

Pollution, Politics, and Public Opinion In Central Asia

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Out of the remains of an environmentally devastated USSR, the new countries of formerly Soviet Central Asia have emerged as some of the greatest environmental basket cases. Heavy use of agrochemicals, diversion of water from the two rivers that feed the region's cotton plants, widespread lack of water treatment, and the like have led to health and environmental problems on a scale almost unfathomable to most Americans. The beginning of environmental movements in the region, and the appearance of environmental issues on the agenda of demonstrations and political platforms, might imply a high degree of public concern over these problems. Recent public opinion surveys in Central Asia, however, suggest somewhat different results, with implications not only for Central Asia, but for Western efforts in the region as well.

Environmental Catastrophe

Due to decades of neglect of environmental questions in the USSR as a whole, and skewed economic policies particularly in the Soviet south, Central Asia currently has among the most devastating environmental problems of the territory that comprised the USSR. For many, this is best symbolized by the Aral Sea catastrophe. Because of diversion of water for cotton cultivation and other purposes, in the thirty years between the early 1960s and 1990s, the Aral Sea has shrunk to only about 30 percent of its 1960 volume and roughly half its 1960 geographical size. The resulting increased drying up and salinization of the lake, and extensive salt and dust storms from the sea's dried bottom, have wrecked havoc with the region's agriculture, ecosystem, and the population's health.

The effects of the Aral Sea disaster have only been compounded by the increasingly serious problem of contaminated drinking water. Large scale use of dangerous chemicals for cotton cultivation, poor irrigation, and especially poor drainage systems have led to a high filtration of salinized and contaminated water back into the soil. In the late 1980s, the Turkmen minister of health, K. Chagylov, described the Amu Darya as "little more than a sewage ditch with

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more than three billion cubic meters of collector drainage and unpurified industrial waste waters—saturated with pesticides—thrown into the river each year from Uzbek and Turkmen cotton fields.” Today, the situation is described only in more severe terms. In some of the republics, most water systems do not meet minimum requirements for permissible levels of bacterial content. The local press and local government reports have consistently reported that communal water systems do not meet health standards; large proportions of the population lack drinking water systems and must drink water straight from the contaminated irrigation ditches, canals, or the river itself.

Poor water management and heavy use of agrochemicals have also taken their toll in polluting the air and degrading the soil. Although there is some discussion of growing air pollution in Central Asia from factories and auto emissions, severe air quality problems focus on the prevalence of salt and dust storms and the spraying of pesticides and defoliants for the cotton crop.

The cumulative health effects have been devastating. Frequently cited in the press are increasing occurrences of typhoid, paratyphoid, and hepatitis due to contaminated drinking water; rising rates of intestinal disease and cancers; and increased frequency of anemia, dystrophy, cholera, dysentery, and a host of other illnesses, including, according to one Russian specialist, a “lag in physical development” especially among children. According to one estimate cited by RFE/RL, 69 out of every 100 adults in the Aral Sea region are deemed to be “incurably ill.” The average life span in some villages in Karakalpakstan is roughly 38 years.

Infant mortality—perhaps the best measure of the health of a population—has increased dramatically over the past twenty years, by as much as 50 percent in some areas of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. At a time when infant mortality rates were declining in most other parts of the USSR, between 1970 and 1986 it rose by a dramatic 49 percent in Uzbekistan, from 31 deaths before the age of one per 1,000 births, to 46.2 deaths. Today, official data put the level of infant mortality in parts of Karakalpakstan at roughly 110 per 1,000 children born, i.e., more than one out of every ten children born do not live to see their first birthday. Because of statistical and other problems of undercounting, officials in the former USSR put this figure much higher, perhaps as high as 150-200/1,000. And the health care system to deal with these problems is abysmal. The majority of hospitals in the region, for example, have no hot water—some have no running water at all—and most lack sewer lines.

The economic effects of these environmental disasters have likewise been enormous. Carried far distances by wind, for example, the salts from the Aral Sea have reportedly ruined hundreds of thousands of hectares of once-arable land. According to one Uzbek report from the late 1980s, between 1976 and 1985, 911,800 hectares in Uzbekistan were brought into production; but during the same period, *losses* of irrigated land reached 550,000 hectares. Because of

increasing salinization, even during the 1980s, planners were pumping more investment into farms and sustaining greater losses. Today, about 44 percent of irrigated land is strongly salinated in Uzbekistan alone.

Public Attitudes

In light of the enormity of these problems, one might assume that environmental issues are likely to be uppermost in the minds of the local populations, a potential catalyst for public pressure if not enormous unrest, and, as a consequence, the most important area targeted by Western assistance. This would appear to be buttressed by the number of environmental groups that have been formed to address these challenges in Central Asia, and the expression of environmental grievances at demonstrations and in political platforms.

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But, ironically, public awareness and concern over environmental problems in fact has been low in Central Asia relative to other parts of the former USSR—perhaps especially in Uzbekistan where environmental problems are among the most severe. In 1990, this author, through Carnegie

Mellon University and in conjunction with the Public Opinion Service VP, conducted a public opinion survey on attitudes toward environmental and other issues in the “then” USSR. In face-to-face interviews conducted in fifteen different regions of the USSR and in the respondents' own languages, we interviewed 2500 people, several hundred of whom were located in the three republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

Despite the magnitude of environmental problems in Central Asia, most significantly in Uzbekistan, we found a lower level of awareness and concern about these problems than anywhere else our survey was conducted. Respondents were asked to rank a series of social problems in order of importance. Roughly one-third of the entire pool of respondents put environmental protection in first place. This tied with the number who put provision of food products in first place, and all remaining categories received far less.

Among the Central Asian respondents, however, the proportion of those naming environment as the highest priority was far lower. Only about one fifth of Kazakhs gave the same ranking—a close second to the 23 percent who ranked shortages of food and consumer goods as the most important problem. And among the Uzbeks, responses showed quite a different set of priorities altogether: roughly 40 percent of respondents ranked inter-ethnic conflicts in first place, with the next most important problem, named by 25 percent, as crime. Way down in last place, only 3.6 percent of Uzbek respondents ranked environmental

problems as a first priority.

Likewise with environmental and economic tradeoffs, Uzbek respondents showed the least concern for environmental issues. When asked which of the following scenarios would be preferable for the future: 1) that consumer goods availability gets better, but the quality of the environment stays the same; 2) that consumer goods availability stays the same, but the environmental situation slightly improves; or 3) that consumer goods availability gets worse, but the environmental situation significantly improves—the largest group of *all* respondents, or about 38 percent, selected the second option; about 23 percent selected the first option, and 20 percent selected the third. By contrast, the largest group, or 42 percent of all *Uzbek* respondents selected the first option, and fewer than 6 percent selected the third—i.e., that the economy could worsen but the environmental situation would significantly improve.

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These results have been mirrored in other surveys taken in Central Asia in the past few years, including a survey just concluded by this author under the auspices of the U.S. Institute of Peace and in conjunction with the “Expert” Center in Uzbekistan. This survey, conducted in June and July 1993, involved over 2,000 respondents in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in face-to-face interviews in one of four languages: Uzbek, Kazakh, Russian, and Karakalpak. Preliminary results suggest that attitudes toward the environment have not changed dramatically since the survey conducted two and one half years earlier.

This is not to say that environmental issues are not considered important. Roughly half of respondents in Kazakhstan, and close to one-third in Uzbekistan, believe that the environmental situation in the region where they live is dangerous for human habitation. About 80 percent of respondents in both our Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan surveys said that environmental protection measures are very important to achieve normal living conditions in these new states.

But when asked, for example, which problems on a list of challenges should be addressed in first, second, and third place, in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, issues of high prices, unemployment, housing, crime, and ethnic relations were all ranked as more important than environmental problems. In Uzbekistan, for example, only 4.5 percent of respondents put environmental problems in first place, as opposed to 29 percent who put high prices in first place, and 23 percent who put unemployment there. Similar ranking of social priorities was found, even in such environmentally devastated regions as Karakalpakstan. In Karakalpakstan environmental problems were ranked roughly

on a par with unemployment and housing problems. In second place was high prices and corruption. This ranking occurred even though about three-fourths of the respondents there believe that the environmental situation in the region where they live is very dangerous.

Regarding environmental and economic tradeoffs, about one-third of respondents in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are against closing factories that are dangerous to the environment and people's health if this should result in increased unemployment. Emphasis on economic over environmental concerns

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was slightly more pronounced in Uzbekistan. More than one-third of all respondents said they would not agree to some worsening of their own material position, if it would help to protect the environment. While not dramatic, these numbers may be particularly telling given the relative “political incorrectness” of these answers; most people want to appear environmentally conscious, even if this is not reflected in their actions.

Finally, survey results suggest that political environmental awareness is low in Central Asia as well. When asked what government or non-governmental organizations they know that focus on environmental problems, two thirds of all respondents in Kazakhstan, and three fourths of all respondents in Uzbekistan, could not name a single organization. The majority of those who named an organization in Kazakhstan cited the Nevada Semipalatinsk antinuclear movement, while the majority of those in Uzbekistan named the State Committee on Environment, i.e., the local equivalent of our Environmental Protection Agency. Only a small percentage of respondents seemed to be aware of the many non-governmental organizations and other environmental movements that have emerged over the past several years.

Part of the reason for these disparities between environmental and economic priorities is the fact that environmental concerns must be balanced against other equally devastating challenges facing the Central Asian peoples. With a population growth rate averaging around 2.5 percent per year and birthrates still ranging between 30-40 per 1,000 population, or more than three to four times that of the Russians up north, these new Central Asian countries have seen enormous and growing population pressures on increasingly limited resources. Over the last two decades, economic growth in most per capita terms has fallen sharply. The tremendous and growing pressures on resources and worsening water supply in Central Asia are expected to place increasingly greater strains on producers and consumers alike. Unemployment has risen, with current estimates

at more than one in ten able-bodied citizens now jobless in Uzbekistan alone. The amount of land both per capita and per agricultural worker has been decreasing greatly. Ethnic tensions, and competition between countries and groups over scarce resources have already led to conflicts, and are likely to lead to more.

Conclusion

Our survey and others would tend to suggest that Central Asians view environmental problems as part and parcel of a rapidly deteriorating quality of life—and not necessarily as the most immediate or most important component. While it is important to address environmental problems within the new Central Asian states, our survey stands as a reminder that we cannot view them in isolation. Efforts to address environmental problems will have more resonance if they place environmental problems in the context of equally catastrophic economic, demographic, political, and social challenges plaguing the populations of these newly independent, but often impoverished states. At a time when public opinion is just beginning to play a role in Central Asia, this will likely be the only way that Western efforts will engender any level of genuine public and policy support.