

Response to the provocation for the Indiana University Round Table on ‘Citizenship and Post-Communism’

Ambivalent citizenship in post-Soviet Central Asia

Madeleine Reeves, University of Manchester
Madeleine.Reeves@manchester.ac.uk

‘What does it mean to be a citizen in today’s post-communist world?’ The question that frames the provocation for this year’s round table is doubly challenging. It is challenging in part because of the nature of ‘citizenship’ – a category that is at once self-evident and elusive; a tool of stately classification and the site of immense affective and emotional investment; a label and a subjective condition of belonging. But it is also challenging because the question cannot be answered with any easy generalisation. What it means to be a citizen, even within that region of the post-communist world with which I deal here – the states of formerly Soviet Central Asia – is mediated by the vagaries of ethnicity and place of birth; by the need to migrate in search of work, or not; by the language one speaks at home and the aspirations for one’s children; by age, gender and past experience, and perhaps above all by wealth and the capacity to provide independently for the gaping holes in state provision. Citizenship, in other words, is not a uniform status.

This opening assertion gestures to a broader theoretical problem. The liberal tradition of citizenship theory in which citizenship is treated as an ‘equal status’ of rights and obligations legally bestowed upon members of a state may be constraining, I suggest, when it comes to thinking about Soviet and post-Soviet citizenship. As Lazar (2008: 5) notes in her analysis of citizenship struggles in contemporary Bolivia, thinking of citizenship as an ‘equal status’ (cf. Marshall, 1950) privileges the result rather than the *processes* that make someone a full member of a political community. Moreover, the tendency to treat citizenship in terms of a bundle of rights and responsibilities that attaches to a particular legal status can easily occlude the degree to which citizenship is also a normative and ethical project – becoming a citizen as a process of ‘self-fashioning’, one mediated by dynamics of power, and differentially accessible to different groups within the polity. In responding to some of the questions that were suggested in the provocation, it is this gap between ascriptive and lived citizenship that I wish to foreground on the one hand; and the diversity of lived experiences of post-communist citizenships that I wish to stress on the other.

Legacies of Soviet citizenship

In Central Asia, as in other post-Soviet regions, any discussion of contemporary citizenship regimes demands engaging with the distinctive history of citizenship that is inherited from the past. As Golfus Alexopoulos argues in a recent analysis of Soviet citizenship (2006: 487), ‘Soviet society consisted of citizens who experienced various and often paradoxical states of civic belonging’, and citizenship itself was a privilege that could be denied, awarded or removed by the state. Particularly in the early years of the Soviet Union, citizenship policy was used politically – to ascribe or deny membership in the political body; sometimes even to deny rights to entire ethnic groups. There was, as in any state, implicit or explicit discrimination towards a variety of groups in society through various kinds of social policy. But as Alexopoulos also stresses, it was the possibility of denying or retracting citizenship that was perhaps the greatest vehicle of social control. Citizenship, in other words, was more than just a label one was born with. It was an immensely loaded, political ascription – and one that could potentially be removed against one’s will.

We should be wary, of course, of extrapolating too readily from early Soviet policies to the contemporary politics of citizenship in the former Soviet space. But there are at least three legacies of such policies that are of significance for thinking about the meanings of citizenship in Central Asia today. The first is the considerable emotional investment that attaches to the seemingly simple fact of being a member of a state – and the way that this is reflected in the kinds of affect elicited by the objects through which that citizenship is coded – passports and certificates; anthems and heraldry; constitutions and flags. During fieldwork I was often struck that some of my Kyrgyzstani friends most ardently critical of the government of the day – those who could reel out political jokes with striking speed; those who were the most damning in their condemnation of presidential politics and parliamentary corruption – were nonetheless intensely invested in the fact that they were citizens of this polity; “that I can go to America and know that ‘Kyrgyzstan’ is written on my passport; that we have our own state”, as one of my informants put it.

The second striking legacy is the way in which citizenship coexists with a coterie of documentary practices that regulate (and often circumscribe) the meanings of civic belonging in practice. The Central Asian states have retained, with varying degrees of enforcement, the Soviet-inherited institution of the *propiska* – a document regulating temporary residence in a given city or region. Although less significant than it used to be in regulating in-migration to urban areas, the *propiska* regime has been used to deny voting rights, to regulate access to jobs and resources and, as my Uzbekistani informants would often point out, to keep large parts of the population in a kind of permanent administrative violation and liable to arbitrary fines. It helps to create, in other words, a form of ‘graduated citizenship’ (contrast Ong,

2000) in which some are more legal, more fully citizens, and more able to enjoy rights than others. It also means that one can easily ‘become illegal’ by coming to be undocumented – or that documents can be used or withheld to keep one, quite literally, in place.¹

The third legacy, and here we get to the fascinating question of how socialism affected peoples’ claims upon the state – is the way in which the experience of Soviet citizenship determines the value attached to (broadly) civil and political rights on the one hand, and social and economic rights on the other. The Soviet state intruded on the private lives of its citizens in ways that have led many commentators to assume that there was no ‘civic realm’ under Soviet socialism.² This, however, is to miss the point that membership in the polity *meant* something quite different than the bundle of rights and duties outlined in the liberal tradition – and that this continues to shape in significant ways everyday understandings of what the state ‘ought’ to be providing or what constitutes the rights that it ought to be protecting. Much of the pathos associated with the collapse of collectivised agriculture, the emergence of new dependencies upon local sponsors and international donors to provide basic infrastructure, or the marketization of education and health, is precisely that these are realms that most people feel *should* be the domain of state provision: that the state ought, properly, to be the provider of school books and pensions, army uniforms and salaries, child-care and heating supplies, medicines and rural health clinics. Accordingly, it is precisely the disruption of these forms of state provision – more, even, than the intrusion upon ‘civic freedoms’ in the form of obligatory participation in collective work-days [*subbotniki*] or the annual cotton harvest – which, for many ordinary Central Asian citizens represents the greatest sign of failure of the state and the collapse of the ‘civic contract’.³

This sense of having belonged to a vast, extensive and incorporating polity by dint of working for the (Soviet) state has a particular pathos for two new groups who deserve mention. The first is that vast cohort of Central Asian men and women – numbering in the millions, and representing as much as a fifth of the working age population of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan –

¹ A striking illustration of this is the fact that the derogatory acronym, *BOMZh*, used to describe the homeless and vagrants (literally, *bez opredlennoogo mesta zhitel'stva*), is not only a descriptive category, but an ascriptive, legal one too. To be a BOMZh was not only morally problematic within the Soviet political order, it was also illegal (Hojdestrand, 2003) and so it remains, technically, today.

² In a volume on *Citizenship and Social Theory* published shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, for instance, editor Bryan Turner asks anxiously whether citizenship will ‘prove to be an adequate basis of social solidarity in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to counteract the force of nationalist identity’ in a context where ‘the traditions of citizenship and civil society are either absent or weak’ (Turner, 1993: x).

³ This is something that I explore in greater detail in my ethnography of how a rural high-school in southern Kyrgyzstan makes ends meet in the face of collapsing state provision and the moral evaluations associated with this shift. As one teacher put it to me, ‘then we used to work for humanity (*adamzat*). Now we just work for our village’ (see Reeves, 2006: 175).

who find themselves working in the metropolises of urban Russia as *nelegaly* (lit. ‘illegals’ - an interesting example of how a documentary category comes to define the whole person). Over the last 7-8 years, labour migrations to the markets and building sites of urban Russia has become the major source of livelihood in rural Central Asia and turned the economies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan into some of the most remittance-dependent in the world.⁴ What is striking about this new post-Soviet migration is not simply its scale, which is profoundly shaping the meanings of ‘independence’ for ordinary people in both the sending and receiving communities, but the fact that many of these migrants effectively find themselves ‘outside the law’ – becoming not just non-citizens but ‘illegal aliens’ in what was once ‘their’ capital city. For while labour migrants from Central Asia typically travel to Russia legally, since they do not require a visa, the majority *become* technically ‘illegal’ by falling foul of complex, draconian and – according to many of my informants – deliberately opaque requirements of temporary registration. Most do not have a written contract and many live in places that are completely invisible to state systems of accounting for population. As a result, they are intensely liable to arbitrary arrest, fines and deportations.

The second group who deserve mention – smaller, less visible and less researched than those former Soviet citizens who are obviously on the move – are those numerous groups of people, mostly residing in border regions in Central Asia, who have become stateless because they cannot unregister from their ‘old’ citizenship and thus cannot acquire citizenship of the state in which they reside. Known in Russian as *litsa bez grazhdanstva* – literally, a ‘person/face without citizenship’ (in popular speech, the euphemism, *LBGshnik* is used; another example of the status defining the person), many of these are women who married ‘across the border’ (e.g. from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan or from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan), or who fled civil war in Tajikistan in the mid-1990s. Typically, such new migrants find themselves with expired Soviet passports which indicate their place of birth or residence to be in a location that is

⁴ According to research by *Inter-American Dialogue*, cited in the New York Times, Tajikistan derives 37% of its GDP from remittances, making it the third most remittance-dependent country in the world after Guinea-Bissau and Eritrea. Kyrgyzstan is the 7th most remittance-dependent economy, with 28% of its GDP from remittances (DeParle, 2007). According to Russia’s Central Bank (which records only official money transfers through banks and the post office), in 2005, \$3.2 billion was formally remitted to the countries of the CIS. The director of the Central bank estimated the volume of informal money transfers to be higher than \$10 billion, ‘undermining the system of state control’ (*Kommersant*, 3rd October 2006). Estimating the true scale of remittances is, of course, notoriously difficult, given that most money is transferred informally. The money remitted to Tajikistan in 2003-4 through official channels alone was equivalent to 18% of total GDP, and 12% more than the official government budget for the year (Olimova and Bosc, 2003). A World Bank report relying on household survey data suggests that the total volume of transfers, both official and unofficial, corresponds, more accurately, to around 60% of the country’s GDP. In Kyrgyzstan, a study by the Economic Policy Institute claimed that remittances in 2003-4 were worth 520 million dollars, equivalent to 27% of the gross domestic product and exceeding the flows of official foreign aid and investments put together (Economic Policy Institute, 2005: 4).

today another state. Registering as a citizen of the ‘new state’ demands, typically being able to demonstrate several years’ residence, as well as formally ‘unregistering’ in person from the previous citizenship at the relevant central offices. Without the documents to move about, however, and often with little way of formally designating that one moved or married in a different year, *unregistering*, like registering, can be a costly, bureaucratic and extremely lengthy process – one that leaves many former citizens in a legal limbo.

The *Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders* estimate that there are over 20,000 such stateless persons in Kyrgyzstan⁵; their number in Uzbekistan is almost certainly much higher. Of significance for the discussion here is the way in which proliferation of documentary practices – and the fact, as Humphrey notes in her discussion of the post-Soviet ‘dispossessed’, that documents are ‘tied to one another in a circular way’ (Humphrey, 2002: 26) -- allows for the proliferation of legal exceptions, and for a host of informal arrangements (passports sold for money, fictive marriages, ‘clean fake’ registration documents....) to fill the gap. Whilst the citizenship regimes of post-Soviet states have changed and diversified, there persists, then, a particular, historically derived attachment to documents, not merely as certifiers of identity, but as guarantors of entitlements and producers of political subjectivity. Without documents one is ‘not fully a person’ in more than just a metaphorical sense.

Varieties of incorporation

There is a further issue that I wish to address, which touches upon a different, though related, aspect of the provocation. This is the complex and contested question of the relationship between ethnic identification and full membership of the body politic, or, put differently, between Soviet ‘passport nationality’ and the quality of citizenship that someone is able to enjoy. The first thing to note here is just how diverse are the various ways in which this relationship is politically enacted across the five central Asian republics. In Turkmenistan, for instance, the cultivation of an explicitly *Turkmen* national state – one that is aspirationally mono-cultural, Turkmen-speaking, and grounded in a national narrative that condemns the Soviet experience as colonial – has left many ethnic minorities *de facto*, if not *de jure*, excluded from full membership in the body politic. Minority language schools have been closed; Russian-language provision has been drastically curtailed, religious and ethnic minorities are monitored, and perhaps most drastically, many public sector jobs require the

⁵ This is the figure given by that organisation’s press release of 11th February 2009, announcing the establishment of an advice centre to help stateless people in Kyrgyzstan.

demonstration of at least three generations of Turkmen ancestry.⁶ Ethnic minorities in Turkmenistan are, quite literally, being made second-class citizens.

This situation contrasts, at the other extreme, with the explicitly ‘multicultural’ discourse of Kyrgyzstan under president Akaev, which – in its official formulation, at least – celebrated Kyrgyzstan as a ‘common home’ [*obshchii dom*] for all of the country’s 100+ ethnic groups.⁷ What is striking in the context of our discussion on citizenship, however, is that a discourse of cultural diversity, linguistic plurality and political equality does not in itself resolve the very complex practical question of how to ensure *real* civic equality, particularly in contexts where, historically, certain of those minorities have enjoyed privileged positions. Does demanding knowledge of Kyrgyz for state employment, for instance, constitute an act of ethnic discrimination towards the country’s non-Turkic-speaking minorities? Or is it a quite acceptable formal requirement that a state employee speak the state language sufficient to conduct state business, irrespective of its popular perception as a distinctively *ethnic* marker? Is the requirement to know Russian for many private-sector jobs discrimination of a different order – against the country’s rural population, or those from mono-ethnic Kyrgyz areas?⁸

Language is perhaps the most vigorous site for contemporary citizenship struggles, but it is not the only one. Debates about ‘representation’ more generally have also forged public debate on extent to which the body politic will be conceived in ethnic terms – just how the normative citizen is envisaged. How formalised should political representation for ethnic minorities be, and what form should it take? Should minorities enjoy quotas for parliamentary seats, or are such acts divisive? Should there be designated quotas for Uzbek and Tajik students in Kyrgyzstan’s southern Universities? Should ethnicity (*natsional’nost’*) be codified in a person’s passport, or should a person be free to declare that they do not wish to declare an ethnic affiliation? Should ethnic ‘returnees’ from the majority population (*Oralman* in Kazakhstan, *Kairylman* in Kyrgyzstan) be privileged over migrants from other ethnic groups in the allocation of land and citizenship?⁹ In Kyrgyzstan, the debate around this

⁶ See for example the report of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (IRIN) report on the rights of ethnic minorities in Turkmenistan, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=28903>, last accessed 17th February 2009.

⁷ The degree to which this rhetoric has changed under the presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiev is something I would be happy to address in the discussion.

⁸ This question, less often posed than the former, was nevertheless of considerable significance to my predominantly Kyrgyz-speaking interlocutors, many of whom felt themselves to be barred from many aspects of urban life because of their poor knowledge of Russian.

⁹ In a recent piece of research I have examined how anxieties over the purchase of land plots in Kyrgyzstani border villages by citizens of Tajikistan has been turned into a site of intense political contestation over the perceived ‘Tajikification’ of border regions. What is striking here is how easily a question of legal violation (sales are often undocumented and technically illegal) slips in public discourse into an issue of cultural threat and loss of sovereignty. As one parliamentary deputy

question has taken interesting forms. Several Russophone urbanites, for instance, anxious to avoid a kind of multiculturalism premised upon the fact of an essential ethnic difference, have lobbied to change the well-known slogan, *Kyrgyzstan - nash obshchii dom* – [‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’] into *Kyrgyzstan – nash otchii dom* [~‘Kyrgyzstan is the home of our fathers’] – the latter explicitly emphasising the fact of birth as the basis for belonging (‘we were all born here’) rather than depicting the country as a ‘common home’ to a variety of peoples, some of whom are implicitly ‘more rooted’ than others.

Nor is it just the presence of sizable (and often economically influential) ethnic minorities that has prompted debate over normative citizenship in Central Asian states. Sexual minorities have been the target of virulent attacks for undermining, in the words of one of Bishkek’s religious leaders, ‘absolute moral values’¹⁰. And a return to ‘tradition’ has often, *de facto*, excluded women from full membership in the body politic by depriving them of rights to inherit and transmit property. This phenomenon is particularly striking in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where a move away from traditional ‘state’ weddings (involving official registration of the marriage) in favour of holding the religious ceremony, *nikoh*, alone has meant that in case of divorce, the wife has no legal claim upon the family’s land or property. Other practices, such as polygamy and *ala kachuu* (‘bride theft’, a practice widespread in rural Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan), have been legitimated through reference to national revival and the need to affirm an essentialized (and often mythicized) cultural identity against an onslaught of external corrupting influences.

Here, again, we return to the ambivalence of citizenship struggles in contemporary Central Asia. For whilst it is precisely civic membership – an appeal to a basic equality by dint of membership of a state – that has been used to legitimise various claims for visibility and acceptance on the part of minority groups, the fantasy of normative citizenship – of a ‘united’ body politic that gains its strength through cultural similarity – has been used to undermine a variety of claims to legitimate difference.

commented in March 2008, ‘In the South of Kyrgyzstan, there are about one million Kyrgyz people living, 600-700,000 Uzbeks and 100-120,000 Tajiks. But many Kyrgyz have left and continue to leave for work abroad. Maybe things will turn out such that in the future the Kyrgyz won’t be the ethnic majority. And what if another ethnic group wants to create a South Kyrgyz republic with its capital in Osh? They’ll conduct a referendum and there, you’ll find that you’ve got one more Kosovo, only in Asia. Kyrgyzstan will be split in two’ (Marat Juraev, Parliamentary deputy, March 2008; see Reeves, forthcoming for an analysis of this rhetoric.)

¹⁰ The quote is taken from a UN report on gay and lesbian rights in Kyrgyzstan, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=27160>, last accessed 18th February 2009.

Homosexuality is legal in Kyrgyzstan, whilst in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan it was (as of 2005) still punishable by law.

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