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# Investigating Regional Identity in Nation Branding and Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan

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*"These regions- it's not just our foreign policy. Some people say it's just confused policies, but I think it's part of who we are." <sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

## Introduction

The groundwork for this research was laid by the growing literature which identifies agency in the behaviour of Central Asian (CA) states, beyond generalising narratives and IR theories<sup>2</sup> which explain CA behaviour, at least in part, through the whims of outside powers and rent and security-seeking regimes. Although such factors exist, CA states employ their own understandings to navigate them<sup>3</sup>. Accounting for this, alternative conceptions of social order and action must be kept in mind, informed by Central Eurasian history, politics, and identity<sup>4</sup>. Mindful of current geopolitics, which has challenged conventional assumptions on regional relations, power, and identity, it is even more imperative that these states' interactions be understood on their own merit, rather than on that of others.

This research set out to explore the construction of overlapping 'regions' within the Kyrgyz Republic's international relations. Since its independence in 1991, the state has explicitly concerned itself with membership of the "kaleidoscopic", nested, state-led, regional organisations of the post-Soviet space<sup>5</sup>. Though some have begun to see agency in the *function* of these 'overlapping' regions<sup>6</sup>, this phenomenon is still *explained* as reactionism to systemic constraints which results in incoherent policy. In contrast, my research direction followed Wendt's explication of constitutive theory. Rather than seeking causality, I sought instead to explore the properties of the system by accounting for the structures which facilitate them<sup>7</sup>. I sought to understand *how* this regional structure is constructed by exploring potential feedback between international and domestic spheres. I find that this structure, both imagined and instrumental, is upheld by a **multidimensional regional identity** (the location of the state within regional social spaces), and suggests **a constitutive relationship between regional experiences, state identity, and regionality**.

I will first outline my theoretical, conceptual, and methodological choices. The essay will then demonstrate "multidimensional regionalism", as present in regional political practices that "brand" the state, outlining a particular understanding of the structure of the region. The essay will then focus on findings from fieldwork and theoretical analysis. It will be argued that this understanding of

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<sup>2</sup> Cornell and Starr, 'Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia', 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*.

<sup>4</sup> Wohlforth, 'Revisiting Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia', 232.

<sup>5</sup> Russo, *Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area*, 226–27. By regional projects, I mean not only multilateral regional organisations, but also "informal" regional projects.

<sup>6</sup> Tskhay and Costa Buranelli, 'Accommodating Revisionism through Balancing Regionalism: The Case of Central Asia'.

<sup>7</sup> Asking "how are things in the world put together so that they have the properties that they do?". Wendt, 'On Constitution and Causation in International Relations', 103.

the region (re)produces and is (re)produced by an understanding of the self within it. This is formulated as regional identity. Consequentially, understanding the context of identity formation becomes important. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, this involves pre-, Soviet, and post-Soviet experiences of 'overlapping' regions. The essay will then conclude and outline potential implications for academia and policy regarding the region and the state.

## Theory and Methodology

Kyrgyzstan was identified as a promising focus of analysis due to its explicit concern with overlapping regions, both in international and (the comparatively competitive) domestic political discourse. This research is state-centric, entering regional identity through the interaction between Kyrgyzstan and state-based regionalism<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, it seeks to draw a conceptual link to domestic understandings of regional spheres of action by analysing the sense of place within the region as understood by domestic policy elites<sup>10</sup>. The level of analysis is therefore between the domestic and the international, intending to explore the mediation between the two<sup>11</sup>.

I utilise a constructivist approach, which can show how concepts of region and identity interplay with policy, behaviour, and interests<sup>12</sup>. Regions and states are seen as co-creative and co-constituted- they simultaneously bound territorial space to a particular "scale" of governance, relational to one another<sup>13</sup>. Neither the state nor the region is "geographically preordained", but instead an "imagined community" constructed by understandings of 'self' and 'other'<sup>14</sup>. They are therefore shaped by identities<sup>15</sup>- "constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons with other social categories, and cognitive models" which determine who belongs<sup>16</sup> (and therefore the make-up of these territories). Finally, therefore, understanding the development of identity is key to understanding 'how' these constructs come into being.

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<sup>9</sup>This is a methodological choice- state-led regionalism is by no means the only form of regional relations (Hurrell, 'Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective', 39–45.), but is dominant in Kyrgyz foreign policy discourse.

<sup>10</sup> Using Hafner-Burton et. Al's definition of elites- "the small number of decision makers who occupy the top positions in social and political structures; those who "have the highest indices in their branch of authority" and "exercise significant influence over social and political change"" (Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor, 'The Cognitive Revolution and the Political Psychology of Elite Decision Making', 369.). This includes academics with 'specialised knowledge' of the context under scrutiny, who therefore have the "authority" to exercise influence (on this, see Birnbaum, 'The Problem of a Knowledge Elite').

<sup>11</sup> And, it is hoped, prompting further research in both directions (Costa Buranelli, 'Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections', 25–26.)

<sup>12</sup> Hurrell, 'Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective', 64–66.

<sup>13</sup> Hameiri, 'Theorising Regions through Changes in Statehood', 13.

<sup>14</sup> Wendt, 'Collective Identity Formation and the International State'; Neumann, 'A Region-Building Approach to Northern Europe'; Katzenstein, *A World of Regions*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Acharya, 'Do Norms and Identity Matter?', 103–6.

<sup>16</sup> Abdelal et al., 'Identity as a Variable', 695.

Nation branding and nation building are both processes which show this. As this research is state-centric, the lenses of nation-branding and nation-building are applied to the Kyrgyz Republic, rather than to Kyrgyz nationhood<sup>17</sup>. Nation building<sup>18</sup> draws on collective understanding and historical memory (among other things) to determine the boundaries of belonging- the 'idea' of a territory. Both top-down and bottom-up nation-building processes are prominent in CA (the balance of these being a topic for further research), using, abusing, shaping but ultimately both drawing upon, memory and understanding. Identity can also develop through "changing human practices" which reflect and constitute perceptions of territorial and political spaces. Nation-branding is one such practice: participation in state-led regionalism which projects and reproduces legitimate forms of social reality<sup>20</sup>. Both processes reflect a social reality- **what regions exist, and how the state exists within them**. This is outlined in figure 1.

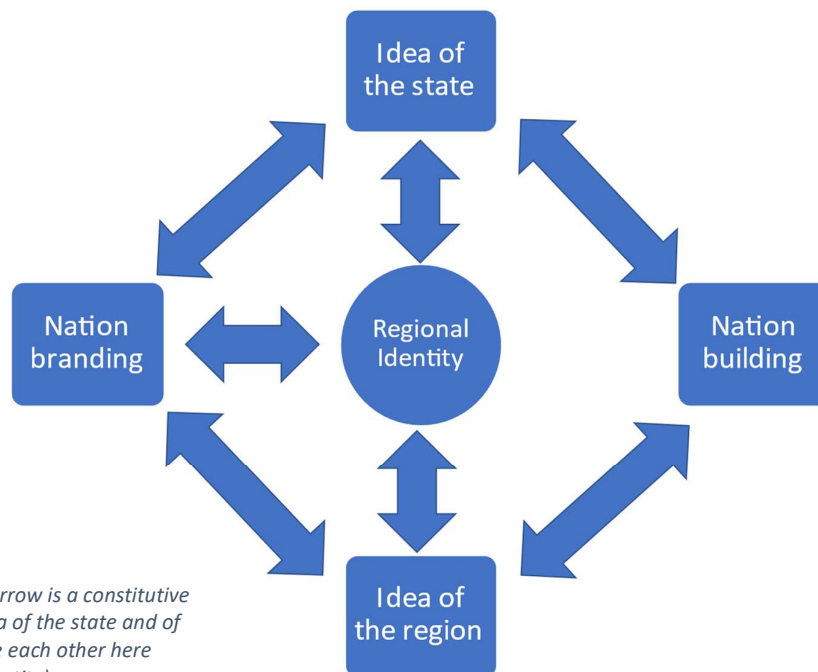


Figure 1, where an arrow is a constitutive relationship (the idea of the state and of the region constitute each other here **through** regional identity).

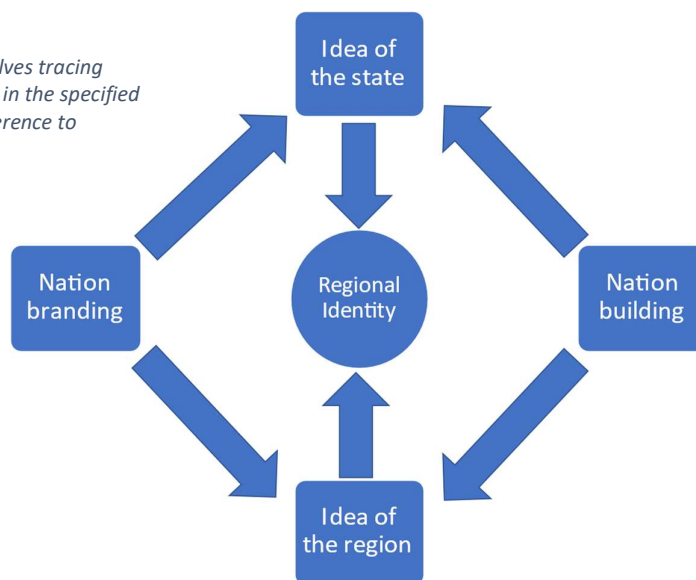
<sup>17</sup> The terms state building and branding are more accurate, but less commonly applied to this context

<sup>18</sup> Here defined as the process through which the boundaries of the modern state and those of the national community become congruent (Mylonas, 'Nation-Building'.)

<sup>20</sup> Which attempts to project an 'identity' through an 'image' or behaviour, "a productive... practice that (re)produces dominant interpretations of national and state identity (Eggeling, *Nation-Branding in Practice*, 52; Dinnie, *Nation Branding*.)

Although these relationships can be theorised, they cannot be researched simultaneously<sup>21</sup>. My research's 'directions' are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2, where an arrow involves tracing 'how' one constitutes another in the specified direction, specifically with reference to regionalism.



Elites have the social and political capital to construct forms of social reality<sup>22</sup>, and the ability to mediate this to the political and international realms<sup>23</sup>. Their understandings of this, therefore, provide the conceptual link between the domestic and international spheres that this research aims for<sup>24</sup>. As well as foreign policy analysis, this entailed interviews with academics, policymakers and foreign embassy officials in Bishkek in June and July 2022. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to direct the conversation to themes they felt were relevant to Kyrgyzstan's place within regions, rather than aiming to test particular hypotheses or seek empirical facts. Participants were identified through online research and snowballing. This has resulted in a Bishkek-centric, political, and educational elite-focused study. Reflexively, conclusions are also drawn from my informal experiences in Bishkek.

<sup>21</sup> And so must be analysed in 'directions' (Russo, *Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area*, 84–85.)

<sup>22</sup> At both the regional (Katzenstein, *A World of Regions*, 86.) and state (Isaacs and Polese, 'Between "Imagined" and "Real" Nation-Building', 372.) levels, although are not the only 'political actors' involved in constructing state and regional identities or agents of identity (in Kyrgyzstan as anywhere).

<sup>23</sup> Hafner-Burton, Hughes, and Victor, 'The Cognitive Revolution and the Political Psychology of Elite Decision Making'.

<sup>24</sup> Isaacs and Polese, 'Between "Imagined" and "Real" Nation-Building', 372.

## Branding the Kyrgyz Republic

### Kyrgyzstan within Regional Organisations (ROs) in Eurasia

This section of the essay will outline Kyrgyzstan's involvement in state-based ROs, summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

Organisation	Acronym	Orientation	Context of Joining
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	SCO	Eurasian	Creation
Conference on Interactions and Confidence-building Measures in Asia	CICMA	Eurasian	Creation
Organisation of Islamic Cooperation	OIC	Islamic/ Turkic	Enlargement
Economic Cooperation Organization	ECO	Islamic/ Turkic	Enlargement
Organisation of Turkic States	OTS	Islamic/ Turkic	Creation
Türksoy/ International Organization of Turkic Culture	TS	Islamic/ Turkic	Creation
Collective Security Treaty Organization	CSTO	Post-Soviet	Creation
Commonwealth of Independent States	CIS	Post-Soviet	Creation
Eurasian Economic Union	EAEU	Post-Soviet	Creation
Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe	OSCE	Western/ European	Enlargement
Partnership for Peace	PFP	Western/ European	Enlargement
Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council	EAPC	Western/ European	Enlargement

Table 1- Orientation is derived inductively from the organisations' membership, founding charters and available official documents.

Organisation	Acronym	Orientation
Central Asian Union	CAU	Central Asian
Central Asian Economic Cooperation	CAEC	Central Asian
Central Asian Economic Union	CAEU	Central Asian
Collective Security Treaty	CTO	Eurasian
Eurasian Economic Community	EEC	Post-Soviet
Organisation of Central Asian Cooperation	OCAC	Eurasian
Shanghai Treaty	S5	Eurasian

Table 2

Kyrgyzstan gained autonomy over its foreign policy *within* the post-Soviet space. This context still shapes Kyrgyzstan's regionalism, most notably in its engagement with post-Soviet organisations, intended to facilitate a "civilised divorce" for former Soviet states<sup>25</sup>. The Alma-Ata Protocol, signed in December 1991, expanded the CIS to an explicitly post-Soviet Union<sup>26</sup>. This was a rejection of an *alternative* Turkic Union of CA states<sup>27</sup>, but not a rejection of CA state-based regionalism in *parallel*.

<sup>25</sup> Policymaker, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Agreement establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States.

<sup>27</sup> Tabled in a meeting of leaders in Ashgabat earlier that month (Toktomushev, *Kyrgyzstan*, 74.)

In 1993, Kyrgyzstan took part in the Tashkent Summit, when Central Asian leaders “defined” the region<sup>28</sup>. In 1994, the CAU was formed, later becoming the CACO. This was regionalism based on European principles of integration and modelled on its structures<sup>29</sup>.

Kyrgyzstan was a founding member of the predecessor of the SCO, the S5, structured around regional stability and security<sup>30</sup>. It has also joined organisations which ascribe identity through commitments to democratic values<sup>31</sup>. Notable is Kyrgyzstan’s involvement with the OSCE, joining its predecessor in 1992 and hosting the OSCE Academy since 1995. Membership of the NATO Partnership for Peace Program and the Building Integrity programme has not been built on security provision but rather on technical assistance<sup>32</sup>. Engagement with the Turkic and Islamic worlds has been largely cultural (for example, Türksoy), and much of the cooperation is built around the common history, language, identity, and culture which defines the broader Turkic region<sup>33</sup>.

### Branding and Ideas of the Region and the State

However, many scholars herald a “crisis” of multilateralism in Eurasia<sup>34</sup>, bemoaning institutional flaws, the processes of nation and state-building<sup>35</sup>, national identity construction<sup>36</sup>, structural constraints<sup>37</sup>, and extra-regional dependencies<sup>38</sup>. Such studies conflate a “failure of regionalism” with the “failure of regional integration” and the “lack of a regional organisation” and therefore suggest a complete lack of regionality, condemning Central Asia to be a “region that isn’t”<sup>39</sup>. The CIS has been “handicapped”<sup>40</sup> and its derivative security (CSTO) and economic (EAEU) organisations are viewed as a cover for Kyrgyz security and economic reliance on Russia<sup>41</sup>. In 2005, Russia joined the

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<sup>28</sup> As opposed to ‘Middle Asia and Kazakhstan’ as it had been known before (Olcott, ‘The Myth of “Tsentral’naia Aziia”’.)

<sup>29</sup> Especially for the CAU, which received European technical assistance. Costa Buranelli, ‘Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections’, 9–10.

<sup>30</sup> As it was originally founded to do (Fawn, ‘International Commitments to International Election Observation in the Caucasus and Central Asia : The Interplay between Political Identity, Foreign Policy and Regional Affiliations’, 151.) and Kyrgyzstan continues (Kabar News Agency, ‘Kyrgyz FM Jeenbek Kulubaev Receives SCO Secretary General Zhang Ming’.)

<sup>31</sup> Fawn, ‘International Commitments to International Election Observation in the Caucasus and Central Asia : The Interplay between Political Identity, Foreign Policy and Regional Affiliations’, 152–53.

<sup>32</sup> Aben, ‘Kyrgyzstan-NATO Cooperation’.

<sup>33</sup> (OTS, ‘Organization of Turkic States’.), similarly for the ECO (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, ‘Cooperation of the Kyrgyz Republic in the The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)’.)

<sup>34</sup> Dragneva and Hartwell, ‘The Crisis of the Multilateral Order in Eurasia’.

<sup>35</sup> Kubicek, ‘Regionalism, Nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia’.

<sup>36</sup> Brkić, *Cultural Policy Frameworks (Re) Constructing National and Supranational Identities*.

<sup>37</sup> Hurrell, ‘Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics’.

<sup>38</sup> Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes, ‘The Region That Isn’t’.

<sup>39</sup> As in Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes., regarding Central Asia.

<sup>40</sup> (Kubicek, ‘The Commonwealth of Independent States’, 237; Toktomushev, *Kyrgyzstan*.). Interviewees were also vocal about its practical limitations

<sup>41</sup> Khitakhunov, ‘How Russia Is Important for Kyrgyzstan?’

CACO and, when it was fused to the EAEC, CA's attempts at integration ended<sup>42</sup>. The benefit of 'Western' alignment has been questioned, both in function<sup>43</sup> and material security<sup>44</sup>. Engagement with the Turkic and Islamic worlds has been perceived as symbolic; much of the economic value of Turkic and Islamic regionality comes from bilateral trade relations<sup>45</sup>.

However, commitment to organisations and their values is an expression of a state's "political belonging"<sup>46</sup>. The fact that foreign policies in the post-Soviet space have a regional dimension makes "regionality meaningful"<sup>48</sup>. Regions exist not by virtue of utility or integrative organisations, but, in constructivist analysis, when social actors "include it in their discourse"<sup>49</sup>. Time and again, Kyrgyzstan has exemplified this- regions are a prominent frame of reference for interactions with in-group members<sup>50</sup> and outsiders<sup>51</sup>. The other reverberation of post-Soviet regionalism for Kyrgyz nation-branding is that it exemplifies the "overlapping regionalism"<sup>52</sup> which constitutes the post-Soviet 'idea of the region'<sup>53</sup>. Analysis of nation-branding practices brings to light a similar dynamic. This pattern is not incidental or, necessarily, dysfunctional. With the ability to project overlapping regional identities, Kyrgyzstan exists within a **multi-dimensional regional framework**. As states and regions co-constitute, such practices also bring to light an idea of the state, one in possession of overlapping notions of political belonging[s]. Both in foreign policy<sup>54</sup> and then in fieldwork, 'elite understandings' of Kyrgyz interests dynamically link them to wider social spaces. 'Identity' and 'interest' are derived from each other<sup>55</sup>. These interests demonstrate a **multi-dimensional regionality**.

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<sup>42</sup> Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes, 'The Region That Isn't', 361.

<sup>43</sup> Such as promoting truly competitive elections (OSCE PA., 'Kyrgyzstan's Well-Run Presidential Election Impaired by Uneven Playing Field for Candidates, International Observers Say'.)

<sup>44</sup> Toktomushev, *Kyrgyzstan*, 122.

<sup>45</sup> Osmonalieva, 'Sadyr Japarov Calls on Turkish Businessmen to Actively Invest in Kyrgyzstan -'.

<sup>46</sup> Through an expression of values and identity (Fawn, 'International Commitments to International Election Observation in the Caucasus and Central Asia : The Interplay between Political Identity, Foreign Policy and Regional Affiliations', 134.)

<sup>48</sup> Russo, *Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area*, 225.

<sup>49</sup> By participating in the construction of in- and out- groups and referring to regional imaginaries in their approach to the "international" (and therefore constructing regions). Pace, *The Politics of Regional Identity*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> In the CIS (Osmonalieva, 'CIS Heads of Government Summit' - note the emphasis on transnational challenges and opportunities (vital for Kyrgyz development), CSTO (Osmonalieva, 'Kyrgyzstan Attaches Importance to Strengthening CSTO Potential – Talant Mamytov -'.) and CA regionalism (Nursha, 'Central Asia Moves Towards Greater Regional Cooperation After Successful Third Consultative Meeting'; Costa Buranelli, '3rd Meeting of Central Asian Leaders'.)

<sup>51</sup> As for CA in C5+1 meetings ('Pluses and Minuses of the C5+1 Format') and in multilateral organisations such as COP26 ('Guest Article: Central Asia at COP 26: 5 Countries, 1 Region, 1 Voice | SDG Knowledge Hub | IISD'.)

<sup>52</sup> Russo, *Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area*, 222.

<sup>53</sup> one of "multiplicity and inconsistency" Russo, 37.

<sup>54</sup> Which organises the international environment into self and the other, establishes the idea of the state in relation to other wider social spaces and thus identities (Neumann, 'Self and Other in International Relations'.)

<sup>55</sup> Huntington, 'The Erosion of American National Interests', 28.

## Regionality in Ideas of the State

### Kyrgyz Foreign Policy Discourse

Kyrgyzstan's complex regionalism has been part of its "multi-vector foreign policy"<sup>56</sup>, a consistent but varied theme in foreign policy discourse. Provoked by a need for "financial assistance and investment"<sup>57</sup>, Askar Akayev (the first president) embarked on global bilateral and multilateral diplomacy<sup>58</sup>, rather than prioritising one region/state. This was presented and interpreted as a policy "vision"<sup>59</sup>, utilising Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical contexts; having been inseparable from the "Great Silk Road", now multi-ethnic and diverse, developing yet democratic, post-colonial and 'central' geopolitically<sup>60</sup>. This was an important part of national ideology construction as well as foreign policy<sup>61</sup>. After the 2005 Tulip Revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiyev rejected "Silk Road Diplomacy. The Russian vector, and its associated ROs were "the priority"<sup>62</sup> (despite the 2007 Foreign Policy Concept claiming otherwise<sup>63</sup>). This shift to pragmatic discourse reflected more interest-based policy<sup>64</sup>, crucial for recovery from the 2008/9 crises<sup>65</sup> and seen to enhance regime rent-seeking<sup>66</sup>. However, this regionality was not static; many ascribe the collapse of the Bakiyev regime in 2010 to the Russian backlash to a 'vector' shift back towards the US<sup>67</sup>. Since then, the narrative has shifted to regional relations as a means of economic and political 'survival' and necessity<sup>68</sup>. Whilst policy has always in part been determined by Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical location and internal and external systemic pressures<sup>69</sup>, this has become explicit, citing increased geostrategic competition and pressure from Great Powers. Almazbek Atambayev, Sooronbai Jeenbekov and Sadyr Japarov all, in foreign policy discourse, *expressed* the need for "balance" or multi-faceted foreign policy, including developing CA,

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<sup>56</sup> Which has received considerable attention in the post-Soviet Studies literature (Secieru, 'Multivectorism in Action: A Pragmatic Attempt to Secure a Special Role in the International System'; Hanks, "'Multi-Vector Politics" and Kazakhstan's Emerging Role as a Geo-Strategic Player in Central Asia'.)

<sup>57</sup> Matveeva, 'Democratization, Legitimacy and Political Change in Central Asia', 30.

<sup>58</sup> Global Security, 'Kyrgyzstan - Foreign Relations'.

<sup>59</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Kyrgyzstan, 'Diplomacy of the Silk Road, (a Foreign Policy Doctrine), the Past and the Present of the Great Silk Road'.

<sup>61</sup> Huskey, 'National Identity from Scratch'.

<sup>62</sup> Toktomushev, *Kyrgyzstan*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> This expressed three balanced "interaction circles" on which FP would be centred (Osmonov, 'NEW KYRGYZ FOREIGN POLICY CONCEPT PASSED'.)

<sup>64</sup> Lewis, *The Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia*.

<sup>65</sup> Marat, 'Bakiyev Promises Reform and Persecutes Opposition'.

<sup>66</sup> Especially concerning Bakiyev's son Maxim and the extraction of rent from the US for the use of the Manas Airbase (Toktomushev, *Kyrgyzstan*, 127–51; Gleason, 'Kyrgyzstan's Multivector Foreign Policy Unravels'.)

<sup>67</sup> Trilling and Umetov, 'Kyrgyzstan'; Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>68</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>69</sup> Wood, *The Formation of Kyrgyz Foreign Policy, 1991-2004*; Huskey, 'National Identity from Scratch'.

Western, and Turkic relations, and emphasising multilateralism<sup>70</sup>. Not only did this often fail to materialise in practice, however, but the discourse has also been tempered by stated beliefs that Kyrgyzstan “needs” balanced relations and remains reliant on outside actors (“the elephant(s) in the room”<sup>71</sup>) for its development<sup>72</sup>. This in part may be due to the decreased powers of the President, diminishing the ability to concretely determine foreign policy direction after the passing of the 2010 constitutional reform and 2011 clarification law, but also the international dynamics (often termed “Moscow’s displeasure”) which provoked the changes<sup>73</sup>. This suggests that the development of the Kyrgyz Republic’s statehood (and understanding of it) has been shaped by international as well as domestic forces, and thus that these connections are fundamental to Kyrgyzstan’s statehood. As such, it aligns (in many ways self-consciously) with Schlichte’s concept of the “international state”<sup>74</sup>

### Fieldwork

To begin fieldwork interviews in Bishkek in June and July 2022, participants were asked to discuss their approach to Kyrgyzstan within their field. Early in the discussion, most framed it in relation to wider social spaces, geographically (“the centre of a huge continent”/ “the point which the most distant point from any ocean”) and politically (post-Soviet/ Central Asian). Asked about challenges and opportunities, even those involved in domestic development cited a need for, and problems with, outside actors and regional cooperation. Whatever the interests and outlook on the world, I was told that “other places, many places” were important to Kyrgyzstan<sup>75</sup>. This correlates with wider surveys which report high levels of interest in other countries and low levels of autonomism compared to other CIS states, despite a slight preference for post-Soviet states<sup>76</sup>.

### Current attitudes

Participants framed political and cultural generational divides through perceptions of regionality. It was suggested that generations which had grown up during and immediately after were more receptive to post-Soviet, and especially Russian, regionality. This was in part put down to Kyrgyz ‘reliance’ on Russia- nevertheless, it was also suggested that nostalgia for the regional cooperation

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<sup>70</sup> Kabar News Agency, ‘Determining Main Directions of Foreign Policy Is Prerogative of President –Kyrgyz MFA Spokesperson’; RFE/RL, ‘New Kyrgyz President Vows Balanced Foreign Policy With Russia As Main “Strategic Partner”’; Abdylbaev, ‘The Foreign Policy Priorities of the Kyrgyz Republic in the European Direction’.

<sup>71</sup> Russia and China- (Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.)

<sup>72</sup> Akipress, ‘Kyrgyzstan Needs Multi-Vector Foreign Policy - Acting Foreign Minister’; Kabar News Agency, ‘Kyrgyzstan Adopts National Development Program until 2026’.

<sup>73</sup> Fumagalli, ‘Semi-Presidentialism in Kyrgyzstan’. See especially pp. 198–201.

<sup>74</sup> Where the state is an “institutional conglomerate of local, “national,” and international agencies and forces.” (Schlichte, ‘The International State: Comparing Statehood in Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa’, 105.)

<sup>75</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>76</sup> ‘EDB Integration Barometer – 2017’.

and cross-border lifestyles facilitated by the structure of the Soviet Union (especially at the personal and societal levels) played a part. Many noted that this was the predominantly political class, and it was suggested that ‘vectorism’ could be traced to Kyrgyz relations with Russia. Younger generations, it was suggested, were more likely to “look elsewhere”, having grown up in a globalised society, whether to the West (perhaps having been educated there, and certainly exposed to its media), or to Russia (where many younger people have migrated for work).

Nevertheless, interviewees noted that these “world views” were not mutually exclusive- every generation had experienced political and cultural interdependence with many different “regions”- varied in distribution, rather than dominance. Many participants suggested that these shifts had been accentuated by reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Participants felt that high Russian cultural and economic influence in Kyrgyzstan meant it was less likely to provoke a shift away from Russia than a newfound interest in other regions to supplement them<sup>77</sup>. This was ascribed to “selective reassessment” of the past<sup>78</sup>, whereby Russian exclusivity may be reassessed without necessarily ‘othering’ the Soviet-based past and Russian-based present political experiences. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this research to assess this, it is supported by pre-2022 research into notions of ‘Soviet’ identity<sup>79</sup>, and, tentatively, by current affairs<sup>80</sup>.

My findings do not suggest an ‘even spread’ of regionalism, just as ‘multi-Vectoral’ was seen as a “catchy name”<sup>81</sup> for foreign policy determined by interests, events, and systemic constraints. In research, participants outside ‘International Relations’ disciplines placed more emphasis on Pre- and Soviet experiences than counterparts who emphasised current affairs, post-independence statehood, and systemic reliance. Elites “shape self-perception”- interests, visions, and motivations, from the “‘givens’ of their environment”<sup>82</sup>. These environments vary, but recurring references to stages of Kyrgyz state-building and regionality also suggested that the idea of the state and its interests was mediated through **multidimensional regional experiences as an environment in which the idea of the state has developed, creating a sense of ‘Multidimensional Regionality’**.

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<sup>77</sup> Using the framework of (Sasse, ‘International Linkages and the Dynamics of Conflict’.), this might be understood as decreasing Russian ‘leverage’, whilst ‘linkage’ ties still remain strong.

<sup>78</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Russo, *Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area*.

<sup>80</sup> Many interview participants pointed to renewed interest in ‘Turkic’ and ‘CA’ groupings. Literature has pointed to ‘strategic silence’ as a form of narrative which ‘makes sense’ of such a geopolitical and ideational context (Dadabaev and Sonoda, ‘Silence Is Golden? Silences as Strategic Narratives in Central Asian States’ Response to the Ukrainian Crisis’.)

<sup>81</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>82</sup> Huskey, ‘National Identity from Scratch’, 111.

## The roots of Multidimensional Regionality

### *Statehood*

Participants, notably those involved in processes of national identity construction<sup>83</sup>, discussed early 'Kyrgyz' history, 'nomadic' heritage and "rustic" lifestyles, as a potential source of regionality<sup>84</sup>. In the absence of 'nationhood', and despite the cultural importance of binaries in regional society<sup>85</sup>, multiple, fluid forms of relation prevailed, with familial, tribal, and geographic relations coexisting with ethnicity<sup>86</sup>. Participants suggested that statehood was similarly imagined. Even after the creation of the Kyrgyz Republic in the 1920s<sup>87</sup>, its paramountcy as an identity construct was circumscribed<sup>88</sup>. The Soviet period saw interplay, suppression, and expression of sub-national, supra-national and 'national' identities<sup>89</sup>. This was most prominent in the simultaneous attempt to cultivate a cohesive Soviet identity<sup>90</sup> which could and did "coexist with national identity"<sup>91</sup>. Islam, too, was both a national and supranational identity trait<sup>92</sup>.

Participants also pointed to shifting definitions of the wider region- more than just semantics, these experiences facilitated being "comfortable" with multiple, shifting and overlapping notions of belonging<sup>93</sup>. Indeed, "geographic, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties" in "Central Asia" expanded far beyond the 'Five Stans'- Central Asia could be both smaller and larger than this definition and has been named many other things<sup>94</sup>.

The regionalism of this period was practical as much as ideational<sup>95</sup>. Despite the creation of the titular republics, life and trade continued across borders, facilitating what one participant termed "cross border societal interdependence"<sup>96</sup>. Even for younger generations who grew up after 1991, this mode of thinking and living was said to continue. Studies of regional coordination at both the

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<sup>83</sup> Policymakers and civil society actors

<sup>84</sup> Huskey suggests that collective memories centred on a nomadic people rather than on a territory or state tradition have hampered development of national identity ('National Identity from Scratch', 112.)

<sup>85</sup> Between settled/nomad, Persianate /Turkic, Russian/Chinese imperial experience (Khalid, *Central Asia*, 34.)

<sup>86</sup> Khalid, 34.

<sup>87</sup> During the Soviet national delimitation process

<sup>88</sup> Roy, *The New Central Asia*.

<sup>89</sup> Bennigsen, *Islam in the Soviet Union*.

<sup>90</sup> Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 23.

<sup>91</sup> Khalid, *Central Asia*, 499.

<sup>92</sup> Bennigsen, *Islam in the Soviet Union*. For Islam as part of civic and ethnic identity in the USSR, and their mutual coexistence, see (Khalid, *Central Asia*, 331–55.)

<sup>93</sup> For example, with CA- especially those engaged in IR were explicit that the region was "something we (elites) made"

<sup>94</sup> Awareness of this, however, was likely due to their elite status- much has been made of it in scholarship- (Cornell and Starr, 'Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia'; Khalid, *Central Asia*; Olcott, 'The Myth of "Tsentral'naia Aziia"'; Azizov, 'Regional Integration in Central Asia'.) and is less prominent in discourse.

<sup>95</sup> Keller, *Russia and Central Asia*.

<sup>96</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

societal<sup>97</sup> and state<sup>98</sup> level suggest that they have their roots in the mutual interdependence of the pre-independence era. For example, even those critical of the role of the CIS and SCO believed they were borne from the “1000s of connections”<sup>99</sup>, the “good things”<sup>100</sup> possible from Eurasian cooperation<sup>101</sup>.

#### *The Development of Post-Independence Statehood*

Participants also pointed to the development of post-Soviet statehood. Akayev’s “tireless”<sup>102</sup> pursuit of multilateral and bilateral ties was perceived as a way of confirming Kyrgyz sovereignty to both international and domestic audiences<sup>103</sup>, and so constitutive of present Kyrgyz statehood. So too was the extreme liberalisation that Kyrgyzstan undertook post-independence, economically and politically. Alignment with the West, including narratives around being an “Island of Democracy”, and the need for aid and technical assistance post-independence, led participants to point to the involvement of international and non-governmental organisations in defining the state<sup>104</sup>.

## Conclusions

### Multidimensional Regionality in Kyrgyzstan

Throughout its political and cultural history, Kyrgyzstan’s **experience of political, historical and cultural development** has been **multidimensional**. The development of nation-building and foreign policy has been within a context of interdependence and membership of a multi-layered, **multidimensional region**. Kyrgyzstan has always been “part of bigger things”<sup>105</sup>. This context has been shown to be expressed in **multidimensional regionality**, understandings of the state’s interests and identities within a region, and in **multidimensional regionalism**, the way the state presents itself internationally through branding. Overall, all four features of regional identity represent, and further perpetuate, a **multidimensional regional identity**, understood to be *dynamic, layered, contestable, and concordant*.

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<sup>97</sup> Reeves, *Border Work*.

<sup>98</sup> Cornell and Starr, ‘Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia’.

<sup>99</sup> Policymaker, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Including more straightforward trade, cross-border travel and experiences and cultural communication.

<sup>102</sup> Global Security, ‘Kyrgyzstan - Foreign Relations’.

<sup>103</sup> One participant stated that many “did not believe that we were indeed... an equal, national state” (Policymaker, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.)

<sup>104</sup> Russo, *Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area*, 142. It must be noted too that these perceptions are a product of a particular political moment; in Kyrgyzstan’s dynamic domestic politics, leaders and their approach to the Kyrgyz state undergo a constant process of rejection and rehabilitation.

<sup>105</sup> Academic, Fieldwork Interview conducted in Bishkek- June and July 2022.

## Theoretical Reflections and Further Research

These findings support the notion that the development of ideas of the state is inextricably linked to ideas of the region. Thus, a conceptual link can be drawn between these areas (Figure 3). If states and regions are co-constitutive, so too are our ‘ideas’ of them, and the basis of those ‘ideas’.

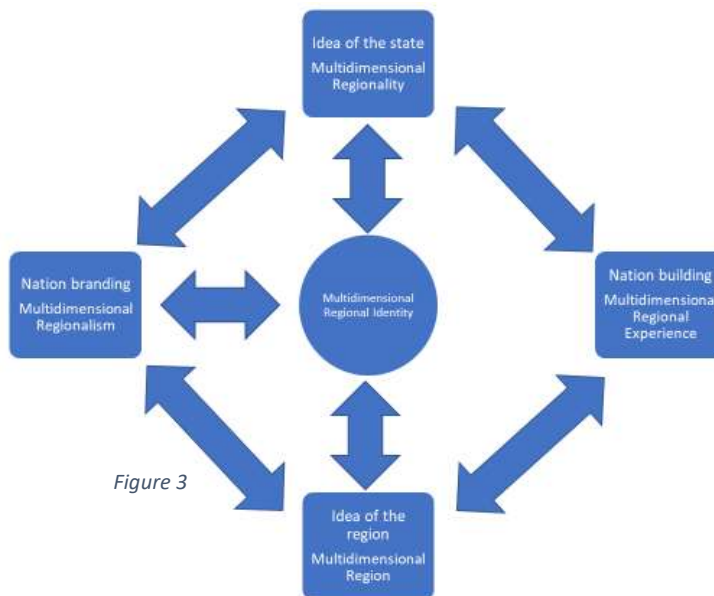


Figure 3

Policy, practice, and study should be more sensitive to *how* the overlapping social orders and foreign policies (discursive and/or

instrumental) in Kyrgyzstan, and Central Eurasia, are facilitated, legitimised and conceptualised, achieved by looking and listening to the states themselves. This research’s limitations, including its highly state-based, elite-centric, and highly conceptual nature could be remedied by further, more ‘bottom-up’ research into the role of collective and individual experience of regions at the societal level, and how they inform state-based and society-based regional projects<sup>106</sup>. Both regional cooperation and the construction of inclusive identities have been hailed as necessary for facing many of the issues which confront Central Asia. They should not be left for dead. Instead, they must adapt to the specific contexts and local understandings in which they operate. A tentative suggestion is that regions, rather than states, could be integrated. Rather than threatening the ontological security of these new national identities, an acceptance of multidimensional regionality could enhance parallel regional cooperation based on issues and identities. Relations and research should be designed with the highly fluid nature of the region and identities in mind, and this should be embraced both internationally (as, for example, a process of ‘ordering’ in the regional system<sup>107</sup>) and domestically (in the construction of civic and inclusive national identities). What has previously been characterised as ‘contradictory’ may be revealed as ‘complementary’ and could be ‘constructive’.

<sup>106</sup> Other types of regional project, such as regionalisation, are explored in Hurrell, ‘Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective’, 39–45.

<sup>107</sup> Costa Buranelli, ‘Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections’.

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