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Wisdom of Social Change in Uzbekistan: Appliance of Ethnicity, Region and Religion

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Abstract: Though it has been well acknowledged that Uzbekistan has experienced improvement in economic and human development over the last three decades, this paper studies the impact of ethnicity, religion and region on discernment of socio-economic and socio-cultural change. Footed on an outcome of the study in Uzbekistan in 2010-11, we discovered that despite of background features, a bulk of people tales socio-economic advancement, more ethnic integration and less favouritism. Even though traditio nally excluded ethnic and religious groups are somewhat less likely to report social improvements than more privileged groups, two models of socio-economic and socio-cultural change show that such group differences disappear when controlling for socio-economic and other background characteristics. The survey data from our study unequivocally show that there are considerable differ-ences across ethnic, regional and religious groups on indicators of socio-economic status. This applies to literacy, educational levels, income and consumption levels, as well as to amenities and con-sumer goods. Social interaction between different ethnic, religious and regional groups is constricted by deeply entrenched cul-tural norms that prohibit direct contact between them. These groups are not confined to one

geographical area but are scattered all over the country. In the present research paper the relationship between perceptions of social change and the impact of ethnicity, religion and region has been attempted to explore with well designed methodology. This article is concerned with people's perceptions of the extent of socio-economic and socio-cultural change that has taken place in Uzbekistan and how these perceptions vary across individual, household and community variables. In particular the focus is on the perspicacity of social change and the effects of ethnicity, religion and region, which are features that predominate in the discussion of inclusion and exclu-sion in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Religion, Region, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, Social Change, Social Exclusion, Islam, Fergana, Tashkent, Uzbeks, Modernization, Education, Political, Economic.

1. Introduction

Uzbekistan has made substantial progress in terms of economic and human development over the past three decades. Development in Uzbekistan shows substantial differences across regions and between urban and rural areas. The far-western and mid-western development regions lag far behind the others, and poverty levels are highest and access to services lowest there. Differences across income groups also increased. Most of this increase in inequality occurred between the middle income and high income groups. In addition to remoteness and poverty, ethnicity and religion are often referred to as barriers to economic advancement and social inclusion. Social hierarchies based on

ethnicity and religion, are distinct features of Uzbek society and the latest survey identified 136 ethnic and religious groups.¹ Since then even more groups have been identified. Despite the abolition of formal hierarchies and the affirmation of equality of different groups before the law in the 1992 Constitution, discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and religion persists.² The notion that progress is restricted by ethnicity and religious affiliation is prevalent in the academic and public debate in Uzbekistan.

Whilst some emphasize the persistence of traditional patterns of social relations, others pinpoint the changes that have taken place and argue that social barriers are slowly eroding. Some reports explain the changes by economic progress and urbanization, whereas others refer to the conflict and the role of the educationists in enforcing and promoting change. Another strand of thought focuses on the impact of social and political mobilization in explaining social change in Uzbekistan. Hence the discourse on social change in Uzbekistan weaves together two seemingly contradictory views. The first is that Uzbek society is marred by unchanging ethnic, religious and regional divisions that effectively prevent excluded groups from upward economic mobility and inclusion in the social and political mainstream. The second downplays group boundaries and maintains that Uzbek society is changing through processes of modernization, such as urbanization, migration, and mobilization by political parties and civil society organizations. As we have seen, the surveys of international and national agencies suggest

¹ Halwai, Mushtaq (2008). *Ethnicity in Uzbekistan: A study in culture and identity*. Srinagar, India: Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir. P. 10.

² UNDP (2006–07). *Report on the status of women in Uzbekistan*. New York: Regional programme in support to gender, in development of RBEC/UNDP. pp. 15,18.

considerable improvements on key indicators.³ However, on average there are some ethnic groups – and especially those living in the north western regions, who are usually landless agricultural workers – have the highest illiteracy rates, pov-erty levels and working conditions among the social groups of Uzbekistan.⁴

The largest share of the Uzbekistan population is made up of Uzbek ethnic group and those who migrated at different points of time and speak various languages and dia-lects of various origins including Armenian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Belarusian, etc.⁵ They are settled both in the hill areas and the plain regions of the country. Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Tatars, Karakalpaks and others are believed to have migrated to Uzbekistan from the north and south, but are often considered as indigenous nationalities of Uzbekistan.⁶ In the Fergana valley region there is also an additional number of ethnic groups with separate identities, some of which are considered indigenous to the region.⁷ Despite being treated as one category in this article, it should be stressed that these ethnic groups are far from homogeneous, and there is considerable variation both within and among the ethnic groups in terms of living conditions and political influence.

According to the 2008 Census the majority of the population

³ Halwai, Mushtaq (2008). Op. Cit. P.11.

⁴ Gleason, G (2003). *Markets and politics in Central Asia – structural reform and political change*. New York: Routledge. P.116.

⁵ Rios, R. (2006). *Migration Perspectives: Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. International Organization for Migration. pp. 23-27.

⁶ Ali Mansoor and Bryce Quillin (2006). *Migration and Remittances: Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. The World Bank. P. 9.

⁷ Halwai, Mushtaq (2008). Op. Cit. P. 13.

of Uzbekistan is Muslims, but some population of the various ethnic groups like Koreans are Buddhists. The religious categories and sizes of religious groups are, however, contested. For example, differences between Muslims and Buddhists have been in general very subtle in nature due to the intermingling of Muslims and Christianity and Buddhist beliefs. Of all the religious groups in Uzbekistan, the Buddhists stand out as particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, especially in areas where they are living as minorities in a Muslim cultural environment. The minority religions make up a socially and economically disadvantaged group. Issues related to the regional identity of the Uzbek population are high up on the political agenda at present. Political tension surrounds the divide between the populations of the various regions. Historically, there has been discrimination of some ethnic groups and lack of trust.⁸ The Buddhists have traditionally been under-represented in the Uzbek political structures, bureaucracy and army. While the Uzbek language has been a lingua franca among the communities of the country, it has not been recognized as first official language in Uzbekistan.⁹

As suggested above, the socio-economic and socio-cultural divides coincide. If ethnic, religious and regional barriers are important in explaining social change and mobility one can expect to find that assessments of change vary according to such affiliation. For example, Karakalpaks and Muslims are expected to report less social change than other regional, religious and ethnic groups.¹⁰ On the other hand, if the

⁸ UNDP (2005a). *Central Asia Human Development Report*. Slovakia: UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. pp. 13,14.

⁹ Macleod, Calum and Bradely Mayhem (2002). *Uzbekistan: The golden road to Samarkand*. Odyssey Publishers. pp. 33-42.

¹⁰ Gleason, Gregory (2008). 'The Idea of Greater Central Asia'. *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*. Centre of Central Asian Studies: University of Kashmir. Vol. XVII,

ongoing social mobility cuts across ethnic, religious and regional divides, one would be more likely to find that group differences have little effect on perceptions of socio-economic and socio-cultural change. This article sets out to explore whether the same back-ground variables have an impact on how people perceive respectively socio-economic and socio-cultural change. The main concern is to what extent and how ethnicity, religion and region are relevant when explaining variation in perceptions of both these types of perceived social change.

2. Data and Methods

The data on popular discernment of social change in Uzbekistan has been collected through a comprehensive household survey that was carried out in six selected oblasts of Uzbekistan in November 2010–January 2011. The study was carried out by the researchers with the help of trained field workers through face-to-face interviews of a randomly selected respondent in a total of 600 households. Target populations in each oblast were respectively Uzbeks, Tajiks, Tatars, Kazakhs, etc., Muslims, Christians, Buddhists etc., and Fergana, Khiva, Samarkand, Tashkent etc., that is, ethnic, religious and regional groups that are commonly considered to be among excluded groups in Uzbekistan according to a variety of socio-economic and/or political parameters. In each stratum 22 people of the selected and 11 households of the non-selected ethnicity were sampled, so that we are able to compare the target groups with the rest of the population in each district. In this paper

weights have been applied to adjust for numerical differences between target and non-target groups so that target groups count according to their relative size in each of the six oblasts. Each oblast is given equal weight in the subsequent analysis, regardless of population size.

It should be noted that the sample in each survey oblast is representative of the oblast as such. We do not claim that the survey is representative of Uzbekistan, since only six out of its 12 administrative provinces are covered in the survey. Nevertheless, the survey is likely to cover a lot of the variation in the country, since geographic regions are covered and representatives of the larger ethnic and socio-economic groups are included. The six selected oblasts belong to the medium range according to their score on the Human Development Index (HDI) of the oblasts of Uzbekistan but are not necessarily representative of the development regions or elevation zones to which they belong. The survey contains questions on a variety of variables related to social exclusion, in terms of its socio-economic, cultural, political and participatory dimensions. The survey includes information about each individual in the household, in-depth information on randomly selected individuals (18 and above years of age), and detailed information about the household level. It should be noted that the variance estimation of ordinary statistical packages assumes ordinary random samples. We are aware that the complex sample design and weights used here may alter significance tests somewhat, and such tests of statistical significance should therefore be treated with a certain amount of caution.

In the survey the respondents are asked to compare different time

periods. Indeed, there are well-known challenges when it comes to the reliability of retrospective and subjective questions, and a longitudinal study may have yielded more reliable results. Challenges of memory fading, ‘telescoping’, time identification, and variations of recalling among socio-demographic groups are relevant also for the analysis of the retrospective data. On the other hand, retrospective questions are widely used when longitudinal data are not available, which is the case with data on perceptions of social change in Uzbekistan. The simple wording of the questions and the answer categories (improvements verses non-improvements) also make it more likely that people are able to give a truthful answer, compared to questions where they are asked to recall past income, wealth or behaviour. It should also be stressed that our aim here is not to measure the actual social change that has taken place but rather analyze the popular perceptions of such change.

It should also be mentioned that studies that have analyzed subjective welfare in developing and transition countries have found large discrepancies between subjective and objectively assessed welfare. Different people may attach different meanings to scales used in subjective questions, and sometimes rich people adopt a broader frame of reference, while poor people answer relative to a very limited experience. An advantage with this survey is that it combines subjective welfare questions with more traditional questions on household resources in terms of income, consumption and land ownership. Although the questions comparing the present and the past are largely subjective, they can be analyzed in the context of both subjective and objective measurements of present household resources. In addition to the

household survey, qualitative tools for data collection were applied to learn about processes revealed in the survey. These tools included in-depth interviews with members of households covered in the survey and focus group discussions with the target and the non-target group populations. Focus groups were constituted in different ways; male versus female, target versus non-target group population, and a mix of target and non-target groups. Finally, in-depth community studies using participatory tools were carried out in various communities.

3. Findings

Seven questions related to economic and social change during the past 20–25 years were asked of the respondents, and the distribution of responses is given in Tables 1–4 (weighted by population distribution in four oblasts). As can be seen from the tables, improvements are found concerning all change items. While the most positive response to the questions is rather infrequent, the majority of respondents (from 52 to 71 per cent) indicated ‘some improvement’ in relation to each of the survey items on change. For four items, the second most common response was the status quo, with hardly any change, while large improvements was the third most common response. Very few respondents indicated deterioration (at the most 8 per cent for slight deterioration and a meagre 1 per cent for severe deterioration), which must be considered a consistent indication of slow but persistent economic and social improvements for a majority of Uzbeks over the past three decades.

Table-1: ‘How do you rate the general economic condition of your household today compared to 20–25 years ago?’

	Frequency	Percent
Very much improved	38	6.33
Somewhat improved	60	10
Neither nor	97	16.16
Somewhat deteriorated	181	3.16
Very much deteriorated	68	11.33
Don’t know/refuse	156	26
Total	600	100.0

Source: Field Study 2010-11.

Table-2: ‘How do you find the situation of health services for your family today as compared to 20–25 years ago?’

	Frequency	Percent
Very much improved	54	9
Somewhat improved	65	10.83
Neither nor	112	18.66
Somewhat deteriorated	138	23
Very much deteriorated	92	15.33
Don’t know/not stated	139	23.16
Total	600	100.0

Source: Field Study 2010-11.

Table-3: How common is the habit of eating together with people of different ethnic/religious/regional groups without discrimination compared to the situation 20–25 years ago?

	Frequency	Percent
It has become much more common	76	12.66
It has become slightly more common	68	10.66
Hardly any change	98	16.33
It has become slightly less common	163	27.16
It has become much less common	68	11.33
Don't know/refuse	127	21.16
Total	600	100.0

Source: Field Study 2010-2011

Table-4: How common is region-based discrimination today compared to 20–25 years ago?

	Frequency	Percent
It has decreased very much	82	13.66
It has slightly decreased	96	16
Hardly any change	88	14.66
It has slightly increased	69	11.5
It has increased very much	152	25.33
Don't know/not stated	113	18.83
Total	600	100.0

Source: Field Study 2010-11

The major findings on the basis of above statistical information and data are briefly summarized below:

1. There are statistically significant differences between oblasts. Tashkent has the highest percentage indicating improvements, followed by Samarkand. Respondents in Andijan and Namangan especially are less likely to report improvements. Thus, differences do appear to follow the centre–periphery differences which seem more relevant;
2. Among the target groups of the survey Kyrgyz and Jews stand out with considerably lower scores than the average for the population, while Tajik groups are close to the average;
3. Economic resources in terms of high income and consumption, a high level of amenities in the household, land ownership and a positive subjective perception of access and afford–ability of vital goods and services (e.g. food, health services and land holding) are all associ–ated with a high score on the perceived change index;
4. Human resources, in terms of literacy and educational level, are also positively associated with the score on the change index;
5. Participation – both political and social – increases the likelihood of a high score on the change index;
6. Personal attributes, such as age and gender, are only moderately associated with the score on the change index, but men and young people are slightly more likely to report improve–ments than are women and the middle-aged and elderly;
7. Whether a respondent perceives her household as excluded or included in the national main–stream of Uzbekistan is quite strongly associated with the person’s score on the change index. Nevertheless, even among those regarding themselves as excluded, a vast majority

(70 percent) report improvements on more than half the change items;

8. Liberal practices (measured, e.g. by eating with other ethnic or regional groups) are moderately associated with a high score on the change index, while traditional (verses modern) values (measured by allowing all members of the family into the kitchen) have very low correlation with the index;

9. People who have experienced discrimination are less likely to report improvements;

10. Finally, perception of change is decisive for the respondents' future outlook, with considerably more optimism among those with a high score on the change index.

Thus, two factors or dimensions of perceived change were identified, and they are labeled respectively 'socio-economic change' and 'socio-cultural change'. The next step is then to identify which background characteristics are associated with variation along the two dimensions (these dimensions are identified as two separate variables) after controlling for other variables. Particularly we are interested in the impact of ethnicity, and religion – as well as the regional variation that was found in the bivariate analysis.

The dependent variable is the socio-economic factor score, while independent variables are oblast, ethnicity/region/religion, sex, age, educational level of respondent and household head, occupation, urban/rural, household size, female-headed household, household dependency ratio, household income, household amenities level, land ownership,

perceived food sufficiency, outstanding loans/debts, access to health services, perception of exclusion/inclusion, household civil society/ political participation, community infrastructure, practice of ethnic mixing. A high and positive standardized partial coefficient indicates a strong positive correlation between the dependent and the independent variable after controlling for the other variables in the model. Let us first look at our primary concerns, the effects of oblasts and ethnicity/ region/religion. Oblast has a certain impact – also after controlling for other variables in the model. The effects are similar to the ones observed in the bivariate model for the whole change index. Compared to Khiva (reference category) respondents in Samarkand are more likely to have experienced improvements in socio-economic conditions, while the opposite is the case for respondents in Namangan and Andijan. Regardless of oblast, people living in rural areas give a more positive assessment of socio-economic change than people living in urban areas.

The effect of ethnicity, region and religion, however, disappears when controlling for other variables in the model. This is a very important finding; to the extent that there are differences between representatives of groups in assessing improvements of their socio-economic conditions, such differences are more a function of their score on other variables (notably socio-economic resources) than a result of which group they belong to. Effects of age and sex on the dependent variable are minor. Surprisingly, the same is the case with respondent's educational level. The educational level of the household head, however, is positively correlated with a high score on the dependent variable, indicating household human resources to be more important than

individual resources for household economic advances.

As could have been expected, present socio-economic resources of the household are closely associated with the factor score for perceived socio-economic change. It is noteworthy that the most important factor is the level of amenities and household consumer goods, while food availability and household income have somewhat smaller effects. Having outstanding loans or debts gives a negative effect on perception of socio-economic change. Those working in agriculture are more likely than other occupational groups to give a positive assessment of socio-economic change. Community infrastructure is also of some relevance, and household access to health services has an independent positive effect.

Respondents living in large households are more likely to have experienced socio-economic improvements than those living in smaller households. Respondents in households headed by a female give a less positive assessment of change than those in male-headed households, and respondents in households with a high dependency ratio (a large proportion of household members outside working age) give an assessment of socio-economic change that is more negative than households with many working age household members.

One can also note a certain positive effect of social and political participation. Mixing with other ethnic groups has a positive effect on perception of socio-economic change: people who regularly or sometimes have a meal together with people of other ethnic/religious

groups report positive change more often than those confined to their own ethnic or religious environment. A subjective perception of being excluded, however, has a negative impact on a respondent's perception of socio-economic change.

While perception of socio-economic change to a considerable extent can be explained by the score on a number of background or independent variables, this is not the case with the socio-cultural dimension. Only about 8 per cent of the variation along the socio-cultural change dimension can be explained by variation along the independent variables in the model (we included the same independent variables as for the socio-economic model). With one exception, neither oblast nor ethnic, or regional and religious group belonging have an effect on the dependent variable after controlling for other variables in the model. The exception is Tashkent, where respondents, interestingly, have a greater likelihood of reporting more socio-cultural integration than is the case in the other three districts.

Several variables have statistically significant effects on the dependent variable, but most of the effects are considerably weaker than is the case with the socio-economic factor variable. The largest effect is given by one variable measuring practices of interethnic behaviour. People who frequently eat together with persons of different ethnic or regional groups report considerably more socio-cultural integration than people who do not. Another expected finding is that people who feel excluded from the national mainstream assess changes in socio-cultural integration to be weaker than those who feel included. Civil society

and political activity have a positive effect on perceived socio-cultural change. In comparison with perception of socio-economic change socio-economic status has only a moderate effect, and only in terms of household per capita income and whether or not the household has taken up a loan. Respondents from households with a high income report more socio-cultural integration, while respondents with outstanding loan or debt have the opposite pattern. Other indicators of socio-economic resources, however, do not show statistically significant associations with the dependent variable. Men report more socio-cultural integration than women after controlling for the other background characteristics in the model. Also, a high educational level of the household head is associated with perceived socio-cultural integration, whereas the respondent's education is insignificant. Community resources are also of some relevance: the better the infrastructure in the community, the more likely the respondent is to report improvements in socio-cultural integration. Other variables that were tested— that is, household size and structure, and occupation – do not show statistical associations with the dependent variable.

4. Discussion of Findings

The previous section presented the responses to a set of questions related to perceptions of social change in Uzbekistan and their interrelation with a variety of independent variables. In this section we focus on three findings that we consider particularly relevant for testing our hypotheses on the impact of ethnicity, religion and geography to

explain variation in the perceptions of socio-economic and socio-cultural change.

4.1. Socio-economic and Socio-cultural Conditions have been improving for all Groups

The fact that such a large majority of respondents give a positive (although moderately so) assessment of the economic and social changes in the country is a strong indication of general improvements in living conditions and a weakening of discriminatory and segregatory practices in Uzbekistan. All additional findings should be interpreted in this light. Thus, regardless of relative poverty levels, literacy levels, feelings of exclusion, experienced discrimination or any other characteristic that has been tested, a majority is more likely to report improvement than the status quo or deterioration for any change item.

This finding is in line with the studies that have shown general living conditions improvements in Uzbekistan over the past decades that were referred to in the first section of this article. It is not evident, however, that people perceive changes in the same way as they are measured through objective change measurements. Recent conflict, generally low living standards, insecurity about the political developments and tension between groups might have influenced the perceptions and yielded more negative results. One may argue that the persistent positive assessment of both socio-economic and socio-cultural change represent a solid platform for necessary political and socio-economic reform in the country.

4.2. Poverty, Human Resources and Region explain more than Ethnic or Religious Belonging

In the bivariate analysis we found that while Kyrgyz and Buddhists on average have experienced less progress than other population groups, other groups report patterns of relative improvements that are similar to the average of the Uzbek population. However, after controlling for a set of back-ground characteristics, the effect of ethnic and religious group belonging disappears. Thus, given equal scores on all the other background characteristics in the regression model, being a Kyrgyz or a Buddhist does not indicate less perceived improvement than is the case for other groups. The reason for the lower score on the change index is not their group belonging per se, but a combination of characteristics that are more common among these groups: a subjective feeling of being excluded, lower income, lower likelihood of land ownership, poorer access to community infrastructure, and so on. A Kyrgyz or Buddhist with higher levels of resources along these indicators is just as likely to report improvements as a representative of a high ethnic or a religious community/group.

One should not, however, jump to the conclusion that ethnic or religious belonging is irrelevant for perceptions of improvements in socio-economic or socio-cultural conditions. There could very well be – and research findings indicate that there are – barriers to social mobilization that some ethnic and religious groups experience to a greater extent than others. For example, being excluded from a number of social institutions due to discriminatory practices make some groups less adept at reaping the benefits of social change than others. Nevertheless,

what our findings indicate is that it is the social mobility itself that affects the improvements in socio-economic conditions, and to the extent that a group is advancing, its representatives will not perceive the situation differently from representatives of other groups at the same welfare and resource levels.

Regional differences (measured by oblast) do have a statistically significant effect on perceived socio-economic change. These differences are not due to differences in economic levels of the regions, as measured by the Human Development Index. Rather, it seems that the remoteness or peripheral location of certain oblasts make them lag behind in perceived social change. Since our project includes only four oblasts of Uzbekistan, however, there could also be local specifics that our survey is not able to identify, and it would be necessary to conduct the survey in a larger number of oblasts to confirm that our proposition is valid.

The considerably higher likelihood of respondents in Samarkand and Tashkent to report advances in socio-cultural integration compared to other survey oblasts deserves some attention. This finding is particularly interesting due to the fact that Khiva is one of the two oblasts reporting least improvement on the overall change index according to the bivariate analysis. What could be the reason for Khiva's relative advancements in socio-cultural integration? Qualitative findings from the six survey oblasts found a greater density of NGOs, often supported financially by international donors, in Tashkent. Moreover, survey results show that NGO memberships and activity levels are slightly higher here

than elsewhere. Many of these organizations focus directly on socio-cultural integration, and membership tends to be inclusive of ethnic and religious groups. Survey results furthermore confirm that socio-economic conditions are considerably better among Uzbeks and Muslims and socio-economic differences between groups appear to be smaller here than in the three other oblasts. Further exploration is, however, needed in order to confirm whether these are the main reasons, or if there are other mechanisms that the survey and our qualitative research are unable to uncover.

4.3. Background Characteristics have considerable effect on Perceptions of Socio-economic Improvements, but not on Socio-cultural Integration

Through factor analysis we identified two dimensions of change based on the seven questions on perceived change in the questionnaire. One of the dimensions is quite straightforward, in that present socio-economic status has a strong effect on perceived socio-economic change. The relative importance of the different socio-economic indicators covered in the survey is, however, worth mentioning. Land ownership, household income and food sufficiency, which are all considered to be crucial welfare indicators in Uzbekistan, are only moderately important for explaining how socio-economic change is perceived after controlling for other variables. What matters most is the ability to take out socio-economic advances in the form of consumer durables and household facilities. Tangible and visible material improvements explain more of the variation than subjective indicators of affordability or household per capita income levels. In this connection it should be stressed that

consumption patterns are uneven, but that general levels are still very low (most households have a very low score on an index of ownership of household consumer durables and facilities), and only slight improvements give apparent large benefits in levels of perceived change.

Very few of the independent variables that were tested in our second model have a large effect on perceived advances in socio-cultural integration. There may be several reasons for this. One may question the validity of the survey questions themselves, since advances along this dimension are asked for society and not for the household as was the case for the socio-economic change variables. Also, people may have different opinions about what constitutes socio-cultural advances, and these opinions may even be correlated with ethnic or regional or religion group belonging. For example, persons who are being discriminated against – something which is more common among ethnic and regional groups – may interpret the questions differently from people in a privileged position, with an impact on responses given. Thus, proper interpretations of findings are made more complex as a result.

It is, however, likely that perceptions of socio-cultural integration are more ‘randomly’ distributed across different population groups and segments, regardless of socio-economic or cultural characteristics of respondents than are perceptions of socio-economic change. Further qualitative work, for example through in-depth interviews, and possibly a refinement of the survey instrument, should therefore take place in order properly to understand the processes and mechanisms influencing opinion on the ongoing socio-cultural integration taking place in Uzbekistan.

The data clearly indicate that such socio-cultural inclusion takes place despite the current research and policy discourses emphasizing group boundaries. The observed trend towards inclusion is in line with studies that emphasize interaction and mobility across groups.

It is worth noting that the perceptions of improvement appear to have a strong effect on people's future outlooks. Those who have experienced improvements along the largest number of change items are also those who are most likely to have high expectations for the future. In general, people are quite optimistic that the positive change they have experienced in the past decades will continue. To the extent that political reform depends on positive perceptions of social change, the current popular mood in Uzbekistan is therefore seemingly very conducive to the continuation of reform efforts.

However, people in Uzbekistan attach no automatic link between social change and political agency. When asked which of the agents have affected positive change in the household's economic conditions, the vast minority ascribe such change to personal or family efforts (69 per cent opt for 'important' and an additional 35 per cent for 'a certain impact' of such private agency). Only 7 per cent say that the government has been important, but an additional 21 per cent believe it has had a certain impact. Corresponding figures for non-governmental organizations (international and national) are 27 per cent for 'important' and 17 per cent for 'a certain impact', while political parties are viewed as somewhat less significant change agents with respectively 6 and 18 per cent for the two answer categories. Our findings should therefore

not necessarily be taken as an indication of high trust in authorities in affecting positive change for the people.

The most important policy implication of our findings is then that improvement of socio-economic conditions is crucial for continuous satisfaction with socio-economic change in Uzbekistan. To the extent that targeted policies towards ethnic, regional or religious groups are necessary, they should be aimed at bringing positive socio-economic change for disadvantaged groups. Group boundaries are blurred in the sense that all ethnic, religious and regional groups perceive the socio-economic and socio-cultural change in a similar way, and this is more dependent on their status along other variables than belonging to the category to which they are ascribed. While much attention has been devoted to traditional divides in Uzbek society, we find that much of the variation on how change is perceived cuts across familiar dichotomies and group identities. For example, differences between various ethnic and religious identities are not decisive when it comes to perceptions of change, but cross-cutting regional differences, such as centre-periphery relations, appear to matter much more. To the extent that Uzbek authorities wish for progress to be evenly distributed across the country, they need to look carefully at the specifics of each oblast and the regional inequalities. Finally, the generally positive assessments of social change are likely to continue if authorities provide opportunities for people to apply their own personal, household and community efforts in shaping their future. The impact of government and political parties, donor organizations and civil society seems to be of a more indirect nature in making the best possible conditions for people's own resources to be put

to good use.

5. Conclusions

Regardless of a great variety of background characteristics, we found that people perceive ongoing socio-economic and socio-cultural change in positive terms. While minority ethnic and religious groups are somewhat less positive in their evaluation of past change than other groups, this is not explained by their group belonging but rather by a set of other background characteristics, most notably their lower socio-economic status. To the extent that social mobility has taken place among traditionally disadvantaged groups, Kyrgyz and Karakalpaks perceive social change in a very similar way to other ethnic and religious groups, and representatives of other groups with the same background characteristics are no more positive in their assessments of change than are the above mentioned two. Our findings lend support to those who argue that social mobility cuts across ethnic, regional and religious divides. However, one cannot conclude that ethnicity, region and religion are irrelevant, because there may well be barriers in society, including discrimination and cultural traditions, which make social mobility less accessible for some groups than others.

Geographic location is relevant for how people perceive social change, and these differences cannot be explained by the economic status of the oblast or variations in socio-economic characteristics of households or communities. The geographic divide does not; however,

appear to be between Tashkent on the one hand and Hills/Mountains on the other. There may be oblast particularities that the survey is not able to reveal, but a likely explanation for the regional differences in perceived social change, especially its socio-economic component, is remoteness from the centre.

People in Uzbekistan ascribe the positive change to personal agency rather than efforts of government, political parties, non-governmental organizations or international donors. This should not, of course, be seen as a sign that political agency is unimportant. The majority of Uzbek people believe that the future will continue to bring progress both in terms of socio-economic improvements and socio-cultural integration. The challenge for policy-makers and those with political influence is then to provide opportunities for personal agency and social mobility, in particular among those people who have reaped fewer of the benefits of previous change, regardless of their group belonging and geographic location.

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