restricting ceremonial spending, people still find hidden ways to preserve their own honor and their family's reputation.

"You spend money on travel and your children's education," Farhod said with a shrug. "We borrow money and go deeply into debt so our children can have a respectable wedding. That is what it means to be Tajik." Then he added, "Tradition is a heavy burden. It is what forced me to go to Russia for work. And yet every wedding is something people look forward to. Everyone gathers together, laughing and smiling."

*Farhod spent about 68 times the average monthly salary on his daughter's wedding.

Heavenly Father, You are the God who saves us. We ask You to carry the burdens of the Tajik people. May the Tajik government have the resources and capacity to provide employment, secure livelihoods, social protection, and care for its people, so that one day Tajik families will no longer have to survive only through a father's labor abroad, a mother's long endurance, and a child's obedience. Remember those who travel far from home to work, yet never stop thinking of home. Remember those who go into debt to give their children a proper wedding. Remember those who are trying to find their way between tradition and modern life, and those who are doing everything they can simply to hold life together. When tradition, duty, and family expectations become too heavy to bear, give people room to breathe and lead them into Your true rest. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Caught Between Leaving and Coming Home

Long-Term Care

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

"I sent money home and told myself everything was fine. Now I'm back, but my savings are almost gone. Should I return to Russia? I feel ashamed. Am I still a good man?"

The room smelled sharply of alcohol. I could see Maqsud struggling to hold back tears. For twenty years, he had been torn between Russia and Tajikistan, sustained by the desire to be a "good man"—a good son, a good father, and a good husband.

In Tajikistan, caring for one's parents is an absolute moral duty. To send money home but not be at a parent's bedside during illness amounts to a kind of social death. Neighbors will criticize your character, and the community will push you away.

For Maqsud, there was no other choice but to leave. Tajikistan's economy had collapsed, and he went abroad in order to provide for his family. Now, in order to fulfill his duty to his parents, he has to return home. He is constantly caught between two painful realities: being far from home and consumed by guilt, or being home with no money in his hands.

Society has offered him no support system—no elder care services, no local employment. Every burden falls on Maqsud alone. He is like a rubber band being pulled from both ends. Moving back and forth between two places is the only way he can maintain any kind of balance, but the strain is slowly tearing him apart, leaving him with the sense that he is losing his wholeness as a person.

Heavenly Father, when Maqsud feels ashamed, speak to him and comfort his heart. Work on behalf of Tajik male migrant workers. Provide family members and communities who can share the burdens they carry, so that they may have space to stop and rest, even for a moment. May Your grace not only encourage the Tajik people to keep going, but also allow them to lay their burdens down for a while—to be held, and to be seen as people of worth and dignity. Provide Tajikistan with a complete social welfare system, so that when its people face the risks of life—birth, aging, illness, death, unemployment, or disability—they may still maintain a basic level of dignity and quality of life. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Chasing the Red Passport

"Illegal" Migrants

"When I was thirty, I thought that if I worked hard for one year, I could finally begin my life. But five years have passed. What have I actually done?"

Sayid had once worked as an accountant at a cotton factory in Tajikistan, but his wages were too low to support a family. When he heard that Russia was about to tighten its immigration policies, he left without hesitation for Saint Petersburg. In order to avoid the high cost of maintaining legal work status[1] and protect his right to work in Russia, he needed to obtain a "red passport"—Russian citizenship—as quickly as possible.

Sayid paid 80,000 rubles to a broker and received a genuine passport through unofficial channels. For four years, he used that passport to work legally. Then, in 2012, the authorities discovered that this batch of passports had been issued improperly. They were not fake passports, but they had not been issued through the proper procedures, and the government declared them invalid. Overnight, Sayid went from citizen back to undocumented migrant.

After losing his passport, Sayid applied for a work permit in order to maintain a "semi-legal" status. But in 2013, when he tried to leave the country, he discovered that he had been placed on an entry ban list. He managed to slip back into Russia and stayed there illegally for three years.

In 2017, President Putin issued an amnesty for undocumented migrants, and Sayid was fortunate enough to receive a naturalization quota in Kaluga. But the system showed that he already had a "valid residence permit" in Saint Petersburg. Because of this phantom document, he could not apply for new papers in Kaluga.

"It is an endless absurd loop. The whole thing is ridiculous, isn't it?" Sayid said with a faint, bitter smile.

1 Migrant workers are required to obtain a work permit. In Saint Petersburg, this costs 3,800 rubles, about US$66, per month—a fee that takes up a significant portion of a migrant worker's income.

Heavenly Father, when Tajik migrant workers are trapped again and again in Russia's bureaucratic maze, comfort and strengthen them, for they have already done everything they can to survive. Lord, when years of life are swallowed up by waiting, and when five or ten years are dismissed as "procedures not yet complete," hold this lost time in Your sight. Do not let them lose their meaning in Your sight. Prepare for Tajik migrant workers an administrative system in Russia that truly responds to their needs. Make the process simpler and more transparent, so that they can obtain legal status smoothly, and so that Russia can also receive the labor force it needs. May Russian Christians break through racial and cultural barriers and enter the lives of Tajik migrant workers, sharing the gospel with them. When these workers are in need, may Russian believers use their skills, resources, and relationships to extend warm and practical help. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Cut Off From Myself

Afghan Refugees

"After the Taliban took power, I brought my whole family and fled to Tajikistan," Zahir said slowly. "In Afghanistan, I was a respected professor in the Department of Science. Here, because Tajikistan does not recognize my credentials, I can only work as a tailor. Am I still a useful person? I ask myself that all the time."

"I left my homeland—the graves of my ancestors, the streets I had known since childhood, all the places that carried my memories and my sense of belonging. We live in constant fear. The president of Tajikistan calls us brothers in his speeches, but the police are always arresting Afghan refugees and forcing them back across the border.[1] The law says we can only stay in Vahdat. We are not allowed to enter the capital, Dushanbe."

"Do we have any future to look forward to? I do not know. When will we receive permission to enter Canada? It has been five years—five years of endless waiting. It has worn away my passion for life and my sense of purpose."

"As refugees, we can no longer live the way we used to. I have no guest room where I can welcome people.[2] I have been cut off from my entire extended family.[3] I cannot give my children a proper wedding or celebrate the holidays as they should be celebrated.[4] This feeling of being cut off from my culture—am I still myself?"

1 There is a deep gap between the government's public rhetoric and its actual policy. Afghan refugees are treated by the Tajik government as a "security risk."

2 Hospitality is one of the most important values in Afghan culture. Whether rich or poor, receiving guests is regarded as a sacred duty and an honor. Afghan homes usually have a dedicated guest room, furnished with carpets and cushions.

3 A person's conduct reflects on the entire family. If an Afghan in exile is forced by poverty to take work considered beneath his status, the blow to family honor can be devastating.

4 Afghan weddings are usually large events with hundreds of guests. Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are also deeply significant occasions, involving large-scale visits among relatives and friends, new clothes, and the sharing of meat.

Heavenly Father, may the gospel enter this land and loosen the structures of Tajikistan's patriarchal society. May many women be free to embrace their dreams, choose whom they marry, and have space after marriage to express their own needs. May missionaries become companions to Tajik women who have been isolated by society. Teach them to listen without rushing to correct what is right or wrong, and without rushing to teach proper Christian doctrine. Instead, may they walk with these women as they experience the restoration and healing of Jesus Christ. Remember these lives that have been put on hold. See the dignity Tajik women continue to hold on to, even when their choices are limited. Until the structures of Tajik society change, may the love of God gently hold every Tajik girl. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A People Left Unrecognized

The Pamiris

The Pamiris, also known as Mountain Tajiks, speak Eastern Iranian languages, practice Ismaili Shia Islam, and live on the Pamir Plateau at elevations over 3,500 meters. In 1936, the Soviet Union renamed Persian "Tajik," marginalizing the Pamiris, whose Eastern Iranian languages fell outside this newly defined category.

During the Tajik Civil War, the Pamiris—long neglected and living on the margins—joined the opposition. This strengthened their sense of ethnic identity and left them with a political wound: the trauma of having lost a struggle for power.

Today, the Tajik state still does not recognize "Pamiri" as an ethnic name. Pamiris continue to be classified as Tajik. The older generation, having lived through both Soviet ethnic classification and the Tajik Civil War, tends to emphasize the differences between themselves and Tajiks, forming closed communities in search of protection and solidarity. The younger generation has taken a different approach. On social media, they use a wide range of symbols—the license plate code 04,[1] the outline of the GBAO map,[2] and the Ismaili flag—to mark the boundaries of their identity and connect with Pamiris around the world. Rather than defining themselves mainly through opposition to others, they seek dialogue and cooperation with the outside world, showing that they are part of Tajik society while also taking pride in being Pamiri.

1 This is the vehicle registration code for Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, or GBAO, the administrative region where many Pamiris live. On social media, "04" has become a powerful and distinctive marker of Pamiri identity.

2 Pamiris often use the outline of the GBAO as a visual symbol, sometimes combining it with other symbols, such as the Ismaili flag.

Heavenly Father, You remember every tear the Pamiris have shed, and You see every political wound they have carried. When a people cannot speak their own name, and when their identity is placed under someone else's category, restore their agency. Help them think, choose, and live as the people You created them to be. Heal the collective trauma of the older generation of Pamiris. Give them space to make sense of the past, to heal slowly, and to find strength to move toward the future. We pray for the younger generation of Pamiris. May none of their efforts be overlooked. Let the world see that the Pamiris exist, and also understand that they are part of Tajik society. May the Pamiris one day come to know the Lord who is full of love and forgiveness. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Today, write your own prayer for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as the Spirit leads.

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

MISSION PATHWAY

PRAY FOR THE UNREACHED

Mission Pathway prayer guide English edition for desktop, laptop, tablet, PC, mobile and eBook readers of every type!

No Special apps Needed!

The Mission Pathway prayer guide English electronic version does not require any special apps to be read. It can be read via your Web browser or eBook readers that are included with your computers and mobile devices.

Subscribe now
to receive the quarterly prayer guide.

Subscription
Google Form

MP
Official Website

Join us
read online and become a mission intercessor!

CROSSROADS
PUBLICATIONS

P. O. Box 3356
Los Altos, CA 94024-0356 U.S.A.
+1 (650) 968-1866
+60 18-315 7707
info@missionpathway.org
www.cross-roads.org/eng

Photo by Evgeni Zotov on Flickr

Cheif Editor
Yein Yein

Editor
Enoch Lee, Isa Hsu, Joan Chang

Translator
Cindy Wu

Proofreader
Keith Carey

Administrative Coordinator
Priscilla Pua, Novia Lu, Sukin, Maritza

Cover Photo
© Photo by Mikhail Blinov on Unsplash

Layout
GF Howe

Publishing
Crossroads Publications
P. O. Box 3356
Los Altos, CA 94024-0356 U.S.A.
+1 (650) 968-1866
info@missionpathway.org
missionpathway.org

CANADA
CCCOWE Canada
+1 (437) 216-6085 (Ps. Enoch Lee)
missionpathway.ca@gmail.com

TAIWAN
UMOT
(02) 2321-2915
service@umot.org.tw

HONG KONG
HKSTM
+852 52822747
info@hkstm.org.hk

SINGAPORE
CNEC
+65 6280 0312
cnec@cnecintl.org