

Worldviews of Youth: Central Asia, Mongolia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan

S. Frederick Starr

Editor

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Introduction

Nearly all commentators on the evolution of the countries of Central Asia, Mongolia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan, (i.e., the “CAMCA” countries) have concentrated on older adults and ignored younger men and women. This collection focuses instead on members of the younger generation whose outlooks have been largely neglected until now.

But what, we must ask, is a generation? For a century Europeans and Americans have coined clichés to describe each rising cohort of young people. Early on they defined their subject as young men and women in their late teens and early twenties. Now the definition commonly stretches further back into the earlier teen years. At the same time, the concept of a generation has itself changed. It was once commonly defined in biological terms, which meant a period of twenty or more years. Today—at least in the West— a social and political “generation” is often shortened to only a single decade.

Why are the views of members of the rising generation in the CAMCA countries (Central Asia, Mongolia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan) of importance? Very simply, because their life experience differs so starkly from that of both their parents and grandparents. Their parents were raised by people born and educated in the Soviet Union or in Mongolia, under Soviet influence. In every one of these countries the current generation of parents has also been challenged by personal contact with the modern world on a global scale and by their national governments’ efforts to respond to it. As a consequence, they sit uneasily on two stools, past and present, institutional and personal, and bravely try to seek a workable balance

between them. As is clear from the essays below, they do not always succeed at this. It is no exaggeration to say that parental influence on source offspring across the region has diminished.

A second and obvious issue that distinguishes the young generation in all of the countries under study is their massive access to cellphone technology and the internet. This development, which contrasts to the experience of some but not all of their elders, gives them access to world-wide “neighborhoods” of like-minded people. This constitutes second and non-institutional forms of education, which contrasts sharply with what is offered in schools, but which is very powerful nonetheless. The scale of contact with this world among members of the young generation is immense. However, it often occurs at the price of reduced communication with their more diverse physical neighbors at home. Moreover, as is clear from the reviews included in this collection, the attention of young people is also focused as much or more on music and pop culture as on the subjects that dominate traditional newspapers, radio, and TV.

All of these pressures and tensions bear directly on educational systems across the entire region and beyond. Educational reform in a post-Soviet spirit has indeed gone forward in all the countries under study, but it has been slow, tentative, and bureaucratic. Worse, to the extent it exists at all, reform has been concentrated at the university level. In some countries the rising generation has been emancipated from Soviet-type training in lower schools by the appearance of a few private institutions, but these are few in number and accessible only to the well-to-do. For the most part, younger men and women across the region are still the product of Soviet-type lower schools. While this results in high competence in mathematics and basic science, it lags in both the social sciences and humanities, leaving these fields wide open to informal learning from the internet and other non-traditional sources.

It goes without saying that the contemporary world is full of continuities that often go unnoticed. Upbringing in the family, the impact of neighbors, religion, traditional life-cycle customs, and deep-rooted musical traditions all remain much as they were in the past. Yet, acknowledging this, it is hard to imagine three generations whose life experiences differ more radically from each other than those of a typical CAMCA family over the course of recent decades.

In a first effort to map at least the outlines of the rising generation across the CAMCA region, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute turned to its own region-wide team of experts, the 280 men and women from all ten countries who have participated in the fellowship program launched fifteen years ago by the Rumsfeld Foundation and our Institute. Now a diverse band of highly accomplished members of their societies, these leaders of business, government, the professions, and press train and hire older members of the rising generation and work closely with them on a daily basis. Many also observe the young through their own children and through their children's friends and schoolmates.

As editors, we will resist the temptation to extract conclusions from the diverse evidence in this report or to propose implications for each of the ten societies included and for the larger region of which they are all a part. This is instead the challenge which our CAMCA contributors set before each reader. To guide such reflection, we offer the following five questions: First, is it possible to speak of this region's rising generation as a single cohort and, if so, what are its boundary ages? Second, is it possible to speak of common generational features across the entire region, or should we focus instead on smaller groupings or even on the distinct generational identities of individual countries? Third, looking forward, what degree of discontinuity should we anticipate on a national, sub-regional, and regionwide basis? Fourth, are the CAMCA countries prepared to deal with

the discontinuities and changes that the rising generation may generate? And, fifth, to what degree is the entire CAMCA region coming to participate in what French sociologist Claude Levi-Strauss called “the global monoculture”?

S. Frederick Starr

Afghan Youth in a State of Fear and Despair

Farishta Sakhi

Many Afghan youths are preoccupied with the constant fear of the Taliban's unpredictable and inconsistent policies. It is hard for them, especially for young girls, to envision any perspective for personal development beyond survival. Finding a way to flee the country living under the dark age conditions could be more painful in the 21st century, a time when most countries experience rapid technological development, advancements in artificial intelligence, and progress in other vital sciences that are primarily driven by young people.

Many conflict-prone and underdeveloped countries share significant common indicators, notably a large population, particularly youth. Afghanistan is no exception, being home to almost 42 million people, with two-thirds of its population in dire need of humanitarian and protection assistance. A country with a fertility rate of 4.3 children per woman, Afghanistan ranks among the top 30 countries with high fertility rates. Data indicates that over 60 percent of the Afghan population is comprised of youth under the age of 25. This demographic represents a powerful force for change, with a wealth of aspirations, dreams, and motivation for prosperity and development. However, Afghanistan's recent history has been marred by violence, dictatorship, radicalization, and terror. The impact of political instability and turbulence has been harsh on Afghan youth, compounded by the strong rivalries among traditionalists and modernists. The traditional norms have consistently underestimated the capabilities of youth, stifled their voices, and misdirected their strength and potential.

Currently, many Afghans under the age of 25 came of age during a period when the country was cautiously adapting to democracy and modernization. During this time, Afghanistan was introduced to modern democratic institutions and an open society. Media and civil society thrived despite the challenges, and the country received an influx of international aid, modern technology, mass communication, and modern educational institutions.

However, with the Taliban seizing power, Afghanistan took a sharp turn backward. Since August 2021, over a million and a half have fled the country, making the global population of Afghan refugees more than eight million. This makes Afghans one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. Additionally, more than three million Afghans have been internally displaced throughout Afghanistan, driven from their homes by violence, natural disasters, and a lack of hope for a better future. Under the Taliban's de facto regime, many youths, particularly Afghan girls, are deprived of the most basic human rights, and many suffer from severe mental health challenges. The Taliban's oppressive policies contribute to a massive brain drain, as many talented individuals seek to leave the country. Child and early marriage, along with the associated risks of early motherhood, mortality, and physical and mental health crises have become prevalent, especially with females being barred from work and education.

The Afghan constitution of 2005, which allowed freedom for religious and ethnic minorities, was abolished by the Taliban. The Taliban intensified oppression by imposing increasing restrictions on people's rights, particularly targeting minorities, marginalized groups, and vulnerable youth, both male and female. After the Taliban took over Kabul, youth from various ethnic and religious minorities faced extreme repressions, particularly Shia Hazaras, Ahmadis, and Baha'is. Many youths in certain provinces were subject to torture, arbitrary detention, and coerced confession, often accused of supporting the Taliban's opposition.

However, females disproportionately bear the burden of discrimination and segregation. The Taliban restricted girls from secondary education followed by banning them from attending universities in 2021. To fill this gap, a few educational institutions based in the UK, EU, and the United States initiated online education programs. These initiatives were received as a sign of hope among young girls, and thousands of girls submitted applications for long-distance online education. However, access to reliable electricity and IT infrastructure remains a critical barrier to internet access among many youths, particularly girls. Women's access to internet was 2% in 2021 compared to men's 25%. The access to internet varies across provinces. In Western Afghanistan 15% of girls are reported to have access to internet compared to 3% in Kabul, and among rural and urban dwellers, 9% girls in cities have access to internet compared to 2% in rural areas, according to the 2022 Gallup World Report.

The Taliban made Afghanistan's education system completely dysfunctional. Female teachers have been dismissed, and curriculum has been altered to prioritize religious subjects. Existing boys-only schools struggle to secure competent teachers and adequate supplies. Students see no prospects of completing their education or pursuing higher studies.

Poverty, discrimination, and imposed Taliban restrictions remain the major reasons that many Afghan youth seek to emigrate. Afghanistan resides near the bottom of the United Nations' list of least developed countries. More than 4.7 million people aged 18-24 lived in poverty in 2020. This figure has increased after the takeover of the Taliban. Now 97% of the Afghan population lives under the poverty line, according to UN reports. Youth are pushed to engage in agriculture for livelihood, and due to lack of access to livestock, land and credit remain at the mercy of their landowners. Natural disasters, such as drought, flood, and earthquakes have pushed many females to engage in livelihood activities, being young female-headed

family members. Youth are also prone to more food insecurity than before, with more than 40% of the current population susceptible to food insecurity. International community efforts are also primarily focused on the humanitarian aspects without long-term prospects for engagement of youth in alleviating poverty. The current de facto government excludes youth from engaging meaningfully in economic decision-making. The economy's loss of young women is also causing major economic losses. Although international financial bodies have provided micro-finance support to the emerging and existing businesses in Afghanistan post August 2021, the situation of financial inclusion remains a major impediment. Currently, nine out of ten Afghans have no access to bank accounts, credit cards, or loans. Only 5% of Afghan women and 10% of men have access to financial transaction accounts. For young women, the international community should continue providing monthly allowances, medical support, and childcare support to prevent them from sliding to extreme poverty.

The Taliban have acted against their own promise of eradicating corruption from Afghan society. Since their takeover of the government, they started bestowing government positions and privileges to their own members, systematically siphoned in extortion of taxes. Access to justice remains a major challenge for those facing domestic violence. Violations committed by the Taliban go unreported. Taliban control of political parties, civil society, and media have shrunk the civic space. The Taliban have implemented a consistent and methodical approach to suppress young people, especially women and girls. They have barred women from accessing education, workplaces, and even appearing in public spaces. Additionally, the Taliban have compelled many organizations to pause their services for women. Since taking control, the Taliban have introduced over fifty decrees and edicts aimed at restricting the basic human rights of women. These growing limitations on youth, particularly women and girls, have created difficulties, eliminating every ray of hope for a free life in Afghanistan. According to the United Nations, Afghanistan qualifies as a state practicing "Gender

Apartheid.” This oppressive atmosphere has unfortunately fostered an environment conducive to human trafficking. Many vulnerable youth seeking a better life abroad fall prey to traffickers without hesitation, often resorting to risky travels with insufficient documentation. These desperate youth, unaware of scams, become victims of trafficking in persons and international criminal networks. Many endure torture and detainment in neighboring states due to their lack of legal documentation and unfriendly immigration policies. This has also led to a serious mental health crisis among youth, and the resources to respond to the mental health crisis remain insufficient, causing increased rates of drug addiction and suicide among youth.

Although the Taliban have reduced the level of insurgency, Taliban internal factional rivalries, attacks perpetuated by Islamic State-Khorasan and other terrorist groups, and the Taliban’s continuous targeting of former security and military forces and human rights defenders have serious security implications. Poverty, state-imposed discrimination, and exclusion from public participation can further push youth towards active engagement in terrorist groups and the National Resistance Front (NRF), further deteriorating the fragile security situation. Jihadi schools/madrassas are proliferating, which can impose serious security implications for Afghanistan, the region, and beyond. With a predominantly young population, Afghanistan is on the brink of becoming one of the most glaring examples of state-sponsored radicalization. Today, Afghan youth are being actively deployed in combat on various fronts in the Middle East, lured by meager financial rewards and incentives such as permanent residency offered by neighboring countries.

Under Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, there exists only darkness and despair. As autocracy tightens its grip on the region and the Taliban clings to power at any cost, the escalating suppression of the Afghan people,

especially the youth, along with the imposition of brutal and outdated regulations, and factors such as unemployment, poverty, inequitable distribution of power and wealth, corruption, and discrimination pushes Afghanistan dangerously close to the brink of total paralysis. It is like a simmering fire hidden beneath the surface, ready to burst into flames sooner or later—a nation isolating itself from modernity and the rest of the world and exporting horrors, extremism, and terrorism.

Dynamics of Armenian Youth: Post-Crises Realities

Artak Shakaryan

The Armenian Velvet Revolution of 2018 marked a seismic shift in the nation's political landscape, predominantly driven by the energy and aspirations of its youth. Subsequent years have seen the emergence of the younger generation as a significant force shaping Armenia's socio-political narrative. This essay will delve deeper into the multifaceted dimensions of the hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses of Armenian youth, providing a brief analysis of their perspectives on politics, societal challenges, international relations, and the evolving post-revolutionary/post-war dynamics.

Youth and Social Media

The preference of Armenian youth for social media, particularly Facebook, as a hub for civic and political engagement, underscores the transformative role of digital platforms. These spaces serve as virtual arenas for open debates, fostering horizontal communication, and mobilizing collective action. The instrumental use of social networks during the Velvet Revolution is indicative of a broader cultural shift, empowering the youth to voice their concerns and contribute to critical discourse.

The younger Generation Z has already moved from Facebook to Instagram and TikTok, impacting the marketing and communication areas, since from now on every message should be packaged within 15-30 seconds. Most young families do not buy land line phones or TVs. Those who have TVs use them to stream YouTube or Netflix. The decline of traditional TV channels is evident.

Political Priorities and International Relations

Youths still largely believe that they can influence the direction of the country. Survey data reveals a nuanced set of concerns for Armenian youth, with conflicts with neighboring countries, territorial integrity, and foreign political tensions topping their list of apprehensions. The majority leans towards aligning with Western values, positioning Armenia as a European nation. While this stance is predominant, the nuanced perspective on international relations is noteworthy. The youth recognize the importance of cooperation with Russia for national security and economic development but express reservations concerning statehood and national values. The tailspin decreasing line of Russia's approval rating in Armenia (from 93% positive in October 2019 to 31% in December 2023, according to the International Republican Institute) is remarkably similar across all age groups.

Post-War and Post-COVID Crises

The term "Youth in Crisis" aptly characterizes the generation that witnessed the 44-day war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and navigated the challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. These dual crises have left indelible imprints on various facets of Armenian youth's lives. The outcomes of these critical situations, coupled with the persistent interference of global challenges, paint a complex picture of a generation grappling with uncertainties and evolving realities.

Political Indifference and Preferences

Despite the central role played by Armenian youth in the Velvet Revolution, a substantial portion reports political indifference. This intriguing phenomenon indicates a preference for informal, community-driven solutions over formal political engagement with a more pronounced focus on issues such as climate change, equality, and social justice. The youth wings of political parties are nominal and not active.

Democracy remains a widely supported ideal, associated with principles of equality, unity, and the exercise of fundamental human freedoms. Interestingly, there exists a minority perspective that sees positive attributes in dictatorship, highlighting concepts of unity and law obedience. The sentiment of disillusionment with democracy arises from the perceived lack of consistent Western support to democratic Armenia against the aggressions from autocratic Azerbaijan. Many young individuals emphasize their concerns about the apparent contradiction within the European Union, where there is vocal advocacy for human rights and freedoms, yet concurrent engagement in economic transactions, such as purchasing Azerbaijani hydrocarbons, which indirectly sustains an oppressive regime.

Education, Emigration and Preferences

Youth in all discussion groups prioritize meaningful professional work or entrepreneurship that earns a decent standard of living and high-quality education as top priorities. While the older generation often followed more traditional educational and career trajectories, valuing stability and job security, youth is perceived as more inclined to explore unconventional paths, including entrepreneurship, freelancing, and gig economy opportunities.

The desire to go abroad for study or work is prevalent among Armenian youth, with motivations ranging from higher salaries to better educational opportunities. The United States emerges as the most favored destination, reflecting aspirations for economic growth and personal development. While Russia also features prominently especially within provincial and rural youth due to familial traditions of temporary work, the ongoing state of war, underdeveloped economy, and comparatively lower education standards are evidently unattractive for the youth.

Challenges and Concerns

Security concerns, particularly in the aftermath of the Nagorno Karabakh war, remain a top priority for Armenian youth. Economic challenges, including rising prices and unemployment, closely follow. The challenges faced by youth, including economic uncertainties and the aftermath of crisis events, are viewed by the adult generation with empathy. There is a shared recognition of the resilience required to navigate these challenges and a hope that the younger generation will be able to leverage its unique strengths (agility, being technology savvy, inclusivity, wider horizon) to overcome adversity.

Conclusion

Armenian youth, having catalyzed transformative political events, find themselves at the nexus of evolving post-revolutionary expectations, global crises, and local challenges. Their preferences, hopes, and concerns are emblematic of a generation actively grappling with socio-political complexities. As Armenia charts its course toward the West, understanding and addressing the multifaceted dynamics of this youth cohort becomes imperative for the nation's trajectory into the future.

We Don't Need No Education. We Don't Need No Thought Control: Youth Perception on Education in Azerbaijan

Anar Valiyev and Nargiz Valiyeva

COVID-19, the advent of artificial intelligence, as well as tremendous growth of social media have had a tectonic impact on the youth generation in the world and in Azerbaijan. Not only did youth change their perception on various political processes, but their attitudes and values toward formal education have also changed. The global pandemic and short-term switch of education to the online mode, in fact, did not throw students at universities and schools into the abyss of ignorance, but instead opened new opportunities for them. The youth in Azerbaijan began to realize that education can be obtained not only formally but through other ways.

Today, we can observe some kind of crisis of formal education when the young generation, compared to previous ones, seems to question and challenge traditional ways of education. A 2023 survey by the Oxford Research Group among the youth population of Azerbaijan (1,605 respondents aged 14-29) showed¹ an interesting dynamic, whereby most of the surveyed youth (56%) highlighted dissatisfaction with their education received or received so far. Thus, to the question, *"How confident are you that your education prepares you well for the labor market?"* around 72% of respondents stated that they are not confident about their education skills and competences to compete in the labor market. That large share of unsatisfied youth shows the absence of trust toward formal education and disbelief that education in the country can help youth reaching their goals.

¹ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, "Youth Study Youth Voices of Azerbaijan – Attitudes, Values and Future Prospects," December 12, 2023. (<https://southcaucasus.fes.de/news-list/e/youth-study-youth-voices-of-azerbaijan-attitudes-values-and-future-prospects>)

As most young Azerbaijanis are dissatisfied with the quality of education, many do not feel that schools prepare them for the labor market. When those who are still in educational institutions were asked how confident they feel in terms of how well education prepares them for the labor market, 72% said that they were either not confident at all or mostly not confident (45%), with only 10% being mostly or fully confident in this regard. While the low level of education was named among the most important issues the country is facing, education was also mentioned as the first and foremost field the state should address to prevent youth migration.

In contrast with previous generations, youth is not shy to criticize the system and methods, referring to the fact that most teachers are very old and teaching methods are rather outdated. Young people are mostly receiving theoretical knowledge, while the labor market requires practical experience. Youth today claims that practice and experience is more important than theoretical information, which is currently the case in Azerbaijan. Such a situation creates problems with employment for the graduates. Thus, youth unemployment rates among youth (20-24 age) is 12,8% and for 25-29 year olds, 34,9.

A similar situation exists not only in universities but in high schools as well. Many students in their last year of classes do not attend school and prepare for national or international tests. The value of the last year school education is perceived as miserable, and students concentrate only on those subjects that are needed in their future career. Structural factors such as low funding for the education system and informal practices like bribery or nepotism in the education sector as well as in the labor market have long plagued Azerbaijan's education system and the transition to employment. Currently, no Azerbaijani higher educational institutions are among the top 1,000 universities globally, and young Azerbaijanis prefer to obtain degrees abroad or rely more on convenient ways of having informal education.

Meanwhile, the advancement of technologies such as ChatGPT and the inability of schools to detect such practices have led to a situation where pervasive cheating and use of AI has become prevalent. Such a situation has also led to massive reliance on international tests and exams, while ignoring creative subjects and writing skills. School pupils have become more practical and concentrate on things that will be useful rather than accumulating knowledge. Meanwhile, excessive reliance on online certificate courses such as Coursera, Udemy as well as the massive spread of certification in project management, accounting, HR practices, and others has led to a situation where employers have begun to trust to these platforms and certificates rather than university diplomas. Thus, youth see a situation where formal education is declining while short-term courses and certificates can guarantee better employment chances.

This type of situation leads to misunderstandings between generations, and the gap between their respective perceptions are growing wider. Thus, parents who grew up in the 1990s or before are looking at formal education as one of the main factors for success, while the younger generation do not share such ideas. The generation that grew up in the 1990s also has different views on nationalism, work ethic, spending of money, and lifestyle. Growing up in the time of the Karabakh conflict made most of the older generation more nationalistic, while the younger generation possesses more tolerant attitudes and is more cosmopolitan. Meanwhile, the absence of income, non-existence of consumerism, and low employment opportunities in the 1990s led the older generation to value the workplace and take any opportunity to work. In contrast, the generation that is 15-25 has not seen the years of deprivation, leading them to have different approaches. The younger generation searches more for quality of lifestyle, better employment opportunities, and development perspectives rather than purely money. Thus, most of the younger generation people, especially those who have had the experience of traveling, have difficulty working for

government agencies where strict Soviet-type bureaucratic rules are prevalent. Even private business in Azerbaijan have not adjusted to the realities of the post-pandemic situation and have an older approach. As one young student eloquently stated in a focus group interview: “The pandemic threw us 15 years ahead. In our minds we are in 2040 now, while universities and the job market remain in 2019.”

Georgia's Youth: Strenuous Road to the Future

Irakli Laitadze

Until recently, I would not have imagined that there would be a palpable connection between myself and Mexican drug cartels. The infamous Sinaloa cartel was the stuff of movies, but right now, when writing this article, my young friend is on a perilous journey in Chiapas, Mexico on his way to the United States as an illegal migrant. He is in the hands of and at the mercy of the Narcos' human smuggling offshoots. On the other hand, neither would I have imagined until recently that another young friend would work in Silicon Valley in the headquarters of one of the big tech firms.

These Georgians in Silicon Valley offices and those going through their tribulations in the semi-deserts of Mexico are both university graduates. So why do the paths of these two university graduates, of these two archetypical individuals, diverge so much? One drinks chilly daiquiri in a posh bar in San Jose, CA, while another gulps tepid water from a dented plastic bottle somewhere on a bank of the Usumacinta River on the border of Mexico and Guatemala?

The migrant's problems started well before his birth. In 1991-95, Georgia went through a dreadful path: the country was plagued by wars, gangsterism, and state collapse. It was very much a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. From an economic perspective in comparative terms, Georgia fared worst of all post-Soviet countries: GDP shrunk by a stunning 64 percent in a strikingly brief period of time, from 1990 to 1994, and inflation reached a galloping 15,500 percent. A great part of the population was left impoverished. The end of chaos in late 1995 was followed by all-permeating corruption. Drastic economic reforms from 2003 to 2012

significantly increased the GDP but did not have the expected spill-over effect on a sizable portion of the population. GDP continued to rise in the following period, but this did not have a great overall effect on the population either.

But my migrant does not delve on that much. He faces his personal reality: poverty and a lack of prospects. This is what he told me before embarking upon his treacherous voyage. His fortunate peer's case is a deviation from the majority of his university mates who end up with jobs that are often below their supposed qualification.

These are two extreme cases, but the statistical tale of migration is thicker. Numerous youngsters leave Georgia to find new lives in Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland, the United States, etc., filling unqualified jobs destined for undocumented immigrants with poor skills. Most of them hope to return home, but frequently, they never do nor can.

University graduates who do not emigrate or do not land in California are seeking jobs in Georgia. They are hopeful – their youthful age helps them to have this sentiment. Many want to become lawyers, financiers, bankers, or diplomats, but the economy of the country simply does not produce vacancies in such quantities to meet the supply – nor should it. Georgia has a preposterous number of universities – more than forty – for a population of approximately 3.75 million. These institutions offer courses for the above-mentioned professions, but elite vacancies are few, which is normal. Many youngsters are left frustrated with their jobs and watch bitterly the children of rich “New Georgians”, who, occasionally, happen to be the children of old, privileged Soviet groups of the *ancien régime*. There also are quite a few young individuals with enterprising spirit, but the access to financing is a critical barrier.

What about those who are in high schools? In December 2023, PISA results became available. Georgian schoolchildren do not receive particularly good results in math, science and reading, paving the way almost inevitably to

messy and destitute jobs. But they also are hopeful. Again, young age supports this emotion.

The education and associated problem of employment is not an issue that arose yesterday. It is the legacy of Soviet education and of a system that was not geared to the job market, which itself was an artificial one. This does not mean that today a noteworthy portion of youngsters do not find proper jobs. They do. But the overall trend is not buoyant - this is what they tell me.

I am neither incredibly optimistic nor exceedingly pessimistic about the coming generation – I am fairly lukewarm. Deficiencies of work ethics, of personal responsibility, of sustained effort, of discipline, and of resilience are quite noticeable. Fraudulent shortcuts in studies and in work are a relatively common feature. Nearly no one in the 15-24 age span that I talked with is concerned about Georgia's territorial integrity. For them, the issues of breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia are occurrences of antediluvian times; something that is not their concern. Their fear is tomorrow, and their hope is also tomorrow.

A blissful exception was the massive rally of mostly young people against the bill "On Foreign Agents" in March 2023. And again, in May 2024, Tbilisi was rocked by massive demonstrations against the reintroduction of the above-mentioned bill. These manifestations are spearheaded by youngsters who display a strong opposition to imperialist Russia and a fervent pro-Western stance. They are valiantly defiant against the government which drags the country into the abyss of autocracy and a quagmire of darkness. Such attitudes of young people raise hopes that one day Georgia will return to the place and space it belongs to – the European Union. If we become a EU member-state, many of the abovementioned faults will be rectified – justice and democracy helps.

The new generation has its strengths: self-reliant, pro-western, a pellucid vision of future, and they are less prone to violence. The next generation must not take the blame at all. We, their parents – and our parents – are culpable. What did we demonstrate to them in the preceding 33 years? I suppose what we have revealed to them is that *homo humini lupus est*, and doing so was utterly wrong. Did we create comfortable settings for them where the best of human qualities could flourish? Not really. Quite the opposite: “For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.” (Hosea 8:7)

Aspirations, Challenges, and Socio-Economic Conditions of Youth in the Kyrgyz Republic

Talant Sultanov, Ermek Baisalov, Aziz Soltobaev

In the heart of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan presents a compelling narrative of a young nation grappling with the dual forces of potential and challenge. The country's youth, making up 35 percent of its population, are at the forefront of a pivotal moment in national history, where their actions and decisions will shape the country's trajectory for years to come.

Kyrgyzstan's young population finds itself navigating an environment characterized by significant barriers to personal and professional development. The lack of accessible opportunities for growth, coupled with insufficient guidance post-graduation, leaves many young Kyrgyz nationals vulnerable to paths that diverge significantly from their potential. This vulnerability is heightened by the stark disparities between urban and rural youth. Those in rural areas often bear the brunt of agricultural responsibilities, which hampers their educational pursuits due to weaker school infrastructure and the high costs associated with university education. Economic migration, while offering a semblance of a solution, exacerbates the social fabric of rural communities, leaving a vacuum that impacts the well-being of children left behind.

The socio-cultural landscape in rural Kyrgyzstan further complicates the picture, especially for young women. The rise in conservatism and religiosity imposes constraints on their freedoms and opportunities, relegating many to roles defined by tradition rather than personal ambition. The prevalence of forced or arranged marriages, coupled with the cultural

acceptance of domestic violence, underscores the urgent need for societal change to empower young women towards equality and autonomy.

The state of education in Kyrgyzstan adds another layer of complexity to the youth's predicament. The education system struggles to provide youth with positive models and benchmarks necessary for personal development and lacks in fostering critical thinking and planning skills. The outdated curriculum, particularly in natural and technical sciences, renders much of the education system irrelevant to the challenges and needs of today's youth. This disconnection from contemporary realities is further reflected in the employment sector, where a significant number of university graduates are unable to find jobs within their fields of study, compelling them to seek employment opportunities abroad. This trend not only highlights the misalignment between education and the job market but also contributes to the fragmentation of family structures due to labor migration.

The cultural and healthcare sectors mirror the broader challenges confronting Kyrgyzstan's youth. Low engagement with cultural activities and an insufficient emphasis on healthy lifestyles point to a need for systemic change in how these areas are addressed. Moreover, the digital divide between urban and rural youths limits access to the Internet and the opportunities it offers for self-development, education, and civic engagement.

Amid these challenges, the capital city of Bishkek emerges as a beacon of hope and opportunity. The IT sector and entrepreneurial ventures in Bishkek represent promising pathways for the youth, showcasing the potential for innovation and economic growth. The contrast between Bishkek's dynamic tech scene and the conservative, traditional backdrop of rural areas highlights the necessity of creating bridges between these divergent realities, enabling young Kyrgyzstanis to participate in and shape the digital future.

Addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Kyrgyzstan's youth requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes their potential as active agents of change. Encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, particularly in the tech sector, improving the education system to better align with contemporary needs, and fostering a culture of health and engagement with the arts are critical steps towards empowering the youth. These efforts must be accompanied by targeted interventions to dismantle gender disparities and create inclusive pathways for young people across the country to contribute to a more equitable and prosperous future.

Research and Studies on Youth

Several studies recently analyzed the aspirations, challenges, and socio-economic conditions of young people in Kyrgyzstan, including the following four reports: "Youth Well-Being and Development Index in the Kyrgyz Republic 2022" (YWB) by UNDP, "Youth Study Kyrgyzstan: Lost in Transition? 2020/2021" (YSK) by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Foundation, "Youth Situational Analysis" (YSA) by UNFPA, and "National Poll of Kyrgyzstan – December 2023-January 2024" (NPK) by the International Republican Institute (IRI).²

The YWB report states that young people in Kyrgyzstan are a significant demographic group with the potential to drive economic growth and

² United Nations Development Program, "Youth Well-Being and Development Index in The Kyrgyz Republic," 2022. (https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-08/YWB_DI_2022.pdf); Marius Harring et. al., "Youth Study Kyrgyzstan: Lost in Transition?," Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2021. (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bischkek/18899.pdf>); Elnura Kazakbaeva, "Youth Situational Analysis," UNFPA 2021. (<https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/%D0%A1%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9%20%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B7%20%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B8%20ENG.pdf>); International Republican Institute, "National Poll of Kyrgyzstan," February 2024. (<https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-kyrgyzstan-dec-2023-jan-2024/>)

societal change. However, their potential is often hindered by various structural challenges, including limited access to quality education, high unemployment rates, and insufficient participation in civic and political processes. According to the study, young Kyrgyzstanis express a desire for improved educational opportunities, better job prospects, and greater involvement in decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities.

One of the strengths of the youth in Kyrgyzstan is their resilience and adaptability in the face of socio-economic challenges, the YWB study concludes. Many young people are increasingly turning to entrepreneurship and digital platforms as avenues for economic participation and self-expression. However, these opportunities are not uniformly accessible across the country, with rural youth and young women facing particular barriers to full participation.

The YWB research shows that the fears among the youth primarily revolve around the lack of employment opportunities and the quality of education. There is a concern that the education system does not adequately prepare them for the modern labor market, leaving many young people feeling uncertain about their future prospects. Additionally, the issue of gender inequality remains a significant concern, with young women experiencing more significant obstacles in accessing education and employment opportunities, the report indicates.

The YWB report concludes that in the coming decades, the strengths and weaknesses of the current generation of young people are likely to have profound implications for Kyrgyzstan. Their ability to access quality education and meaningful employment opportunities will determine not only their individual futures but also the overall economic and social development of the country. Enhancing youth participation in civic and political processes is also critical for ensuring that young people's voices are heard in the formulation of policies and programs that affect their lives.

Therefore, to harness the potential of the youth, is crucial for Kyrgyzstan to invest in improving their education system, creating more economic opportunities, and fostering an environment where young people can participate actively in society. Addressing gender disparities and ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all young people, regardless of their background, will be essential for building a more prosperous future for Kyrgyzstan.

These conclusions are echoed by the report “Youth Study Kyrgyzstan: Lost in Transition?” (YSK) conducted by the Freidrich-Ebert Stiftung Foundation. In summary, the rising group of 15-25-year-olds in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a mix of hope and apprehension about their future. Their aspirations for better education and employment opportunities, coupled with concerns about socio-economic inequalities and limited civic engagement, reflect the broader challenges facing the country. Addressing these issues through targeted policy interventions and inclusive development programs will be key to unlocking the potential of the youth and steering Kyrgyzstan towards a more equitable and prosperous future.

As the YSK document indicates, this demographic (15-25 years old) is seen through a lens of hope and concern for the future and balancing traditional values with a desire for modernization and change. They exhibit a strong commitment to family and education, viewing these as foundations for personal and societal growth. However, there is an evident anxiety about economic stability, employment opportunities, and the effectiveness of political engagement. Their strengths lie in resilience, adaptability, and a deep-rooted sense of community, which are counterbalanced by challenges in accessing quality education and meaningful employment. The youth’s active participation in social and political life is still evolving, reflecting a cautious optimism about their ability to influence change. As Kyrgyzstan navigates its way through socio-political transitions, the role of its youth is

crucial. Their aspirations, coupled with their concerns, are likely to drive the country towards a future that balances tradition with the demands of a rapidly changing world.

In addition to these findings, the "Youth Situational Analysis" (YSA) report views the role of young people in Kyrgyzstan as a pivotal force for the nation's future, embodying a vibrant mix of hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses[15]. Their primary hope lies in achieving better educational opportunities and secure employment, aiming to contribute positively to their country's development. However, fears about the adequacy of the current education system to prepare them for the labor market and the challenge of finding meaningful employment loom large. Strengths among this demographic include adaptability and a keen sense of social responsibility, which positions them well to tackle contemporary challenges. Nevertheless, weaknesses such as limited access to quality education, economic instability, and a lack of platforms for meaningful civic engagement hinder their potential. The YSA study concludes that these young individuals are likely to be at the forefront of driving change in Kyrgyzstan, advocating for reforms that enhance educational quality, fostering economic growth, and ensuring greater inclusivity and participation in the political process. Their active involvement and leadership could significantly influence the socio-economic landscape of Kyrgyzstan.

If the three aforementioned reports emphasize the potential and role of young Kyrgyzstanis, IRI in its "National Poll of Kyrgyzstan" for December 2023-January 2024 (NPK) provides a detailed analysis of various socio-political aspects in Kyrgyzstan, with some sections specifically addressing the perspectives and engagement of the youth. A significant portion of the youth aged 18-35 frequently use the internet, showcasing a high level of digital engagement compared to older age groups. This indicates the critical

role of digital platforms in reaching and engaging with younger demographics.

According to the poll, social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok are prominent sources of political information for Kyrgyzstan's youth. This highlights the importance of these platforms for political communication and information dissemination among younger populations.

The document discusses the perception of political inclusion among different demographic groups, including young adults. It underscores the importance of ensuring that young people, along with other groups like women, minorities, and people with disabilities, are included in political decision-making processes. Most respondents see this as very important, reflecting a desire for a more inclusive political environment.

Conclusion

The narrative of Kyrgyzstan's youth is emblematic of the broader struggles and opportunities facing young populations in transitional societies worldwide. As Kyrgyzstan stands at this critical juncture, the collective actions taken to support its youth will have lasting implications for the nation's social cohesion, economic development, and global standing. By harnessing the potential of its young population and addressing the systemic barriers they face, Kyrgyzstan can pave the way for a future that is innovative, inclusive, and resilient.

The journey of Kyrgyzstan's youth, marked by significant challenges yet brimming with untapped potential, reflects the broader dynamics at play in transitional societies. The path forward requires a concerted effort to bridge the gaps between urban and rural realities, dismantle societal norms that hinder personal and professional growth, and create opportunities that align with the aspirations and talents of the young generation. By doing so,

Kyrgyzstan can harness the energy and innovation of its youth to forge a future that is prosperous, equitable, and reflective of the diverse aspirations of its people. The story of Kyrgyzstan's youth is not just a tale of adversity but a beacon of hope for what can be achieved when a nation comes together to uplift and empower its future leaders.

Analyzing the Pulse of Gen Z in Kazakhstan: Shaping the Future in a Globalized Context

Iskander Akylbayev

As Kazakhstan surpasses three decades of independence, a transformative wave led by Generation Z—those born between 2000 and 2015—is reshaping the nation's socio-political landscape and its stance on the global stage.³ This cohort, distinct in its worldview and aspirations, has matured amidst significant political, economic, and social flux, crafting a unique set of values, expectations, and concerns that are steering the country toward a new paradigm.

Today Kazakhstan's society, in which young people comprise 30% of the population,⁴ is characterized by rapid urbanization and a growing exposure to global cultures and technologies. The advent of the internet and social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube has been instrumental in knitting Kazakh youth into the global fabric.

Digital connectivity has not only broadened the sense of their intercultural horizons but also sharpened their awareness of and engagement with pressing global issues such as climate change, human rights, and social inequality. Thus, today they anticipate proactive and tangible responses to these challenges from their leaders, thereby extending their expectations to Kazakhstan's international reputation.

³ Katie Davies, "Which generation owns Kazakhstan's future?" BBC Worklife, February 25, 2022. (<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190730-older-generations-look-at-us-and-say-were-lost>)

⁴ Zhanna Shayakhmetova, "Kazakhstan population reaches 19.17 million in 2021," *Astana Times*, December 9, 2021. (<https://astanatimes.com/2021/12/kazakhstan-population-reaches-19-17-million-in-2021/>)

Shifting Values and Expectations

Today, Kazakhstan's Generation Z gravitates towards socio-economic justice, political transparency, and social mobility. These priorities have been molded by the volatile post-independence era witnessed by their predecessors and their own experiences of Kazakhstan's oil-driven economic fluctuations. Witnessing stark economic divides has instilled in them a profound sense of social justice, urging a push for greater equality and opportunity. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who are accustomed to ideological rigidity, this generation has been nurtured in a period of relative economic development and openness, leading to a shift towards post-materialist values that champion self-expression, environmental stewardship, and quality of life.⁵

Besides, the younger generation tends to score lower on Hofstede's power distance index,⁶ which means that they are less accepting of hierarchical structures and more inclined towards horizontal relationships. This is evident in their approach to social activism and outlook towards politics, where they demand more voice and participation.⁷

Multipolar Mental Preferences

The worldview of Kazakh Generation Z has evolved from a Soviet Moscow-centric orientation to a multipolar perspective. While cultural and economic ties with Russia remain significant, the new generation is more open to

⁵ Michal Nový, Michael Smith and Tomas Katrňák, "Inglehart's scarcity hypothesis revisited: Is postmaterialism a macro- or micro-level phenomenon around the world?" *International Sociology*, vol. 32 no. 6, 2017, 683–706. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580917722892>)

⁶ Andreas Zehetner, Daniela Zehetner, Tetyana Lepeyko and Tetyana Blyznyuk, "Generation Z's expectations of their leaders: A cross-cultural, multi-dimensional investigation of leadership styles." *European Conference on Management, Leadership and Governance*, vol. 18 no. 1, 2022, 447–455. (<https://doi.org/10.34190/ecmlg.18.1.891>)

⁷ Daniyar Kosnazarov, "#Hashtag Activism: Youth, social media and politics in Kazakhstan," *Voices on Central Asia*, March 4, 2019. (<https://voicesoncentralasia.org/hashtag-activism-youth-social-media-and-politics-in-kazakhstan/>)

influences from other regions, including South Korea, China, the United States, and many European countries. This diversification of influences is changing mental preferences, making the youth more cosmopolitan in their outlook and aspirations. They are more likely to pursue education and career opportunities abroad, engage with global media, and participate in international networks, which in turn broadens their perspectives and reshapes their identity.

This can be witnessed through the unprecedented rise of the Kazakh creative industry,⁸ reflecting a nuanced blend of global influence and local heritage. Exemplified by globally recognized singer Dimash Kudaibergen, Grammy winner DJ Imanbek, musicians like Jah Khalib, Scriptionite, Irina Kairatovna and Q-pop group 91, and talents in cinema and new media such as Aisultan Seitov and Kanat Beisekeyev, Kazakhstan has emerged as a new center of gravity for soft power in Eurasia.

This pivot is also reflected in the educational aspirations of Kazakh youth, many of whom seek opportunities abroad, facilitated by initiatives like the Bolashak scholarship program and the growing number of international university branches inside Kazakhstan.

Moreover, these trends align with Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, which aims to balance relations with key players like Russia, China, the European Union, and the United States, reflecting a broader geopolitical strategy that resonates with the youth's global outlook.⁹

⁸ Assem Assaniyaz. "Kazakhstan steps up creative economy development," *Astana Times*, January 2, 2024. (<https://astanatimes.com/2023/12/kazakhstan-steps-up-creative-economy-development/>)

⁹ Aida Haidar, "Kazakhstan's Multi-Identity Foreign Policy: Path to Win-Win Relationships" *Astana Times*, February 24, 2024. (<https://astanatimes.com/2024/02/kazakhstans-multi-identity-foreign-policy-path-to-win-win-relationships/>)

New Fears and Anxieties

However, these opportunities have also brought new fears and anxieties. The global financial crises of the early 21st century, coupled with environmental challenges and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, have left a mark on the collective consciousness of Kazakh youth. There is a palpable concern over job security, climate change, and social inequality, with fears driving a greater demand for social safety nets, sustainable development, and equitable economic policies.¹⁰

Changing Social Contract and Political Leadership

The evolving aspirations of Kazakhstan's youth are recalibrating the social contract and redefining political leadership norms. This generation yearns for a governance model that is transparent, accountable, and attuned to their needs. They challenge conventional hierarchies, advocating for a more inclusive and participatory policy-making process. This shift signifies a move away from Soviet-era acquiescence to state authority, towards a more engaged and questioning citizenry.

The Kazakh political landscape is responding to these transformative currents. The resignation of President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2019 and the subsequent reforms under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signal an acknowledgment of the need for change. Tokayev's reforms, aimed at diluting presidential power in favor of a stronger parliament, reflect an effort to align with the younger generation's demands for a more democratic and responsive political system.¹¹

¹⁰ Paolo Sorbello, "The Sorrows of Kazakhstan's Generation Z," *Diplomat*, January 31, 2018. (<https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-sorrows-of-kazakhstans-generation-z/>)

¹¹ "President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address" Akorda.kz. (<https://www.akorda.kz/en/president-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-181857>)

Concluding Remarks

As Kazakhstan continues to navigate its independent trajectory, Generation Z stands at the forefront of a societal shift embodying the complex interplay of global influences and national identity. Their international outlook, shaped by demographic changes and the digital revolution, is pushing the boundaries of the old social contract, demanding a political and economic recalibration. Today, the major task for Kazakhstan's leadership lies in balancing these evolving expectations with the country's economic and geopolitical realities. In doing so, they must forge a path that honors the aspirations of its youth while safeguarding the nation's stability and prosperity. This delicate balancing act will define Kazakhstan's future in the global arena and determine the destiny of current and future young generations.

Youth in Mongolia

Khulan Davaadorj

Mongolia stands apart due to its history, geographical positioning, and population. The country is landlocked in East Asia, bordered by Russia and China, and has a population of 3.47 million people. It is considered the seventh largest landmass in Asia and the most sparsely populated fully sovereign state in the world.

Due to this position, Mongolians are a balance of both worlds – East and West – with a touch of the former Soviet Union. But due to its young population, the country is changing fast, and the young generation is leading this change.

A total of 45 percent of the population is concentrated in Mongolia's capital and largest city, Ulaanbaatar. The Government of Mongolia has been promoting population growth since its independence in 1921. Older persons constitute a mere 4 percent of the total population; thus, Mongolia can still be described as having an expansive population pyramid. This was likely caused by a financial and social crisis triggered by the fall of the Soviet Union. The Government of Mongolia consequently strongly promoted population growth by campaigning for larger families, providing longer paid maternity leave, and offering monetary incentives for mothers with more than three children. The birth rate has thus increased 22 percent since 2004, and there are now 2.7 births per woman.

At more than one million, youth aged 15–34 represent the largest demographic group in the country, constituting 35 percent of the population. Young people are a potential resource for the county's economic development, given that they account for a significant share of the working-

age population. The median age is 27. In 2022, just over 31 percent of the population in Mongolia was aged up to 14 years, showing that Mongolia is a nation with a great potential.

Youth Employment

Youth unemployment is a substantial problem in Mongolia, and as a result, international migration has significantly increased with an estimated one in eleven Mongolians living abroad. International migration and mobility of Mongolians is growing rapidly, with approximately 65 percent of Mongolians migrating doing so for economic reasons. These migrants are mainly males and travel to other Asian countries (with the majority going to China, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Korea, and Japan) some countries in Europe, (i.e., Belgium, the Czech Republic, Netherlands, and Switzerland) and the United States.

Youth unemployment is one of the predominant obstacles currently facing Mongolian society. While there are many government-backed initiatives to increase the number of young people in the labor force – such as the Part Time Project, Ulaanbaatar Soup and The Young Mongolian with a Job, and Income Program – more needs to be done. Training and skills workshops should be expanded to cover all regions of Mongolia, both rural and urban, to ensure all youth are benefitting from such programmes. Labor market information and career counseling at school should be provided so young people can ensure they have a suitable skill set for the careers they wish to pursue.

Youth Political Engagement

Among youth, those with relatively higher educational attainment or who reside in urban areas are more critical of the government than their less educated or rural counterparts. This indicates that youth with access to information about government performance tend to be critical evaluators.

Assessing the Emerging Generation

As an employer, socially active person who also has a podcast on mental health, I deal with youth a lot. Due to social media, the rising group of 15-25 year olds is exposed to information much more easily, local and global. This on one hand makes it much easier to research various issues and stay informed no matter where you are, even in the countryside. But on the other hand, it creates difficulties in terms of attentiveness and focus. The differences between our generations are very interesting as it creates challenges but also opportunities. Our older generation, especially when it comes to business and politics, is very one-sided, corrupt, strict, and still has the experience of the fall of the Soviet Union, the transition to democracy, and the opening up of the economy.

My generation (30-40 year olds) experienced the tough times of the 1990s, the disciplined lifestyle of the Asian parenting ways, but also remain young enough to adapt to the current globalization and modern ways. The younger generation have no idea about the struggles of the 1990s and are already children of the digital age. They are much freer, have greater options, and thus are more creative and independent. Yet, it does seem that there is a lack of discipline, and due to the fact that there seems to be too many options available, a struggle to find their true self creates a lot of anxiety and depression.

The young generation is much more sensitive to issues such as environment, human rights, mental health, and individualism. To my mind, this leads to a good synergy as it enables us to learn from each other and also move forward in a much more efficient way. Especially in my company, I try to have both the older generation and the younger generation as this mixture always makes for a very balanced yet productive company culture. The young are technologically advanced and we see that more and more young people are rising successfully internationally. Thus, the young population seems to be a huge changemaker in Mongolia, and due to the vast usage of

social media, they are even able to change policy making and get their voices heard.

I personally have great hope in Mongolia due to its large youth population and see how they can distinguish right from wrong much better than our older generation. If more opportunities are given to the youth and we could increase their (our) economic and political engagement, then Mongolia will definitely be able to develop in a much more sustainable way.

Youth of Tajikistan

Nailya Menlasheva

In Tajikistan, people under 35 make up about 70 percent of the total population, according to 2023 statistics. This generation represents the future of the country and holds immense potential to shape the trajectory of Tajikistan in the coming decades. Given historical context and current advancements, it is critical to keep in mind that this potential might not be fully realized or might even go in the wrong direction in the absence of appropriate training, employment opportunities, and support networks. Tajikistan can build a brighter and more prosperous future for all of its citizens, as well as for the entire region, by empowering its youth.

Tajikistan's youth no longer share a common Soviet identity, have been educated in a collapsing educational system, have limited economic opportunities, and have grown up in conditions of state-building and religious revival.

The quality of education remains one of the most pressing concerns for youth development. Low teacher salaries and a standard approach to learning create a negative environment in many educational institutions. Annual state education budget expenses are very low, never exceeding five percent of GDP. However, the government has been creative in solving educational problems by increasing the number of exchange programs between universities, and the number of participants in these programs is growing. It is critical to ensure that all talented youth have equal access to such educational opportunities and that those who successfully complete their studies have enough space and support to invest back into the country.

Language barriers in Tajikistan make it difficult for young people to access modern information, limiting their ability to form independent opinions and fully participate in society. With Tajik as the official language and Russian as a second language, many young people have difficulty accessing comprehensive information that is primarily available in English. This lack of access limits their ability to stay current on global trends, advancements, and diverse perspectives, stifling their personal growth and development. By addressing these language barriers through improved language education and increased information availability, Tajikistan can empower young people to broaden their horizons, develop critical thinking skills, and actively shape the country's future path toward sustainable development.

Gender inequality also impedes the country's full youth potential. Cultural norms and stereotyping of women remain widespread, particularly in remote areas where the majority (more than 70 percent) of the population lives. Girls in remote areas do not attend school, and women face discrimination in all forms of employment. By breaking down barriers to education and employment opportunities for women, the country can ensure a more inclusive and equitable future for all its citizens.

Many studies come to the same conclusion: young people feel alienated from politics, the economy, and decision-making processes, and this leads to anger, conflict, and class enmity. The young generation frequently feels unsupported in their home country, leading to emigration, crime, interest in extremism, and involvement in conflict. According to official statistics, one in every nine Tajiks is a labor migrant, with the majority of them aged 18 to 50. Unofficially, the number of people working overseas, primarily in Russia, is three times higher. To address the aforementioned issues, Tajikistan has adopted the Concept of Youth Policy and the Youth Development Strategy, with the primary goals of improving educational quality, lowering crime, creating more job opportunities, and increasing

sociopolitical participation. It is critical to ensure proper monitoring and implementation by involving various stakeholders and carrying out various projects in this area.

It should be noted that a small number of young people, in comparison to the majority, use various methods to work creatively within the existing environment to achieve their goals. These bold youth representatives are typically educated abroad, intelligent, and creative. However, the majority of gifted individuals with access to quality education depart the nation in pursuit of a better life in Europe, America, Dubai, South Korea, or Russia. This brain drain phenomenon poses a challenge for the country's development as it loses valuable human capital. Efforts should be made to create opportunities and incentives for these talented individuals to stay and contribute to the nation's growth. There are several examples where entrepreneurs with degrees from prestigious world universities have returned to Tajikistan and are running successful businesses domestically. By providing support such as funding, mentorship, and networking opportunities, more talented individuals could be encouraged to stay and make a positive impact on their homeland.

Tajikistan currently lacks sufficient natural resources to export; it is a landlocked country that is 93 percent covered by mountains, so investment in young population human capital should be one of the country's strategic priorities. Tajikistan's youth population holds the key to the country's future success and prosperity. However, various challenges, such as a limited education system and economic opportunities, language barriers, and gender inequality hinder their full potential. Tajikistan can empower its youth to actively shape not only the country's future but also the future of the region as a whole by addressing these issues through improved education, increased access to information, making more space for talented young people, and breaking down gender barriers.

Youth in Turkmenistan: Hopes, Fears, Strengths and Weaknesses

Kakajan Berdiyev

Turkmen society is a traditionally patriarchal and conservative society, which strongly follows the unique set of rules and traditions known as *Türkmençilik* (literally translated as Turkmenness). Until recent years, Turkmen tended to follow this set of rules and traditions without any questioning. However, increasing levels of usage of Internet and social media, exposure to different cultures, the Covid-19 pandemic, and living and studying abroad during the last two decades are phenomena that have significantly affected the social norms, mindsets, and lifestyle of Turkmen society, especially for people under 45. Especially since Turkmen youth (Generations Y, Z, and Alpha) never experienced Soviet times.

Hopes: An Open and Free Society, Freedom of Expression, Equal Access to Opportunities

The young generation hopes to live in an open and free society more than anything else because every day they witness on social media how their peers live in free societies. They also encounter pressure from both the regime and other people about how to behave or not to behave in their daily lives .

Youth tend to believe in freedom of expression. This generation is more prone to express their views openly about something they do not agree with. They even express their different views on family matters, which was still taboo a decade ago. The so-called “Greta effect” has also inspired them. They witnessed on social and traditional media how their peer, 16-year-old

climate activist Greta Thunberg raised public awareness about climate change across the world. Not having equal access to opportunities is something that youth agree upon, leading to staunch support for equal access to opportunities.

Fears: Rejection of Family; Persistence of Status Quo; Neighborhood Pressure

The most pressing fear among youth is the rejection of family. Unfortunately, Turkmen society is not yet ready to embrace non-traditional behaviors and attitudes. Having grown up in a conservative society, most parents do not welcome their children wearing or doing something non-traditional, not to mention radical changes like different sexual orientations. Many of the youth fear that if they break taboos or social norms, their parents and other family members may reject them by suspending their relationships, support, or contact.

The autocratic political system and status quo prevents the healthy development of both state and society. Youth understand that the current system silences any diverging voices, and they fear that this status quo will persist forever.

Neighborhood pressure is a very common in Turkmen society. It automatically rejects radical changes in worldview and lifestyle. Youth face this neighborhood pressure, and many fear it.

Strengths: Patriotism, Hard Work, Intelligence, Helpfulness

Young members of Turkmen society grow up with a very strong sense of patriotism. *Türkmençilik* (Turkmenness) requires being hard-working. First, parents teach their children to be hard-working.

Being intelligent and helpful are the other main characters of Turkmen youth. I observe everyday how the young generation is more helpful and intelligent than their elders.

Weaknesses: No National Identity, Modernism vs Traditionalism, Information and Education

The biggest weakness of the young generation is that their national identity has not formed yet. This makes them vulnerable to abuses. Youth grow up in conservative families, with parents following strict *Türkmençilik* (conservative lifestyle), while every day they are exposed to free and liberal lifestyles on social media. Therefore, the young generation face a dilemma of traditionalism vs. modernism. However, the majority of this generation lean towards modernism, and few of them follow the conservative lifestyle.

Because of the high level of Internet censorship, the Turkmen youth generation is comparatively less informed and less educated than their peers in other countries. Despite the high appetite of youth to learn more, this situation makes it nearly inaccessible and unaffordable for most families.

Unfortunately, the young Turkmen generation is unprepared to face and tackle the most pressing global challenges: attempts to dismantle the current international economic and legal order, geopolitical confrontations, the dysfunction and inefficiency of international institutions, climate change, increasing populism and right-wing movements, proliferating wars and conflicts, cyber attacks, information operations, etc. Most of them either have no idea or very limited information about these challenges.

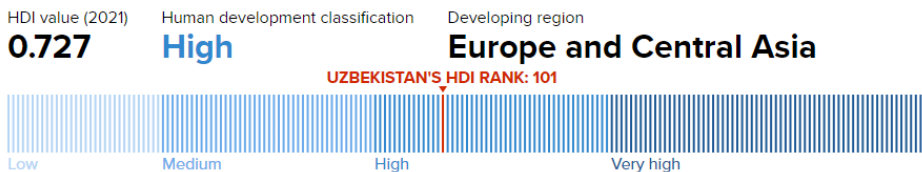
An Arab proverb says that “the man who speaks about future is lying even if he tells the truth.” In other words, nobody can precisely foretell the future, because there are many known unknowns and unknown unknowns. However, we can attempt to predict the future based on the signs we see and the impressions we have. I can see and observe the changes happening in the social dynamics of Turkmen society. The young generation’s behavior and attitudes are harbingers of the large and long-expected radical changes in both the status quo and in Turkmen society’s lifestyle.

During the three decades of Independence, it was easier to control and restrict people by isolating them from global interactions. Nearly all members of society grew up in Soviet times, isolated similarly under the Iron Curtain. But times are changing, and the same tools and instruments are no longer very useful to control youth. The young generation refuse to be isolated and controlled. That being said, I do not expect any radical changes in the next decade or two. However, in the long term, sometime after 2040, I expect big changes. A color revolution, or a sudden and unexpected incident may trigger this change. Both local dynamics of Turkmen society and international developments will eventually require a structural change because at some point in time, the current status quo will not be sustainable anymore.

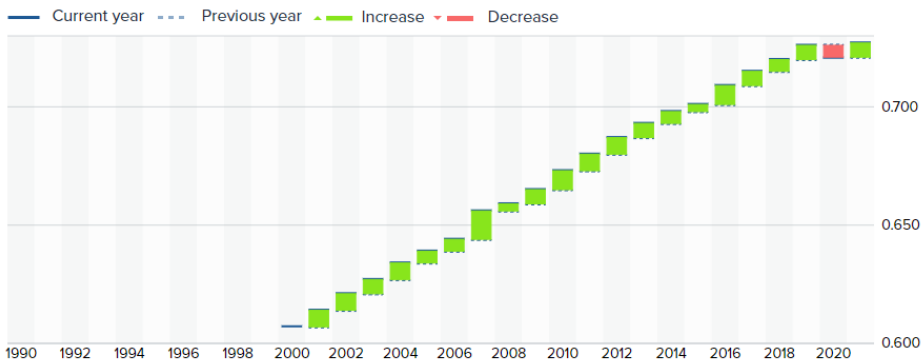
Four Stories, Four Paths: A Glimpse into Uzbekistan’s Youth and the Nation’s Many Futures

Murod Ismailov

Understanding the lives of Uzbekistan's 15–25-year-olds is like studying a chessboard at the outset of a game. Each piece, distinct in role and potential moves, mirrors youth’s journey through a maze of the nation’s history, culture, and governance, crafting their own unique destinies through personal choices. To gain insights into Uzbekistan’s younger generation, I initially looked for credible data. Agencies like the [UNICEF](#) and the [World Bank](#) have dedicated substantial resources to [documenting](#) youth conditions. Some highlights are rather optimistic, such as Uzbekistan's considerable progress in the Human Development Index.



Trends in Uzbekistan's HDI 1990 – 2021



Source: [UNDP](#), 2022

However, finding the meaning beyond statistics proved challenging. So, I moved away from numbers to uncover the real stories of four young Uzbeks, varying in age and background. I changed their personal information to protect their identities. These stories, collected during my research on social capital and more recent conversations, echo the broader experiences of Uzbekistan's youth, each navigating their unique journey akin to the diverse strategies on a chessboard.

Sanobar, 16: On a Thorny Road to a Better Life

Meet Sanobar, a 16-year-old from a kishlak near Muinak in Karakalpakstan, where the remnants of a once-thriving fishing community linger beside the dwindling Aral Sea. Her encounters with UN environmentalists and the influx of foreigners drawn to the area's eerie boat graveyard have illuminated the potential that speaking a foreign language holds. For Sanobar, learning English appears as a beacon of hope amidst her daily challenges, dedicating herself to study through YouTube on her phone.

She dreams of relocating to Tashkent, enchanted by the prospect of cleaner air (which is not completely true, but let's not shatter her hopes), accessible running water, and schools free from the burdensome trek and harsh conditions of her current life. Her dedication culminates in the acceptance of her application to a prestigious Academic Lyceum under Westminster University in Tashkent, news that brings mixed emotions to her family. While they grapple with the thought of Sanobar moving 1,300 km away and the financial strain it implies, the aspiration for her brighter future takes precedence. They decide to sell their old Matiz to support her journey to Tashkent.

Sanobar's story mirrors one likely future for Uzbekistan, navigating between systemic challenges like the rural-urban divide, healthcare decline, and poor infrastructure, and external pressures like climate change and

water scarcity. These issues, alongside urbanization, brain drain, and the rise of climate refugees, sketch a complex landscape. Many young Uzbeks encounter harsher or more manageable circumstances, but a common thread is the aspiration to improve their lot, whether by leaving their hometowns or the country.

The growth of private language schools, alongside stories of Uzbeks entering Ivy league universities, sometimes on full scholarships, reflects this ambition. Having experienced this firsthand, I am viewing the trend of turning hope into action with optimism. It highlights young people's belief in the value of knowledge and skills. While such ambitions may contribute to brain drain, they also signify a vibrant push towards progress, impacting Uzbekistan's future economy and human capital.

Sukhrob, 19: On Gold, Faith, and Identity

We turn to Zarafshon, located in the Navoi region amidst the Kizilkum desert. This town stands on a literal goldmine and is a hub for some of the world's top production of rare metals and minerals. It is also where Sukhrob, a 19-year-old, hoped to join the regional mining university but missed out on a scholarship, delaying his dream to become an engineer like his late father at the Navoi Mining Plant, a leading producer of gold and uranium.

Faced with the choice of working to support his mother or studying for exams with costly tutors, Sukhrob finds himself at a crossroads. Seeking guidance, he turns to Friday prayers at a local mosque, finding solace and direction in faith. This experience leads him to grow a beard, become a frequent mosque attendee, and find community, postponing his academic ambitions for now as he searches for a job, which proves challenging. Ultimately, he travels to Russia for a construction job, finding solidarity and shared purpose with other Uzbeks who have found strength in their faith abroad.

Sukhrob's story reflects the subtle rise of religion as a vital identity marker among young Uzbeks, even in traditionally secular areas. Islam provides a sense of purpose and stability for many during tough times, marking a shift towards a more organic embrace of faith compared to the past. However, the blending of religion and politics remains a complex issue, with potential implications for the country's ideological path.

Sitora, 21: On Tradition and Communalism

Speaking of tradition, the story of Sitora, a 21-year-old married woman, stands out. Born and raised in the Surkhandarya Region, she did well in school. Thanks to her father's farming business, she was in a favorable position to gain admission to a nursing college and pursue a career as a nurse—a profession valued more by those seeking brides than by the hospitals themselves. However, upon graduation, marriage and motherhood to two children soon followed, dimming her career aspirations. Aware that defying her husband's demand to stay home would mean challenging the entire community, or *mahalla*, Sitora finds herself silently resenting those around her. She grapples with the dilemma of whether it is right to sacrifice personal dreams, freedoms, and the social good (such as helping patients in a hospital) to uphold traditional values.

The paradox of traditionalism in Uzbekistan, as experienced by thousands of young women, is that traditions, while designed to strengthen societal bonds, often contribute to the unraveling of the social fabric under contemporary conditions. Sitora perseveres for the sake of her children, but many others are losing patience. The increasing divorce rates in both rural and urban settings highlight a growing tension. The way the government and community address these challenges may significantly impact the shape of Uzbekistan's social fabric in the forthcoming years.

Anvar, 25: On Innovation and Resilience

Anvar, a 25-year-old from Samarkand, has turned his academic journey into a pioneering venture. After mastering Japanese at a foreign languages university in Uzbekistan's second-largest city, his scholarship to a leading Japanese university introduced him to aquaponics—an innovative agricultural technique. Recognizing the potential back home, Anvar invested his scholarship savings into starting a small aquaponics farm, despite the bureaucratic hurdles and opaque customs practices that have slowed progress. Though his venture is yet to turn a profit, Anvar is determined to navigate these challenges.

Uzbekistan's path to innovation and economic growth extends beyond attracting foreign investments. It lies in nurturing the returning talent pool—thousands of young Uzbeks coming home armed with new skills and ideas. The country's future hinges on creating a transparent, supportive business environment that not only retains this skilled workforce but also leverages it to revamp the national economy, preparing for a more innovative future.

One Generation, Many Futures

Each narrative offers a glimpse into Uzbekistan's potential futures, a complex tapestry of development paths: Sanobar's journey suggests a focus on development, welfare, and bridging the urban-rural divide amidst unpredictable environmental challenges; Sukhrob's experiences underline the impact of ideology and faith on young Uzbeks; Sitora's life reflects the enduring influence of tradition, necessitating adjustments to maintain social harmony; and Anvar's venture into innovation emphasizes the need for reforms and a supportive stance towards those aiming to contribute positively to the nation.

Authors

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