

CENTRAL ASIA

Human Rights Concerns in
Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan

Research Unit

USCIS Refugee, Asylum and International Operations

June 2020





LITHUANIA

BELARUS

RUSSIA

POLAND

UKRAINE

KAZAKHSTAN

MOLDOVA

ROMANIA

Aral Sea

Lake Balkhash

SERBIA

BULGARIA

Black Sea

GEORGIA

Caspian Sea

KYRGYZSTAN

ARMENIA

AZERBAIJAN

UZBEKISTAN

TAJIKISTAN

GREECE

TURKEY

TURKMENISTAN

SYRIA

IRAN

AFGHANISTAN

Mediterranean Sea

CYPRUS

LEBANON

IRAQ

PAKISTAN

NEPAL

ISRAEL

JORDAN

KUWAIT

EGYPT

BAHRAIN

QATAR

Persian Gulf

OMAN

Gulf of Oman

U. A. E.

Arabian Sea

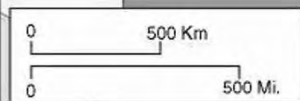
INDIA

Red Sea

SAUDI ARABIA

OMAN

SUDAN





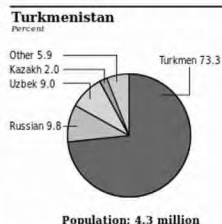
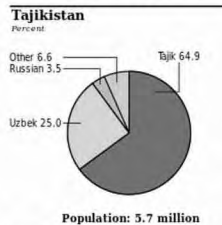
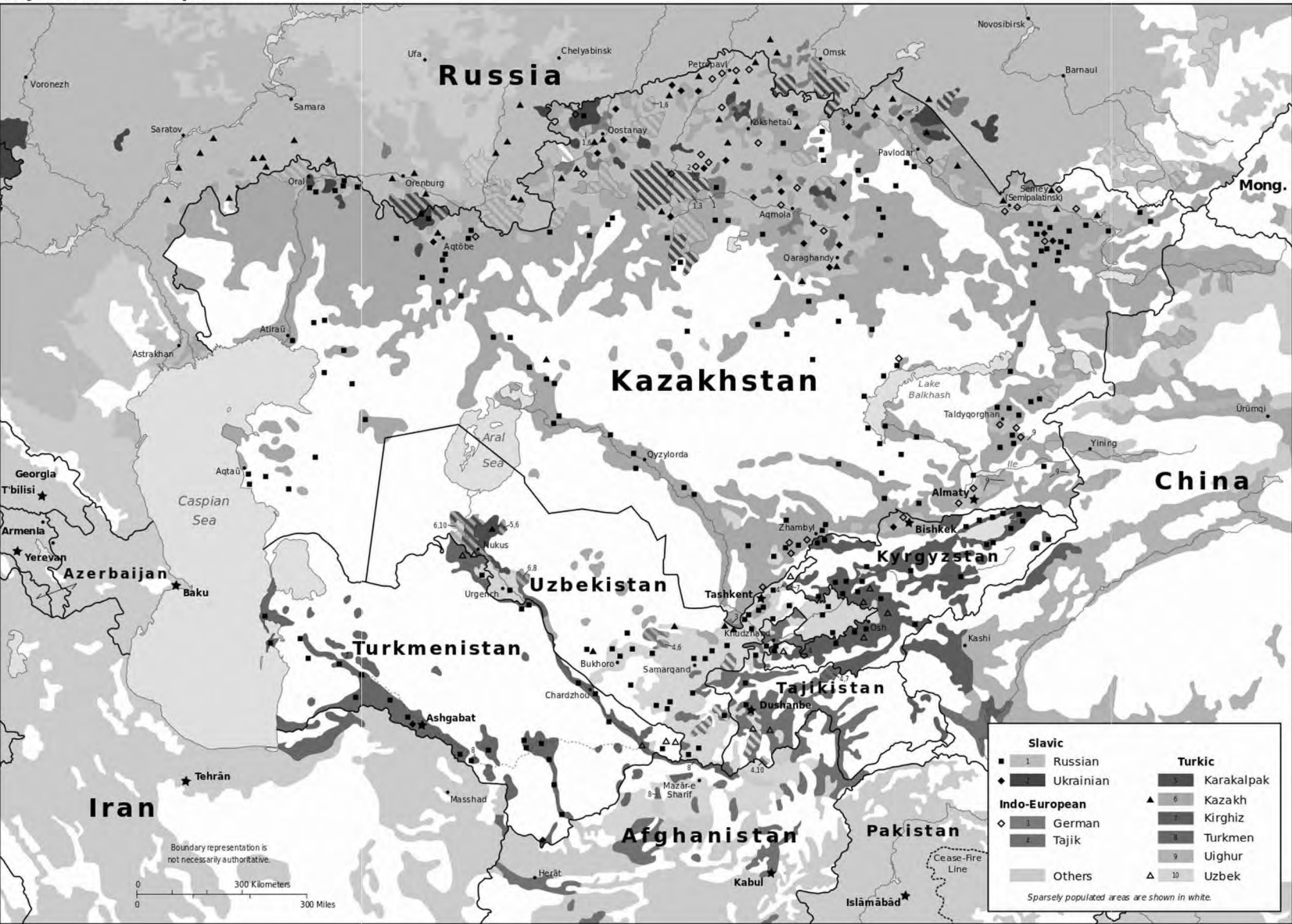
Historical Context

- History as a crossroads
- “The Great Game” (Russia vs. Britain)
- Post-Soviet independence, regional instability, shifting regimes
- Modern struggle for influence (Russia, US, China)
- Central Asian countries leveraging major powers for strategic advantage





Major Ethnic Groups in Central Asia



Slavic		Turkic	
■ 1	Russian	■ 5	Karakalpak
◆ 2	Ukrainian	▲ 6	Kazakh
Indo-European		■ 7	Kirghiz
◇ 3	German	■ 8	Turkmen
■ 4	Tajik	■ 9	Uighur
□	Others	▲ 10	Uzbek

Sparsely populated areas are shown in white.

Relationships to Russia

- Post-Soviet countries
- Russians and ethnic-Russians present
- Courting Russia as partner vs US and China
- Echoing Russian law
- Dissent characterized as “foreign” (NGOs, unwanted religious practices, LGBTI)
- “Gay Propaganda” Laws?

Regional Human Rights Concerns





КУРМАНГАЗЫ



ПУШКИНА

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ КЛУБ "СТУДИЯ 69"

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ И ЗАКАЗ СТОЛИКОВ ПО ТЕЛ. 8 701 418 78 06, 8 705 555 22 69

Regional: LGBTI

- Pervasive homophobic attitudes, hateful treatment (public and private spaces)
- Acerbic anti-gay rhetoric from members of government
- Attempts to impose Russia-inspired “Gay Propaganda” laws
- Failure of police and other government agencies to protect from violence and discrimination
- LGBTI persons adjust their daily lives to avoid harm or exposure, curtailing their movement and silencing themselves for safety

Regional: LGBTI

- **Kyrgyzstan**: Anti-LGBTI rhetoric in Parliament (LGBTI people should be “not just cursed, but beaten”); LGBTI events targeted by nationalist groups (Kryk Choro) who threaten and film them, and throw eggs/paint, without police response; 300% increase in attacks after “gay propaganda” law introduced; police pose on Grindr, arrange dates, then extort
- **Uzbekistan**: Consensual sexual relationships between men criminalized (1-3 year sentence); hate crimes and police abuse common, including beatings and torture of men perceived as gay, posted online; blackmail, extortion, coerced collaboration; Istanbul-based activist’s family visited by police and threatened

Regional: LGBTI

- **Tajikistan**: Ombudsman for Human Rights stated Tajikistan could not uphold the rights of LGBTI people because they were “contrary to the moral and ethical norms of relationships...”; Law enforcement officials routinely target LGBTI people with intimidation, beatings, arbitrary arrests and extortion; beatings abroad by Tajiks
- **Kazakhstan**: Routine harassment, discrimination, threat of violence; Kazakh Constitutional Chamber nullified a Russia-style “gay propaganda” law; Supreme Court awarded two women compensation when a man filmed them kissing, posted on Facebook for shaming

Regional: Bride Kidnapping

- Kyrgyzstan: Pervasive (15-75%) – in all parts of the country; typically young women or minors; deception/violence/rape; lack of government assistance because “Kyrgyz tradition”
- Kazakhstan: In some remote areas; prohibited by law with long sentence; rare action on complaints
- Tajikistan: Ethnic Kyrgyz; (2011) reports of ethnic Tajik neighbors in the north-eastern Jyrgatal district copying
- Uzbekistan: Some reports among Karakalpaks, an ethnic group with an “autonomous republic” in the north/west deserts

Regional: Cossacks



Nursultan Nazarbayev with Cossacks at the Day of Unity of the People of Kazakhstan

- Mostly in Kazakhstan
 - Typically grouped with Russians
- Kazakhstan: in 1990s, Cossacks associated with Russian efforts to break off from country. Some reports of secessionist violence around 1998, but little since then

Kyrgyzstan





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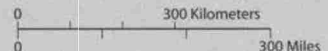
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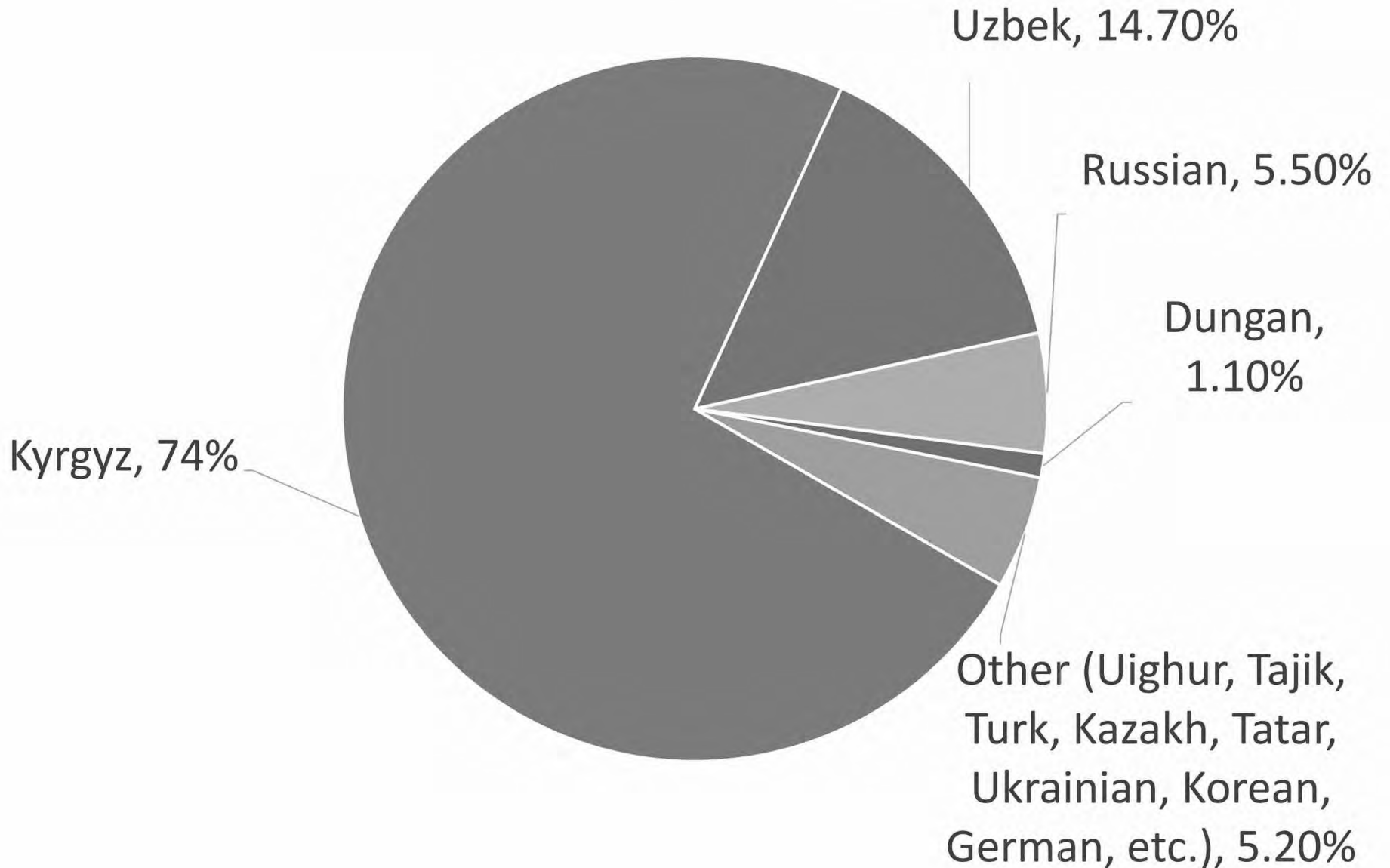


Boundary representation is
not necessarily authoritative.

Kyrgyzstan

- Capital: Bishkek
- Population: ~5.4 million
- Major languages: Kyrgyz, Russian
- Major religions: Primarily Islam, some Christianity
- Resentment at widespread poverty and ethnic divisions between north and south led to violence (Osh; ethnic-Uzbeks)
- President Sooronbay Jeenbekov (2017); former President Atambayev detained and on trial for corruption (first two post-Soviet presidents removed from power by popular discontent)
- Had closer relationship with U.S., base for Afghanistan operations, but turning pro-Russia

Ethnic Groups in Kyrgyzstan



Kyrgyzstan

Human Rights Concerns for ZNY:

- Anti-government political claims
- Religion: treatment of Christians; Muslim “extremists”



Kyrgyzstan Political Dissent

- Civil society groups face pressure (May 2019, Coalition Against Torture meeting broken up by men with cameras, “patriotic youth movement”)
- Human Rights defenders detained:
 - Azimjon Askarov (Ethnic-Uzbek, life sentence for “murdering a police officer” during 2010 violence); Kamil Ruziev (head of Ventus, well-known for anti-torture, DV work, complaint against GKNB)
- Deputy Minister of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) targeting international financing of NGOs (like Russia)
- Defamation lawsuits a tool for politicians to silence media outlets

Kyrgyzstan Political Dissent

- Some human rights reports banned, then overturned by courts
- Statutes with overly broad definitions of “incitement” and “extremism” used against dissent:
 - (Two with posters condemning Putin accused of “inciting national enmity”; teacher charged with “inciting interethnic discord” for anti-Russian comments on Facebook; blogger held for “inter-regional incitement” for posts about government figures)
- January 2019: no longer a crime to possess materials such as videos/pamphlets classified as “extremist,” unless for dissemination. But some cases not overturned and prison continues
- Torture widespread; impunity

Kyrgyzstan Religion

- State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) permission required
- Muslim Board and Russian Orthodox Church favored and controlled
- Change of policy in 2019: many religious communities given state registration (permission to exist) - various Christian churches, Baha'i communities, Falun Gong, and some Jehovah's Witness communities
- Refusal to register Ahmadi Muslims
- Ban on "door-to-door proselytizing"
- Raids on some religious communities; investigations accompanied by violations of detainees' rights
- State censorship; "extremists" literature
- Arbitrary expulsions of foreigners

Kyrgyzstan Religion

- Harassment and mob violence against non-Muslims and those friendly with them including church arson and preventing the dead being buried
- Underreporting because victims fear reprisals and are threatened by authorities (lawyer of Protestant victim threatened with prosecution for "Incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred", possible 8-year sentence)
- DOS: "Incidents of harassment of minority religious groups typically occurred in small towns and villages with majority Kyrgyz populations", yet Bishkek authorities support attackers
- Religious extremism or ethnic minority (Uzbek)?
- Restrictions on conscientious objection to military service

Kyrgyzstan Religion

“Religiously Oriented” Groups banned as extremist

- al-Qaida
- Taliban
- The Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkistan
- The Kurdish Peoples' Congress
- The Organization for the Release of Eastern Turkistan
- Hizb ut- Tahrir (HT)
- The Union of Islamic Jihad
- The Islamic Party of Turkistan
- The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church; Mun San Men Church)
- Takfir Jihadist
- Jaysh al-Mahdi
- Jund al-Khilafah
- Ansarullah
- At-Takfir Val Hidjra
- Akromiya
- Islamic State (ISIS)
- Djabhat An Nusra
- Katibat al-Imam al-Buhari
- Jannat Oshiqdari
- The Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad
- Yakyn Incar

Kyrgyzstan Facial Recognition



Kazakhstan





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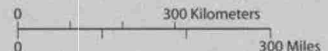
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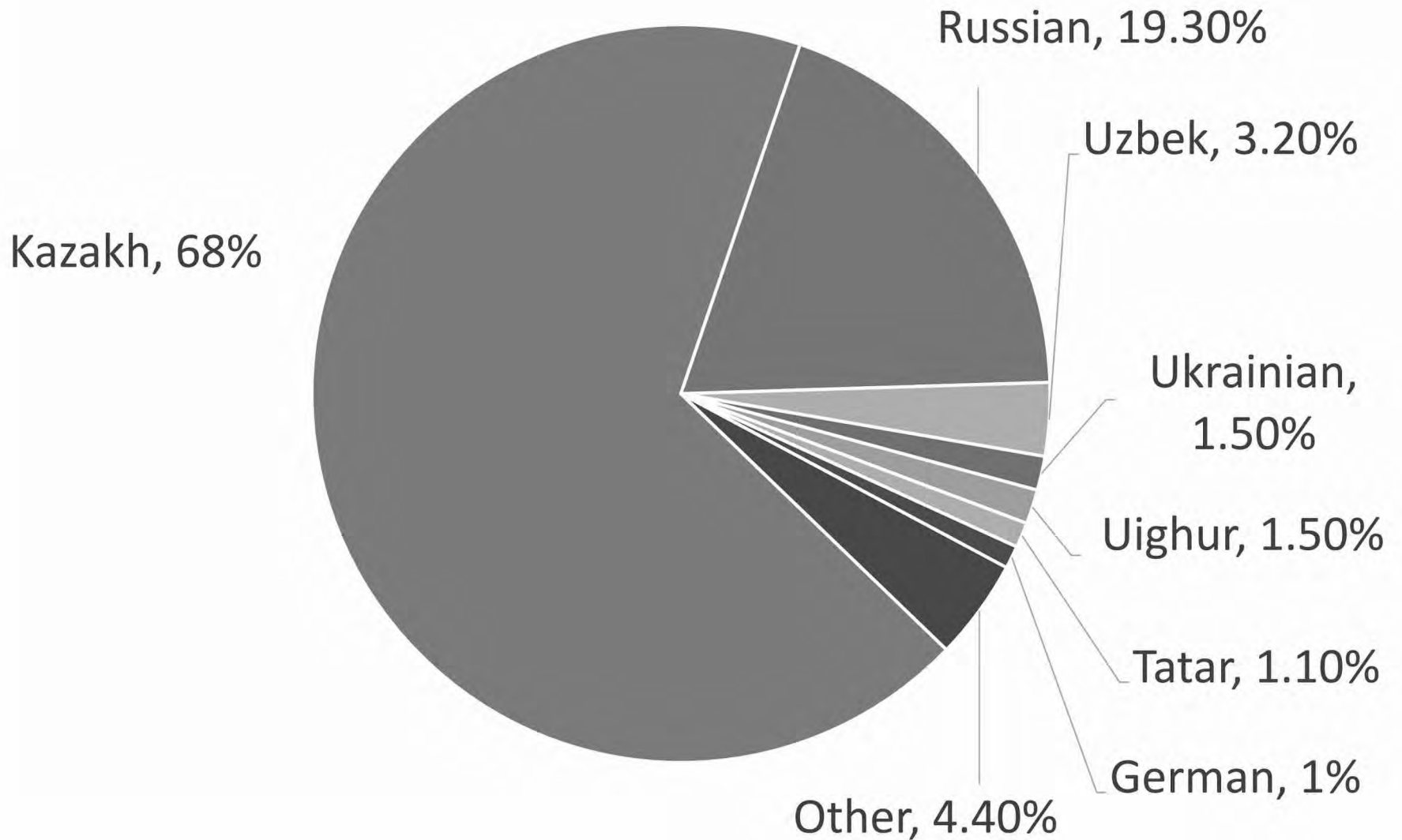


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Kazakhstan

- Capital: Nur-Sultan (was Astana)
- Population: ~18 million
- Major Languages: Kazakh, Russian
- Vast mineral resources and enormous economic potential
- Varied landscape
- Main religion is Islam, but also Christianity

Ethnic Groups in Kazakhstan



Kazakhstan

Human Rights Concerns for ZNY:

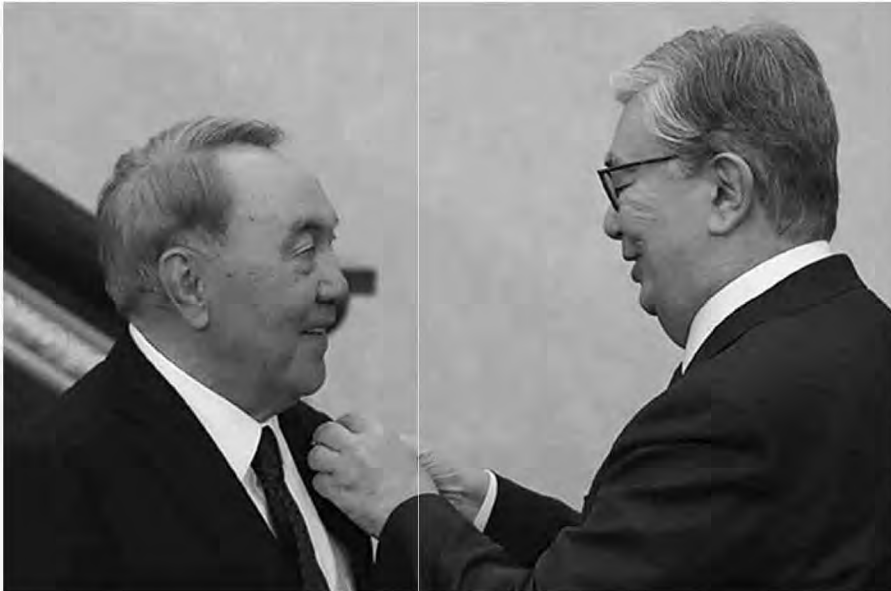
- Political opinion (anti-government claims, Alga, Azat, corruption)
- Organized crime
- Race/nationality



Kazakhstan

Leadership:

- President Nazarbayev: April 1990 – March 2019
- President Tokayev: March 20, 2019 – present
- Protestors arrested after Tokayev sworn in



Left: Nursultan Nazarbayev
Right: Kassym-Jomart
Tokayev

Kazakhstan

Political Opinion:

- Vague and overbroad charge of “inciting social, national, clan, racial, class, or religious discord.”
- NGOs
- Media
- Opposition Parties
- June 2018 Election Law

Kazakhstan

Zhanaozen Protest Violence:

- May 10, 2011, oil workers in southwestern Kazakhstan went on strike
- On Dec. 16, Kazakhstan's Independence Day, at least 16 people died in police violence
- Limited investigation into government role
 - Most investigation targeted political opponents



Kazakhstan

Alga! (Forward/Onward) Party:

- Formed Apr. 29, 2005 by former members of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK)
 - Not allowed to register as an official party
- Leader Vladimir Kozlov (right) arrested Jan. 23, 2012
 - Unfair trial, assets seized
- Alga declared an extremist organization Dec. 12, 2012



Kazakhstan

Azat Civil Movement:

- Azat or “freedom” movement, June 30-July 1, 1990 to about 1995
- Shut down Russia-oriented activities planned by Ural Cossacks
- Called for investigations into 1986 government mistreatment of civilians
- More radical members split into the Republican Party of Kazakhstan in September 1991



Kazakhstan

Azat Party:

- Formed 2008, named after earlier Azat movement
- 2009, merged to create the National Social Democratic-Azat Party (OSDP-Azat)
- Campaigned for seats in parliament in 2012
- Three leaders detained January 2012 for protesting the arrest of opposition leaders
- OSDP-Azat may have split around 2013

Kazakhstan

Corruption Charges:

- “Corruption is endemic” and “the state bodies that are responsible for corruption are ineffective, unreliable, and fail to hold high-level officials responsible for corruption, abuses of office, and conflicts of interest” –GAN Integrity, 2016
- There were “significant acts of corruption” and the “government selectively prosecuted officials who committed abuses, especially in high-profile corruption cases. Nonetheless, corruption remained widespread.” - DOS Human Rights Report, 2019
- 15 political prisoners in Kazakhstan at the end of 2019



Mukhtar Ablyazov

Kazakhstan

Organized Crime:

- Grew in the 1990s
 - Weak government
- Criminal violence decreased after 1990s
- Criminal groups appear more legitimate now
 - Racketeering, extortion, etc.
 - Drug smuggling
 - Infiltrated government

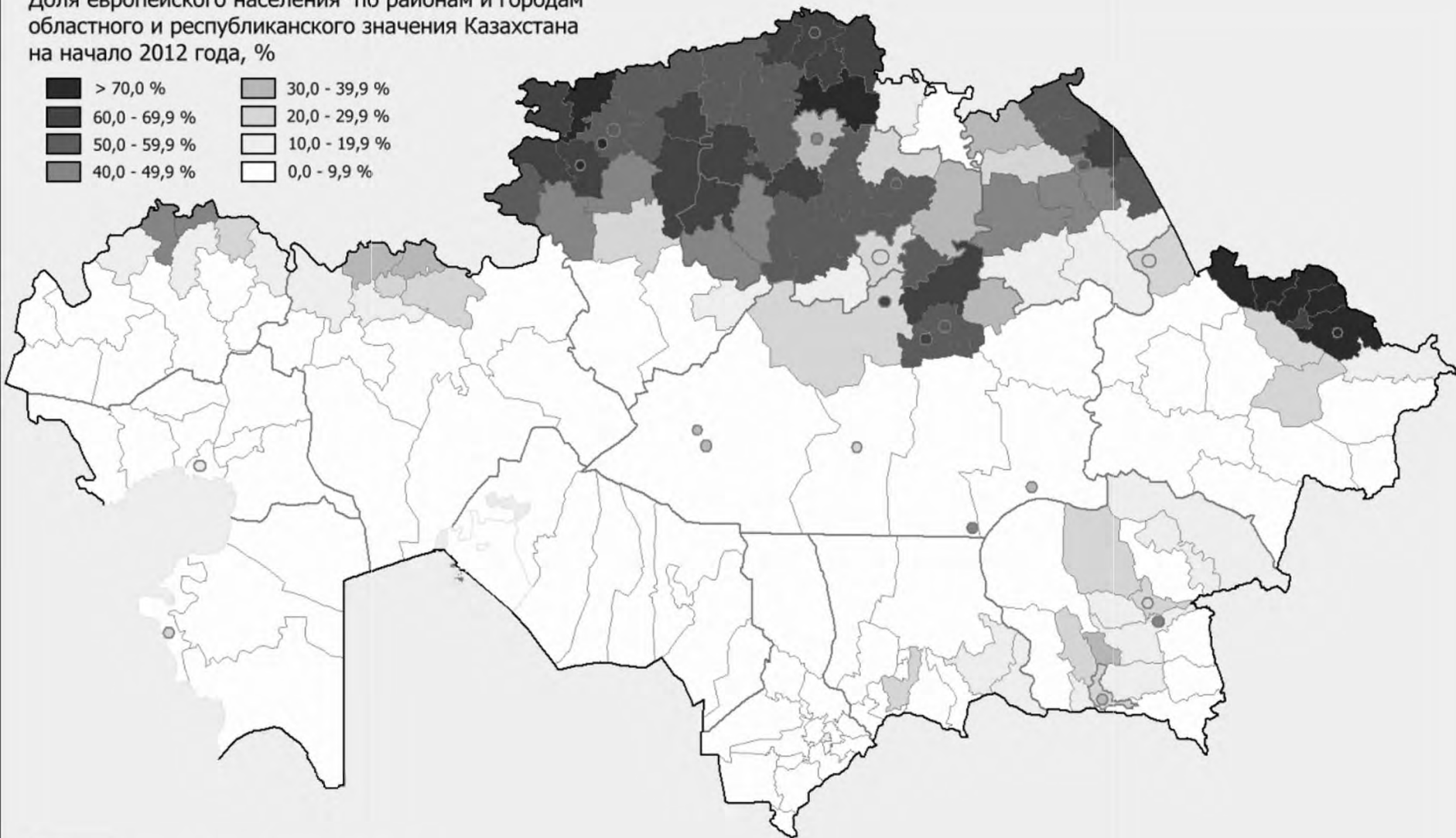
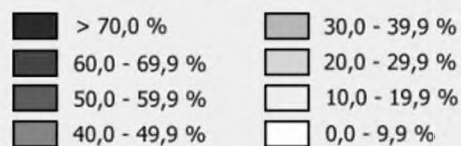
Kazakhstan

Ethnic Russians:

- 19.3% (has declined over past several years)
- Mostly live in north
- Recent primary human rights reports don't address serious harms
- Russian action in Ukraine a counter-balance to Kazakh nationalism; fear of Russian action
- Russian remains an official language; dual encouraged
- Russian Orthodox and Sunni Islam designated primary religions
- Incentives for ethnic Kazakhs to return
- Some crack-down on pro-Russian separatist activities

Kazakhstan: Ethnic Europeans

Доля европейского населения¹ по районам и городам областного и республиканского значения Казахстана на начало 2012 года, %



¹ русские, украинцы, белорусы, поляки, немцы

Kazakhstan

Other Groups:

- Uzbeks – 3.2% of population
- February 2020 anti-Dungan clashes near Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan border



Tajikistan





R U S S I A

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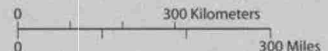
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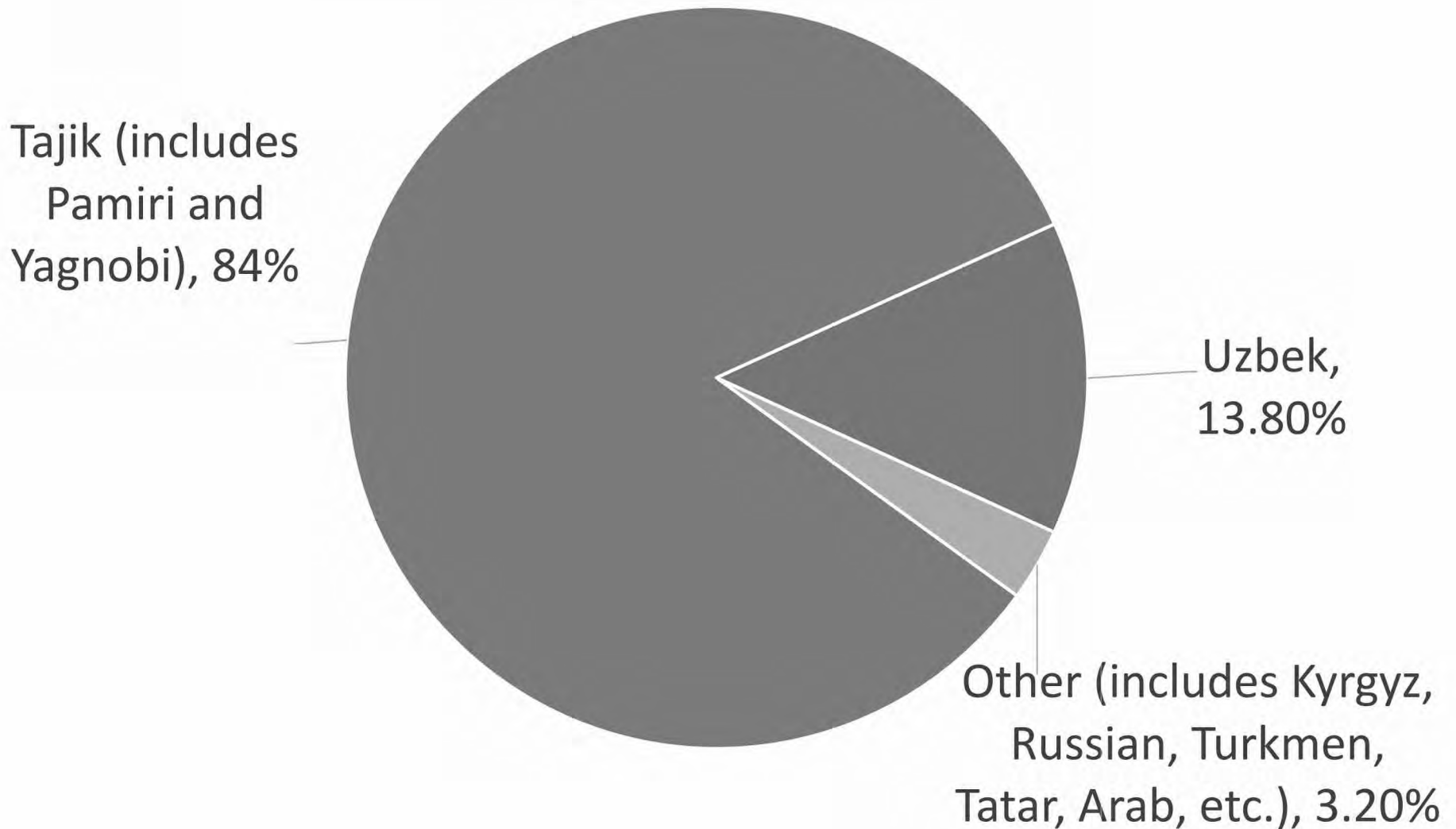


Boundary representation is
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Tajikistan

- Capital: Dushanbe
- Population 7.1 million
- Major languages: Tajik, Uzbek, Russian
- Major religion: Islam
- Five-year civil war upon independence
- Poverty, instability
- Heavily dependent on Russia for economy and security assistance (Islamic extremism), but growing connection to China
- President Emomali Rakhmon since 1994, firm grip, unfair elections

Ethnic Groups in Tajikistan



Tajikistan

Human Rights Concerns for ZNY:

- Anti-government political claims
- Religion: Converts from Islam to Christianity, Baptists, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormonism
- Ethnic claims: ethnic-Uzbeks

Tajikistan: Targeting Dissent

- Continued crackdown on political dissent
- Activists, journalists, social media users given lengthy prison sentences
- Lawyers who take up politically sensitive cases, especially related to national security and counter-terrorism, face harassment, intimidation, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and prosecutions on politically motivated charges
- NGOs intimidated and restricted; NGO law (register and identify foreign funding)
- Trumped up criminal charges to punish criticism (extremism)

Tajikistan: Targeting Dissent

- Journalists face threats, restrictions, exile
- Internet heavily censored; sites blocked incl. YouTube, Facebook, RFE/RL (*Radio Ozodi*), Asia-Plus
- Cut access to mobile and messaging services when critical statements about the president, his family, or the government appear online
- Banned opposition party Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and political opposition movement Group 24
- Targeting activists abroad and their relatives in Tajikistan: listing on Interpol, forced returns for prosecution (Russia, Belarus, Turkey, EU), foreign disappearances, murders
- Torture to obtain confessions and in prison

Tajikistan: Religion

- DOS: Country of Particular Concern (“CPC”) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom
- Government surveillance, raids, forced closures of all religious groups, including Islam and Christianity, registered and unregistered
- 2018 amendments to religion law: require religious organizations to report all activity to the state, require state approval for the appointments of all imams, and increase control over religious education
- Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains a very broad mandate that includes approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature

Tajikistan: Religion

- Law recognizes the “special status” of Sunni Islam’s Hanafi school of jurisprudence with respect to the country’s culture and spiritual life
- Hanafi Sunni mosques enforce a religious edict by the government-supported Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying at mosques
- Authorities harass women wearing hijabs and men with beards, discourage women from wearing “nontraditional or alien” clothing, including religious dress (roadblocks, forced barber visits)
- Reports of State National Security Services (SNSS) detaining religious minorities, beatings
- Imprisonment for spreading Salafi ideas, membership in extremist organizations

Tajikistan: Religion

Christians constitute approx. 1% of population

9,000-12,000 Protestants, including:

- The Pentecostal Korean movement Sonmin Sunbogym
- Presbyterians from the Greece Sonmin mission
- Adventists
- Baptists
- Lutherans

Three Catholic parishes - in Dushanbe, Bokhtar and Chkalovsk

No indication of Mormon communities

Tajikistan: Religion

Converts from Islam to Christianity

- Pressure and occasional physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to Islam
- Some locked up by their families for long periods of time and beaten, and may eventually be expelled from their communities
- Local mullahs preach against them, adding pressure
- Converts hide their faith, becoming “secret believers”, attend Mosques to hide conversion

Tajikistan: Religion

Converts from Islam to Christianity

- Jehovah's Witnesses illegal since 2009 (prevention of registration; raids and beatings, conscientious objection)
- Prevention of burials in town cemeteries
- October 1, 2000 bombing of "Sonmin Sunbogym" Protestant Church in Dushanbe killed 8, injured 48

Tajikistan: Religion

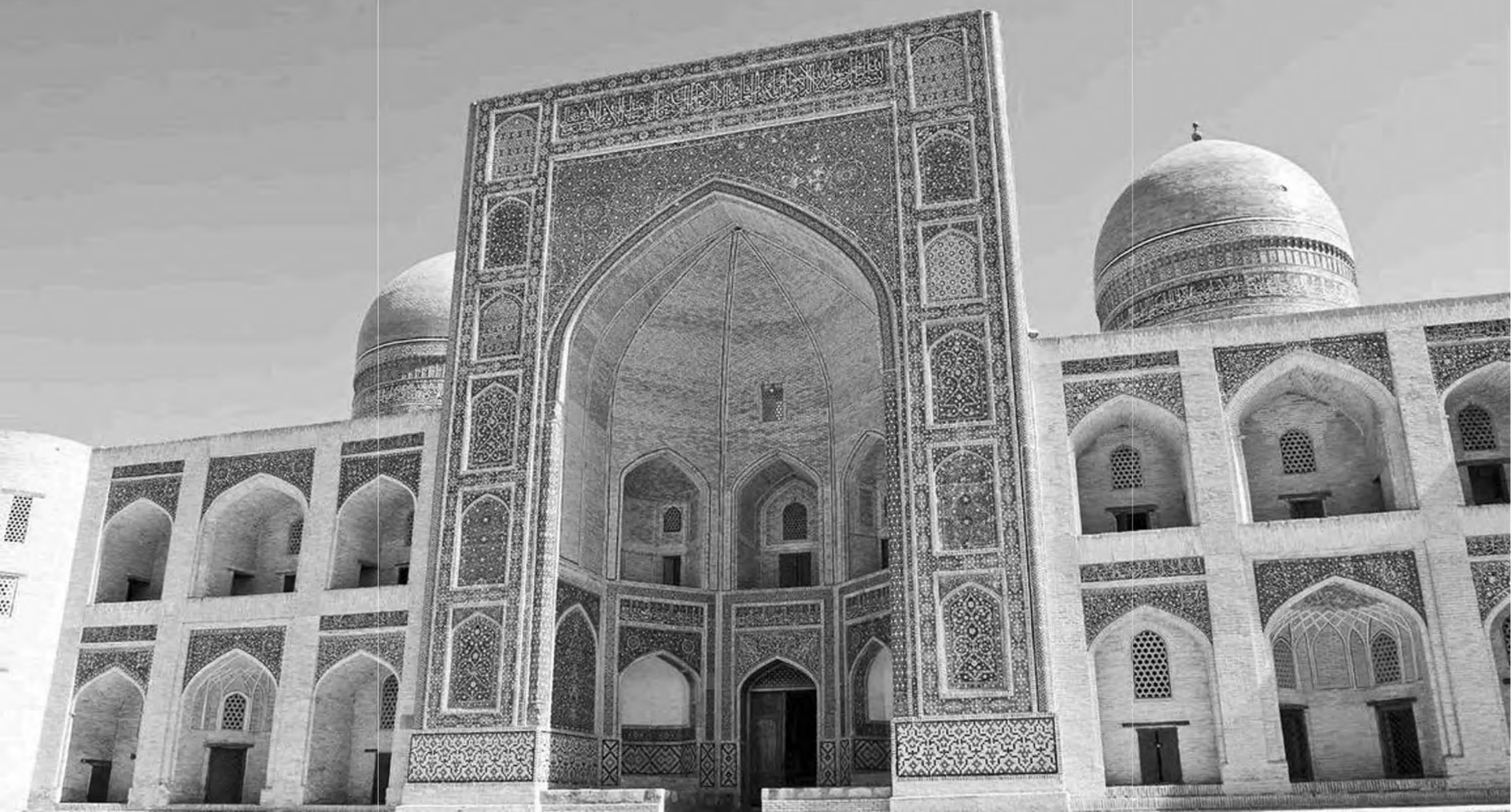
Banned groups:

- Hizb ut-Tahrir
- al-Qaida
- Muslim Brotherhood
- Taliban
- Jamaat Tabligh
- Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan)
- Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan
- Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – IMU)
- Lashkar-e-Tayba
- Tojikistoni Ozod
- Sozmoni Tablighot
- Salafi groups
- Jamaat Ansarullah
- The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)

Tajikistan: Ethnic-Uzbeks

- Uzbeks constitute up to 20% (also Kyrgyz, Russian, Pamiri, and Slavic minorities)
- Tajik nationalism and lack of linguistic plurality
- Discrimination in government appointments, employment and business opportunities, academic admissions, often on the basis of inadequate knowledge of the Tajik language
- Online hatespeech
- 2013 Uzbek leader who criticized the government's policies towards ethnic minorities targeted, killed (Salim Shamsiddinov)
- Few radio or television broadcasts in Uzbek
- Can be associated with Islamic extremism: Most Hizb-ut-Tahrir members come from Uzbek communities

Uzbekistan

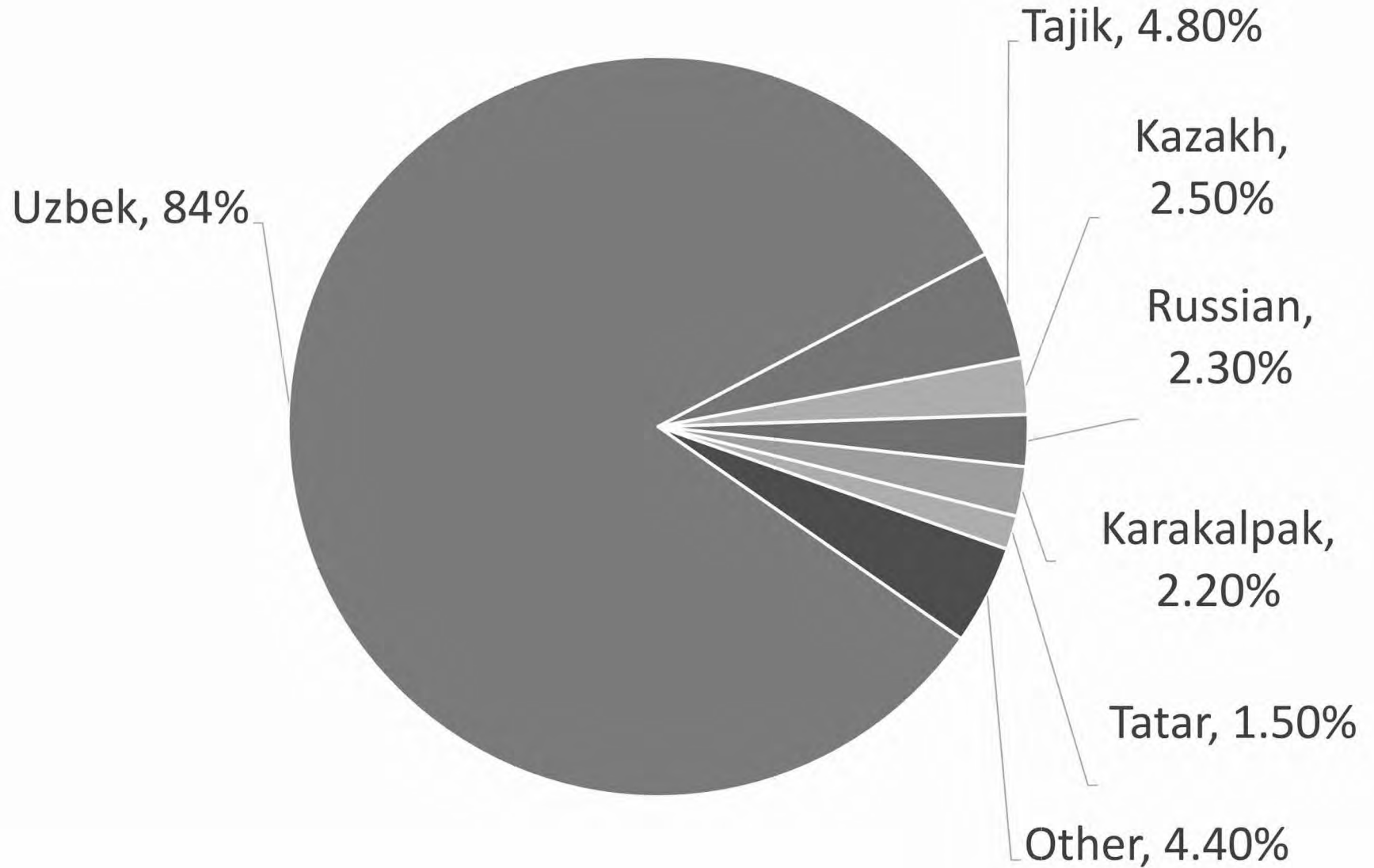




Uzbekistan

- Capital: Tashkent
- Population: ~28.1 million
- Major languages: Uzbek, Russian, Tajik
- Major religion: Islam
- Most populous Central Asian country and has the largest armed forces
- Political system is highly authoritarian, no true opposition, media tightly controlled
- Human rights record severe but some improvement under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2016)
- One of the world's biggest producers of cotton and rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and gold

Ethnic Groups in Uzbekistan



Uzbekistan

Human Rights Concerns for ZNY:

- Political dissent
- Religion: Christianity
- Organized Crime
- Domestic Violence
- Ethnic Tajiks

Uzbekistan: Targeting Dissent

Improvements since 2016 under Mirziyoyev?

- Jaslyk prison closed (torture); some political prisoners released, including rights activists, journalists, and opposition activists
- Ban on some key websites lifted (YouTube, Facebook, Eurasianet, Fergana News, Human Rights Watch, BBC's Uzbek service, Voice of America) but Uzbek RFE/RL (*Ozodlik*) still inoperable
- Some relaxing of restrictions on NGOs, but still controlled and some refusals to register
- Removed over 20,000 citizens from security services' "blacklists" of those suspected of extremism

Uzbekistan: Targeting Dissent

- Security services wield enormous power
- Treason (article 157) and other charges used to detain “enemies of the state” with closed trials
- Police, State Security Service (SGB), prison guards and prisoners continued to use torture and other ill-treatment to obtain confessions or punish (physical abuse, sexual violence, mock executions, sleep deprivation)
- Blogger was forcibly confined to a psychiatric hospital for months for reporting on a demonstration
- Human rights defenders and journalists, including those released from prison since 2017, and their families, continue to be under close surveillance and face intimidation, threats and arbitrary detention by police and the SGB

Uzbekistan: Targeting Dissent

March 2020 Amnesty revealed sophisticated SGB campaign of phishing and spyware attacks targeting activists and journalists (*but see* “Sandcat”)

Utilized spyware has the following capabilities:

- Extract device information (configuration, IMEI, phone number, history of Wi-Fi networks, etc.)
- Monitor chat applications, including VKontakte, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, IMO, TamTam, Telegram
- Monitor phone calls and text messages
- Record phone calls
- Record audio and video from the embedded microphone and cameras
- Take screenshots
- Monitor the clipboard
- Monitor the geographical location of the device
- Extract the browser history
- Receive commands by text messages

Uzbekistan: Christianity

Approx. 3.5% of population is Russian Orthodox

3% includes small communities of:

- Catholics
- Ethnic Korean Christians
- Baptists
- Lutherans
- Seventh-day Adventists
- Evangelical Christians
- Pentecostals
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Buddhists
- Baha'is
- Members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness
- Atheists

Uzbekistan: Christianity

- Unregistered religious activity illegal (up to five years in prison or a fine), but many reports of government's refusal to register
- Literature: Official approval of the content, production, distribution, and storage required ("Bible application" required to purchase a government-authorized version)
- Proselytism and other missionary activities illegal (up to 3 years in prison); Private teaching of religious principles illegal; Religious instruction limited to officially sanctioned religious schools and state-approved instructors
- Covert and open surveillance of all religious communities by the SGB secret police
- Police raid unregistered religious group meetings, detain participating individuals, conduct legal and illegal searches, and seize outlawed religious materials from private residences

Uzbekistan: Christianity

- Ministry of Education issued dress code prohibiting religious garments and symbols (skullcaps, crosses, and hijabs) in schools
- Converts to Christianity suffer harassment and discrimination, including government pressure on convert and family, and community targeting (burials)
- Bloggers discussing religious ideas detained
- Criminal code: “illegal” groups are unregistered; “prohibited” groups viewed as “extremist”

Uzbekistan: Organized Crime

- Soviet-era “Thieves-in-Law” growing in power under President Mirziyoyev
- April 2019, Akhtam Yakubov “Samarkandsky” crowned second thief-in-law in Uzbekistan
 - Bakhti Qudratullaev “Tashkentsky” is the other thief-in-law



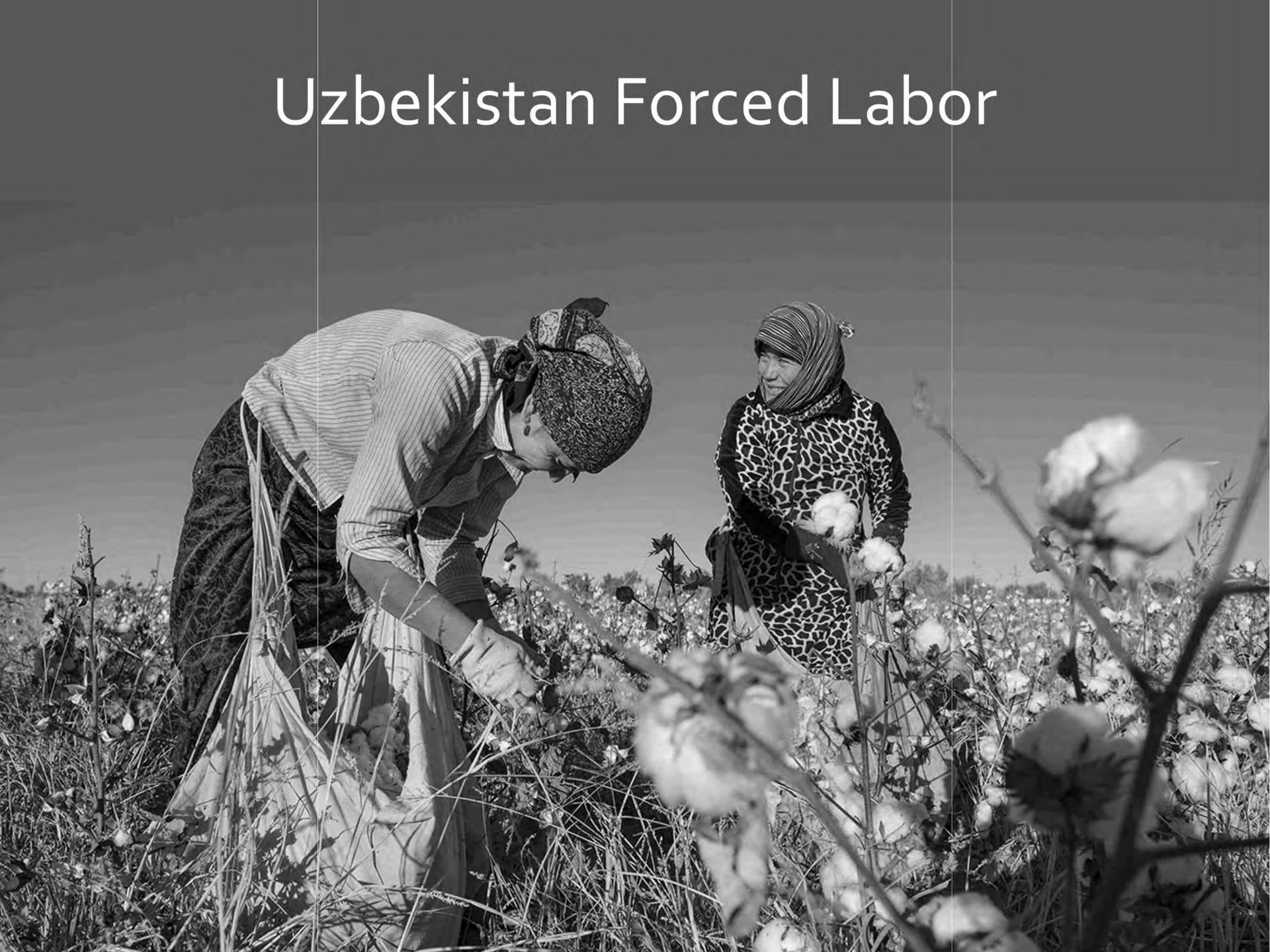
Uzbekistan: Domestic Violence

- Widespread, with little recourse for victims
- No legislation specifically outlawing domestic violence
- Emphasis on having families resolve issues themselves
- March 27, 2020, NeMolchi (Don't Keep Silent), ordered to take down a story about domestic abuse
- Until 2017, women needed husband or parental permission to leave the country
- First domestic abuse hotline and women's shelters opened in 2018, but understaffed

Uzbekistan: Ethnic Tajiks

- Largest minority: approx. 4.7%
- Major human rights reports do not indicate widespread serious problems
- Complaints of societal violence or discrimination against Tajiks are rare
- Generally under-represented in public and private sector positions
- Tension between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan governments has led to border controls, but some relaxing as of 2018
- Some reports of Tajiks having their citizenship revoked for allegedly fraudulently obtaining Uzbek passports
- Language: Uzbek is exclusive nation-wide state language; Tajik parents often enroll kids in Uzbek-language schools to avoid disadvantage

Uzbekistan Forced Labor



Regional: COVID-19 and Locusts



Resources

RAIO Research Unit ECN Country Pages:

[Kazakhstan](#) [Russia](#)

[Kyrgyzstan](#) [Uzbekistan](#)

[Forum18.org](#): Religious freedom in the region

[U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports](#)

[Minority Rights Group International](#)

[Human Rights Watch](#)

[Amnesty International](#)

[Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty](#)