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## Welcome and unwelcome connections: travelling post-Soviet roads in Kyrgyzstan

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### ABSTRACT

In this article we discuss how infrastructural connections – here the ‘northbound’ and ‘southbound’ sections of a transregional road crossing the mountainous district of Toghuz-Toro in central Kyrgyzstan – become sites where identities can be either confirmed or contested. Linking this district with places that figure prominently in the symbolic geography of Kyrgyzstan, which divides the country into North and South, the two sections of road are inherently enmeshed in regional identity politics. Further, the article considers how the inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro take care of their own mobility and preserve desired connections in a harsh terrain, in the absence of state-managed public transport, and in a situation that sees only rudimentary road maintenance. It shows that technologies such as mobile Internet, and social media such as Facebook, have engendered a profound transformation in the use of transport infrastructure, breathing new life into journeys along the old, dilapidated post-Soviet roads.

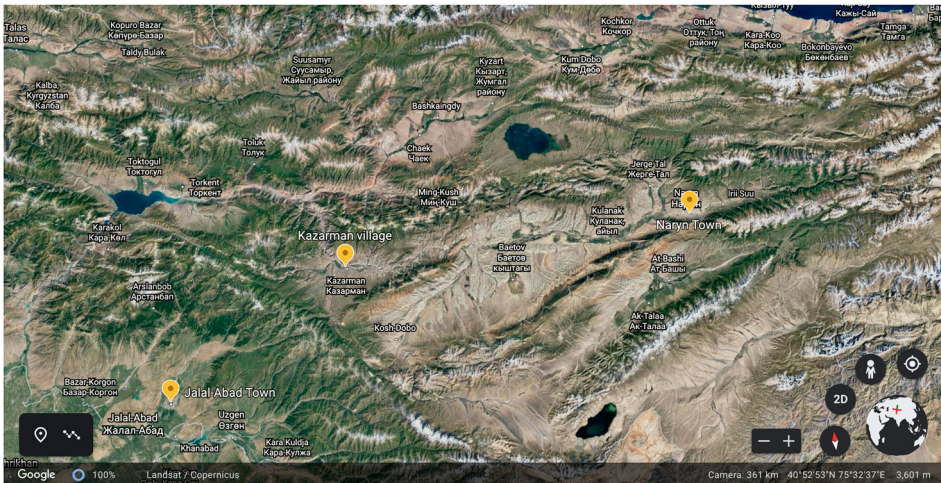
### KEYWORDS

connectivity; remoteness; roads; transport infrastructure; social media; unwanted connections

### Introduction

Historical developments and geographical location have made the district of Toghuz-Toro, and Kazarman as its administrative centre, challenging to place on the symbolic map of Kyrgyzstan for many Kyrgyz, who typically talk of their country as divided into North (Kyrgyz: *Tündük*) and South (Kyrgyz: *Tüshtük*). This conceptual division defies cartographic logic – for example, the Naryn region (Russian: *oblast*) is perceived as part of the North, and Jalal-Abad region as part of the South, even though, cartographically speaking, Naryn is located in south-east Kyrgyzstan and Jalal-Abad in the west. The mountainous Toghuz-Toro – on which we focus – is nestled between the two (Figure 1). The only transregional highway that crosses the district is the high-altitude road built in Soviet times between Naryn and Jalal-Abad towns (Figure 2). This road is 330 km long and negotiates two major passes – Kara-Göö (2800 masl) and Sary-Kyr (3050 masl) – as well as a number of smaller ones.

The aim of this article is to explore the technological, political and environmental relations that connectivity has depended on in the mountainous centre of Kyrgyzstan. We begin with a brief outline of past connectivities and disconnectivities in order to



**Figure 1.** Toghuz-Toro district and the village of Kazarman.

Source: Google Earth.

understand the ways in which they resonate in today's mobility. The history of those (dis-)connectivities is not unique: parallels can be drawn between Toghuz-Toro and other infra-structurally remote places in post-Soviet Highland Asia. After that, we move to the present and show how the transregional road that crosses Toghuz-Toro emerges as a major reference point in ongoing identity negotiations. Located between the Naryn region, which is



**Figure 2.** The only transregional highway connecting Naryn with Kazarman and Jalal-Abad.

Photo: Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi.

considered as belonging to the North, and Jalal-Abad, considered as part of the South, the inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro district regard administrative and infrastructural connections as sites where their regional identity can be confirmed or challenged. Identifying as Northerners, they perform this identity in their actual and figurative mobility by frequently engaging with the North-bound section of the road through travel, narratives of connectivity, and an affective longing for closer and faster connections with the North. The South-bound section of the road is ostensibly ignored in affective narratives and largely also in the practices of mobility. Hence, it is not the case that the inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro – and likely any other infrastructurally remote place – simply desire connectivity of whatever sort; rather, they want connectivity in the ‘right’ direction and with the ‘right’ places. Toghuz-Toro figuratively faces North: this is the direction in which local people are emotionally invested and the direction of connections that they are keen to maintain.

The second goal of this article is to consider how the inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro take care of their own mobility and preserve desired connections in a harsh terrain and climate, in the absence of state-managed public transport, and in a situation that sees only rudimentary road maintenance. Murton and Sigdel (2021) demonstrate that in Nepal road development has gone hand in hand with a new, highly exploitative organization of road travel. In Toghuz-Toro, old, dilapidated post-Soviet roads are extremely poor quality, but technologies such as the Internet and social media, such as Facebook in particular, breathe new life into them. Though Facebook and similar platforms do not have any direct impact on the materiality of roads, they have introduced competition and transparency among private transport providers, improved the price, quality and comfort of service, and brought a sense of modernity to the area despite its infrastructural marginality.

Toghuz-Toro was not exactly at the centre of infrastructural attention in the Soviet era, and in the aftermath of Soviet disintegration (1991), when young Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan were unable to uphold the provision of state services, public transport ceased entirely and road maintenance became rudimentary at best. However, Toghuz-Toro is perhaps different from other places – such as those described by Mostowlansky (2017) and Maertens (2019) – which in the perceptions of their inhabitants lost their modernity with the cessation of Moscow provisioning and the planned economy. In Toghuz-Toro, we have not encountered narratives of lost modernity. What one tends to hear instead during long journeys is that the Internet, and especially Facebook, helps make inhabitants feel modern despite their persistent infrastructural marginalization. New types of infrastructure – such as mobile phone signal and roaming Internet – allow residents to organize themselves to look after the connections of greatest value to them. In this part of the story, we thus reveal how Facebook and private entrepreneurship have replaced the state in the provision of transport services. The Internet, in this case a digital subtending system (Bowker 2018), has significantly transformed practices of travel along old post-Soviet roads.

This paper is based on an ongoing ethnographic study in the Toghuz-Toro district and its administrative centre, the village (Kyrgyz: *aiyl*) of Kazarman. According to the 2020 census, the district has a population of 25,183, and Kazarman is its largest settlement with 10,964 residents.<sup>1</sup> A few smaller villages are clustered around Kazarman on this high-altitude plateau. Part of Kazarman’s population lives from livestock farming.

Tourism is also an important element of the local economy; quite a few guesthouses operate in the village – offering bed-and-breakfast services from June to late October, mostly to international tourists. Kazarman has its own cultural centre, an active library as well as quite a few grocery shops and restaurants. There are also several schools: a primary and a secondary school, state and private kindergartens, a sports academy, and a music school. As the administrative centre of the district, Kazarman also offers employment with the government. Thus, a significant proportion of Kazarman's population derive its living from non-agricultural jobs. One of the key employers in Toghuz-Toro was the Makmal gold mine, which operated until 2016 when the deposits were deemed economically unviable (Alagushev et al. 2016). In 2019, the mine partially resumed works via Chinese investment capital.

The first author conducted more than five months of fieldwork in Kazarman in the period 2019–20. In addition, both authors have spent some weeks exploring the district over two consecutive summers in 2018 and 2019. We have travelled extensively along the transregional road in an attempt to experience it with our own bodies and through the eyes of various individuals with whom we shared collective taxis and private cars. This co-itinerant ethnography (cf. Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012; Saxer 2016; Joniak-Lüthi 2020), combined with participant observation and interviews in Kazarman, have been the key methods through which we tried to comprehend the meaning that the transregional highway has in Toghuz-Toro. The ethnographic material presented herein is complemented with observations of conversations about travel and transport evolving on social media such as Facebook, analysis of local historical literature and the district newspaper *Jengish-Tuusuu* ('Victory Flag'), as well as legislative documents and statistical data on road construction, use and maintenance.

### What can a road do?

In social science studies, scholars demonstrate that infrastructure and its condition, its maintenance or lack thereof, and its accessibility are popularly understood as reflecting the relationship of a place and its people with the local and central state. Infrastructural connection can be sought after as part of a promise of inclusion in urban (Anand 2017) and state citizenship (Correia 2019). On the other hand, some collectives and individuals may resist state infrastructures if those are understood as perpetuating colonial and other discriminatory relations (Campbell 2012; Von Schnitzler 2013; Filipello 2017). Such studies make clear that infrastructure is a locus for debates on citizenship and political participation, and their meaning. In this sense, infrastructure is more than a network of subtending relationships, a complex and ever-transforming pleated arrangement, and a mediator (Larkin 2013; Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017; Bowker 2018). It is understood as possessing a quasi-agency (Bennett 2005; Harvey and Knox 2012; Schwenkel 2018) to commit actions and 'get things done' on behalf of the individuals and groups that invest it with such power.

In our research, the transregional road via Toghuz-Toro – the quality of which deteriorates every winter – emerges as just such an agentive force. However, its agency seems to differ, for instance, from the type that inhabitants of Vinh in Vietnam ascribe to a certain heroic smokestack as an affective centre-point of the community (Schwenkel 2018); it is also distinct from the 'independent' enclave roads described by Reeves (2017) in the



region of Batken in Kyrgyzstan. In Toghuz-Toro the transregional highway is perceived rather as a doer, capable of making the place and its people into one thing or another. The road, by virtue of connecting Toghuz-Toro with the state capital in the North, has the power to confirm the place and people as having an identity as Northerners as well. The road and its condition are thus anxiously observed by the inhabitants of the region as a materialization of their regional identity, the credibility of which rises and falls with the road. The road emerges as holding a quasi-materialized identity, which it can convey onto the places and people that it connects. The inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro, by travelling along this road, by worrying about it, by venting their anger about its state of neglect, further reproduce this identity both in practices and in narratives.

### Past and present (dis)connectivities

Similarly to other areas in Highland Asia considered remote from the perspective of power centres, Toghuz-Toro has been connected in all directions by enduring but subtle pathways – that is, largely invisible to central states and imperial centres – throughout its history (Saxer 2016). These connections come to fore in the stories of transhumance, migration and past connectivities as told by the elderly in Kazarman.

The district of Toghuz-Toro was founded in 1935 and since then has been shifted a number of times between the administrative regions of Naryn, Jalal-Abad and Osh (Alagushev et al. 2016). Likely due in part to this administrative instability, many Kyrgyz outside of the immediate region have difficulty placing the area in terms of the all-permeating conceptual North–South divide. The transregional road crossing Toghuz-Toro connects it to both: the city of Jalal-Abad, which is perceived as belonging to the South, and to the town of Naryn, considered as belonging to the North. From Naryn, the road continues to the national capital of Bishkek. Year-round overland communication exists with Naryn and Bishkek only, although Kazarman is today administratively part of the Jalal-Abad region. The only road connecting Kazarman and Jalal-Abad is snowed shut for seven to eight months of the year. This is inconvenient for administrative personnel who need to travel for at least two days by car via Bishkek in order to reach the administrative centre of the region. For most of the people of Kazarman, having the road to Jalal-Abad – a ‘southern’ city located near the border with Uzbekistan – unnavigable for most of the year is not a concern. It is close ties with the North, and especially with the national capital, that they really desire.

The first road link connecting Naryn to Andijan through Toghuz-Toro was built around 1902–04, with construction initiated by Russian Tsarist officials. Following the road, Russian families soon settled in the region. They are credited with opening the first local schools (Abdyldaev 2006; Moydunov 2011). It was along this road that Toghuz-Toro developed its socioeconomic relations with Jalal-Abad and, farther west, Tashkent in Uzbekistan, as well as the Naryn and Chuy regions in the east (Alagushev et al. 2016). This old road is not used anymore, but elderly residents of Kazarman can identify its trail on the surrounding mountain slopes.

After those early efforts, road construction in the region proceeded far from smoothly, not least due to the ongoing political turmoil. In 1916, a riot broke out against the Tsarist conscription of men aged 19–43 into Russian military service in the First World War. In the aftermath of its pacification, some Toghuz-Toro citizens fled eastwards across the border

to Kashgaria in neighbouring Xinjiang. Just a year later, with the October Revolution, the Tsarist regime collapsed. Yet the ensuing Soviet power was also slow to establish itself in Toghuz-Toro. The poor condition of overland communication was one reason for this. But in local stories, Toghuz-Toro was also a hideaway for the Basmachi – the fighters in the anti-Soviet movement in Central Asia – and their families. Additionally, in its early decades the Soviet state was economically weak; its resources were further drained by the Second World War, during which some 1550 more men from the plateau were recruited for the Soviet army (Alagushev et al. 2016).

The current dirt/gravel road to Jalal-Abad was only built between 1983 and 1986. This connection is open for four to five months a year, between June and October. When the snow comes, usually in early October, the administration circulates a statement informing residents about the dangers resulting from harsh weather and the critical condition of the road, and requests that they avoid using it.

In the opposite direction, to Naryn, the road currently in use was completed in the 1970s (Mojudunov 2011; fieldwork interview, October 2019). Since then, it has been taken care of by road maintenance units from the Toghuz-Toro and Ak-Talaa districts, but its upkeep is rudimentary – limited to occasional levelling of the stone-sand surface in summer and autumn, and snow-clearing in winter. A few more road links to Naryn and Bishkek were planned and even partially built in the twentieth century, but they were all either abandoned before completion or left unmaintained. Such was the fate of the unfinished 64 km road via Saryk-Ata, which would have reduced travel time from Kazarman to both Bishkek and Jalal-Abad to about four hours.

During Soviet times, but also in the early years of Kyrgyzstan's independence in the 1990s, commuting was handled by the network of bus stations. One PAZ 3205-bus – referred to affectionately as PAZik – serviced the whole Toghuz-Toro district. The bus commuted between Kazarman and Bishkek, with scheduled stops in Naryn and Balykchy. The journey typically took 12–13 hours, but delays for days were not rare. Salkyn, a shop owner in Kazarman, remembers that she once waited for the bus for more than two days in one of the villages along the way. Eventually, she gave up and caught a lift on a lorry.

None of our interlocutors could recall when exactly PAZik ceased operating, but it appears to have happened around 1994, also the year in which the first private Moskvitch and Zhiguli cars arrived in Kazarman. The public bus stopped servicing the district due to the shutdown or privatization of transportation depots across Kyrgyzstan, which functioned as basic units for organizing passenger and goods transport in the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Just like the rest of the country, Toghuz-Toro faced dramatic changes with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the planned economy. This resulted in a decline of industrial production, as well as a drop in public spending on transport. Although the Makmal gold-mine continued operating in spite of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the needs of the traffic related to the mine did not significantly contribute to improving the overland transport infrastructure of the district. What it did have an impact on, however, was air transport. The airport in Kazarman was still in use for a decade after the Soviet collapse due to mine-related traffic, but the frequency of flights continually decreased. Since the early 2000s, the still very neatly maintained airport and its landing strip have been out of use.

Therefore, beginning in the 1990s, the region witnessed the gradual ruination of an already threadbare network of state-managed public transport infrastructure. It also

experienced the end of state employment. Some of those left unemployed after the closure of industry found new jobs in private passenger transport. Sgibnev and Rekhviashvili (2018) argue that the emergence of shuttle buses (Russian: *marshrutka*) was an indicator of economic liberalization and grassroots entrepreneurship. The same can be said of collective taxis in Kazarman, where in response to the retreat of the state, a community of taxi drivers and various ride-sharing practices emerged. After 2016, when the Makmal goldmine closed, many of its former employees also moved into private business, taxi-driving included. Because of this, the local taxi business has expanded significantly in recent years. Travellers today can usually choose among a pool of professional taxis and private cars when sorting out their travel. Online networks and offline parking lots are where taxi drivers, private car drivers, and commuters meet to fix arrangements.

### Heading north or going south?

Every day about 30 cars – most of them shared taxis as well as some private vehicles, each with four to seven passengers – leave Kazarman taking either the ‘northbound’ road toward Naryn and Bishkek, or the ‘southbound’ route to Jalal-Abad. Most of the cars transport goods and people toward the North, usually to Bishkek, where the passengers visit their children and other relatives, look for work, study, visit a doctor, entertain themselves or shop. Some economic transactions are also concluded in Naryn and Jalal-Abad, for example, the livestock and hay trade. During summer, certain goods such as fresh fruit and vegetables are brought to Kazarman from Jalal-Abad, too.

In both directions, the road is unpaved for most of its length; in the vicinity of the two towns, the crumbling asphalt is not necessarily any easier on the cars. Taxi drivers emphasize that only sturdy makes and models such as the Audi 100 and Honda Odyssey – living their second or third lives on Central Asian roads – can manage this terrain with its stony, dusty, muddy surface, frequently having to battle the cold and snow (Figure 3). When asked how many times a year he usually repairs his cars, Askat,<sup>3</sup> an experienced taxi driver, unsurprisingly remarked: ‘It does not matter how many times you repair your car, the road always beats the machine’ (fieldwork interview, February 2020, Kazarman).

In terms of road maintenance, Toghuz-Toro was part of the Naryn region until 1989 – and thus under ‘northern’ road administration. After that, it was shifted to the jurisdiction of Osh and then to that of Jalal-Abad – and thus ‘southern’ road administration. In 2006, the situation of before 1989 was restored and Toghuz-Toro’s road maintenance has since been overseen by Naryn’s road authorities, despite the fact that the district itself is administratively part of the ‘southern’ Jalal-Abad region. This administrative complexity and continuous switching about heighten the ambiguity of the district’s regional identity.

While connection with the North is wanted and frequently used, in the opposite direction, toward Jalal-Abad and the so-called South more generally, it is discussed in much less enthusiastic terms and used much less often. The inhabitants of Kazarman – with the exception of, for instance, ‘southern’ women who have married Kazarmani men – repeatedly mentioned in conversation that they feared the influx of outsiders (Kyrgyz: *syrtytk*) from the South whose language was considered as undesirably ‘mixed with Uzbek’ (Kyrgyz: *özbekche aralashyp ketken*), should the southbound road get improved.





**Figure 3.** On the road from Kazarman to Naryn: the first snow in September 2019.

Photo: Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi.

The North–South othering that is so present in Kazarmani identity politics permeates Kyrgyz politics and society at large, too. It is reflected in national discourses on infrastructure, such as in the 2014 speech by former President Almazbek Atambayev (2011–17) in which he stressed the need for a road connection to unite the North and South.<sup>4</sup> The two parts of the country are discursively constructed as culturally and socially distinct. This distinction is of tremendous importance today and regional identities play a major role in political events, for example, presidential elections. Whenever a political transition is about to occur, when citizens demonstrate against the president or nationwide elections are discussed, the public and social media reproduce the discourse of the North–South rift. During the elections, Kyrgyzstanis view the candidates or party leaders overwhelmingly in terms of their regional identities and tend to vote accordingly.

How have these regional identities and distinctions come to achieve such a prominence? Mountain ranges do divide Kyrgyzstan roughly into northern and southern halves, but the northern and southern parts are just as much partitioned by mountains within themselves. Although roads connecting those various areas are relatively new, people had moved about extensively via nomadic pathways long before. Some historians and political scientists suggest that the North–South polarization started in the early Soviet period and is a product of Soviet rule in Central Asia (Jones Luong 2002; Radnitz 2010; Bitikchi and Abisheva 2014). Jones Luong (2002) contends that the foundation for this was laid in the forced settlement of the then predominantly nomadic Kyrgyz in the early Soviet years. Having previously identified primarily with a tribe or clan (Kyrgyz: *uruu*, *uruk*), sedentarization campaigns clustered Kyrgyz into villages, which were further combined into administrative units such as collective farms, districts and

regions. This process initiated a new form of identification based on the Soviet administrative division, with regions competing for central administrative attention and resources (Jones Luong 2002; Radnitz 2010; Bitikchi and Abisheva 2014).

Soviet cadre recruitment further polarized the regions: promoting and supporting candidates from one's own region for positions in the government became a common pathway to secure access to centrally distributed resources. Since political leaders were promoted by 'their' regions, they tended to return this support when in power. The notion that those promoted to higher positions are indebted to 'their' regions and thus should hire 'their' people in the state administration, direct central funds toward the construction of infrastructure there, and generally promote the interests of the region and its people have become an unwritten but clearly perceived commitment (Jones Luong 2002, 69–81).

In independent Kyrgyzstan, regionalization remains a major route along the lines of which power in the country is discussed and distributed. Although former President Askar Akayev (1990–2005) launched administrative reform with the purpose of decentralizing power and distributing more of it to local governments and district leaders, this shift has done little to break down the entrenched regionalism. Although conceived with a different purpose in mind, Akayev's project unhappily overlapped with the regionalism persisting from the Soviet period and further fuelled the role of regions in the organization of political power (Jones Luong 2002; Radnitz 2010). Today, political leaders typically employ the narrative of being a 'native son' (Kyrgyz: *öz bala*) of a particular region and rely on regional patronage networks to garner votes and build up their political support (Ismailbekova 2017).

Hence, sedentarization and regionalization appear to have played a significant role in the emergence of the North–South dichotomization. However, it seems equally relevant that different regions of today's Kyrgyzstan have been historically linked to different lowland areas – such as Ferghana and Jeti-Suu (Russian: Semirechye) – with their distinct economies, ethnicities and histories. As Bitikchi and Abisheva (2014) point out, Soviet historians, ethnographers and linguists contributed to the creation of the perceived North–South distinction by discussing societal, linguistic and cultural differences, as well as Kyrgyz history, in those terms. Moreover, influenced by scholarly discourse, the impression emerged that because 'southern' Kyrgyz have been influenced by the Uzbeks, and 'northern' Kyrgyz by the Russians, there are no Kyrgyz who are 'truly' Kyrgyz, or who are Kyrgyz 'enough'.

The inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro self-identify as Northerners and are not thrilled by the fact that many Kyrgyz outside of the region are not aware of this, or doubt their identity. The proximity of the Uzbek border and of cities such as Jalal-Abad and Osh, which are considered 'South', makes residents anxious about having their regional identity properly recognized by outsiders, prompting them to insist on it and perform it perhaps more vehemently than is necessary elsewhere. Interestingly, former president Atambayev provided the inhabitants of Toghuz-Toro with a new spatial optic on their district, declaring it to be the 'centre' (Kyrgyz: *borbor*) of Kyrgyzstan that will connect the North and the South, once a new road, the so-called Alternative North–South Road (Kyrgyz: *Tündük-Tüshtük Alternativdik Jolu*), is built through the region. Following that 2014 speech by Atambayev, a large metal sign was erected on one of the hills on the outskirts of Kazarman, reading: 'Toghuz-Toro is the geographical centre of Kyrgyzstan' (Kyrgyz: *Toghuz-Toro*

*Kyrgyzstandyn geografialyk borboru*). Still, despite being repeated in conversations from time to time, this new apparent centrality of Toghuz-Toro has not alleviated residents' aspiration to be identified as Northerners – nor has it dispelled their anxiety over being figuratively drawn 'southward' by current and future infrastructural connections.

### Finding the road to Kazarman via Facebook

Before Zarina's long-term fieldwork, we had always – without knowing it – gone about things the wrong way when travelling in the region. We would go to the bus station in the late afternoon,<sup>5</sup> search for a car to rent, discuss prices with the few drivers left at that time of day, phone around to find out who would be going in our direction the next day, then wait for a call-back to set the departure time. Then, a few weeks into her fieldwork in Kazarman, Zarina found out about a Facebook group which the residents of the village had created to facilitate the linking of private car owners advertising their destinations and free places in their cars with passengers looking for lifts and other people needing goods delivered. As Gulim, a 60-year-old teacher at one of the schools in Kazarman observed, people in the village regularly use Facebook to search for lost animals, to advertise items for sale and, importantly, to organize their travels.

The price of a regular taxi ride is generally higher than private offers advertised via Facebook (Figure 4). In summer, a trip in a Honda Odyssey or a similar type of taxi taking up to seven passengers costs 1000 *som* (US\$12), and the fare for an Audi 100 that can carry up to four passengers is 1200 *som* (US\$14). In winter, journeys take longer and are also more expensive, costing around 1500 *som* (US\$18). In private cars, where drivers take on passengers basically to cover the cost of fuel, rides are cheaper. Individuals who wish to travel usually post a note about their plans on the Facebook group wall and leave their phone number for further enquiries. Drivers who intend to head to the requested destination on that day will then contact them via phone, negotiate a price, and schedule a starting point and time. Or vice versa, a car owner who plans to drive to Bishkek or elsewhere and has free seats in their vehicle posts on the group and thus gathers fellow-travellers. All parties benefit: the drivers cover their fuel, while the passengers get to their destinations for less money than in a regular collective taxi. Unsurprisingly, these car-sharing practices are very popular.<sup>6</sup> Owners of mini-buses and vans that commute between Bishkek and Kazarman transporting commodities such as household items use the same Facebook group to advertise their services, too.

Following the example of her research participants, Zarina submitted a request to join the Facebook group. It was quickly approved and gave her the opportunity to experience how networks of online connections materialize in joint travel. The commuter Facebook group is called *Saparlash Kazarman–Bishkek–Jalal-Abad* and was founded on 21 March 2017. *Saparlash* is a Kyrgyz term for 'fellow-traveller', clearly indicating the purpose of the group. More than 16,500 people are registered and make regular use of group services. The long, 8–10 hours spent with the co-passengers in the car – when the online community materializes as real life, offline encounters and relations – is filled with stories of the road and other travel experiences, as well as memories and narratives of present and past (dis)connectivities. As Campbell (2012) observes, in such cases the road becomes an experience that connects co-passengers as they, for the duration of



**Figure 4.** A taxi in Kazarman.

Photo: Zarina Urmanbetova.

the journey, become a ‘community of destiny’ for whom a successful journey – in other words, not only accident-free but also harmonious – is a collective endeavour.

While Facebook is the most common technology used to manage personal mobility in the absence of state-provisioned transport, some Kazarmani choose to travel by licensed taxis; they consider professional taxi drivers better qualified for tackling such a challenging road. Taxi drivers are formally categorized as individual entrepreneurs. Though it is rare for any taxi driver to have proper documents, the two practices – car-sharing and taxi-driving – are nonetheless clearly distinguished. While the former operates



through social media, the latter is organized around taxi stations (Russian: *stoianka*) and by phone. One way of finding an official taxi is thus by going in the morning to taxi stations. Three such stations exist in Kazarman: one for passengers wishing to travel to Bishkek (Figure 5), another used only in summer by those going to Jalal-Abad, and the third for people commuting to surrounding villages. The Bishkek station is based on a rent contract between individual taxi drivers and the local government; the other taxi stations are informal, though well-known, meeting points.

Although the catching of taxis at a taxi station does happen, a more popular method nowadays is to pre-arrange by phone to be picked up at one's home, especially for long journeys. The home pick-up service, which is also offered by private drivers, is greatly appreciated because it shortens journey times significantly. As journeys are long and arduous, this is a major concern for travellers. Waiting in a collective taxi while it gradually fills with passengers – the usual practice across Kyrgyzstan – is not appreciated in Kazarman. A certain pride in how well the local taxi service and car-sharing is organized – with both old and young using the convenience of Facebook, and offering a unique door-to-door service – can be heard in conversations with passengers and drivers alike.

In early 2020, between 2.5 and 3 million people in Kyrgyzstan were reported to use the Internet, out of a total population of 6.5 million. In March 2020, Kyrgyz Facebook users numbered 2.4–2.5 million.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, smartphones and mobile Internet have become very popular, not least thanks to relatively cheap Chinese smartphone brands, and Internet access is affordable as well. National Statistical Committee figures show



**Figure 5.** The official taxi station in Kazarman.

Photo: Zarina Urmanbetova.



that 92% of the population aged 15 and over have their own mobile phone.<sup>8</sup> This is definitely true for Kazarman, where elderly people are just as active on social media as the youngsters.

In a press release of October 2020, the State Committee on Information Technology and Communications states that of the 2080 settlements in Kyrgyzstan, 1574 (76%) have access to 4G mobile Internet. Three major operators – Megacom, Beeline and O! – provide mobile Internet throughout Kyrgyzstan. In addition to this, Kyrgyztelecom reports to have connected 928 settlements (45%) to the Internet through fibreoptic cables.<sup>9</sup> However, in Toghuz-Toro, mobile Internet reception can be interrupted by mountain ridges and may be weak between settlements. Moreover, access to mobile Internet on the road depends on the operator, as their respective network coverage does not necessarily overlap. During our travels, we witnessed that some passengers had Internet access even in the Kara Göö pass, while others were still unable to get online when approaching Naryn. Yet, although network coverage can be patchy between towns, in settlements Facebook and the like facilitate logistics and make organization of travel convenient.

For example, Sono, a 60-year-old woman from Kazarman, was given a smartphone by her children in 2016; this was also the time when, similar to other elderly people in Kazarman, she began actively using social media, especially WhatsApp and Facebook. As Sono said:

[Here in Kazarman] we are different; we are civilized [Kyrgyz: *biz tsivilizovannyibiz*]. We are the first to know the news because we have Facebook. Once, my sister-in-law who lives in Moscow came for a visit and I recounted all the recent national news to her. She was surprised that I knew everything. 'How do you know it all?' she asked. I said that I learned it from Facebook. She didn't even know what Facebook was! Around 2016, smartphones became very popular, especially among elderly people. I joined the online community of the district so that I can follow the news on buying, selling, transport, and so forth. (fieldwork interview, August 2019, Kazarman)

The influence of Facebook and other social media platforms is obviously limited to the organization of travel and has little impact on the actual materiality of the road, its rudimentary maintenance and the harshness of the climate. Still, social media appears to be making a difference. In a situation where Kazarman airport is immaculately maintained but remains closed, and the state provision of transport services is non-existent, social media allows passengers to 'squeeze out' a few drops of modernity – despite all the odds from their arduous experiences of travel on the infrastructural fringes of the state.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have explored the technological, political, and environmental relations that affect practices and discourses of connectivity in Kyrgyzstan's mountainous heartland, after the retreat of the state from the provision of transport services and also to a great extent from the upkeep of roads. In Toghuz-Toro, the stony and muddy materiality of the only transregional road, and the unstable mountainous terrain in which it is embedded, are a major concern not only in practical terms but also vis-à-vis their effects on symbolic connections and identity politics. On the one hand, the region's inaccessibility – the name Toghuz-Toro is interpreted locally as meaning 'lying behind nine mountain chains' – has a significant influence on the ways in which local identity is

narrated and anchored in this harsh landscape (cf. Argounova-Low 2012). On the other hand, the so-called northbound section of the transregional road link – a road that actually, cartographically speaking, goes eastwards – is of profound importance to the residents: this road performs the symbolic belonging of the region to the North.

The parlous condition of the transregional highway is perceived locally as a sign of state neglect and disrespect – and social media is used to vent frustration about it. Interestingly, however, this frustration focuses almost exclusively on the northbound section of the road. The rough terrain and poor condition of this road translate directly into a very specific anxiety about cultural belonging and about having this belonging confirmed in infrastructural terms (cf. Dalakoglou 2010). An awareness that their regional identity is, at best, unclear to the outsiders, and the fact that administratively speaking Toghuz-Toro is linked to cities associated with both the South and the North, further amplifies this disquiet. Concerns over the state of the road reflect worries about staying connected in the ‘right’ direction, as well as maintaining control over the other direction, which can potentially undermine local identity projects. The current neglect of the northbound section of the road by the central government calls this belonging dangerously into question. The link is maintained only thanks to the efforts of local drivers who uphold the connectivity along this ruined road that, in turn, also unavoidably ruins their cars.

The history of Toghuz-Toro’s connectivities and disconnectivities is not unique, and parallels can be drawn between this and other infrastructurally remote places in Soviet and post-Soviet upland Asia. What is probably common to such places, but has so far rarely been studied, is the combination of dilapidated infrastructures (here a road) with relatively new technologies (mobile Internet and social media), and the ways in which this is transforming the organization and experience of travel. In Toghuz-Toro, social media provides a tool to express concerns about the state of the road *and* to organize travels to desired destinations. How have other infrastructurally remote places in Central Asia coped with the retreat or absence of the state in the transport sector? We have little material with which to compare our findings. In the mountainous centre of Kyrgyzstan, the use of social media platforms for the organization of transport seems to have facilitated a transformation of the market that benefits both passengers and drivers, and makes the practices around travel more transparent. Social media also shapes the experience of the road itself. Although Facebook and other platforms are full of complaints about the condition of the road, they also figuratively smooth over the fissures that arise in the terrain because of state neglect.

The residents of Toghuz-Toro use smartphones, mobile Internet, personal networks and private cars to uphold connections with desirable destinations. As is probably the case in other places considered ‘remote’ by outsiders, it is not connectivity in general that is desired here. The Kazarmani are very specific about which road they want, and which they would prefer to not be there. The ‘southbound’ connection to Jalal-Abad and Osh, although sometimes handy, exists as a significant silence in conversations about mobility; it is not a destination about which many stories are told and on which expectations are projected. Rather, it is linked with anxieties about regional identity – in local imaginaries the southbound road has an ambiguous power that may symbolically ‘pull’ the region in an unwanted direction.

Few people outside of Toghuz-Toro are aware of the importance of the transregional road in regional identity politics. The road appears to possess an agentive force akin to the

water pipelines in Mumbai described by Anand (2018) – these are intuitively understood by residents as sites where their struggle over participation in urbanity, in urban citizenship, is fought. Leading eventually to the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek – the most fixated upon of all northern destinations – the ‘northbound’ road in Toghuz-Toro is imagined as capable of conveying its own quasi-northern identity onto local people and the places through which it passes.

Although of tremendous importance regionally, this road does not appear to be of primary concern to the government – a fact that is reflected in its rudimentary maintenance. The 30 or more long-distance taxis that travel this road daily – and thus around 160–170 people – in addition to mini-vans transporting cargo, local vehicles carrying hay, agricultural produce and animals, and other vehicles commuting to Naryn and Jalal-Abad all appear unworthy of much attention. Still, as is usually the case, numbers cannot truly communicate the multiple meanings that a social–material object such as a road has in the negotiation of belonging, modernity, inclusion and participation. Maintaining – or not – the road and its connections means also to maintain – or not – all the other relations in which the road is embedded, and those that are projected onto it (Barnes 2017). They hang together with the road in ways impossible to disentangle in the multifarious daily practices of mobility, but also in people’s experiences of being stuck and neglected.

## Notes

1. Document title: Численность населения областей, районов, городов, поселков городского типа, айылных аймаков и сел Кыргызской республики [Population of *Oblasts*, Districts, Cities, Urban Settlements, *Aiyl Aimaks* and Villages of the Kyrgyz Republic]; see <http://www.stat.kg/ru/search/?news=1&pages=1&publications=1&statistics=1&vacancy=0&opendata=1&query=численность±населения>.
2. Interview with automobile engineer Karabekov (anonymized), Kyrgyz Technical University, Bishkek, June 2020.
3. All interlocutors’ names have been changed to preserve anonymity.
4. See [https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan\\_economics\\_north\\_south\\_road/25370580.html](https://www.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_economics_north_south_road/25370580.html).
5. Although there are no public buses operating in rural Kyrgyzstan, bus stations still stand. Some of them have been repurposed as shops and small restaurants.
6. Fieldwork conversation, Kazarman, July 2019.
7. See <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-kyrgyzstan>.
8. Document title: Цели устойчивого развития: 17 интересных фактов о Кыргызской Республике (по данным 2018 года) [Sustainable Development Goals: 17 Interesting Facts about the Kyrgyz Republic (Based on 2018 Data)]; see <http://www.stat.kg/ru/news/celi-ustojchivogo-razvitiya-17-interesnyh-faktov-o-kyrgyzskoj-respublike-po-dannym-2018-goda/>.
9. Document title: Информация по покрытию услугами доступа к сети Интернет населенных пунктов КР [Information on the Coverage of Internet Access Services in Settlements of the Kyrgyz Republic]; see <http://ict.gov.kg/index.php?r=site%2Fpress&pid=655&cid=1>.

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