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**RESOURCE
NATIONALISM AND
SLOW VIOLENCE
IN KYRGYZSTAN**

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"We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales"

Rob Nixon



INTRODUCTION

Year in and year out, political and economic elites in Kyrgyzstan have recast the country's resources into sources of rent. Echoing extractive states in other parts of the world, despite national populist discourse about the need to transform nature into national riches for "the greater common good" (Blaser & de la Cadena 2017), extraction-led development has ultimately provided little or no benefit to ordinary citizens in Kyrgyzstan. The growing mismatch between undelivered promises of a gold bonanza "for the people" and the undeniable accumulation of mineral rents by elites has over time exposed the dispossession that made this accumulation possible in the first place. The values, meanings, histories and identities attached to people's social nature has, since 2010, been transformed into gold in Kyrgyzstan, fueling persistent grievances, injustice, and protest. These acts challenge the repressive commodification of natural resources by the state and with that, also the state's legitimacy. This kind of "slow violence" - invisible and incremental, as opposed to visible and instant acts of violence (Nixon 2011) - is what we would like to highlight in this paper.

There are many lenses through which to understand the connection between nationalism and political violence in Central Asia. Some have explored the role of religion and patronage networks (McGlinchey 2011), while others have examined ethnic



tensions (Liu 2012) or the importance of borders (Megoran 2017) in fueling conflict. Another site of intervention, which has largely escaped the critical spotlight by both scholars and policy-makers, is how what we routinely refer to as “natural resources” become subject to nationalist mobilisation by states, and consequently, authoritarian repression and violence. While resource nationalism - nationalism of and through resources - has long preoccupied practitioners and politicians at the junction of international business, foreign policy and development initiatives, this preoccupation has been largely limited to understanding the concept as a “risk” or as a “threat” to doing business. Connections between nation and nature have only recently received attention from critical social sciences, motivating situated conceptualizations of these junctures (e.g., Fumagalli 2015; Childs 2016; Koch & Perrault 2019; McCarthy 2019; Myadar & Jackson 2019; Poncian 2021).

Our aim with this research-based policy paper is twofold. First, building on recent scholarship, we attempt to render visible the connections between populist politics and resource nationalism in Kyrgyzstan, contextualising these developments within an authoritarian-neoliberal governing order that has perpetuated rent-seeking behaviour by its ruling elites since independence (Engvall 2015; Doolot & Heathershaw 2015; Wooden 2018; Ocaklı et al. 2021; Ocaklı 2022a). We thereby respond to the call from the nascent body of critical scholarship to engage more deeply with questions of “how, for whom, and to what effect resource nationalism becomes salient” (Koch & Perrault 2019, p. 624)



as we inquire into the significance of this phenomenon and its relationship with violence and repression. Our second aim is to draw policy-makers' attention to this dynamic in order to create better programs that mitigate against political violence and instability.

A review of policy interventions by key peacebuilding and development actors in the region¹ reveals that current programming does not capture the violence associated with resource nationalism and governance. While these organisations aim at reducing violent conflicts, promoting democracy, good governance and human rights, and building capacities towards economic and ecological resilience, they tend to treat these action areas as disconnected fields of intervention without taking into account cross-sectional linkages. USIP, for example, mentions ethno-nationalism, nativism, religion, competition over scarce resources and climate change, labour migration and economic conflict as the most likely sources of violent conflicts (Helf 2020), attributing their structural drivers to political and governance problems. Nevertheless, extant policy initiatives do not tackle slow but sure state violence and human rights violations through national populism and authoritarian modes of resource governance. A part of this problem might be the analytical lens through which peace is seen as absence of overt physical violence in the public eye that is commonly associated with authoritarian regimes.

With this article, we aim to address this gap by drawing the



attention of scholars and international policy-makers, as well as government and civil society actors in Kyrgyzstan to the understudied relationship between authoritarian nationalism by the state, resources, and violence. We thereby respond to three of the themes that emerged from the Oxus Society Workshop “Nationalism and Violence in Central Asia.” First, our research aims at engaging with different narratives of nationalism: in our case, vis-à-vis resources, their different representations, and their extraction. Second, we seek to unpack state and non-state actors’ agendas at multiple sites that seek to channel or challenge these nationalist narratives. This entails inquiring into cases of deliberate disinformation to inflame resource nationalist grievances and/or the delegitimization of genuine citizen concerns regarding just resource use and governance. Third, our interdisciplinary perspective on resource nationalism and political violence enables us to open up politically-sensitive analyses of resource nationalism, transcending dominant realist conceptions.

Broadening our perspective on nationalist violence beyond familiar narratives of ethno-nationalism, religion, or far-right extremism (Foroughi 2002; Lain 2016) allows us to detect repressive mechanisms and ensuing grievances, particularly in connection with discourses of “the nation,” “the people,” and “shared resources.” As interdisciplinary geographers with long-term grounded engagement in Central Asia, we approach the concept of resource nationalism not simply as a state’s control over resources but also as nationalist discourse (Koch & Perrault 2019; Atkins & Menga 2021). Attending to the often-competing visions



of how national and natural identities in Kyrgyzstan are connected to the state's legitimization efforts and its projects of resource extraction at different scales, we pursue two questions: (1) What are the fissures within discourses of resource nationalism and how have they been related to authoritarian tendencies and other invisible forms of violence? (2) What are the implications of acknowledging resources and resource nationalism as a source of violence for policy and programming in Central Asia?

We answer these questions based on our original, multi-source research in Kyrgyzstan from 2014 regarding attitudes and beliefs about Kyrgyz socio-natural identities, and how these relate to spiritual traditions, as well as on discourses and practices of resource extraction and nationalism. Sites of data collection include Bishkek, the center of policy-making and governance; Talas, the site of the tomb of Manas, Kyrgyzstan's national hero and a focal point for nationalist veneration, and Orlovka, a former Soviet mining town that now hosts the country's second-largest gold mine. We complement primary data with official statements/ media releases and bring these into conversation with the relevant literature on resources, resource nationalism, authoritarianism, and violence.

The following section makes the case for broadening our perspective on resource nationalism for rendering visible the violence concealed in states' projects of natural resource governance and extraction. Next, we illuminate different mechanisms and manifestations of resource nationalism in



Kyrgyzstan, with an eye towards the interactions between authoritarianism, violence, and the natural environment. We conclude our paper with a consideration of the transdisciplinary implications of engaging critically with the concept of resource nationalism for audiences beyond academia, including policy-makers and practitioners at the intersection of nationalism and violence.

¹ We screened the information about programs and initiatives by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and German Corporation for International Development (GIZ). The rapid review was limited to scoping the sources that were readily available on their respective online platforms.

NATURE AND KYRGYZ NATIONAL IDENTITY

Since independence, the natural environment has played an important role in discourse about Kyrgyz national identity. Bodies of water and mountains such as the Ala Too Mountains and Lake Issyk Kul are inseparable from popular images of the Kyrgyz Republic and discourses surrounding “Kyrgyzness.” According to Ormush Choinbaev, former director of Manas Ordo, a museum and park complex centered around the tomb of the Kyrgyz national hero Manas in Talas, “[t]he ancient Kyrgyz lived in open nature and among mountains. Their life was connected to water and fire [...] They drew their sustenance from the mountains and from the water.” Well aware of this connection, Askar Akayev, the first president of independent Kyrgyzstan, made sure to integrate references

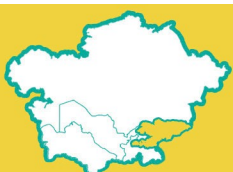


to the natural environment in nation- and state-building discourses and practices during his reign. In his book “Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos Manas,” he highlighted how the sacredness of the natural environment of the contemporary Kyrgyz nation-state was intimately connected with timeless conceptions of Kyrgyz national identity and statehood:

The most valuable legacy of the Kyrgyz people, in my opinion, is the sacred land of Ala-Too, which we received from our ancestors. Our ancestors left to present and future generations the wholesomeness and royalty of these fine mountains, the Lake Issyk Kul – a magnificent pearl that has no equal in the world today - fertile valleys, and sparkling mountain streams and rivers. On this ancient land, in the twentieth century, the Kyrgyz people created their own national state
(Akayev, 2003, p. 8).

It is tempting to interpret such sentiments as an anachronistic imposition of concepts and institutions like national identity and the nation-state onto an era when they did not exist, or to simply dismiss them as nationalist romanticizing. However, to wholly dismiss such sentiments is to miss the point that, for many Kyrgyz people, the natural environment of their country, which is imbued with meaning by mythic, sacred, and historical geographies, is part of what gives Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz people their special character. According to one manaschy, a reciter of the Kyrgyz national epic, “Historically, Kyrgyz lived in close relationship with nature. Each person’s character depends upon the land he or she lives in³.” Thus, as Aitpaeva and Egemberdieva note, “The Kyrgyz people have a saying ‘El menen jer kindiktesh’ which means ‘The people and

³Interview on October 31, 2014, Bishkek.



the earth are connected by an umbilical cord” (2009, p. 85).



Fig. 1. A natural mazar, or sacred site, near Talas, Kyrgyzstan (photo by Vincent Artman).

This “umbilical cord” connecting people to the natural world has proven to be a factor in efforts to protect, but in the same breath, to plunder, Kyrgyzstan’s natural environment. On the one hand, for example, pilgrims visiting natural sacred sites are expected to abide by certain guidelines to avoid causing damage to the site or to the natural environment (Samakov 2015; Artman 2021). On the other hand, and quite contradictorily, nature and the variegated values it embodies have also become instrumental in preying on nature itself. As we will see in the next section, Kyrgyzstan’s



bountiful natural environment has become the subject of the country's post-independence economic policies, feeding increasingly into national-populist discourses for both legitimising the commodification of nature and violently delegitimizing any resistance against doing so.

INDEPENDENCE, GOLD AND "SLOW VIOLENCE"

The violence associated with nation-nature junctures in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is rooted in post-independence politics and development policies, and the role gold mining has come to play therein. Like other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan decided on an economic development path driven by the extraction and export of natural resources. Unlike its neighbors, however, Kyrgyzstan under the leadership of Askar Akayev, radically and famously sought to integrate into a global economy that had by the 1990s become neoliberal and resource-intensive (Ocaklı 2022a). With the advice and support of international financial institutions, the Akayev administration foregrounded the gold mining sector as a source of economic rescue and recovery (Bogdetsky et al. 2001). Based on the largely untapped Soviet-era geological infrastructure and unrestrained opening of the economy to global markets under neoliberal policies, it quickly put the country on the map for investors. Just one year after independence, in 1992, the largest gold deposit in the country, "Kumtor," found its investor (Fig. 2). The Canadian company Cameco, assisted by funds from international financial institutions, began investing in the development of the Kumtor gold deposit (Engvall 2016; Wooden 2018). Large-scale gold production commenced in 1997.





***Fig 2. Permafrost mining operations on the Kumtor gold deposit.
Photo by Janarbek Joldoshbaev (RFE/RL).***

Initially hailed as a rescue to the country’s economic depression⁴, operations on the deposit soon started taking a toll on rivers, wildlife, human bodies, land and livelihoods. Situated at 4000 masl, extracting gold from the Kumtor deposit meant, “tapping mountains, removing glaciers” (Ocaklı & Niewöhner 2022, p. 155). From the very start, then, Kumtor’s violence through dispossession was visible and directed towards glaciers in pursuit of the gold beneath. However, permafrost mining under lax and opaque governance mechanisms, bred other expressions of violence. A year after the onset of full-scale operations, in 1998, violence against glaciers started literally spilling over.

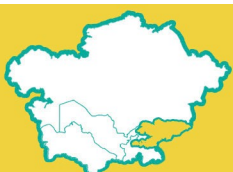
⁴ Gold production at Kumtor helped reduce Kyrgyzstan’s trade deficit by more than 60% while achieving a nearly 50% increase in industrial output during the same year (Pannier 1998, 2021).



A truck transporting sodium cyanide to the mine site overturned, discharging 1.7 tons of the toxic solution into the Barksoon river (Pannier 1998). The river became contaminated and people lost their livelihoods as the poisonous incident gave the local produce a bad name; thousands of people became ill, and several died (Pannier 2021). In 2009, another Canadian firm, Centerra Gold, made a new deal with Bishkek, taking over the mine's management. In an unexpected move, the agreement would allow the new operating company to dump waste rock on the glaciers (ibid.).

The violence, through dispossession, did not stop at the Kumtor mine. It has steadily increased with every new (planned) mine site in the country, finding during the process also new expressions in the form of denial and discourse. People affected by the Kumtor catastrophe would have to spend, or rather waste, years trying to prove that they had been actually affected by the spill - mostly to no avail⁵. With neither the state nor the company taking full responsibility, people were physically and psychologically left to their own devices in their fight for justice. Unfortunately, this event did not motivate a fundamental rethinking of the sector and its governance. Nevertheless, it gave rise to a fundamental critique of the sector and enduring grassroots activism against the injustices that the state perpetuated through natural resources (Lee and Styers; Wooden 2017; Horrocks-Taylor; Ocaklı 2022a). Since 2010 more communities near licensed deposits realised who gold mining has benefited and who it has cost, and has coalesced into anti-gold mining

⁵Cameco agreed to a compensation of \$4.6 million; yet, the compensation had either not reached the people affected or when it did, it was not commensurate with the physical and psychological damages inflicted. Further, as Pannier (2020) reports, many of the medical records in the aftermath of the spill had been altered, making any attribution between cyanide exposure and health problems and consequently making any compensation (near) impossible.



sentiments, distrust of the state, and the eventual ousting of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev (Fumagalli 2015; Doolotkeldieva 2021). However, as protests became louder, violence has changed face, becoming to the contrary invisible and insidious. Instead of listening and taking people’s voices seriously, genuine protests have either been dismissed as “mobs for hire” (Satybaldieva 2018), “loud acts of rent-seeking” (Ocaklı & Niewöhner 2022, p. 160) or, even more dangerously, have been co-opted to establish a case for resource nationalism.

As popular contestation against the reckless proliferation and haphazard governance of gold mining operations peaked in 2012 (Lee and Styers), it was none other than Kyrgyzstan’s current president, Sadyr Japarov, who sought to manipulate these underlying concerns, taking nationalist-populist dynamics to a whole new level. Most notably, as a member of the national parliament, Japarov relentlessly called for nationalising the Kumtor mine on the grounds of its environmental violations, trading on ordinary people’s genuine grievances for his own political ends (Wooden 2017; Horrocks-Taylor 2018; Ocaklı 2022). The first calls for nationalising the mine did not produce the desired outcome: This would have to wait a decade, when Japarov made an unexpected jump not only back into politics, but also into the presidency around the country’s third national uprising in October 2020. When he eventually came to power that same year, arguing for the “urgent need” to rectify the environmental and safety wrongdoings under all the previous governments, his administration hastily seized the Kumtor gold mine and introduced external management in May 2021 (Kapushenko 2021; de Gouvello 2021).

On July 29, 2022, Japarov’s Press Secretary Erbol Sultanbaev rejoiced at the news of full nationalisation on his Facebook page, claiming that “the hopes of our people have come true.” The “big victory,” as the presidential



administration ordered the divorce between the Canadian Centerra and the Kyrgyzstani state (Beishenbek kyzy 2022), stands accordingly for the historical justice for the nation and its mine. In his comment, Sultanbaev ascribed this alleged victory to Japarov and “his unshakable determination to fulfil his promise to his people.” Regrettably, owning the mine is not likely to translate into owning up to decades-long pending responsibility and transparency towards citizens. As a crack in one of the gold mine’s pit walls was detected, following the nationalisation of the mine, Japarov seemed to have forgotten his promises of responsibility and justice behind his drive to nationalise the same mine. It was, after all, in the name of increased “responsibility for the future of the country” that he reverted the country to a strong presidential rule in 2021 (Japarov 2021). With no-one else to blame anymore, he now resorts to God as he continues to disown responsibility, commenting on the crack that “Disasters will continue to happen. [...] When and what will happen, only God knows, do not forget that” (Turgunbaeva 2022).

Three decades on, Kumtor continues to haunt the country; its economy, politics, and its people. Since the Kumtor takeover by the state, transparency around gold production and governance has hit a new low. First, under the management of the now abandoned national holding “Heritage of the Great Nomads,”⁶ and now under heightening silence, the governance of the gold-mining sector specifically, but also the governance of natural resources in Kyrgyzstan generally, has become a governance of exclusion and secrecy. Not much is known about what has been going on at the Kumtor gold mine, the whereabouts of gold mine,

⁶The national holding “Heritage of the Great Nomads” was created in December 2021 for allegedly reforming the mining industry (Kyrgyz Republic n.d.) without a disclosure of information regarding its exact mandate (Ocaklı 2022b).



the whereabouts of gold produced, due to safety concerns (Radio Azattyk 2022b), or the future of its operations.

As the Kumtor saga retains its prominence, both for national and international audiences, other “shades of conflict” and slow violence unfolding elsewhere go unnoticed (Ocaklı 2022a). For example, Orlovka, a former Soviet mining town 1.5 hours’ drive from Bishkek, has since 2012 hosted the country’s second-largest gold operation after Kumtor (Fig. 3). Beneath the image of an exemplary project for Kyrgyzstan’s development, despite agreeing to the opening of the mine, dwellers of Orlovka resist how the mine has been operating under Chinese investors. Unfair hiring and employment conditions, and a lack of environmental compliance constitute residents’ grievances. Through regular praise of the mine and the community, state actors however try to sustain the façade of a “good” community that unconditionally accepts mining, moralising at a stroke communities that reject mining as “bad” communities (Ocaklı et al. 2021). Such a discourse not only serves to coerce people into silence through psychological repression. It also denies people’s realities that allow mining as a means for survival, not an end, dispossessing them of their voice⁷. That the mine is a joint venture with a Chinese firm further complicates the nationalist narrative, laying bare at its core the multinational resource extractivism that the state prioritises over local perspectives on resource governance and development.

⁷ For historico-geographical reasons behind Orlovka’s consent to the mine, see Ocaklı et al. 2021.





Fig. 3. Taldy-Bulak Levoberezhny gold mine, operational since 2015 by the joint venture “Altynken LLC” between the state-owned gold mining company “Kyrgyzaltyn OJSC” and a subsidiary of the Chinese “Zijin Mining Group Co. Ltd.” Photo by Beril Ocaklı, taken during fieldwork in Orlovka.

Kyrgyzstan is abound with stories of resistance. These unfortunately face different forms of slow violence through: Dispossession of agency, living natures, immaterial meanings attached to natures, livelihoods; derogatory and praising discourses alike, of “mobs for hire,” “rent-seeking opportunists,” “good vs. bad communities,”; and denial of constitutional rights to freedom of expression and human rights to information and participation, of their diverging life commitments and concerns, and of the state’s responsibilities. Make no mistake: this is not an exhaustive list of how violence is connected to the nation’s resources. With populist



and non-democratic actions such as the rushed nationalisation of mines or the opaque monopolisation of investments under shady holdings, the methods and manifestation of violence are likely to evolve and expand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing discussion has sought to unpack the concept of resource nationalism and its complex interconnections to nationalist populism, the commodification of nature, resource extraction, and political violence. Focusing on the decades-long saga of the Kumtor gold mine, we have seen how violence against nature has, at various times, “spilled over” into violence against people. Highlighting the interlinkages between nature and society, the violence(s) associated with Kumtor have assumed a variety of forms, ranging from dispossession of healthy resources and livelihoods; denial of damages done, of the right to compensation, of sovereignty over their own futures in favour of a relentless discourse of “gold for development.” This has all resulted in the immiseration of thousands and, in some cases, serious injury or loss of life. Such events complicate nationalist discourse emphasising the Kyrgyz people’s “umbilical cord” connecting them to the earth by treating the natural environment as a source of profit, rather than as a sacred homeland, all the while irreversibly eroding any basis for democratic governance in the country.

Kumtor, of course, is not unique. As state-led efforts to extract profit from the commodification of mineral resources have proliferated across Kyrgyzstan, affected communities have often reacted in different ways. As the example of Sadyr Japarov himself illustrates, criticisms and concerns



underlying the protests have been embraced, co-opted, and redirected by different governments in the service of increasingly populist politics whose goals and strategies often diverge substantially from the grounded concerns that animate protests in the first place.

With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations:

- The first step for policy-makers interested in addressing accelerants of authoritarianism and conflicts is to move beyond an understanding of peace as absence of overtly violent conflict. This will reveal concealed forms of state aggression towards its citizens over conflicting conceptions of development and democracy, and as we have shown here, and present opportunities to mitigate them.
- Better connection to the state-of-the-art research and activists' matters of concern can inform future policy design and help reach the often silenced and sidelined victims of slow violence. This can be achieved through establishing a transdisciplinary dialogue series and/or policy-oriented workshops with policy-makers, critical researchers and activists.
- A broader perspective on both violence and nationalism has implications for working towards deliberative democracy, peace, and human rights. Both scholars and policy-makers should engage critically with the question of how different narratives of nature are mobilised by both state actors and local non-state actors, and to what end. Natural resources, populism, and political violence interact in both discursive and material ways. Nexus studies and programming beyond silos can unveil power-laden processes that construct and reconstruct resources in particular ways for particular ends.



- More than two decades of gold mining protests is a clear call for international policy-makers and the state in Kyrgyzstan to take stock of the development and the damage recorded through gold extraction. Policy-makers should thus refrain from reinforcing structures of traditional development schemes that concentrate on extractive industries. Resource extraction entails and enables violence against both nature and society, prioritising the extraction of profit over ensuring the welfare of ecologies and communities. In practice, this means investigating how extractive projects impact people's relationships to one another, to their environment, and to the government. Policies need to involve broader publics in affected communities and respond to their past experiences, current exigencies and future aspirations.
- Ordinary people's genuine protests should be understood as attempts to take part in regulation and governance that endanger more than human lives and not as conflicts that need to be done away with. A democratising resource governance ought to allow room for and respect alternative meanings and identities that are enmeshed in people's relationships with the natural environment. Accepting or rejecting mining are not good or bad community traits and shall not be moralised. Communities have different reasons, situated in their historically evolving life projects, for consenting to or contesting mining.



- Policy-makers should treat derogatory discourses that play concerned communities off against each other with caution. Any international policy intervention interested in promoting human rights and development needs to call these framings into question and make every effort to listen to heterogeneous voices instead of dismissing them as loud acts of rent-seeking. Here, connection to existing activists and collective action networks will be insightful for grasping some of the key fault lines and for charting areas of intervention that can support activists' concerns.



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NOTES

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