

Research Description

This project looks at the effects of economic change on interethnic and other social relations in two different field settings in Uzbekistan, one in the Bukhara Oasis and one in the Ferghana Valley. On a line indicating the expected likelihood of conflict, the two represent opposing poles: Bukhara as an epitome for peaceful coexistence of two major ethnic groups (Uzbeks and Tajiks) and Ferghana allegedly as the major threat to stability in the region as the cradle of Islamic fundamentalism.

Conducting research in those two different field sites also offers the chance to look at the meaning of "locality", which is an important identity marker in Central Asia, not only between the nomadic and sedentary groups but also within the sedentary groups in itself.

One further aspect of central importance is the nation-state. The promotion of Uzbek national identity includes not only the search for national symbols and heroes but also extends into the economic sphere. State ideology stresses the need for a particular "Uzbek Way" in the transformation to a market economy. The project tries to analyze the interrelated processes of economic change and a re-configuration of local solidarity groups like the village and kin community, the former socialist enterprise (now usually with a new Uzbek name) or an ethnic group. The research focuses on the relevance of these groups on individual behaviour and the composition of social networks.

The oasis of Bukhara is a paradigmatic case for this. It is a place famous for the close and intimate interaction between Uzbeks and Tajiks, or Turkic and Iranian speakers, with the latter forming the majority of the population. This "melting pot" situation is not a recent one but has existed for almost 1,000 years. Both groups exhibit a common culture, the same type of economic organization, and share the same economic niche in present-day Uzbekistan. A common expression in the region for this is of "one people with two languages". In fact, the only recognizable difference is linguistic, the Uzbeks speaking a Turkic and the Tajiks an Indo-European language. Although it is possible to find "pure" Tajik or Uzbek villages, most of them have a mixed population. Bilingualism, a result of sharing the same setting and the high proportion of mixed marriages, is a widespread phenomenon.

By contrast, the Ferghana Valley is considered the part of Central Asia with the highest potential for social and ethnic conflict. High population density, complex borders and strength of the Muslim belief are thought to be the reason for this. Without doubt, a high potential for

conflict exists due to increasing poverty and social stratification. So far, however, peaceful coexistence has prevailed also in this region. Internal divisions, especially among the Uzbeks, are often more important in terms of social networks and inter-marriage than presumed ethnic boundaries. Of increasing importance, however, are state boundaries created arbitrarily during the Stalin period cutting through many people's networks and kin groups. Visiting one's in-laws is becoming more and more difficult. Social borders are also more pronounced in this region in comparison to Bukhara.