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On researching 'Ethnic Conflict': epistemology, politics, and a Central Asian boundary dispute

Nick Megoran^a

^a University of Newcastle upon Tyne,

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On Researching ‘Ethnic Conflict’: Epistemology, Politics, and a Central Asian Boundary Dispute

NICK MEGORAN

Abstract

Providing a critique of alarmist discussions of the danger of ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan, and the positivist epistemological assumptions and research practices that underpin them, this article develops an approach to researching ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic conflict’ through the use of focus groups. Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan expressed similar views about the closures of international boundaries, framed in terms of ethnicity. However, this was not an essentialist notion, but rather a concept of authentic ‘Uzbekness’ or ‘Kyrgyzness’ predicated primarily on the performance of endogenous kinship practices and Muslim/Soviet notions of class morality, nuanced by geography. These overlaps and discrepancies provide resources for those wishing to articulate visions of future social formations wider than the range of options currently propagated by ethnic entrepreneurs.

TISHKOV HAS OBSERVED THAT MOST TYPOLOGIES OF ETHNIC CONFLICT BETTER reflect the thinking and agendas of the typologists than the actual social panorama (Tishkov 1999). A staple theme of Anglophone academic, journalistic and international organisation discourse about post-Socialist Eurasia has been the importance of ‘ethnicity’. This tendency is particularly marked in discussion of the Ferghana Valley region of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (see Figure 1). Piontkovsky is not alone in regarding the Valley as a dangerous ‘powder keg’ of ‘ethnic and territorial conflicts’ (Piontkovsky 2000). Indeed, many commentators script ‘ethnic conflict’ as the defining drama of a Valley ‘in the midst of a host of crises’ (Slim 2002), the yeast that animates social life. This article is a critical interrogation of this contention,

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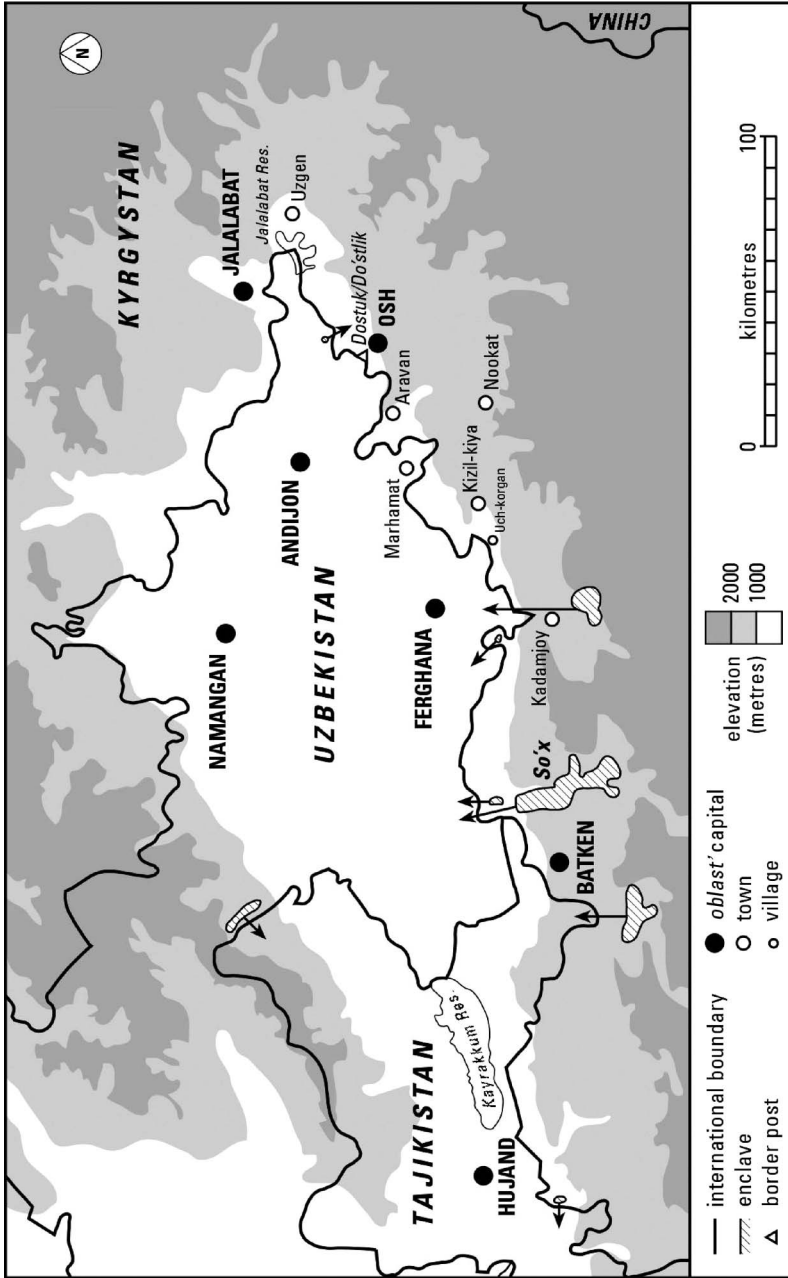


FIGURE 1. THE FERGHANA VALLEY, DEPICTING PLACES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

foregrounding the neglected epistemological question of how the way that we do research about 'ethnicity' impacts on our conclusions.

The lens that this article uses to consider the ethnicity/conflict nexus is that of international border disputes in the Ferghana Valley. Since early 1999 'border issues' have been of major concern for many of its inhabitants.¹ Up until this time, international boundaries were laxly monitored and had a minimal impact on the lives of borderland dwellers.² Throughout 1999 and 2000 however, this changed, as Uzbekistan took dramatic unilateral measures to enforce control over the circulation of goods and people into and out of its territory, making the boundary a concrete—and often traumatic and violent—intrusion into the lives of its inhabitants. This was intended to protect the economic and military security of the state, but also enabled the incumbent leadership to entrench its authority by inscribing its own geopolitical imagination onto the Valley (Megoran *et al.* 2005).

These events, and subsequent developments, have not only received detailed coverage in local and foreign-funded news agencies, but they have been subject to scholarly assessments of their impact on topics such as regional integration (Dadabaev 2004, ch. 4), domestic political contestation (Megoran 2004, 2005), and international jurisprudence (Johanson 2004). The purpose of this article is to address the following question: have 'border disputes' made 'ethnic conflict' in the Ferghana Valley more likely, as many commentators have warned? This question is a pressing one because, if true, then it is imperative that action is taken to avert it. However, if it is not the case, then activities and policies aimed at preventing it may be misguided or even counter-productive.

To address this question, this article begins by discussing the meaning and recent historical role of 'ethnicity' in Central Asia, particularly in Anglophone literature, and the politics of its use as a category to explain conflict. It argues that the way that the impact on research results of how ethnicity is researched is enormous, but that this is too rarely considered in academic texts. Adopting a post-structural theoretical standpoint, it considers the conceptual and epistemological conundrums of investigating ethnicity in field research, arguing that focus-group methodology is peculiarly appropriate for the task. The empirical section analyses the results of 15 focus groups conducted in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2000.³ The article considers ethnicity not as a given attribute adhering to an individual, but as a fluid and contested process that only has meaning in concrete contexts (in this case, the border crisis). Ethnicity *is* important, but not necessarily in the way that outsiders consider it to be. It uncovers a significant gap between elite conceptions of ethnicity, and the popular significance attached to it. The article concludes by suggesting that, in the light of Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution'

¹'O'sh-Andijon chegarasi passajir transporti uchun yopiq nega?', *Mezon*, 13–20 February 1999, p. 1.

²Despite the independence of all the countries of the Soviet Union, borders with non-CIS countries are still thought of very much as external frontiers, while those between CIS states are not much more than administrative boundaries in most cases' ('The thin red line?', *Labyrinth: Central Asia Quarterly*, 2, 3, 1995, p. 8); see also Megoran (1996).

³This focuses on the period 1999–2000 because at no time before or since (until the time of writing) has a political crisis been discussed as having the same potential to fan ethnic conflict. Subsequent research in the Valley between 2004 and 2006 leads the author to conclude that the findings are still valid.

of March 2005, this interstice may be a space for imagining alternative forms of national belonging and political formation in south Kyrgyzstan.

Ethnicity and conflict in Central Asia

The politics of writing ethnicity

As Smith (1996) and Brubaker (1994, 1996) have analysed, the USSR institutionalised ethnicity in a federal structure that enshrined the paradoxical combination of ethnic and civic nationalism, in a manner that determined access to scarce resources and life chances.⁴ At the scale of the Soviet Union, leaders elaborated the *civic* idea of a *Soviet* nation that was supra-national, the fusion of peoples of all ethnic backgrounds. Yet, on the scale of union republics, the USSR codified and institutionalised nationality through the organisation of republics based on single, dominant *ethnic* groups. In each republic, cadres of the titular nationality were cultivated and promoted over other groups. According to Smith, this unique arrangement was a pragmatic and short-term solution to problems of state building and the assertion of centralised authority following the Bolshevik Revolution, yet one that, because it failed to modernise, contributed to the eventual demise of the Union itself. As Kandiyoti put it, the Soviet Union, 'while officially espousing the goal of merging nationalities and transcending ethnic particularisms . . . institutionalised, codified and ossified them' (Kandiyoti 1996, p. 542). Far from being an empty fiction, as some Sovietologists argued (D'Encausse 1979), or a temporary interruption of historic nation-building processes, this institutionalisation of ethnicity mapped the territorial-political contours of the USSR's implosion (Smith 1998), laying the foundation for the political geographies of the post-Soviet era.

During the Soviet period, the efficacy of Soviet nationalities policy in Central Asia was a politically contentious issue. Whilst it was defended by Tuzmuhamedov as having structurally remade Central Asia (Tuzmuhamedov 1973), a number of Western scholars downplayed the impact of nationalities policy, suggesting instead that a politicised putative Islamic identity would make Central Asia the USSR's undoing.⁵ In fact, Central Asian elites remained largely loyal to Moscow until the end, and inter-communal violence in the Ferghana Valley occurred apparently down ethnic lines, not least in disturbances in the Kyrgyzstani towns of Uzgen and Osh in 1990 (Abazov 1999; Asankanov 1996).

Shaken by these events, and perhaps also taken aback by the failure to appreciate the role of ethnicity during the Soviet period, scholars quickly began to predict that 'ethnic conflict' would become the norm for Central Asia where, 'tensions continue to smoulder' (Fane 1996, p. 275). This extreme view was understandable: as scholars now recognised 'the ethnic basis of the new Central Asian countries', they therefore assumed that more events such as those in Uzgen and Osh in 1990 'will no doubt occur in the years ahead' (Clem 1997, pp. 172–173). 'Incidents such as these are likely to

⁴For a comprehensive application of Smith's framework to Central Asia, see Patnaik (2003).

⁵For example Bennigsen and Broxup (1983), D'Encausse (1979, see footnote 14) and Imart (1987). For an acknowledgement of this error and a retrospective assessment, see Rywkin (1994).

increase in frequency and intensity', warned Kaiser (1994, pp. 370–371), while Dash predicted that, 'Central Asia is sure to pass through a chaotic phase of self-assertion of its peoples' identities' (Dash 1992, pp. 119–120).

The basis of these claims seems to be a conception of ethnicity as a historically determining and tangible force from which the contours of efficacious action could be plotted. Empirically, theory outpaced fieldwork. Thus, Carlisle discussed, 'the centuries old antagonisms between Uzbeks and Tajiks' (Carlisle 1995, p. 75), and Haghayeghi the supposed 'ethnic discord which has always been a major feature of the Central Asian landscape' (Haghayeghi 1995, p. 186). Here, Carlisle identified the Tajiks and Uzbeks as ancient enemies, but Haghayeghi lumped them together as comrades in a putative struggle against the Kazakhs and Turkmen! The notion of Osh in particular being a dangerous place became almost received wisdom far outside Central Asian circles, where it featured as a stock, yet superficial, example of ethnic conflict. That the respected *Atlas of War and Peace* should mis-name it 'Och' (Smith 2003, p. 75), and Anderson's otherwise splendid textbook on frontiers claim that political instability may result in the region 'because the important Kyrgyz town of Osh is in Uzbekistan' (Anderson 1996, p. 73) is perhaps revealing of the superficial level at which ethnicity and conflict have been discussed in the literature. As Polat was able to write at the end of the decade, 'ethnicity as an indomitable source of tension in Central Asia may have been greatly overstated in the doomsday scenarios advanced in abundance with the Soviet breakup'.⁶

Nonetheless, the notion of ethnic conflict being the defining drama of Central Asian regions such as the Ferghana Valley has received a new fillip with the post-1999 border issues. In spite of his otherwise sober judgements, Polat reckons that there remains a high likelihood of ethnic issues being transformed into border disputes (Polat 2002, ch. 3). Babakulov warns that border guards' 'conduct has bred such resentment among Kyrgyz and Uzbek travellers that some analysts are warning that frontier disputes could sow the seeds of inter-ethnic violence'.⁷ McGlinchey wrote of Uzbek–Kyrgyz relations in 2000 that 'ethnic tensions have grown since 1998. Border controls between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have become increasingly draconian, making Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan feel ever more isolated' (McGlinchey 2000). The International Crisis Group warned that border disputes might exacerbate 'existing inter-ethnic strains in the region between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks' (International Crisis Group 2002, p. 16).

Much of this work is both poorly theorised and weakly substantiated, and it is tempting to dismiss it in the same way as the work of the Sovietologists is now considered to be flawed. However, that would be imprudent. Simply because outside scholarly understandings of ethnicity and conflict have been so awry in the past, does not necessarily mean that they will be so in the future. Nonetheless, in order to

⁶Polat (2002, p. 186). As far back as 1997, Bichel commented that, 'the lack of violent ethnic conflict in Central Asia since independence is especially noteworthy, given the sharp decline which each of these states has suffered in its economy, severe dislocations in the workforces, reductions in patterns of national wealth and in standards of living' (Bichel 1997, p. 148).

⁷Ulugbek Babakulov, 'Kyrgyz–Uzbek Border Tensions', *Reporting Central Asia*, 96, 3 February 2002 (London, IWPR), available at: www.iwpr.org, accessed March 2006.

negotiate the current question, it is profitable to consider why errors were made in the past. Previous work suffers from four main shortcomings.

Firstly, it reflects the politicisation of scholarship. In assessing how anti-Soviet sentiment influenced Cold War US and West European conceptualisations of Central Asia, Myer concluded that, 'political palatability remains a strong criterion in determining which interpretations of Central Asian political and social dynamics gain an ascendancy' (Myer 1999, p. 269). The reliance for coverage of border issues of some influential international media outlets on journalists associated with nationalist opposition newspapers and groupings would be a case in point.

However, politicisation is a clumsy term, easily taken as implying a deliberate and cynical manipulation of data. Thus, secondly, it may be more useful to think in terms of the concept of 'geographical imagination', how (often unexamined) worldviews construct and depict certain places as imbued with certain qualities. Thus, in some semi-scholarly pieces the Ferghana Valley is depicted, on account of supposed ethnic divisions, exacerbated by factors such as poverty and borders, as an inherently dangerous place in need of assistance from the USA or international/intergovernmental organisations to rescue its population from themselves.⁸

This points, thirdly, to a lack of empirical research. This was particularly the case in the early- and mid-1990s, when it was obvious to anyone living in Central Asia that the prophets of doom had little appreciation of social dynamics on the ground. I have sometimes been amazed to read accounts of the existence of 'ethnic conflict' by outside organisations, only to visit the named sites and discover very different local understandings.

This suggests, fourthly, fundamental problems in the theorisation of ethnicity. Much literature on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan suggests that 'ethnicity' is tangible, even ontological, and that ancient or enduring ethnic cleavages determine political conflict in contemporary Central Asia.⁹ At times, ethnicity has been ascribed with great causal power, conceived of as the most important social cleavage in the Ferghana Valley.

Thus over the past three decades the politics of writing about ethnicity in Central Asia have hampered scholarly analysis and distorted an accurate understanding of actual social and political processes.

Re-writing ethnicity

The above use of 'ethnicity' or 'national identity' as an explanatory variable of social and political formation and conflict has been thoroughly critiqued in the social sciences (Pieterse 1997), with scholars insisting on the fragmentary nature of identity which stresses that aspects such as gender, race, sexuality, and class are mutually constructed (Kofman & England 1997). Rather than conceive of it as a quality from which opinions can be read and mandates for action derived, 'National identity', argues Doty, 'is never a finished project: it is always in the process of being constructed

⁸For example, Rubin and Lubin (1999) and Tabyshalieva (1999). For a critique, see Megoran (2000a). See also the essays in the special collection by Thompson and Heathershaw (2005).

⁹For example, Büyükkakinci (2000).

and reconstructed' (Doty 1996). Identity, argues Vila, 'is not a "thing" that an individual "has" once and forever, but rather, a construct, which undergoes constant negotiation with "others" as its contours are defined and redeemed over time' (Vila 2000, p. 14). Cogent critiques along these lines have been applied in the Central Asian context (Schoeberlein-Engel 1994; Bichel 1997). These have stressed instead the fluidity and historical contingency of 'ethnic' boundaries and the role of Soviet (Allworth 1990; Kamp 2002) and post-Soviet (Adams 1999) authorities in designating and manipulating national categories. This literature should not be read as downplaying the social importance of ethnicity, or suggesting that it cannot be mobilised to powerful effect in particular contexts, but rather that it is a historically contingent and malleable force.

The question of how to study 'ethnic conflict' thus poses a dilemma. As Eriksen wrote, in one of the most important theoretical studies of ethnicity to date, 'The choice of an analytical perspective or "research hypothesis" is not an innocent act. If one goes out to look for ethnicity, one will "find" it and thereby contribute to constructing it' (Eriksen 1993, p. 161). Thus, even studying ethnic conflict can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially when it informs policy: Alimov argues that the superficial reporting of the alleged problems of non-nationals in Uzbekistan only aggravates discontent (Alimov 1994, p. 232).¹⁰

Eriksen highlights succinctly the dangers facing students of 'ethnicity':

In a sense, ethnicity is created by the analyst when he or she goes out into the world and poses questions about ethnicity. Had one instead been concerned with gender, one would doubtless have found aspects of gender instead of ethnicity (Eriksen 1993, p. 16).

To illustrate this general argument, imagine a researcher asking Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh a string of questions:

Do you think that the 1990 fighting was between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz? Do you think that ethnicity is still an important and sensitive political factor in the Osh region? Do you think that there could be further violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the future?

It would not be hard to elicit positive responses to all those questions, and the researcher could conclude, 'All sides think the Osh region is dangerously susceptible to Uzbek–Kyrgyz violent conflict'. Policy initiatives and further reports would follow. Suppose, on the other hand, that the researcher asked the same people the following questions:

Do you think that most Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are generally good people who want to get on with making a living and bringing up families in the tradition of their ancestors? Do you think that uninformed and malicious politicians from the North of Kyrgyzstan mishandled the 1990 tensions and helped incite fighting between people who want to live peacefully together? Do you think that there are still incompetent politicians in Bishkek with sinister goals who want to exploit divisions? Do you think that, under these circumstances, similar incidents could occur in the future?

¹⁰See also Tishkov (1999).

Again, it would not be hard to elicit positive responses, and the researcher could conclude, 'All sides agree that it is regional not local ethnic divisions that caused the 1990 riots, and may provoke further violence in the future'. Neither of these conclusions would be complete: either by itself would be misleading.

The way that we ask about ethnicity determines the results that we discover. This critique applies to any form of question posed by a researcher about ethnicity, whether in personal interview or written survey. If this is the case, perhaps the obvious solution would be simply to ignore 'ethnicity'. Eriksen rejects this, however, as 'on the other hand, individuals or informants who live in the societies in question may themselves be concerned with issues relating to ethnicity, and as such the phenomenon clearly does exist outside the mind of the observer'. The 1990 Uzbek–Kyrgyz clashes evince tragic support for this argument. In the context of this essay's question about the impact of border disputes, it would appear that it is irresponsible to study ethnicity, but likewise irresponsible not to do so. Eriksen's problematic thus poses a methodological dilemma. In my experience, research that directly asks people about ethnicity and conflict in the Ferghana Valley can lead to misleading results. People may deny or confirm it for a whole host of reasons, including what they conceive of as the interests and aims of the researcher. It is then extremely easy for the researcher to either ignore or overdetermine the importance of ethnicity: put simply, it might be 'there', but not be the only or even most important issue in play. As a result, the researcher would miss this, generating the results that they came looking for and were thus determined by their research question in the first place.

I have addressed this quandary by researching a concrete political conflict that was not explicitly 'ethnic'—the border dispute—through focus groups. In none of the groups that I ran did I ask, either directly or indirectly, any questions pertaining to ethnicity (except for the purpose of basic self ascription in the introductory phase). By structuring discussions around a number of aspects of the border dispute, I allowed ethnicity to emerge as a pertinent issue, should this be the case, alongside other constituents of social identity such as gender and class. I believe that this has enabled me to avoid the dangers that Eriksen outlined, whilst constructing an account of the meaning and importance of ethnicity in understanding reactions to the border dispute.

A focus group is 'a one-off meeting of between four and eight individuals who are brought together to discuss a particular topic chosen by the researcher(s) who moderate or structure the discussion' (Bedford & Burgess 2001, p. 121). Invented during World War II to investigate the impact of propaganda, focus groups were subsequently developed as a commercial market research tool (Schutt 1996, p. 328). Epistemologically, the focus group, thus conceived, operated within a positivist paradigm, regarding opinions as enduring attributes of a subject which simply needed uncovering. Distinguishing themselves from this use, post-structural social scientists, however, have argued that focus groups are highly appropriate tools in which to consider opinions rhetorically as utterances specific to a particular situation (Myers & Macnaghten 1999, p. 182), an ideal way to explore how ideas, story-telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context (Kitzinger & Barbour 1999, p. 5). They are particularly sensitive to emic categories of knowledge, rather than etic categories imposed by the quantitative survey method,

and are thus highly appropriate for such a methodologically sensitive issue (Goss & Leinbach 1996, p. 117).¹¹

I ran 15 focus groups, employing 'qualitative sampling' in order to select groups of people who reflected my research interests (Kitzinger & Barbour 1999, p. 7).¹² Groups (of Kyrgyz, Uzbeks or Tajiks) were composed on average of 6.5 people (see Table 1).¹³ Twelve groups were composed of students, and there was also one rural women's group, and two groups of unemployed men who were sitting at Osh's so-called 'slave market', waiting for people to come and employ them for casual labour. I wanted the majority of the groups to be drawn from the same occupational and age background to enable better comparison, and student groups are easier to form. I arranged a rural women's consciousness group and the unemployed male groups in order to see if a single gender group made an appreciable difference (but it did not). The unemployed men were selected to ensure that I was sensitised to those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. In all cases, group members knew each other, facilitating a more free-flowing discussion.¹⁴ Groups were moderated by the author in Kyrgyz, Uzbek and English, and all names have been changed for this article.

Following an initial opportunity for questions, I structured the conversation around a series of headlines relating to the border crisis taken from Kyrgyz newspapers. One highlighted President Karimov's statement in February 1999 that he had closed the main Osh–Andijon border crossing to passenger transport because every day 5,000 people from Kyrgyzstan came to Uzbekistan to buy bread, and it was not his duty to give charity to his impoverished neighbours.¹⁵ The second was a cartoon from the Kyrgyz opposition newspaper *Aalam*, depicting the map of Kyrgyzstan being shredded at the edges by ogres representing the surrounding countries. Under the accompanying headline, 'Kyrgyzstan—Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?', the article claimed that neighbouring states were freely swallowing Kyrgyz territory by advancing border posts, a geopolitical weakness that mirrored the parlous state of the Kyrgyz language and culture.¹⁶ The third headline quoted veteran Kyrgyz author and pro-government politician, Chinggis Aitmatov, suggesting that in the future a 'Turkestani

¹¹An emic category is a term of self-ascription that people use about their own lives, whereas an etic category is one devised by researchers that is not used in the same way by the research subjects themselves.

¹²The goal is not to be able to claim to have held discussions with a statistical sample of each group, but rather to explore in detail the responses of some people, whose experiences may have much in common with those of other people.

¹³In their studies Burgess ran 13 focus groups, and Holbrook and Jackson 20 groups (Burgess 1996; Holbrook & Jackson 1996).

¹⁴Space does not allow anything more than a cursory review of these issues: for a fuller discussion of conceptual, ethical, and methodological issues involved in forming and running these groups and analysing data, see N. Megoran, *The Borders of Eternal Friendship? The Politics and Pain of Nationalism and Identity along the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Fergana Valley Boundary, 1999–2000*, PhD dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, 2002, ch. 5, available at: <http://www.megoran.org>.

¹⁵'Tübölük dostuktun baasi 5000 bölkö nan', *Res Publica*, 8, 340, 16–122 March 1999, p. 1.

¹⁶'Bügün Kırğızstan Bar: Erteng jok bolup ketishi мүmkүн?', *Aalam*, 7, 259, 24 February 1999–2 March 1999, p. 1.

TABLE 1
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

| Group | Participants (majority) and location of focus group | No. in group (M/F) | Homeplace of participants (majority) |
|-------|---|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| FG1 | Kyrgyz students, Osh | 3/5 | Osh & Jalal-Abad |
| FG2 | Kyrgyz students, Osh | 6/0 | Osh |
| FG5 | Kyrgyz students, Osh | 0/7 | Osh City, Kadamjoy |
| FG6 | Kyrgyz/Uzbek students, Osh | 0/3 | Osh City |
| FG7 | Uzbek students, Osh | 4/4 | Osh |
| FG8 | Uzbek students, Osh | 6/1 | Osh |
| FG9 | Kyrgyz students, Andijon* | 1/7 | Osh |
| FG10 | Kyrgyz students, Jalal-Abad | 0/8 | Jalal-Abad & Osh |
| FG11 | Kyrgyz housewives, Jalal-Abad | 0/7 | Rural Jalal-Abad |
| FG12 | Unemployed Kyrgyz men, Osh | 7/0 | Alay & Kara-Suu region |
| FG13 | Unemployed Kyrgyz men, Osh | 8/0 | Alai |
| FG14 | Uzbek students, Osh | 3/5 | Osh |
| FG15 | Kyrgyz students, Kizil-Kiya | 1/7 | Kadamjoy & Nookat |
| FG16 | Tajik students, Kizil-Kiya | 1/6 | Uch-Korgon & Batken |
| FG17 | Tajik students, Kizil-Kiya | 0/7 | Uch-Korgon, Batken |

Notes: 'Osh' and 'Jalal-Abad' refer to both the cities and regions unless otherwise stated. Focus groups originally indexed as FG3 and FG4 are excluded from analysis due to incomplete data. The subsequent group names have not been revised, in order to facilitate comparisons between this article and other publications.

*Andijon *oblast'*, Uzbekistan.

confederation of Central Asian states might emerge to obviate the need for borders'.¹⁷ This reflected the Kyrgyz government's upbeat position that its policy of promoting a tolerant multi-ethnic society at home was matched by good relations with neighbours. Finally, I showed an article entitled 'Iron curtain?', accompanied by a dramatic cartoon of Uzbek and Kyrgyz men stripped to their underwear by Uzbek border guards, superimposed over barbed wire stretched over the Ferghana Valley.¹⁸ These cartoons, montages, and headlines proved highly conducive to initiating discussion, as they graphically represented issues and opinions under consideration in the Kyrgyzstani press. Like Meinhof, Armbruster and Rollo working on Central European boundaries, I found pictures to be a good trigger to initiate the sharing of narratives in a way that reduced the level of direction from the researcher (Meinhof *et al.* 2002, pp. 7–8). I distributed multiple copies of each in turn, asking people what impression it made on them and what they thought it was about, and followed the conversations that developed, recording them on cassette. With the first cartoon I excluded the accompanying text so it was not necessarily apparent that it was the border being discussed, and told them the actual topic of the article after some conversation. In analysing results, I gave particular attention to the *context* in which statements were made, the *emphasis* attached to certain statements and issues, and whether *consensus* was reached.

¹⁷'Biz, Türkestan jamaatchılığı XXI kiliında birigishbiz kerek', *Kirgiz Tuusu*, 187–188, 22, 382–383, 3–6 December 1999. For a discussion of the debate generated by this article, see Megoran (2002).

¹⁸'Jelezniy zanaves?', *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 205, 7361, 22 October 1999, p. 1.

Overview of responses

NM: What effect has the border had on you?

FG17 participant: First of all, on *qarindosh-urukchilik* [the social practice of kinship]. For example, it is now hard to go and visit family when we have to. Secondly, we used to go to Uzbekistan to sell the fruit we grew here. Now, we can't do that, and our fruit is left unsold.

Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Tajik responses to the newspaper headlines, and the border question in general, displayed a remarkable similarity. There was general consensus across all ethnic groups that President Karimov was right to enforce control of Uzbekistan's border in order to protect it against terrorism and narcotics, and that Kyrgyzstan was unduly lax in comparison. However, there was also a near consensus¹⁹ that Uzbekistan was wrong to restrict links with Kyrgyzstan in the way that it was doing, cutting kinship ties, reducing trade and increasing poverty, and setting once-united peoples against each other. The tensions in these positions were left unresolved. Likewise, President Karimov's assertion that he had to control the boundary to protect Uzbekistan's wealth from impoverished Kyrgyzstanis drew near unanimous criticism, all groups insisting that mutually beneficial trade, not charity, was occurring across borders. In fact, many groups (of both ethnicities) repeated the common wisdom that had emerged in recent years, that 'in Kyrgyzstan the state is poor and the people rich, whilst in Uzbekistan the state is rich but the people poor'.

Of particular interest were reactions to the cartoon and headline from *Aalam*, 'Kyrgyzstan—Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?'. I began focus groups with this cartoon, without telling them what the accompanying article was about. The majority of groups immediately surmised that it referred to their *chongdor* (Kyrgyz) or *kattalar* (in Uzbek), devouring the country for their own ends. This word literally means 'big ones', those well-connected, (relatively wealthy) elites including politicians, businessmen, and heads of public bodies whose access to power allows them to exploit their position by trapping resources and advancing themselves and their families and allies.

Some groups hit upon the actual topic of the article, the threat of neighbouring republics. I revealed the answer to all groups in time; every group agreed in theory with the claim of the article that the border question was 'the most serious issue', but, nonetheless, emphasised with far more passion the threat to Kyrgyzstan posed by the *chongdor*. When the border was discussed, it was generally in the context of impeded border crossings, tortuous routes, broken kinship ties and more expensive goods in the bazaar, rather than the idea that Kyrgyz territory or culture was being threatened.

The general response to Chinggis Aitmatov's suggestion of a 'Turkestani confederation' showed no significant split along ethnic lines. The consensus was that it was a good idea, but would be unlikely to be implemented in practice, because

¹⁹With one or two dissenters, the Uzbekistanis Muzaffar and Elip in FG8 and FG14 respectively, and Bolot (Kyrgyz, male) in FG15.

the Osh–Uzgen incidents and diverging political paths of authoritarianism and democracy pointed to futures further apart, rather than closer together. Nonetheless, the idea was universally regarded as noble in theory. As a Tajik man put it (FG16): ‘It would be great if there was a union as at the moment everyone suffers hardships when they go and see their relatives. They could freely go and visit them, they could buy and sell’.

This quotation indicates the two themes that emerged that are key to analysing the role of ethnicity in responses to the border crisis: kinship and class. I argue that kinship and class are the core components of ‘Uzbek’ and ‘Kyrgyz’ ethnicities in the context of the border crisis, as subsequent sections will demonstrate.

Ethnicity, kinship and the border (i): Uzbeks

In focus group discussions, the key concept used by borderland dwellers in responding to the border crisis was *kinship*. For example, the expression ‘giving daughters in marriage, taking daughters in marriage’, referring to marriages establishing or cementing relationships between families, invariably recurred in descriptions of cross-border kinship networks. Here I argue that ‘kinship’ is not a separate type of social network, a pre-modern form of organisation surviving as a remnant alongside modern ethnicity. Rather, I argue that kinship systems are at the very heart of modern Osh Uzbek senses of ethnicity in the context of the border crisis.

Participants described the very essence of ‘Uzbekness’ (*O’zbekchilik*) in terms of kinship networks and responsibilities, which were the basis for the strongest attacks on Uzbekistan’s border policy. This is clear from the words of Dilshot (FG7) who lived right on the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border in Kyrgyzstan’s Aravan region:

We are Uzbek *millat* but Kyrgyz citizens, and 70% of our families live in Uzbekistan. We each have a relative in this place, a friend in that—and when people die, Uzbekness means we go for *patochilik*.²⁰ At the time of the Batken incident [the invasion of Kyrgyzstan’s Batken region by the so-called ‘Islam Movement of Uzbekistan’ in 1999], one woman’s relative died. She wanted to go, but the soldiers wouldn’t let her cross. She sobbed and wept, and implored them to let her go to the funeral of her relative, but they wouldn’t let her . . . this is not right, because we are Uzbek, that’s our *millat*. [addressing NM] As for you, you come from a foreign land, from the other side of the ocean. If they search you, you won’t be too offended. But because we are from Kyrgyzstan—your own *millat*, your own *halq*²¹—our only fault is to live in Kyrgyzstan.

In this impassioned plea, Dilshot explicitly defined the kinship duty of attending the final rite of passage as being at the heart of ‘Uzbekness’. In his understanding, the behaviour of the border guards who turned the woman away was as despicable as it was incomprehensible, cutting as it did straight across the bonds of *millat* and *halq*. The mere fact that the woman in question happened to live on this side of a border was incidental and subservient to the more relevant fact of common ethnicity. The border guards should have understood this as it was central to being Uzbek. Whilst tacitly

²⁰Prayers held at the house of the deceased.

²¹*Millat* and *Halq* can both be translated as ‘nation’.

acknowledging that, although Uzbekistan might have the *technical* right to control the passage of non-citizens across its border, this playing by the rules of the *nation-state* directly contravenes *national/ethnic* Uzbek notions of trust and respect. That lack of trust may be fine for outsiders (such as me), but is insulting to kinsfolk or, as Nagerza (FG7) said, anyone from Kyrgyzstan.

This conceptual clash between the legal imperative of the nation-state and the cultural imperative of kinship can be seen more fully in a sharp exchange (FG8) between another Aravani, Olimjon, and an Uzbekistani, Muzaffar. Olimjon gave an example of a woman being held up for two hours by Uzbekistani guards as she was on her way to her mother's funeral in Uzbekistan, and concluded that, 'This border is nothing but harm to us'. Muzaffar objected, saying to Olimjon, 'You don't seem to understand that every developed capitalist state has its own borders'. Olimjon indignantly retorted:

You're speaking from the *rasmīy* (official) perspective. But we have what we call *milliy* (national cultural/ethnic) traditions and customs. For example, my aunt lives in Uzbekistan: if I marry and have a wedding, doesn't my father have a right to go and invite his younger sister to the wedding?! If you have to take two hours of stick from a soldier on the way to make a wedding invitation—there are such things as 'human rights', aren't there? Where we live, human rights are being broken everywhere.

In this fascinating exchange radically different political geographic logics are played out against each other. Olimjon began by stating that borders were bad because they hindered important kinship obligations—the logic of kinship. Muzaffar objected not by denying the validity of kinship as a form of action, but by stating that the logic of the modern nation-state overrules it. Olimjon responded by contrasting the authority of 'official' (nation-state) discourse with 'national-cultural' (ethnic), and making the former subservient to the latter. He finished with the sophisticated twist of salvaging the 'ethnic' discourse from being superseded by the nation-statist discourse by conflating the pre-modern national-cultural with the ultra-modern discourse of 'human rights'. In so doing, he flagged a debate that is central to international law: the 'sovereignty' of a nation-state versus alleged 'rights' of its inhabitants.

This intriguing and emotional debate is at the root of a struggle over nationalism as an ideology, addressing the question as to where the ethnic Uzbek nation is located spatially. Islam Karimov would map it as coterminous with the newly-independent nation-state, demarcated by new boundaries. This would exclude stranded Uzbek minorities in adjacent states, rendering them marginal not only to Uzbekistan but to the revivalist project of Uzbekness itself. Osh Uzbeks reject this, prioritising non-territorialised kinship practices over the institution of nation-state and international boundaries. Although temporarily marginalised by Uzbekistan's policies, they believed that they would surely prove more durable than the nation-state and in the end lead to its marginalisation: 'There *will* be a confederation, definitely, because until this day we have been close kinsfolk, and even if there are a million obstacles in the way, it will still happen'. For Olimjon, these ties were at the heart of Uzbek ethnicity: the basis not only of past society and present belonging, but the rock of geopolitical eschatology.

Ethnicity, kinship and the border (ii): Kyrgyz

The circumstances in Kyrgyzstan of the majority Kyrgyz are very different from minority Uzbeks, as its members have not been 'stranded' outside a titular homeland. What is more, whilst Uzbek participants of the focus groups overwhelmingly had relatives in Uzbekistan, only a minority of Kyrgyz had. Nevertheless, and perhaps surprisingly in view of this, in commenting on the border, Kyrgyz people used kinship figures in a very similar way to the Uzbeks. Significantly, the point was stressed most by FG15, a Kyrgyz group in Batken region where the majority of its participants had relatives in Uzbekistan. They spoke a great deal about the breaking of *tuuganchilik* (Uzbek: *qarindosh-urukchilik*), and the exchanging of daughters in marriage as both a concrete social practice and a metaphor of kin between the two states. Zinat (FG11, Kyrgyz, female) gave an example of how the border disrupted these connections:

We gave a daughter in marriage to Uzbekistan, and went to the wedding. The car was full of gifts for the dowry. At every single checkpoint and customs post they opened and checked every last item and wouldn't let us through until we gave money . . . they took 40 soms here, another 80 soms there.

Although few Kyrgyz in the groups had relatives in Uzbekistan, the existence of a Kyrgyz minority there was generally regarded as important.²² Thus one participant in FG12, a group where no one had relatives in Uzbekistan and some had never even been, said that, 'There is a lot of exchange between us. We have always lived together, taking daughters and giving daughters. For example, there are Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan, and here in Osh we have lots of Uzbeks'. Nonetheless, whilst Kyrgyz participants made these points frequently, they did not rouse quite the passion that they did for Uzbeks.

Like Olimjon in FG8, one Kyrgyz female participant of FG11 believed that the enduring efficacy of kinship bonds underwritten by a common Muslim heritage could form the basis for Chinggis Aitmatov's confederation: if the political will of the leaders existed:

If there is *intimак* (peace and solidarity) amongst the five countries—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkestan, [group intervened with correction: Turkmenistan], and Tajikistan, the five—all five are Muslim, if they put their heads together, these kin countries and kin peoples, if they want to come together, and don't do harm to each other—yes, it could happen.

These examples show that Uzbek and Kyrgyz people responded in remarkably similar ways to the new boundary restrictions in Southern Kyrgyzstan. Both groups offered implicit critiques of nationalistic state discourse that conflated nation with state and territory, and insisted upon the moral imperative that new borders should not hinder cross-boundary interaction with minorities united by blood ties whose very existence is an inconvenient fact for a nationalising regime. In both cases, this critique of the politicisation of ethnicity was based upon an alternative reading of ethnicity, defining

²²According to Bohr there were 358,700 Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in 1997 but only 200,000 Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan (Bohr 1998, p. 153).

authentic Uzbekness or Kyrgyzzness as the social practice of kinship. The ethnic geography of the Valley mapped by that practice was accorded greater significance than the one produced by nation states using cartographic science.

This is not to say that respondents collapsed the boundaries between Uzbek and Kyrgyz in practice. They generally assumed the maintenance of endogamous kinship relationships, and were not imagining that their similarities rendered their differences insignificant in the way that Soviet, pan-Turkic or Islamist visions of the region have desired. Rather, by observing how Kyrgyz and Uzbek participants had similar visions of 'ethnic' authenticity, I am underlining that exclusive notions of ethnicity propagated by some politicians are not the only interpretations possible of the data of everyday life.

It is worth noting, in passing, how sensitive research on ethnicity is to the way that that research is conducted. A study of one of the groups in isolation might identify an opinion as peculiarly Uzbek, for example, when in fact it was shared by Kyrgyz too, thus exaggerating a sense of 'ethnic' difference.²³ Likewise, it is not difficult to imagine how a quantitative survey asking Kyrgyz people whether they thought that the border issue was the most important issue facing Kyrgyzstan, or even a focus group asking that question directly, could produce a set of results that concluded that the pronouncements of nationalistic elites were mirrored by popular opinion.

Class, ethnicity and border crossings

The general interpretation of the cartoon was that the *chongdor* were devouring Kyrgyzstan for their personal gain. Untold foreign aid had poured into the country, but had been embezzled without any of it benefiting the common people. The resultant social ills of poverty, a drift from professions to the bazaars, narcotic abuse, factory closures, hunger, and unemployment were freely rehearsed. Oftentimes, the *chongdor* were portrayed as being in cahoots with foreign capitalists. As one Kyrgyz participant said, 'The *chongdor* love gobbling everything up, for their own benefit; why, they are ready to lick the whole of Kyrgyzstan clean, if it comes to it!' The *chongdor* were prospering whilst the common people suffered. This interpretation transcended ethnic group and can, I argue, be understood as indexing the concept of *class*.

The discussions of focus group participants indicate not only that class played a significant role in the articulation of popular understandings of the political geography of independence, but that class, like kinship, was also *constitutive* of ethnic subject positions. This was the case insofar as the differential impacts of the border regime were discussed in class terms, and that these were implicitly related to notions of in authentic Uzbek/Kyrgyzzness. Focus groups relayed a view of independence, the concomitant border regimes, and the penetration of global capitalism yielding access to foreign revenues and goods, as developments that have benefited the *chongdor*, but brought unmitigated disaster to the ordinary people of Central Asia in the form of nationalism and poverty. However, class terms were also used explicitly to discuss differential experiences of actually crossing the border. Again, these cut across simple

²³This is arguably a weakness of Liu's otherwise invaluable and rich ethnography of Osh Uzbeks (Liu 2002).

ethnic divides. As an Uzbek man said, ‘the *kattalar* get across the border, the poor don’t’. This was put more strongly still by an unemployed and destitute Kyrgyz man in Osh in FG14:

It’s hard on the working men,²⁴ you can’t bring things over that you need, things that you lack . . . those that transport scrap iron etc. have money, they can pay; it hits the ordinary, everyday people. If you take apricots to sell, you have to pay at the borders for this and that, and it doesn’t cover what you make from it. Those rich people with plenty of money can cross, while the poor people are left standing there.

The argument of this last sentence was echoed in many discussions. A Kyrgyz participant in FG2 expressed the common sentiment that government officials were unaffected by the crisis: ‘Uzbekistan customs officers take from the ordinary people, but from officials they do not take a bribe—they cover all their mistakes . . . they do not touch officials, they touch only poor people’. Sontag (FG10, Kyrgyz, female) suggested that officials were so out of touch with people’s concerns because the same restrictions did not apply to them: ‘Whenever they cross the border, they don’t encounter such difficulties—they use official cars, that’s why they don’t know about these problems and don’t want to solve them’. These accusations were borne out by the results of interviews I did with local officials in borderland regions of Southern Kyrgyzstan. The interviews were about boundary management, but officials often related their personal experiences of crossing the boundary to me. Invariably, they said that they experienced no difficulty at all.

It is not difficult to identify here a rudimentary form of class analysis, which claims that ordinary working people are being impoverished and oppressed as they try and eke out a daily living, while the rich prosper and bend the law. It resonates both with the Soviet critique of capitalist exploitation, and an enduring ethic, common to Uzbek and Kyrgyz but perhaps more marked in the latter, that lambastes the wealthy who do not use their power for the good of the people—thus, who do not act according to norms of authentic Uzbekness or Kyrgyzness. This demonstrates not only that class is a subject position that people occupy alongside ethnicity, and which filters their geopolitical imaginations, but also that the two are inseparable: ‘class’ and ‘ethnic’ subject positions are mutually constitutive.

I have described the importance of *kinship* and *class* as subject positions constitutive of particular forms of ethnicity to which people responded to the border crisis. In the next section I will deepen the analysis of ethnic subject positions to show how they are even further complicated by factors such as location.

Factors mediating responses to the border crisis: geography

That a particular response to the border crisis cannot be universally ascribed to members of a single ethnic group is clear when the importance of *geography*, or location, is taken into account as a mediating factor. This is true for both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. Every person in the Uzbek/Tajik groups FG7, FG8, FG16 and FG17 had

²⁴*Jumushchular*. I have gendered the term as this captures the traditional class sense of a labouring male that I believe the respondent was evoking.

relatives in Uzbekistan, spoke Uzbek as a primary language, and mainly followed Uzbekistani radio and television. However, Uzbeks in the groups FG7 and FG8 spoke with great passion about the insidious effects of the border, whereas Tajiks in FG16 and FG17, whilst disapproving of the border regime, were less impassioned in their criticism. I suggest that this discrepancy can be partially explained by local factors. Many participants of FG7 and FG8 were from Aravan, a border region near Osh. Local stories about violent incidents at the border abounded, and the region had a highly complicated border geography of dissected settlements. Furthermore, a long section of barbed wire fencing erected by Uzbekistan ran alongside the main Osh–Aravan highway, and students would see this powerful symbol of the nation-state every time they travelled to Osh for lessons. In contrast, students in FG16 and FG17 lived in Uch-Korgan, a short road journey from their university in Kizil-Kiya. They experienced no border checkpoints in the course of their daily lives. In that border zone at that time, I saw none of the barbed wire fencing that had been established in the Osh–Aravan region, suggesting a more lax border regime. This difference is reflected in the perspectives of students from FG16 and FG17.

A further example also illustrates the importance of seeing ethnicity as only one constitutive element of social identity. All the participants of the groups FG15 and FG16 studied in Kizil-Kiya. It would have been possible to explain the greater hostility towards Uzbekistan's border regime expressed by Kyrgyz group FG15 in comparison with Tajik groups FG16 as simply 'ethnic', for example, by arguing that Kyrgyz had an enmity towards the Uzbek state that Tajiks, being closer ethnically to the populations in the south of Uzbekistan's section of the Ferghana Valley, lacked. However, the discussion yielded no corroborating evidence, and a better explanation is geography. FG16 students came from the village of Uch-Korgan, a short and unimpeded journey from Kizil-Kiya. They passed no borders in the course of their daily lives. Students in FG15, however, lived mostly in rural Kadamjoy and Nookat areas. They had to pass through Uzbekistan's tightly-controlled So'x enclave. As one student put it, 'we cross four borders to get from Kadamjoy to here. We are searched at every one—it's far too much, it's unnecessary'. This argument is further corroborated by contrasting the views of Osh-based participants in FG1. Like FG15 they were Kyrgyz students and, whilst vocally objecting to the border regime, their attacks were more muted than those of FG15. Most came from the Osh area and crossed no borders to get to college. Only one out of eight had family in Uzbekistan, in contrast to FG15 where a majority had relatives over the border. There was little reason for the participants of FG1 to cross the border: therefore, it impinged less upon their daily lives.

These examples demonstrate that the geographies of residence and occupation are important both in explaining attitudes that might otherwise be mistaken as 'ethnic', and in constituting and differentiating attitudes and experiences within the same ethnic group.

Implications for conflict (i): explanation

Having explored the meaning of 'ethnicity' in the context of the border dispute, this section returns to the question at the heart of this essay: does the changed boundary

control regime in the Ferghana Valley increase the likelihood of 'ethnic conflict'? Two salient points emerge from the focus group results.

The first is the similar explanations offered for events in 1990 and 1999. Although I had initially gone to the Valley in 1995 with an interest in the earlier incidents, I quickly learnt better than to naïvely ask about them. In the focus groups I never mentioned them unless participants brought them up first, which happened on a number of occasions. To recount and analyse everything said, or not said, about 1990, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, both Uzbek and Kyrgyz groups generally held their leaders responsible for 1990, blaming selfish and careless politicians for a dispute that split the unity of the common people. In this, they drew comparisons with the events of 1999. As Farida in FG14 (Uzbek) put it, the Osh–Uzgen incident was the result of a dash for sovereignty by republican leaders who did not give due heed to the consequences and 'didn't think about the friendship of the peoples'. She argued that this was a lesson that needed heeding in the contemporary border crisis. The context of the comments is significant, as Farida made this remark during discussions about Islam Karimov's '5,000 loaves of bread' comment. A number of Kyrgyz groups made exactly the same point about Karimov's remarks. A Kyrgyz participant of FG11 said:

Nick, do you see that with one word from our presidents so much nationalism can be produced amongst the people, setting them against each other. The Uzbek and Kyrgyz people live well together. In saying that the Uzbeks live well and us badly—nationalism and conflicts appear.

The overwhelming majority of participants agreed with these sentiments. It is significant that the same class analysis was used for events in 1990 and the border crisis: the solidarity of the ordinary peoples of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was broken by thoughtless and grasping politicians, intentionally incited by shady outsiders—including businessmen, journalists and researchers.²⁵

Therefore, the 1990 dispute is not the all-determining issue that more sensationalist accounts have made it,²⁶ nor was it understood by focus group participants as simply the manifestation of enduring hostilities ready to re-emerge. On the contrary, nationalism and ethnic tension were almost universally explained as the product of malign leaders deliberately stirring up trouble between otherwise friendly kin peoples, or causing it by a thoughtless quest for sovereignty. Whether this is accurate or not, it is surely a positive thing to believe. However, the rejection of crasser forms of the 'ethnic animosity' thesis does not necessarily preclude the recurrence of

²⁵ A comment by one participant showed the imprint of the Soviet-era discourse of the danger posed by capitalist countries. Muzaffar, an Uzbekistani Uzbek in FG8, argued that outsiders were also involved in causing trouble, pointing the finger of blame at the US and the UK. In particular, he accused the BBC's then Central Asia correspondent, Louise Hidalgo, of purposely exaggerating reports of the border issues, and implied my focus groups had a similar aim. This parallels one opinion widely held in Osh that the violence of 1990 was caused by reactionary agents from Moscow inciting instability to discredit Gorbachev's reforms. Such views are entirely understandable: the role of British imperial agents knowing local languages is attested to both in Central Asian and Western literature. See Pahlen (1964, pp. 108–109), Hopkirk (1990) and Sodiqov *et al.* (2000, pp. 53–60).

²⁶ For example, Rubin and Lubin (1999).

Uzbek–Kyrgyz conflict. People feared that just as leaders caused the 1990 fighting by their mismanagement and desire for political power through state sovereignty, so the leaderships of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan might again precipitate conflict. And yet, as I suggest below, in the very border crisis that intensified these concerns, there lie the seeds of a different sort of hope: the reconstitution of new forms of ethnicity more finely attuned to changing geopolitical realities.

Implications for conflict (ii): redefinition of identities

Although focus groups drew similarities between 1990 and 1999 in terms of explanation, raising the spectre of increased tensions in the short term, the border crisis led to a redefinition of ethnic and geographical senses of identity that has the potential to reduce the long-term possibility of 'ethnic conflict'.

For Uzbekistani Kyrgyz focus-group participants, 82.5% of whom did not have relatives in Kyrgyzstan,²⁷ the border crisis made the experience of crossing through Uzbekistan to get to other parts of their country an unpleasant one to be avoided if possible. A Kyrgyz participant in FG10 told her group that after the experience of being stopped and fined by an Uzbekistani border officer, 'now we don't go through Uzbekistan—even if they invite us, even if they request us, we will never go. I would rather go through the mountains than Uzbekistan'. Whilst many Kyrgyz might be able to decide to avoid Uzbekistan wherever possible and take longer routes to get around the Valley, the border crisis raised far deeper existential questions about belonging for Osh Uzbeks. The experience of being turned away, or treated with suspicion, or humiliated at the border by people of the same *millat* was generally traumatic for Uzbeks. An Uzbek participant of FG14 told us that some of their relatives were thinking of moving to Uzbekistan, but were put off by the experience of others who had moved and were still disparagingly called 'Kyrgyzstanis'. This sense of exclusion was chilling, and was reinforced by the experience of crossing the border: 'It makes you not want to go to Uzbekistan', said Anny (FG6, Uzbek), 'Isn't that the plan?'

However, the border crisis meant more than just crossing a frontier; it was symptomatic of a broader process of disengagement and differentiation between the two countries. Nigena (FG17, Tajik) noticed the difference: 'In our country I can speak my mind freely, but after crossing over into Uzbekistan it's not wise to talk about the president etc.'. In two Uzbek focus groups there was one vocal Uzbekistani Uzbek, who strongly supported Uzbekistan's border control policy (Muzaffar in FG8, and Elip in FG14). Elip engaged in a heated argument with Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks in FG14 about the relative development strategies of their respective countries, and Farhod infuriated Muzaffar by insisting that whilst Uzbekistan was totalitarian, Kyrgyzstan was democratic, and that this resulted in the consciousness of the young being lower in the former than the latter. Participants from all ethnic backgrounds shared the view that Kyrgyzstan was more democratic than Uzbekistan. This illustrates not only a sense of difference, but of a positive identification with Kyrgyzstan, that might even perhaps be termed national pride, and is a clear

²⁷The figure excludes participants of FG12 and FG13, who do not originate from the Valley but an adjacent area (Alay). If they are included, the figure rises to 88%.

expression of divergence from Uzbekistan. The phrase, 'in Kyrgyzstan the state is poor and the people rich, whilst in Uzbekistan the state is rich but the people are poor', was consistently repeated by both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. It suggests an acknowledgement that Uzbekistan was making better state-led economic progress than Kyrgyzstan in opening new factories and maintaining the physical infrastructure, yet at the same time there were economic advantages to being Kyrgyzstani, such as a greater availability of land and less government interference in its use.

Two conversations unconnected to the focus groups that I had in 2000 with young Kyrgyzstani Uzbek intellectuals aged in their late 20s furnish similar examples of this sentiment. One from Jalal-Abad told me that from the 1990 events to the middle of the decade he felt under pressure as an Uzbek. However, as relations had slowly mended and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan had seen that they enjoyed more economic and personal freedoms than those over the border, he detected a growing confidence.²⁸ On another occasion, over lunch with an Osh Uzbek, I discussed the relative merits of Islam Karimov's regime. After defending Karimov robustly, he leaned back and admitted candidly, 'Having said all that, Nick, I know that if we lived in Uzbekistan me and all of our friends would be dead or in jail'.

This articulation of the advantages of life in Kyrgyzstan did not receive universal consent and was balanced by an awareness of the disadvantages. Nevertheless, it was widespread and does indicate something of a desire to be part of the new state—particularly amongst the young. It supports the findings of the survey by Elebaeva *et al.* that, whilst yielding somewhat ambiguous results, suggested that most people accepted the reality of living in Kyrgyzstan (Elebaeva *et al.* 2000).

Thus, the border crisis has forced Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan to confront the reality of the division of the two states for the first time. This corroborates my conclusions from ethnographic work conducted in the Valley between 1995 and 2000, in which I argued that the 1999 border crisis was the moment when Osh Uzbeks were forced to experience this separation as more than a legal fiction, but as a harsh transformation of geopolitical reality (Megoran 2006). Therefore, rather than increasing ethnic tensions, this may actually have the opposite effect of forcing them to seek to establish a future for themselves in Kyrgyzstan—or to seek participatory 'voice' rather than 'exit', in the political science formulation that Fumagalli uses (Fumagalli 2004, pp. 12–16). As one Kyrgyz parliamentarian said to me, 'The border dispute is actually a very good thing—it has made our Uzbeks realise they belong with us, as Uzbekistan doesn't want them'.²⁹

Thus, whilst 1990 created and cemented hostility and difference between groups, the 1999 border crisis actually demonstrated that Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Southern Kyrgyzstan have, in some contexts, convergent interests. Thus, rather than creating 'ethnic conflict', the border crisis might open new spaces for new forms of identification that could cut across ethnic divisions. This is not remotely to downplay the importance of exclusivist notions of ethnicity as a factor around which identities and interests can be politicised. As Fumagalli has argued, political entrepreneurs have

²⁸This was an opinion that he professed even more emphatically at a subsequent conversation in 2004.

²⁹Anonymous, Bishkek, December 1999.

the potential to successfully mobilise populations around ethnicity (Fumagalli 2007; forthcoming). Indeed, that is what happened in Osh and Uzgen in 1990. It could happen again, and it could happen in relation to border disputes. However, it need not, and if it does, it will be due to political culpability at one or more scales of authority, not to 'ethnicity' as a causal, exogenous factor.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to assess whether border issues in the Ferghana Valley since 1999 have made 'ethnic conflict' more likely. It challenges the assumptions about identity and ethnicity implicit in the question. It rejects the conception of 'ethnicity' as an enduring essence adhering to an individual that awaits uncovering by experts wielding questionnaires or interview schemata. Such a positivist epistemology frames answers by the very act of asking questions, reducing complex social interactions into pre-determined scripts, creating 'ethnicity' within the architectural confines of the researcher's preconceptions. Rather, this article has drawn on post-structural theorisations of identity that see 'ethnicity' as one element of complex social identity, as a context-sensitive dynamic process under continual re-negotiation. Arguing that focus groups are epistemologically well attuned to capturing utterances as specific to particular situations, it has explored 'ethnicity' without ever directly asking about it, allowing it to emerge—or not—as a salient feature in the flow of conversation on a concrete topic, the 1999–2000 border crisis.

Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Southern Kyrgyzstan expressed remarkably similar views of the border crisis, and this was indeed framed in terms of a notion of ethnicity, but this concept of 'ethnicity' was not the same as elite notions of a nation that needed defending by establishing, against its neighbours, the territorial integrity of a coterminous state. Nor was it the researchers' or developers' essentialist category from which the contours of political conflict could unproblematically be read. Rather, focus group participants saw border closures, the introduction of tighter passport regimes, and more intrusive customs checks as hostile to notions of authentic Uzbekness and Kyrgyzness, which are epitomised in the fulfilment of kinship obligations. Furthermore, both groups saw the real 'enemy' as not the population of the other state or even the other ethnic group, but the *chongdor*, an elite class who, in collusion with foreigners, create poverty and foment discord as they enrich themselves. Thus *kinship* and *class* as moral categories were at the heart of ideas about 'ethnicity'.

This is not to claim that this is the only conceivable or most correct definition of Kyrgyzness or Uzbekness. On the contrary, as this article has argued throughout, ethnicity is highly contextual. In other situations these categories can be imbued with radically different meanings, arousing hatreds and fears that flag stereotypes and collective memories of trauma. Nationalist politicians and media can fan and intensify such feelings, creating and manipulating nationalist sentiments for their own ends, feeding upon localised injustices and struggles over scarce resources. As Vaux and Goodhand (2001) argue, well-meaning but misconceived foreign aid programmes can also exacerbate such tendencies.

However, these findings also point towards other possibilities, based on the remarkable overlap in everyday Kyrgyz and Uzbek senses of ethnicity and common

interest in Southern Kyrgyzstan. The border crisis has forced Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks to confront the fact that they are excluded from Uzbekistan, and their future must be in Kyrgyzstan. Likewise, the failure of Kyrgyzstan's March 2005 'Tulip Revolution' to bring stability and a consensus of legitimacy has further discredited elements of a political class who, in opposition, consistently resorted to dubious appeals to exclusionary and discriminatory visions of ethnicity (Megoran 2004). For both of these reasons, it may be that the time is right for the emergence of a new, popular political movement that can unite people of all ethnic groups in Southern Kyrgyzstan on the grounds of common interest and shared values (Megoran 2000b, pp. 125–131).

This article argues that ethnicity *is* relevant in the Ferghana Valley, but not necessarily in the way that outsiders imagine it to be. It is thus not an attempt to delegitimise research on the subject, but a plea for more reflective investigation that does not close itself off from complexity and nuance by the use of rigid taxonomies, positivist epistemologies and inflexible methodologies.

In southern Kyrgyzstan, the gulf between popular and elite geographical imaginations of the relationship between ethnicity, nation and state is a space that elites attempted to collapse by writing exclusionary accounts of ethnicity as the true ones. In so doing, they risk alienating ethnic minorities and damaging the livelihoods of large sectors of the rural poor, sowing the seeds of future conflict.³⁰ However, 'ethnic conflict' is not an inevitable feature of Ferghana Valley topography, as this very space opens the possibility of new, inclusive ways of framing political formation. For all the good intentions of outsiders, the outcome of this process is, to a large extent, in the hands of local populations—and particularly their political elites.

University of Newcastle upon Tyne

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³⁰As Glenn and Akiner argue, this may be more likely due to ongoing processes of immersion and pauperisation (Akiner 2004; Glenn 2003).

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