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# Materialising State Space: 'Creeping Migration' and Territorial Integrity in Southern Kyrgyzstan

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> Behind the beautiful façade of independence and the loud, sombre pronouncements of 2,200 years of Kyrgyz statehood, an ugly reality is concealed. Kyrgyzstan as a state does not even have its own borders, and the borders that we do have more often have just an administrative character, so our neighbours can move them about just as they like. And yet—territorial integrity and borders—aren't these supposed to be the very foundation of any state? (Kalet 2006, p. 1)

> Places . . . are always imagined in the context of political-economic determinations that have a logic of their own. Territoriality is thus reinscribed at just the point it threatens to be erased. (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, p. 40)

THIS ESSAY IS CONCERNED WITH THE MATERIALITY OF STATE SPACE in a rural region of post-Soviet borderland. It examines the institutional forms and mundane practices through which a juridical boundary between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is materialised; the work involved in inscribing territoriality (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, p. 40), and the social consequences of these interventions. Such processes, it argues, are more extensive, complex and disjointed than the mounting of barbed wire or the building of border posts. Territorialising the state is never merely a technical exercise; it is disparate, contentious, temporally extensive, symbolically loaded and, as Kyrgyzstan's recent past has shown, politically consequential.[1] The intense political

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[1]The revelation of concessions of land to China by former President Akaev during closed-door negotiations fostered public outrage and was the catalyst for popular demonstrations that led to political violence in Aksï in 2002. See ICG (2002, pp. 17–18), Khamidov (2001), Plenseev (2002) and Sydykova (2003) for contemporary analyses of these events, and Lewis (2008, pp. 127–33) on the significance of the allegations of 'treacherous' land sales for Akaev's political demise.

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and material investment that is entailed in producing 'territorial integrity' is particularly striking in the area of the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan borderland in the Isfara valley that is the focus of concern here: a region where borders have historically been of little popular relevance and where they remain poorly demarcated and weakly institutionalised.

Yet if this essay seeks empirically to explore some contemporary practices of 'state-fixing' in rural Kyrgyzstan it also harbours a second aim, one that speaks directly to the volume's broader concern with understanding the place of the symbolic in our analyses of Central Asian politics. This is to understand the politics and pathos of territorial integrity in Kyrgyzstan: the anxieties around territorial 'unboundedness' that ring through Kalet's article above, written in the aftermath of political crisis and a moment of intense public debate about being an 'integral' state. The essay argues that 'territorial integrity' has become an issue of public and political significance in contemporary Kyrgyzstan for two main reasons. First, the very material consequences of having an undemarcated border directly affect the livelihoods of thousands of people along the country's southern perimeter, and the future dynamics of inter-communal relations. Secondly, the 'border' has come to figure in public discourse—a fantastical border that is contingent, resistant to inscription, vulnerable to the whims of neighbours and liable to shift—and to articulate much broader concerns about the correlates of independent statehood and the integrity of the body politic.

The point of entry for this analysis is a particular empirical phenomenon known as 'creeping migration' (*polzuchaya migratsiya* in Russian; *jïlma migratsiya* in Kyrgyz) that is occurring along parts of Kyrgyzstan's southern border with Tajikistan. In contemporary official and popular usage 'creeping migration' refers to the illegal purchase, or leasing, of property and land plots from citizens of Kyrgyzstan by citizens of neighbouring Tajikistan. It is a process that has gained increasing prominence in Kyrgyzstani public and political debate in recent years: the object of internationally sponsored roundtables, policy documents and law-making initiatives aimed at preventing Kyrgyzstan's (ethnically Kyrgyz) border populations in parts of Batken *oblast*' from selling up and moving north.[2] The discourse enacts a particular—and productive—equation: between the sale or leasing of land in a border village, and the 'creep' of the state border itself.

The essay draws on ethnographic fieldwork in the Isfara valley between 2004 and 2008,[3] as well as an analysis of newspaper discourse and official documentation pertaining to the issue of 'creeping migration'.[4] It seeks to illuminate both the

[2]Several local and international organisations working in the Ferghana valley have examined the phenomenon in published analyses. See, for example ICG (2002), Kuehnast and Dudwick (2008), Passon and Temirkulov (2004), UNDP (2006) and most systematically, FTI (2008). For an important recent contribution which situates 'creeping migration' within the broader context of regional 'delimitation politics' see Bichsel (2009, pp. 114–6).

[3]All translations are my own.

[4]The main period of field research was between March 2004 and September 2005 in Batken and Sokh raions, supplemented by two shorter return visits in 2008. This research was primarily qualitative, and involved participant observation and extended ethnographic interviews with dozens of people whose livelihoods involved crossing, guarding or 'working' Batken's southern borders, including traders, herders, students, border guards, children, teachers, grandparents, customs officers, NGO employees and bus drivers. I have used pseudonyms throughout the essay unless requested otherwise by my informant. All translations are my own.

dynamics of such land sales in one densely populated area of borderland along the Isfara valley (see Figure 1), and the political reaction that it has fostered. This reaction is both discursive and material: that is, there has emerged a particular account of

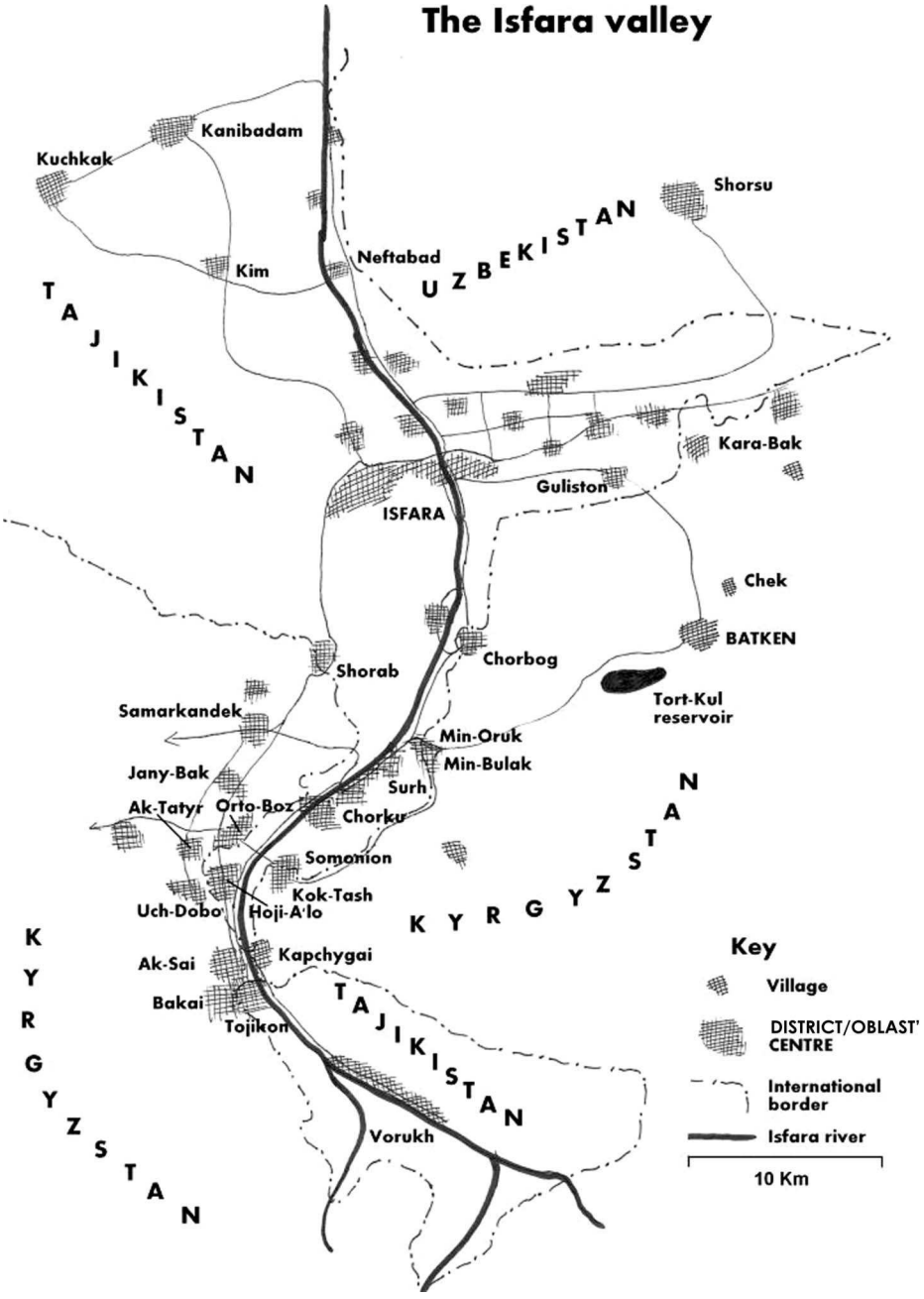


FIGURE 1. MAP OF THE ISFARA VALLEY, SHOWING PLACES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT. BOUNDARIES SHOULD NOT BE TREATED AS AUTHORITATIVE

threat posed by 'creeping migration' which has tangible material effects. The articulation of risk to the state's territorial integrity is used to mobilise resources and to fix state infrastructure such as roads, water-channels and border-posts; and it has been used to determine the kinds of state benefits (*l'goty*) that border populations are able to access and the areas to be policed by border guards. Such infrastructure, in turn, leads the 'border' to be experienced and imagined in new ways: it shapes the kinds of everyday paths through the landscape that are walked and driven along; the kinds of exchange that are encouraged or deemed illegal; the sites where collecting firewood or grazing cattle are to be either ignored or subject to a fine; and the places that come to be learned and lived as 'shared' and those that are separate.

Through this analysis, the essay makes two broader interventions of relevance to the study of symbolic politics in Central Asia. The first is to argue for a more nuanced analysis of the dynamics of coexistence and conflict in the Ferghana valley, alert to the lived history of a landscape and the diverse spatial visions that it animates. The region of borderland on which the essay focuses has come to be identified, in scholarly and policy discourse alike, as one where a particular conjunction of resource shortage, geographic complexity and ethnic diversity has rendered it unusually vulnerable to cross-border conflict.[5] As such it has been the site of numerous interventions aimed at 'preventive development': that is, state and donor-driven projects aimed at mitigating inter-ethnic conflict through a combination of 'community mobilisation' and the fixing of material infrastructure including water pipes, irrigation canals, schools, markets, health clinics and 'bypass roads'.[6]

In making a critique of the logic of some of these interventions, the essay does not seek to question the considerable threats to inter-communal relations posed by acute shortages of land and water. The Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan borderland in the Isfara valley has been a site of periodic stress from at least the 1930s, since when the region's population has grown dramatically, creating considerable tension over land today (Bushkov & Mikul'skii 1996; Faizullina 2007; FTI n.d.; Ikromov 2006). At the time of writing, informal labour migration to the markets and construction sites of urban Russia remains the major source of livelihood for people on both sides of the border, and there is considerable anxiety about the potential for tensions to rise as Russia's construction sector contracts and the volume of money remitted home declines. Yet this is also a landscape which, since at least the middle of the twentieth century, has been subject to attempts to render ethnic and administrative boundaries isomorphic. Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) borders have been shifted to accommodate *de facto*

[5]See, indicatively, Lubin and Rubin (1999), Passon and Temirkulov (2004), Satarbaev (2006), Slim (2002), Tabyshalieva (1999), UNDP (2006) and Young (2003).

[6]During my period of research in the mid-2000s, interventions with the aim of conflict prevention or mitigation were being conducted, amongst other agencies, by the UNDP through its 'Preventive Development in the South' programme (UNDP 2001); the German Organisation for Technical Cooperation (GTZ); Mercy Corps, through its Peaceful Communities Initiative (PCI); the Swiss Development Cooperation, through its project on Regional Dialogue and Development; and through programmes on poverty alleviation and cross-border co-operation in the Ferghana valley and peace promotion in the Ferghana valley, as well as several local donor-funded NGOs. In some border villages, these agencies have occasionally been working at competing purposes (interview with Gerald Gunther, GTZ, Batken, July 2005). See also Passon and Temirkulov (2004, p. 51) and Maasen *et al.* (2005, p. 21).

shifts in population, maps have been written and rewritten, and the establishment of new 'planned' border villages has been justified in terms of ethnic 'defence' against migratory pressures.[7] It is a region, in other words, in which territory and ethnicity are both symbolically linked and discursively over-determined. Leasing a home to someone from a neighbouring village who happens to have different ethnic identification and a different colour passport enters discourse today not as an instance of administrative violation, or as an unremarkable and legal transaction within the same federal state, as was the case in Soviet times, but rather as an act of gross symbolic transgression: selling a home as selling the border.

In this context, delimiting the border—establishing its location categorically as a preliminary to physical demarcation—is an intensely contentious process, and that contention is unlikely to diminish if local populations are not actively involved—or do not perceive themselves to be actively involved—in its determination. The essay thus argues against the claim, widespread in Kyrgyzstani public discourse and in much of the policy literature concerning peace and conflict potentials in the Ferghana valley that territorial delimitation—'fixing' the border categorically to determine its 'true' spatial correlates—will necessarily act as a guarantor of peace; a technical solution to social complexity and competing claims upon the land.

Second, and linked to this, the essay examines the ambiguous and at times contradictory effects of interventions aimed at territorialising the state. Many of the most prominent and costly of recent development initiatives on the Kyrgyz side of the border have sought, literally and metaphorically, to create 'detours' around neighbouring Tajikistan; that is, to obviate the need to enter the neighbouring territory through the building of alternative roads and infrastructure, and the fostering of separate paths and channels through the landscape. This is true of recent road-building projects in Batken *oblast*', which create detours around Uzbekistan's Sokh enclave and the Tajikistani settlements of Chorku and Surh, respectively.[8] But it is also reflected in other initiatives, such as the establishing of separate 'national' markets instead of the existing cross-border bazaars; in the location of new school buildings in such a way as to prevent schoolchildren from needing to cross the border on their way to and from classes, and in the posting of border guards to police contested territory.[9] By drawing attention to the importance of everyday cross-border contact—the mundane sociality that tends to fall under the radar of 'community building'

[7]Such is the case, for instance, with Ming-Örük, a border village established in 1991 to accommodate ethnic Kyrgyz 'returnees' from Tajikistan. The most striking example of such strategic village-building is in the case of Maksat, in Batken's western-most Leilek district. This village was created in 1996 with Kyrgyzstani state funds with the explicit aim of limiting the unregulated occupation of land in the Maksat *massiv* since the late 1980s by ethnic Taijks from the much larger village of Qalacha (Tajikistan) (FTI 2008, p. 4). In the words of one recent newspaper article, the village was conceived to act as an 'outpost [*forpost*] in the way of unwanted migration' (Khamidov 2006).

[8]The bypass road around the Sokh enclave was commenced in 2006 using unpaid voluntary labour [*ashar*], later supplemented with state funding (Urumbaev 2007). Construction of the detour around Chorku and Surh was commenced in 2007 (Anarkulov 2008b).

[9]For example, recent school-building initiatives in the border village of Tashtumshuk (bordering Taijkistan) and Charbak (bordering Uzbekistan in the Sokh valley), have been explicitly conceived to obviate the need for children to pass through the neighbouring state on their way to school (FTI 2008, p. 18).

initiatives—this essay questions the assumption that fostering separate 'routes' through borderland space will minimise the likelihood of inter-communal conflict.

### *Symbolic politics and 'state effects' in the study of Central Asia*

As Cummings argues in her introduction (Cummings 2009), understanding the 'politics of the spectacular' in Central Asia demands an inter-disciplinary approach—one alert to the symbolic dimensions of social life. My essay argues specifically for the potential of an anthropological perspective to enrich our understanding of the political—or, put differently, the need to attend to the affective dimensions of the 'symbolic' beyond the domains of formal institutional politics. This is in part a methodological claim: that an ethnographic analysis, alert to the ways in which technical interventions are encountered, subverted, contested and appropriated in specific sites, can enable a more nuanced and less teleological account of political transformation in the region. This is an argument that has been well made before, and informed a number of insightful critiques of triumphalist narratives of 'transition' (Kandiyoti & Mandel 1998; Liu 2003; Megoran 2006; Sahadeo & Zanca 2007). However, my concern in this essay is not simply with the need for the study of political processes from the 'bottom up', or to couple 'macro-analyses' with attention to the lived worlds of ordinary people. It is also, more substantively, to explore the significance of two anthropological insights for an analysis of political transformation in Central Asia.

The first is to question an easy separation between 'the material' and 'the symbolic' in analysing the political process. If we start from a recognition that human beings are creatures who make meaning and are constantly engaged in symbolising the world to themselves and others, then 'the symbolic' is integral to political life, not simply an epiphenomenon or a tool for political manipulation. Moreover, the domain of the 'symbolic' should not be confined to those iconic markers of self-representation of the state that make their way onto flags, school books and national currencies, such as the figure of Manas in Kyrgyzstan, or the architecture of the yurt. From an ethnographic perspective, the most mundane of objects can come to 'stand for' something else—that is, they can come to do symbolic work. A water pipe, or road; an apricot tree or a stretch of pasture can be the locus of enormous affective and symbolic investment, just as a flag or a statue can.

The tendency to treat the 'material' and 'symbolic' as separate domains (with the 'symbolic' epiphenomenal to 'real' material interests) is analytically consequential. It reflects, as Joyce (2008, p. 5) puts it, a 'basic western epistemological distinction between the subject and the object, the material and the non-material, the concrete and the abstract', one that can limit our capacity to recognise the enormous significance of interventions that would appear to be 'purely' technical (Barry 2001; Harvey 2005). But it is also significant for the way it constrains our analysis of the political. Politics, as moments of upheaval remind us, is messy; it is radically unpredictable; and it tends to exceed the institutional bounds within which state officials and analysts would try to contain it (Gupta 1995; Navaro-Yashin 2003, 2002, pp. 155–203; Spencer 2007). An anthropological perspective can help us gain some conceptual and theoretical purchase on what Spencer (2007, p. 17) has called 'the dynamic force of the political': the

political that overspills institutional bounds and animates everyday life. Attending to this dimension, I argue, is crucial for developing a non-reductionist account of cross-border contention in southern Ferghana.

The second insight which this essay draws from recent anthropological literature concerns the study of the nation state, and specifically the importance of attending, ethnographically, to what Timothy Mitchell calls 'state effects': the practices, institutions, technologies and material objects through which the state comes to appear bounded, integrated and connected; as well as separate from the domain of 'society' and authoritative over it (1999). Mitchell draws on governmentality theory to emphasise the activity and techniques involved in producing what he calls 'two-dimensional effects'; that is, the practices that

> contribute to constructing a world that appears to consist not of a complex of social practices but of a binary order: on the one hand individuals and their activities, on the other an inert 'structure' that somehow stands apart from individuals, precedes them and contains them and gives a framework to their lives. (Mitchell 1999, p. 89)

Like other governmentality theorists, Mitchell is concerned with the constitution of the state through representational practices such as statistics and mapping (Mitchell 1988). But he also seeks to move beyond a Foucauldian concern with discourse to explore the concrete mechanisms and material technologies through which 'the state' comes to be produced as something outside and 'above' society (Mitchell 1999, 2002). State effects, in other words, are not simply the outcome of discourse, but are rather 'consolidated' in 'visible everyday forms, such as the language of legal practice, the architecture of public buildings, the wearing of military uniforms, or the marking and policing of frontiers' (Mitchell 1999, p. 81).

Mitchell's concern with the materiality of state effects is useful here in that the imagined unity of the state and the search for an ordered world are outcomes not only of ideological investment, but are also the product of specific technological possibilities and material interventions. Moreover, it follows from Mitchell's argument that we should not accept easy distinctions between the 'material' and the 'conceptual'; between particular logics of rule and the technological forms that enable certain kinds of social and political organisation to become imaginable and possible. The 'imagined' state is always already materially mediated:

> A construct like the state occurs not merely as a subjective belief, incorporated in the thinking and actions of individuals . . . The cultural forms of the state are an empirical phenomenon, as solid and discernable as a legal structure or a party system. Or rather, I argue, the distinction between a conceptual realm and an empirical one needs to be placed in question if we are to understand the nature of a phenomenon like the state. (Mitchell 1999, p. 81)

This kind of theoretical move is helpful in focusing our attention on how it is that 'stateness' comes to be produced and consolidated—a dimension that has tended to receive little attention in studies of the former Soviet space.[10] Specifically, in the case of

[10]However, see Collier (2001, 2004).

the poorly demarcated, weak sovereign borders of the Ferghana valley, it allows us to approach the production of state territoriality ethnographically: to explore how it is that the state comes to be produced as something bounded, integrated and protective of its citizens, bearing both authority and 'territorial integrity'; how space comes to be turned into territory.

## *Mapping the Ferghana valley*

The region where this study is focused lies on the southern perimeters of the Ferghana valley, a large, fertile basin that is the most densely populated region of Central Asia. Ethnically and politically diverse, this region has nonetheless been part of a single polity for most of its history, and residents often speak of a distinct 'Ferghana' identity that coexists with other forms of ethnic, regional and religious identification (Abashin & Bushkov 2004). Today the Ferghana basin is divided between independent Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with the Isfara valley, where my research was concentrated, marking an ecologically transitional, irrigation-dependent region between the fertile Ferghana basin to the north and the Turkestan mountain range which rises steeply to the south.

The cartographic divisions that now mark international boundaries in the Ferghana valley were drawn up between 1924 and 1927 as part of the 'national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia'. This was a critical event in the region's history, for whilst it was not the first instance of territorial boundary making in the Soviet Union, or the only one to be conducted upon 'national' lines (Brown 2003; Haugen 2003; Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001), it was the first in which a process of national delimitation was conceived as an explicitly modernising move, one that would overcome backwardness and the 'perversions' of previous Tsarist policy by propelling nations (*natsii*) into being. As one commentator put it during celebrations to mark the tenth anniversary of delimitation in 1934, the creation of 'national' republics on the territory of former Turkestan had allowed the populations of Central Asia to 'become closer [*priobshchitsya*] to the family of soviet nations who are building socialism' by enabling 'tribe, an ethnographic category, to be transformed into nation, a historical category' (Shteinberg 1934, p. 53).

Western Sovietology (and now, in an interesting twist, contemporary Uzbekistani historiography) has tended to depict the national-territorial delimitation of 1924 as an arbitrary, indeed wilfully malevolent, act of artifice designed to thwart a nascent pan-Turkism in late colonial Central Asia.[11] This view, which has received sustained critique in recent years from scholars who have made use of recently opened archival materials (Haugen 2003; Hirsch 2005; Karasar 2008; Khalid 1998, 2007; Koichiev 2001) misses much of the complexity of the dynamics of delimitation and its aftermath, for it occludes the detailed, minutely calibrated and positional languages of identification that characterised pre-modern Central Asia; and ignores the extent to

[11]See, for example Carrère d'Encausse (1987). For critical analyses of Western historiography of the delimitation, see Byrbaeva (2005, pp. 73–84) and Haugen (2003, pp. 9–29). For an analysis of the divergent reinterpretations of the delimitation in contemporary Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani scholarship, see Reeves (2008, pp. 51–52).

which the articulation of the 'nation' (*halq*) and the 'country' (*watan*) were the subject of intense debate amongst the local reformist elite prior to the delimitation (Khalid 1998, pp. 184–215). Crucially, moreover, this narrative obscures the extent to which a logic of national delimitation, premised upon the possibility of creating coherent 'proto-national' republics, coexisted with a quite different rationale throughout much of the Soviet period: that of producing an integrated, centralised system of transport, provisioning and agricultural production that would propel a 'backward' region into socialist modernity.

Although the delimitation had invoked 'nationhood' as the organising category of Soviet administration, the realities of Soviet modernisation often undermined the coherence of these newly national republics from within. From the 1930s onwards, resettlement policies, building programmes, mine workings, roads, railway lines and often quite utopian irrigation projects were built with little regard for the republican boundary lines. State policies often tended to alter the border line *de facto* through the leasing of land from collective farms on one side of the border to those on the other, or the exchange of land in return for the provision of irrigation water. Pastoralist Kyrgyz populations from the high Turkestan mountains were resettled into 'planned villages' (*planovye sela*) further down the valley well into the 1970s, such that summer migration patterns now traversed the land of the neighbouring republic.[12] Reservoirs and canals were built ignoring the republican boundary line (Bichsel 2006; Thurman 1999, pp. 203–59); tractor stations nominally under the jurisdiction of one republic were built on the land of the neighbouring one (Mamaraimov 2007); new Tajik *mahallas* (neighbourhoods) that were subordinate to state farms in the Tajik republic were built on the outskirts of villages that were themselves administratively part of the Kyrgyz SSR. This has created a border that is often hard to determine today. The village of Kök-Tash, for instance, administratively part of Kyrgyzstan, contains within it the *mahalla* of Somonion, which is administratively part of Tajikistan's Chorku *jamoat* (district). The two schools in the village, 300 metres apart, operate on different time-zones and celebrate different independence days, though no-one in the village is able to say with any confidence where the territorial border lies—the assumption is that 'if it's a Tajik house, then it is probably Tajikistan' (see Figure 1).

Such arrangements, often provisional, and sometimes occurring without formal ratification at the republican level, were consistent with the broader logic of Soviet state-formation, in which nominally 'sovereign' republics were involved in multiple and complex relations of mutual inter-dependence. This was not, *pace* Slim (2002), a case of the 'deliberate' creation of enclaves to ensure dependency on Moscow. Indeed, early Soviet maps reveal that the borders of the Ferghana valley were initially contiguous with the enclaves visible on maps today that emerged as a result of the development of collective farms from the 1930s and the expansion of territory under cultivation (Koichiev 2001, pp. 88–89; CECCP 1928; Alamanov 2008).

[12]According to Osh historian Zairbek Ergeshov (personal communication, Workshop on Nationhood and Narrative in Central Asia: History, Context, Critique, Issyk-Kul, January 2009), the fact that the initial process of delimitation occurred in the summer months, when Kyrgyz herders tended to be in the summer pastures (*jailoo*) meant that many Kyrgyz pastoralists found that their winter settlements and summer grazing grounds were located on the territory of different Union republics. See also Dzhunushalieva (2006, pp. 9–10) and Koichiev (2001, pp. 48–77).

FIGURE 2. CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE AK-TATÏR/MACHAI CANAL ON THE KYRGYZSTAN–TAJIKISTAN BORDER

The case of the Kyrgyz–Tajik Ferghana valley boundary is particularly instructive here. As early as 1949, a parity commission was established to try to resolve conflicts that were emerging over *kolkhoz* lands, which decreed that the boundary of the Union republics should be shifted to coincide with *de facto* land use of the respective collective farms. Continuing disputes over collective farm boundaries led to a second parity commission in 1958, which determined the line of the border that is today considered authoritative by Kyrgyzstan. However, whilst the document was ratified by both Kyrgyz and Tajik *oblast*' administrations, it was only ratified by the Kyrgyz (and not the Tajik) Council of Ministers. Consequently it is disputed as the basis for current interstate negotiations (Alamanov 2005, pp. 82–84; Faizullina 2007). For this reason, when the process of delimitation of this border was initiated by independent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1997, it was interrupted a year later because of disagreement over the principles by which to proceed and the maps to use as a point of reference. (The issue was whether to take the parity commission of 1959 as authoritative, or to return to the original agreement on the location of borders between the Uzbek SSR and Kyrgyz Autonomous *Okrug* from 1925.) Talks recommenced in 2002 but have proceeded slowly. Consequently, to date only 237 km of the 674 km of the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border have been delimited, and these overwhelmingly in uninhabited mountainous regions (FTI 2008, p. 5).

Contemporary cartographic and political complexity is not, then, simply the result of a shift in status as Soviet-era republican boundaries became international frontiers. It arises, rather, from the conjunction of multiple logics—with 'national' borders

overlaid upon kinship networks, trade routes, grazing patterns, pilgrimage circuits, canal systems and memories of historical landholdings that follow entirely different spatial patterns and social logics. It was never assumed, for instance, that a long-term land lease from one Union republic to its neighbour would result in the creation of what are now, juridically, enclaves of one independent state inside another, or that it would leave officials from neighbouring republics arguing over which Soviet map is to be treated as historically authoritative (Urumbaev 2008).

### *Materialising independence*

The conjunction of these logics has been particularly consequential in the last decade. The first years of independence were characterised by relatively open borders between the three Ferghana valley republics of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Liu 2002, pp. 31–67; Megoran 2004, p. 732). None of the three states was politically, economically or militarily prepared for 'independence' and for those living in the border regions there were few material traces of state territoriality in the form of patrolling border troops, manned border-posts or barbed wire. Indeed, as Salamat Alamanov, the head of Kyrgyzstan's commission on delimitation and demarcation noted in a recent 'open lecture', he and other Central Asian officials responsible for conducting delimitation with China in the early years of independence 'never imagined that we would have to undertake the same task [of delimitation] with our other neighbours—with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan'. This assumption set the tone for the early discussions:

> If you leaf through the documents from those early meetings of the heads of state at that time, it is written there that we wouldn't have any borders, we won't bother with any of that business [of changing borders], that we would keep the same community [*obshchnost*'] that we had in the Soviet Union. (Alamanov 2007)

The continuation of relatively open cross-border movement that characterised the early post-Soviet period deteriorated dramatically from 1999, when Uzbekistan unilaterally closed its border with Kyrgyzstan, destroying a symbolically resonant 'bridge of friendship' across the canal border in Kara-Suu on the eastern side of the valley, mounting barbed wire and laying land-mines along stretches of the border deemed particularly vulnerable to 'terrorist' incursion. As Megoran (2002, 2004) has argued, this was the first moment at which the border came to be experienced as a 'concrete reality' by many of those who found themselves living at the new state edge, and it precipitated a series of reciprocal interventions from Uzbekistan's neighbours, in the form of fixed and mobile customs units, the closing of previously cross-border bus routes and restrictions upon cross-border trade.

The result has been a qualitative shift in the everyday experience of 'living at the border' over the last decade, one profoundly mediated by a stately optic of finite, bounded, homogenous space (Scott 1998; Yeh 2003). Yet it would be an oversimplification to assume that the process of materialising the state has been straightforward, unidirectional or uncontested. It entails considerable effort: creating 'homogenous space' demands improvisation; manning the border, as much as crossing it, demands negotiation and an ability to 'read the land'. Moreover, state practices of

inscription never entirely erase other readings of that landscape. Memories of seasonal migration and of pilgrimages to sacred sites, myths about land that was worked and watered by ancestors, experiences of obligatory resettlement to lower-lying 'planned villages', practices of place-making through ritual visiting, and claims about land that was unjustly taken or distributed during Soviet times are not simply deleted by technologies of control (Verdery 1994). This multiple spatiality is materialised today in the scattered private land plots and the rusting remnants of collectively owned infrastructure which create a 'chessboard border' (*shakhmat chek arasi*), the precise spatial correlates of which are often indistinct. They are present in the stretches of so-called 'contested land' (*talash jer*), and in the thousands of hectares of undemarcated border which sustains cross-border livelihoods. Above all, they are present in the contestation over the historical legitimacy of 'illegal' land seizures, as logics of contemporary state territoriality collide with memories of pre-war spatial perimeters and the location of grandparents' fields.[13]

The villages that lie along the length of the Isfara valley, which tacks back and forth between the jurisdiction of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, provide a particularly vivid illustration of the issues at stake. Landscapes and livelihoods here are shot through with reminders of intertwined pasts and the simultaneity of claims upon the land and its history. Many villages, sacred sites and informal landmarks bear both Kyrgyz and Tajik names;[14] many people have held—and often continue, informally, to hold—citizenship of both states; many others have built homes and gardens and raised families on land allocated in the 1980s whose status is today contested. In the contiguous villages of Hoji-A'lo/Machai (Tajikistan), Üch-Döbö (Kyrgyzstan) and Tashtumshuk (Kyrgyzstan), it is common for families to receive electricity from one state and to collect water from the other. The minibuses that run the route along the valley between Isfara and Vorukh are used to accepting two currencies and the conversations onboard, the gestures of respect and recognition, the greetings and subtle demarcations of space according to age and gender speak of such public transport as shared space. The pervasiveness of Kygyz–Tajik bilingualism among the older generation attests to a past in which ethnic boundaries were much less firmly marked, and in which inter-marriage between the settled and semi-nomadic populations of today's Vorukh enclave was much more common that it is today.[15]

[13]Such appeals are common. In a recent instance when the Kyrgyz authorities sought to deport a Tajik farmer from Chorku who had started to lay the foundations for a home on contested territory, the farmer justified his actions by reference to the fact that he had helped his grandparents farm that land immediately after the war (interview with Mansur-aka, Ak-Sai, August 2008).

[14]Examples of villages in the Isfara valley that have both Tajik and Kyrgyz variants include Govsvuar/Orto-Boz, Tojikon/Poselok, Tangi/Kapchïgai and Hoji-A'lo/Machai/Oktiabr'.

[15]According to one elderly informant from Ak-Sai, due to extreme poverty during the Second World War, Tajik girls from Vorukh would often be married at a young age to Kyrgyz men, who were prepared to pay higher bride-price (interview with Tolib-aka, Ak-Sai, August 2008). Certainly, until the resettlement of Kyrgyz herders in the 1970s and 1980s, the village of Vorukh, today considered ethnically 'Tajik', had a significant Kyrgyz-speaking and identifying minority, and ethnic inter-marriage, mutual visiting and ritual celebrations seem to have been much more common than they are today (author's informal conversations with elderly residents of Ak-Sai, Vorukh and Tojikon villages, June–July 2005). Kyrgyz–Tajik inter-marriage in the Isfara valley is today extremely rare. When I asked young people from Ak-Sai and Ak-Tatïr in 2004–2005 whether they condoned inter-ethnic

This is not to romanticise a past or present of harmonious coexistence. The Isfara valley has been the site of considerable tension over land and water since at least the 1930s; and these resources remain contentious today. There is an indigenous discourse on 'conflict' and contention (*konflikt, talash*) which cannot be reduced simply to the politicisation of difference by outsiders; and the contours of perceived difference are often articulated in unambiguously ethnic terms. As everyday 'categories of practice' (Bourdieu 1992; Brubaker 1996), the ethnic identifiers 'Kyrgyz' and 'Tajik' are locally salient and understandings of ethnic difference structure social life, patterns of social visiting and the dynamics of friendship and marriage in significant ways. Nigora, a teacher from Hoji-A'lo, who had recently started working in the Kyrgyz village school across the border as a teacher of Russian, was typical in speaking of the 'nervousness' she felt if she departed from the main roads and into side streets on her way to and from work. It is important not to underestimate the sense of relations under strain, or the potential here for conflict to be structured along lines that actors themselves perceive in terms of ethnic difference.[16]

But it is equally important that recognition of this contemporary reality does not lead us to ignore those mundane spaces of 'everyday getting along' which are crucial to the production and experience of a space as shared: the kind of borderland sociality that develops in markets, at bus stops, on public transport, at water pumps, walking to fields, in medical clinics, or to and from school (Flynn 1997). As one Ak-Tatïr school teacher put it to me, in the context of a long interview in which he expressed frustration at several of the 'tolerance building' projects that had been initiated to improve relations between schoolchildren in Ak-Tatïr and neighbouring Hoji-A'lo, the important thing was to sustain the mundane forms of cross-border connection, rather than in a few symbolic displays of 'toleration':

> During the [Soviet] Union there were all sorts of things. Then we really met! Today, we only get together when [U] or [A] comes along and starts to organise something.[17] They have their goals, definitely, they want to develop friendship between our communities, tolerance, but now when they leave the friendship goes with them . . . Someone should make sure that after holding all these kinds of events that people really do make a point of starting to visit each other every day. Now when they come along and hold some volleyball match they can hardly wait until it is over. They come along and before the match is even over they come up and go 'gently, gently, thank-you, thank-you. Well done. Remember to stay friends'. They have that kind of volunteer, kind of . . . without a sense of responsibility. If I were organising that kind of thing I would make sure that they met up with each other every day. That's the most important thing. It shouldn't be a one-off meeting.[18]

marriage, the response was almost uniformly negative. '*Tukhum buzulup baratat*' ('the lineage would be broken') was how one eighth-grade schoolgirl put it.

[16]This is not, of course, the same as according some ontological status to ethnicity, or assuming it to be the 'driver' of conflict. As Brubaker has demonstrated, the conceptual challenge is to understand how and when social life comes to be structured in terms of ethnicity—when ethnicity 'happens'—without taking it to be a self-explanatory analytical category, or according ontological status to 'ethnic groups' (Brubaker 2005; Brubaker *et al.* 2006).

[17]Tursun-agai mentioned here two international organisations, the names of which I omit.

[18]Author's interview with Tursun-agai, Ak-Tatïr, July 2005.

It is in such contexts, I suggest—of simultaneous claims upon the landscape; of intransigent infrastructure; of a history in which borders were felt to move, often quite arbitrarily; and of the exigencies of daily getting along—that we need to understand both the dynamics of 'creeping migration', and the considerable local ambivalence that surrounds interventions aimed at materialising the state border. In villages such as Ak-Sai and Üch-Döbö there is, on the one hand, a real concern that the boundary be 'fixed' and a fear of 'enclavement': a desire, as Temirbek, a middle-aged father of two put it in an interview in September 2004, that the authorities in Bishkek 'delimit and give us' the border (*taktap berish kerek*); but there is also a real concern that 'fixing' the border without recognising the degree of mutual interdependence risks being counterproductive. 'When you are only given [irrigation] water for half an hour every two weeks', this same man told me later in the interview, referring to the summer distribution cycle for irrigation water 'you know what harmony [*ïntïmak*] is; you don't need to be taught toleration [*tolerantnost*']. You know what we need more than anything? More than toleration? A bath-house!!'

### *The contexts of 'creeping' migration*

As we have seen above, 'creeping migration' refers, in contemporary public discourse in Kyrgyzstan, to the illegal purchase of homes and land plots on Kyrgyzstani territory by citizens of Tajikistan. Typically, the homes or land in question are sold by Kyrgyzstani citizens who wish to leave their village and move to Batken town or to the more fertile and land-rich Chui valley in the north of Kyrgyzstan. In this strict sense, 'creeping migration' is a relatively sporadic and isolated phenomenon that, according to my informants in the Kyrgyz border village of Ak-Sai, was much more common in the early 1990s than it is today.[19]

However, as the term has gained political currency in recent years, it is used to refer to the broader social and spatial transformation of border villages that is less about the juridical exchange of land than it is about their perceived 'Tajikisation' (*Tadzhikizatsiya*). Precisely this term, which collapses citizenship and ethnicity into a generic 'Tajik' threat, was used by the authoritative 'Expert Group' of Bishkek's International Institute of Strategic Studies in its 2008 'analytical reference' on creeping migration along Batken's borders (Ekspertnaya gruppa MISI 2008). In this much looser sense, the term is used to refer to a variety of processes whereby people of Tajik

[19]My informants often mentioned the considerable social and legal sanctions that inhibit people today from selling land to citizens of Tajikistan, even in those instances where the latter could offer a larger sum for the purchase of the land than a citizen of Kyrgyzstan. According to Salamat Alamanov, director of the Institute for Regional Problems under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the geographer responsible for chairing Kyrgyzstan's commission on demarcation and delimitation, there are few contemporary instances of illegal land sales, but there were many historical instances of such sales, and it is precisely because these families are now well established and cultivating the land in question that they 'create headaches for us today' (Alamanov 2007; see also 'Batken: Prokuror oblasti Ryskul Baktybaev oproverg soobshcheniya o sluchayakh zakhvata kyrgyzskikh zemel' grazhdanami Tadzhikistana', *KyrgyzInfo*, 28 April 2005).

ethnicity from villages on the Tajikistani side of the border enter into informal long term lease agreements with Kyrgyzstani citizens to rent or otherwise come to occupy abandoned homes or to lease land for their own cultivation; a process that has been accelerated by growing differentials in the cost of land on the two sides of the border and the scale of Kyrgyz out-migration. This arrangement can involve a variety of procedures to ensure that land is still formally owned by a Kyrgyzstani citizen, including the (informal) purchase of Kyrgyz citizenship by the person wanting to lease or purchase the property; the registering of what is *de facto* a land purchase as a loan or rental agreement; the registering of property under the name of a relative who already has Kyrgyzstani citizenship; or, more commonly, the registering of the property in the name of some other real or fictive Kyrgyzstani citizen. It can also refer to the cultivation of un-demarcated, so-called 'contested' territory (*spornaya territoriya*/*talash jer*) lying between the jurisdiction of the two states, and some observers have used the term to characterise the documented or illegal use of Kyrgyzstani pastures by citizens of Tajikistan as a source of grazing land or firewood.[20]

What is at stake at one level, therefore, is an issue of informal, and technically illegal, sales and leases of land and property between citizens of neighbouring states, brought about by changes in the juridical status of land that accompanied independence.[21] But as the anxieties about 'Tajikisation' suggest, the reason for the considerable political and public debate around the issue is less to do with the juridical validity of land sales in this particular region of Batken than with two much more emotive processes: the cultural transformation of villages that are understood to be

[20]In the Isfara valley, pastures are a particular source of local contention. There are barely any Tajikistani pastures, and as foreigners on Kyrgyzstani pastures, citizens of Tajikistan have to pay a land tax of 200 som per month (c. $5), plus 50 som ($1.5) per head of livestock to the shepherd who looks after them (figures from 2005). Citizens of Kyrgyzstan pay a land tax which entitles them to use the pastures, and the rates per head of livestock are considerably lower (25–30 som) which is a source of some resentment (author's fieldnotes from Ak-Tatyr and Orto Boz villages, July 2005; UNDP 2006, p. 19). This has led to widespread illegal pasture use, a source of concern to the Batken border authorities (Aiypova 2008).

[21]According to Kyrgyzstan's 1999 Land Codex (*Zemel'nyi kodeks*), foreign citizens do not have the right to purchase land in Kyrgyzstan, though they do have the right to purchase property. In practice, however, the procedures involved, which demand presenting a packet of documents to the Ministry of Justice in Bishkek for authorisation, mean that virtually none of the property in question is exchanged in a juridically authorised way. See *Poriadok priobreteniya inostrannymi grazhdanami zhilykh, nezhilykh pomeshchenii i zemel'nykh uchastkov*, available at: http://www.kg.spinform.ru/articles/bvv004.htm, accessed 11 January 2009. Further complicating the legislative environment in Batken is the coupling of statewide legislation with locally issued 'orders' (*rasporyazheniya*), some of which are in tension with statewide legislature. In March 2006, for instance, the local administration of Batken *oblast*' issued its own order forbidding the sale of houses and land to foreign citizens (*O zaprete na prodazhu domov i zemel'nykh uchastkov inostrannym grazhdanam*). This gave the regional administration and the mayors of towns the authorisation to conduct investigations amongst border settlements to determine whether there had been instances of illegal land sales to citizens of Tajikistan, and authorised the state security agencies to invoke 'strong measures' against those found violating Kyrgyzstan's land codex (FTI 2007b, 2008, pp. 8–9). Land and property sales are also affected by a bi-party moratorium on land sales in contested areas between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and by the law on the state border of the respective states (Imanaliev 2006a, 2006b).

'historically' Kyrgyz; and the spatial movement of the state's own boundary line and associated 'sapping' of sovereignty. In a context where borders are poorly demarcated, and where in everyday practice (and political discourse), the border is understood to follow the spatial contours of 'Tajik' and 'Kyrgyz' homes and land plots, leasing a house and garden to somebody from a neighbouring state, or allowing an area of un-demarcated borderland to be cultivated by a citizen of Tajikistan is understood to be tantamount to 'moving the border'. As 'creeping migration' has come to enter political and academic discourse, therefore, it is as much the border that is felt to 'creep' (*polzat'*)—a term that gestures at once to stealth, invisibility and deception—as it is with the movement of people. 'Land' and 'motherland' are collapsed in this discursive move: selling a house transformed into a threat to the very integrity of the state.

To understand the dynamics of such cross-border arrangements, and the intense political debate that they have served to fuel, it is therefore important to examine the historical and political contexts in which they occur. First and most striking is the enormous difference in the relative population density of Kyrgyz and Tajik villages. This reflects, in part, historical differences in patterns of settlement, sources of livelihood and social organisation of space. But it also, crucially, reflects the legacy of Soviet delimitation and subsequent exchanges of land between Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs, some of them as late as the 1960s. This has created along this valley a situation where the population of Tajikistan is concentrated into settlements, such as Vorukh, that are today either *de jure* enclaves, entirely enclosed within the territory of a neighbouring state (see Figure 1), or which, whilst not enclaves in a juridical sense, are experienced and spoken of as such by their residents, surrounded on three sides by the territory of the neighbouring state, and on the fourth by mountains, or connected to the state's 'mainland' by only a thin finger of territory.

The conjunction of these cultural and environmental factors is socially consequential. Tajik family life has historically been organised around a high-walled courtyard, and married sons are expected to remain close to the parental home and within the latter's *mahalla* (Bushkov & Mikul'skii 1996). The *mahalla* in this sense is more than simply a neighbourhood or administrative district: it denotes a moral community and a finite geographical space; one which contains and animates senses of historical connectedness, and in which a 'moral self' is able to develop (Rasanayagam 2002, pp. 75–102). As Liu argues in his account of Uzbek sociality in Osh, *mahalla* space is experientially and discursively a 'realm of distinct manners', one in which, for Osh Uzbek men, a sense of distinct ethnic identity can be articulated in a Kyrgyz majority state (Liu 2002, p. 10). In the villages along the Isfara valley, ethnic boundaries are similarly indexed and 'read' through distinctly different socio-spatial organisation. Walking between Üch-Döbö, a Kyrgyz-majority village, and its more populous Tajikistani neighbour, Hoji-A'lo, my interlocutors would often point out the otherwise unmarked state border through shifts in building style and the organisation of communal space. In Hoji-A'lo, high courtyard walls, metal gates, narrow streets and the concentration of homes into discrete, contiguous groups demarcate distinct realms of 'courtyard' and 'public' life. In Üch-Döbö, by contrast, it is often difficult to tell where a family land plot ends and a path or short-cut begins. Walls, if they exist at all around a domestic land plot, are usually well under human height; with single-storey

homes both visible from the road and a site from which to observe what is going on around.

We should be wary, of course, of extrapolating in any simple way from such obvious spatial distinctions to the kind of social life they foster: to read the presence of high walls and metal gates as a sign of less 'openness'; or to assume that architecture dictates the organisation of social life. This, indeed, is how the *mahalla* has often been portrayed in the policy literature (and spoken of by many of my Kyrgyz informants): as a potential barrier to the rational organisation of space, just as it has been a vehicle for institutionalising projects aimed at 'preventive' development.[22] Yet if we should be cautious about identifying attachment to place as a 'source of conflict', or dismissing as 'irrational' the concern of those who have grown up in Chorku and Surh to remain in the area that they consider ancestral lands, we should also not underestimate the degree to which transformation of a lived landscape can come to stand for much more than itself—can signal a threat to sources of livelihood and act as a trigger for open antagonism (Bichsel 2009, p. 117). In Ak-Sai (Kyrgyzstan) in 2008, for instance, the appearance in the last year of a row of high-walled homes and a large, brick-built wedding-hall (*toikhana*) on the road that marks the border with neighbouring Vorukh (Tajikistan) was a source of considerable local comment. Although these buildings are not on contested land, the wealth which they evidence; the wedding music that regularly punctures the evening calm (this, too, 'heard' in ethnic terms by the Kyrgyz family with whom I was staying); and the transformation of previously open fields into homes and garden plots, fuels anxieties about being 'hemmed in' by a much larger, and apparently wealthier, population—of Ak-Sai itself 'becoming an enclave'.

The point, then, is that we need to recognise the symbolic resonance of such changes, whilst refusing to read them simply in 'cultural' terms. To understand the striking differences in population density on either side of the border and the concomitant pressure on land, we need to attend to the political economy of its allocation. The Tajik *jamoats* of Chorku, Surh and Vorukh sustain levels of population density that are some of the highest in Central Asia: in the enclave district of Vorukh, over 40,000 people derive a living from the enclave's 64,000 hectares of land; whilst Chorku and Surh have populations of over 30,000 and 12,000, respectively (FTI 2008). These three large villages (for, in the administrative system of contemporary Tajikistan, this is indeed how they are categorised) exceed the total population of the whole of Batken *raion*, which had an estimated population in 2001 of 80,800 (UNDP 2002). When one considers that much of this land in these enclaves and semi-enclaves is mountainous and thus unsuitable for cultivation; and that despite the size of population, people here rely on agriculture for their livelihood, this makes

[22]A 2004 report analysing peace and conflict potential in Batken *oblast*', for instance, identifies the '*mahalla* concept' as one among a series of 'sources of conflict' in its discussion of inter-ethnic relations in the Isfara valley: 'Because people are strongly attached psychologically to their communities (the "*mahalla* concept"), they are reluctant to migrate permanently to other places. They fear not being accepted by residents of other regions if they leave their homes. The demographic pressure combined with a perceived need to remain close to one's place of birth forces Tajiks to migrate to nearby disputed areas and Kyrgyz territory rather than to less controversial land further away. However, neither land shortage nor demographic growth is currently having a practical impact on their *mahalla* concept' (Passon & Temirkulov 2004, p. 50).


FIGURE 3. The Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan Border between Ak-Sai and Vorukh in 2004


FIGURE 4. The Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan Border between Ak-Sai and Vorukh in March 2008, Showing New Construction Underway

for levels of rural population density on a par with southern China and Bangladesh (Imanaliev 2006a, p. 7). In practice, it creates a situation where several married sons and their families will continue to live in the parental household, since there is no further land available for new domestic developments; and a land pressure which means that the price of property can come to exceed that in Dushanbe. It also creates a local, cross-border economy which is ripe for informal, illegal cross-border sales and leases. According to the Foundation for Tolerance International (FTI), for instance, on the Kyrgyz side of the border in 2007, a *sotok* of land (0.1 hectare) cost between $240 and $450, whilst in Chorku and Vorukh it cost between $4,000 and $4,500 in the same period. The same contrast characterises the cost of houses on both sides of the border. In the mid-2000s, a house on the Tajik side of the border cost between $25,000 and $30,000—considerably more than in neighbouring villages of Kyrgyzstan (Kozhomkulova 2008), and considerably exceeding the cost of a house on the outskirts of Bishkek or in the fertile Chui valley.

The pressures created by this local difference in the cost of real estate are compounded by the extent of irrigation dependence and the way in which this limits the possibilities for the cultivation of new lands. Other than in the narrow alluvial plane of the Isfara river, where rice and other irrigation-dependent crops are grown, the region relies upon artificial irrigation for the watering of fields and land plots. This irrigation is either electricity-dependent, as in the village of Ak-Sai where a pumping station pumps water from the Isfara river; or it is generated mechanically from the Ak-Tatïr and Törtköl canals. The opening of these irrigation canals during late socialism transformed this formerly barren 'stony land' (*tashtyk jer*) into an area sustaining the cultivation of tobacco, rice and apricots. It also enabled the creation of new, so-called 'planned villages' where Kyrgyz herders who had continued to lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle on the high pastures above Vorukh were resettled in the 1970s and 1980s. Such irrigation systems, however, were never intended to sustain the volume of domestic garden plots which, with the end of state socialism, have become a primary source of family livelihoods. This irrigation-dependence means that land without access to water is of little use; and it has also served to transform a finite resource that has historically been pumped, piped and channelled with little regard to international borders, into a 'national' resource with enormous social consequences if it is withheld, diverted or siphoned off by upstream homes. This situation also helps to explain the continued pressure on land in upstream Tajik villages, despite the formal allocation of land plots lower down the valley.[23]

Local pressures on cross-border sales are complicated by the political economy of land. On the Tajik side of the border, land is not only in considerably shorter supply but the majority of arable land also remains the property of the state, farmed collectively with crops that are not of the individual farmer's choosing. The privatisation of land in Kyrgyzstan has not been without profound social consequences: one of the most

[23]In densely populated Chorku and Surh, for instance, many young families have been allocated land in the Shorab, a mining town that formerly enjoyed 'Moscow provisioning' (*Moskovskoe obespechenie*). Shorab has lost the majority of its population through out-migration and its dependence upon pumped water for irrigation and drinking has made domestic cultivation virtually impossible. Many of the families allocated land there only reside during part of the year, returning downstream to Chorku during the spring planting season.

painful shocks of a relentless programme of neoliberal 'shock therapy' (Pelkmans 2005; Pétric 2005). When the lands of the former collective were privatised, many families found that the land to which they were nominally entitled was several dozen kilometres away on the other side of Batken town, making it too costly for all but the best-resourced families to farm. Most of my Kyrgyz informants were extremely nostalgic for a time of collectively farmed land. Yet despite the failings of Kyrgyzstan's land privatisation, for Tajiks living at the border, the presence of large tracts of Kyrgyz land that are left uncultivated (often for want of fertiliser, diesel fuel and now, given the scale of out-migration to Russia, human labour) is interpreted less as a sign of the failure of land privatisation in Kyrgyzstan, than a further insult to their own land poverty (Kuehnast & Dudwick 2008; UNDP 2006; Urumbaev 2008).

Zukhro, a Tajik woman from Hoji-A'lo in her early forties who scraped a living from her small domestic plot and the remittances sent by her husband in Novosibirsk, echoed a view that I often heard when she remarked, tracing a line across her neck in a gesture of abundance that she and her four children would 'live like this [in plenty] if we had been given the same amount of land to farm as the Kyrgyz'. Like the three-storey wedding hall that is a source of rumour and speculation in Ak-Sai, what is significant here is the capacity of a piece of uncultivated land to mediate much bigger concerns about unequal distribution. Both of these objects are symbolically resonant, just as they are materially important to lives and livelihoods.

Perhaps the most significant local factor for understanding contemporary tensions over land, however, concerns the role of memory, and the way in which different groups of people differently remember place and its rightful ownership. The significance of these divergent spatial visions was expressed vividly by Jamshed-aka, a Tajik doctor from the village of Tojikon, when he gestured to the surrounding pastures—pastures that my 'reading' of the landscape, based on contemporary maps of the valley, told me were unambiguously Kyrgyzstani territory—and recalled a time when these were, as he put it, 'all Tajik lands'; and when the planned, 'Soviet' villages that we could see from where we stood had never existed. His account of how the surrounding pastures came to be 'lost' to the neighbouring republic—one that I have heard versions of from several interlocutors from Tojikon and Hoji-A'lo—claimed that they were given informally on long term lease to the neighbouring Kyrgyz collective farm to avoid unnecessary taxes on swathes of unused pastureland. This was, as other interlocutors also reiterated, the result of a misguided decision by a lowly collective farm official, one that should never have been taken as politically authoritative and which was never ratified by the Constitutional Council of the USSR.[24]

[24]This sense of 'betrayal' comes through vividly in a comment made by the head of the Vorukh farmers' cooperative, Validjon Nozirov, to a local Tajik journalist: 'The will of one local Soviet official cannot carry authority for the population . . . However, precisely because of this betrayal on the part of local officials during the life of the Soviet Union, Tajiks now find themselves caught in a vice [*zazhati v tiski*]. Today we are forced to reap the fruits of that tolerance and internationalism, which was drummed into our heads in Soviet years. Judge for yourself: the Tajik villages today are deprived of pastures, of water, of any kind of land reserve [for distribution to new families]. Each year the population is growing and people need to find homes for young families, and yet the borders of Vorukh village cannot in any way be moved. Is there any logic in the fact that all the land surrounding this settlement should belong to the neighbouring state?' (Mirsaidov 2008).

FIGURE 5. VIEW FROM JAMSHED-AKA'S ROOF, SUMMER 2005: 'THESE USED TO BE ALL TAJIK LANDS'

*Stabilising space: 'creeping migration' in Kyrgyzstani political discourse*

These, then, are the contexts in which land is bought, sold, leased and used along Batken's borders, and which frame contemporary political debate. The paradox here is that 'creeping migration' in the strict sense of the term was largely a phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s. It occurred at a time when the borders along the Isfara valley were not only un-demarcated (as they remain today) but were also comparatively little policed. This was also a time of considerable population growth and population movement, when many Kyrgyz families sold up and moved north. The more recent and relatively isolated instances of creeping migration since 2000 have tended to be on uncultivated, 'contested land' between Kyrgyz and Tajik settlements, where there is a moratorium on new construction.

Yet despite this, it is in the last few years that creeping migration has become a significant political issue. Newspaper searches through the Integrum database going back to the early independence period suggest that the term first entered public discourse in 2001, when outspoken governor Mamat Aibalaev headed the Batken *oblast*' administration; and there has been a proliferation of references since 2006.[25] In

[25]Integrum database, available at: http://www.integrumworld.com, is a database of print and online media reports from Russia and the CIS. See, indicatively, Abdullaev (2006), Aiypova (2008), Anarkulov (2008a), Kozhomkulova (2008), Omuraliev (2008), Pozharskii (2008), Skorodumova (2007) and Urumbaev (2005, 2006, 2007). For a critique of the tenor of some of this reporting, see Mirsaidov (2008) and Alamanov (2008).

the last two years, illegal exchange of land and property in border areas has become the object of newspaper and online debate, NGO-sponsored roundtables investigating the potential for violence and threats to the integrity of the state, and analytical reports predicting the expansion of neighbouring states onto Kyrgyzstani territory and urging restrictions upon freedom of movement to prevent, as the title of one report put it, the 'loss of the south' (*Poteryannyi yug?*) (Ekspertnaya gruppa assotsyatsii politologov Kyrgyzstana 2007). This has been coupled with legislative initiatives seeking to accord 'special status' to border regions and a notable concentration of resources to institutionalise and enforce a *de facto* international border through the construction of bypass roads, the allocation of land in newly formed border villages for the construction of homes, and the expansion of territory under the ownership and control of border units (FTI 2008, pp. 7–8).

Perhaps most significantly, it has turned the 'defence' of border villages into an issue of political capital. In 2008 President Bakiev visited the border village of Tashtumshuk promising that he would sort out the village's electricity shortages, a visit that was soon followed by a raid by regional officials to determine the number of properties that had been illegally sold to citizens of Tajikistan.[26] A few months later, at a meeting for the heads of *raion* and *oblast*' administrations, Prime Minister Chudinov insisted that the government was 'devoting all its strength' to prevent, as he put it, the 'further depopulation [*ogoleniya*] of border regions'.[27] Echoing a claim that Bakiev had made when he visited Batken the previous spring, Chudinov insisted that the government itself would purchase the homes of Kyrgyz citizens in border villages who might otherwise be tempted to sell their property to citizens of the neighbouring state:

> To halt this process [of illegal sales of property] I invite the residents of these regions to inform me personally, so that the government of Kyrgyzstan can buy these houses from its citizens. It is better that we buy these houses than that they are bought by citizens of neighbouring states. Given the current rate of development of this process of latent migration, I wouldn't be surprised if in one of the border districts of Kyrgyzstan there will soon appear the school of one of the neighbouring states. And then just try moving it or bringing it to the other side of the state border.[28]

The concern with territorial integrity that such initiatives evince is not in itself new. The 1999–2000 'border crisis' with Uzbekistan (Megoran 2004) thrust questions of state spatiality into the public domain, and concerns about the vulnerability of the state borders to pressure from neighbouring states gained momentum in the new millennium with revelations over secret exchanges of land with China. Throughout the spring and summer of 2005, in the euphoria and chaos following Kyrgyzstan's so-called 'Tulip Revolution' in March of that year, television bulletins and newspapers

[26]'V Batkenskoi oblasti 8 zemel'nykh uchastkov pereshli na balans Tadzhikistana', *Obshchestvennyi reiting*, 12 September 2007.

[27]'Igor' Chudinov: Pravitel'stvo vystupaet za pridanie osobogo statusa prigranichnym raionam strany', *Gazeta.kg*, 27 February 2008, available at: www.gazeta.kg/image/2008-02-27/4252, last accessed 17 January 2009.

[28]'I. Chudinov obespokoilsya zaseleniem prigranichnykh raionov yuga respubliki grazhdanam sosednikh stran', *Obshchestvennyi reiting*, 27 February 2008.

were full of accounts of disgraced President Akaev's 'secret sales' of land. The border issue (*chek ara maselesi*), then, has been a staple of opposition discourse throughout the new millennium. What appears to be new in the current moment, however, is the extent to which issues of territorial integrity have gone from being a discourse through which the political opposition mobilised, and through which the 'treachery' of President Akaev was discursively sealed, to becoming much more thoroughly embedded in government rhetoric and official state policy: a vehicle for 'stabilising' the state after the ousting of Akaev.

Mitchell's concept of 'state effects' is helpful in exploring why this is so. Mitchell draws attention to the way in which certain 'novel practices of the technical age' allow the categories 'state', 'society' and 'economy' to come to appear to be both ontologically and conceptually distinct. His critique of existing state theories is precisely that they fail to problematise how it is that the state comes to appear as an entity 'outside' of society and authoritative over it. Once we turn attention to the permeability of the state–society boundary and the 'political significance of maintaining it' (Mitchell 1999, p. 82), then the spatiality of the state comes into view not as an *a priori* attribute, but as the outcome of technical interventions and social practices that are accessible to empirical exploration.

It is in the realm of such 'effects' that we need to locate the 'creeping migration' that has taken on life in political discourse. For whilst the term denotes an empirical process—one that is indeed socially and economically consequential for people living at the border—it is also, crucially, a generative site for the elicitation of state effects. That is, it allows a proliferation of assertions to territorial integrity; it legitimises quite draconian interventions to keep populations 'in place', and it rationalises these through reference to acute, existential threat to the continuity of the nation and the integrity of the state. Two recent responses to the phenomenon of creeping migration illustrate such state effects particularly vividly: the designation of 'special' status to border villages, and the building of bypass roads. Like the raft of official visits, neither of these has done much to address the acute underlying sources of tension over water and land; and yet, like the 'dropping in' of the president to a border village, the sudden raid by local migration officials to determine who of the village's residents 'turned out' to have been living there illegally, or the promise by a prime minister that the state would buy up property that might otherwise be sold to neighbour-foreigners, these are important vehicles for enacting territorial integrity.

### *'By whatever means we must keep people in the south of the country': the draft law on 'special' border villages*

In March 2008, Batken parliamentary deputy Marat Juraev drafted a law that would grant special status to those Kyrgyz border villages most at threat of creeping migration.[29] This followed an earlier legislative initiative in 2006 to give 'special legal

[29]Draft law, 'On Special Border Settlements of the Kyrgyz Republic' [*Ob osobykh prigranichnykh naselennykh punktakh KR*] initiated by Deputy Juraev, available at: http://www.kenesh.kg/.f/98ccf0fe-c839-46ef-ab45-2495d24aeb16/Проект%20закона%20о%20пригр.пунктах.doc, accessed 1 May

status' to border regions of the Kyrgyz Republic, which would accord material benefits to residents of border regions in return for their active involvement in civic border defence.[30] As Juraev explained in an interview with the Russian-language *Vechernii Bishkek*, the 2008 draft was motivated by a quite personal sense of threat at the lost of familiar lands in his native Leilek district:

> In the 1970s I remember as a boy helping the adults to collect cotton on the fields. And these same fields now belong to others. As children we loved climbing up in the mountains. We considered them ours. Now there are claims on them by residents of the neighbouring states. I see that little by little we are giving away our own areas [*uchastki*] to other republics. (Temir 2008a)

The law was debated in parliament and received the support of the parliamentary speaker and presidential party member, Adakhan Madumarov.[31] It was ultimately returned to the committee for constitutional affairs for reworking, however, because of the excessive costs that would be entailed in its implementation. The draft listed a series of so-called 'special' (*osobye*) border villages, all but one of them in Batken *oblast*',[32] in which citizens of Kyrgyzstan would be forbidden from leasing, selling or giving away any land to any foreigners or stateless persons; or to the spouse or business partner of any foreigner or stateless person (Article 1).[33] This would be accompanied by a special system of entry and exit (*ustanovlenie kontrol'no-propusknogo rezhima*) to regulate movement in and out of border villages, and would punish those deemed to be selling or leasing land illegally (Article 2).

The same law also outlined a series of provisions which sought, quite explicitly, to keep the border population 'in place'. These included preferential rates in applications for state loans; increased wages, the provision of 110 free university places for students applying to become doctors, teachers or military officers, and 'the provision of . . . drinking water, food, irrigation systems, electricity, transport, [telephone] connections and educational facilities in a manner to be determined by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic' (Article 4). As Juraev explained in a newspaper interview at the time of the parliamentary debate, 'the most important thing is that by whatever means we keep people in the south of the country'. This entailed 'creat[ing]

2009. The parliamentary debate was widely covered in the print and online media. See Akmat uulu (2008), Anarkulov (2008a), Erkin uulu (2008), Karimov (2008), Kozhomkulova (2008), Nurakun uulu (2008), Temir (2008a, 2008b) and 'M. Dzhuraev: Na granites s Tadzhikistanom bole 3 tysyach gektarov territorii Kyrgyzstana zakhvatili grazhdane sosednei strany', *Obshchestvennyi reiting*, 4 March 2008.

[30]Draft law, 'On the Special Legal Status of Border Settlements of the KR' [*Ob osobom pravavom statuse prigranichnykh naselennykh punktov KR*], initiated by Deputies Imanaliev, Tekebaev, Juraev and Shernyazov in 2006, see FTI (2007b).

[31]A figure, as one of the reviewers of this article correctly noted, regarded with fear by minority groups in Kyrgyzstan for his outspoken nationalist statements.

[32]The one village that was not in Batken *oblast*' was Barak, a small enclave of Kyrgyzstan with a population of 700, in the territory of Uzbekistan.

[33]Draft law, 'On Special Border Settlements of the Kyrgyz Republic', Article 1, available at: http://www.kenesh.kg/.f/98ccf0fe-c839-46ef-ab45-2495d24aeb16/Проект%20закона%20о%20пригр.пунктах.doc, accessed 1 May 2009.

the conditions for people living in border regions, so that they do not leave and abandon their homes' (Pozharskii 2008). The draft law was accompanied by a document outlining the rationale (*obosnovanie*) for these changes, which stressed that the protection of border populations in 'strategic' areas was not simply a matter of social concern but an issue of national security:

> It is important to note that the majority of residents of the above-named border settlements are obliged to leave their settlements because of the absence of suitable living conditions. This leads to the abandoning of homes and land, which become the target of creeping migration from neighbouring states. This represents a threat to the safety and integrity [*tselostnost*'] of the state. The guaranteeing of state security and the integrity of the state border represent one [sic] of the strategic directions of state policy.[34]

Juraev accompanied his proposed law with a series of strongly worded newspaper interviews, in which this sense of 'threat' was spelt out all the more vigorously. In an article published in the independent newspaper *Delo Nomer* under the headline, 'Is Kyrgyzstan a country without territory?' (*Kyrgyzstan—strana bez territorii?*), Juraev detailed the 'take-over' (*zakhvat*) of land and property in particular border villages by citizens of the neighbouring state:

> Tajikistanis are building huge mansions with fountains and then live there under Kyrgyz surnames. At the same time the [northern Tajik] city of Khujand is literally twenty kilometres away and they can travel to Tajikistan without obstacle. In this way the line of the border is moving, and the speed is not letting up . . . The paradox is that if for the Kyrgyzstanis the districts bordering Tajikistan are contested, for the Tajiks these same lands are no longer contested, since they have already appropriated this land and constructed buildings on it. On the contrary, they increase the territory that is contested by dint of the fact that Kyrgyzstanis from Batken *oblast*' abandon their lands, sell their homes, or lease them to citizens of Tajikistan, and themselves migrate to the Chui valley, to Kazakhstan or to Russia. (Pozharskii 2008)

To stress this growing threat, the article was accompanied by a map showing large swathes of contested territory along Batken's borders and a village plan on which were highlighted the land plots that had been illegally sold to citizens of Tajikistan: a stark visual representation of the border under threat.

Juraev's law, together with the official rationale that was debated in parliament and accompanying public interviews, articulated a particular conception of the threatened state—one that in turn was used to justify a series of interventions: economic, military and technical. It is striking for the conceptual elisions that it makes between state territory and an (ethnic) national body; between human movement and the creep of the border. But it is also remarkable for the particular kind of state that it is used to effect—a state that controls and regulates, but which also provides materially for its

[34]'Obosnovanie k proektu Zakona Kyrgyzskoi Republiki 'Ob osobykh prigranichnykh naselennykh punktakh Kyrgyzskoi Republiki', available at: http://www.kenesh.kg/.f/98ccf0fe-c839-46ef-ab45-2495d24aeb16/Проект%20закона%20о%20пригр.пунктах.doc, accessed 1 May 2009.

borderland population so as to ensure that people remain 'in place'. As James Ferguson notes in his analysis of contemporary topographies of power, such gestures of stately provision are as important to spatialising the state as the mounting of a border post: 'state benevolence as well as coercion must make its spatial rounds' (Ferguson 2006, p. 110).

### *State effects*

In analysing these effects, three features of the emergent discourse around creeping migration deserve particular note. The first is the suggestion that the fact of illegal land sales at the border was less a natural, if lamentable, response to the acute land shortage in the neighbouring state than a deliberate policy, which had the blessing of the authorities in Dushanbe. Juraev was at pains to contrast the relative peace of Kyrgyzstan's much more vigorously militarised border with Uzbekistan, and the 'openness' that allowed the Tajik 'creep' to persist: 'The Uzbek authorities have already put up border posts and barbed wire along the areas of contested territory', he argued. 'That's why there are no attempts there to settle and appropriate Kyrgyz territory' (Pozharskii 2008). By contrast, the Tajik authorities had allowed, as he put it in a meeting of the parliamentary committee on constitutional affairs on 4 March 2008, the 'systematic occupation [*planomernyi zakhvat*] of our territory'.[35]

This emphasis was echoed in a report, widely discussed in Kyrgyz online forums and extensively reproduced on the internet, which was prepared for official use by the International Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic. Entitled 'On the policy of Dushanbe concerning the ''Tajikization'' of border territories of Batken *oblast*' of the Kyrgyz Republic and possible measures in response', the report started from the premise that creeping migration was an intensely political issue, of more than merely local significance. The situations of conflict (*konfliktnye situatsii*) that had occurred in Batken *oblast*' during the preceding two years, the report argued, 'witness to the single-minded policy of Dushanbe for the further appropriation of Kyrgyzstani territories bordering Tajikistan in areas still awaiting delimitation'. The report went on to elaborate the population differentials in border regions that gave Tajikistan an advantageous position (*preimushchestvennoe polozhenie*) in negotiations. Recognising its advantage, it argued,

> Dushanbe secretly supports the borderland Tajik population in putting psychological pressure on Kyrgyz, with the goal of forcing them to move. The tactical instrument in this policy is . . . the illegal purchase and building of homes, and likewise the sowing of crops in areas located very close to the border or on the very territory of Kyrgyz villages.

[35]'Grazhdane Tadzhikistana uzhe zakhvatili bole 2 tysyach gektarov kyrgyzstanskoi territorii', *Gazeta.kg*, 4 March 2008, available at: http://www.gazeta.kg/news/2008-03-04/4382, accessed 1 May 2009.

> The departure of Kyrgyz families to different regions of the KR creates for the Tajik side a 'precedent of success' in its tactic of psychological pressure, it shows the relative closeness and the ease of reaching their goals. (Ekspertnaya gruppa MISI 2008)

Striking in the vigorous online response to this report, and in much of the subsequent newspaper coverage, was a sense of shock and offence that *Tajikistan*, the weakest and poorest of all Kyrgyzstan's neighbours, should be acting in such a way. In an article published in April 2008, shortly after a local conflict over water between upstream and downstream communities in the Isfara valley made national headlines, Kubanichbek Omuraliev, a prominent public figure, responded angrily to the incident by asserting that the dynamics of 'expansion' of citizens of Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstani territory represented 'an example of grave violation of land, belonging by right of historical ownership [*po pravu istoricheskogo vladeniya*] to another people' (Omuraliev 2008). Omuraliev's report completely ignored the complex dynamics of the conflict in question, which had little to do with 'creeping migration' and was in fact triggered by the unannounced closure of the waterway during the spring planting season. Instead he went on to make a critique of the 'long-standing silence, excessive patience and indecisiveness' of the Kyrgyz authorities, which had allowed this situation to develop:

> This position [of inaction] is more or less understandable when, in the question of contested border territories with China, Bishkek demonstrated a certain willingness to concede. However, such concessions are simply shameful [*postydny*] in relation to Tajikistan, where the authorities are unable even to provide their citizens with light and heat, and where the basic source of monies entering the state budget is the army of illiterate guest-workers, with a solid reputation as narco-traffickers. Bishkek is obliged, come what may, to finally stand by the rights of its citizens, and ensure the inviolability of its own territory. (Omuraliev 2008)

The tenor of Omuraliev's critique points to a second striking effect of the developing public debate: to demand a more assertive policy in regard to its neighbour, Tajikistan. 'Creeping migration' was taken as a sign of state weakness: the 'moving' borders less a reflection of the overlapping territorial claims bequeathed by 70 years of coexistence than the symbol of a much broader failure of state sovereignty. Juraev, for instance, responded to a question about why this was happening with the response, 'if we were a strong state [*sil'nym gosudarstvom*], of course [Tajikistan] wouldn't treat us like that'. He then went on to list Kyrgyzstan's territorial concessions, with the 'creeping migration' from Tajikistan the last in an ongoing drama of disappearing territory: 'First it was China, now talks are going on about us giving land to Kazakhstan; then in turn Uzbekistan will want something or other. And then Tajikistan will join in this process' (Pozharskii 2008).

The third striking effect of the discourse that emerged around 'creeping migration' was the way in which it transformed a phenomenon of state territoriality into a cultural threat. Speaking to the parliamentary committee on constitutional legislation, for instance, deputy Juraev began by outlining the danger to the state's territorial integrity posed by illegal occupation and lack of border controls. This, however, was immediately followed by a rather different kind of threat—less the moving of the border than a process of cultural domination: what Juraev calls a 'Kosovo scenario':

> We are witnessing a classic 'Kosovo' scenario. We may well reach a moment, when this territory will be inhabited by citizens of other nationalities [*grazhdane drugikh natsional'nostei*]. Who would have thought that Kyrgyz citizens would have to take their passport with them to fetch water? Or that girls would have to be accompanied to school by several lads, so that they weren't attacked? Or that our [*oblast*'] governor would be beaten up by the border guards of the neighbouring state![36] Whatever next? (Karimov 2008)

Juraev's 'citizens of other nationalities' is telling here. For it suggests that it is less the fact of different citizenship that is the issue in the illegal land sales, or their illegality *per se* than the cultural integrity that is at stake when those purchasing the land are perceived to be linguistically, culturally and ethnically 'other'. Asked several days later in interview to explain what he meant by this 'Kosovo scenario', Juraev responded by describing how the gradual migration of ethnic Albanians had led to a declaration of independence in a 'Serbian *oblast*'', leading to the splitting apart of a previously integral state: 'When [Yugoslavia] fell apart, it turned out that in Serbia one *oblast*' [sic] had become predominantly Albanian. The Albanians conducted a referendum on their *oblast*', announcing the independence of Kosovo, and Serbia was split apart [*raskololas*']' (Pozharskii 2008). Quite apart from its rather scant regard for historical, demographic or juridical accuracy, Juraev's comment is striking for the parallel that he immediately went on to draw with the situation in southern Kyrgyzstan, in which the real threat—that of cultural and ethnic domination by ostensibly 'minority' groups—comes to the fore:

> In the South of Kyrgyzstan, there are about one million Kyrgyz people living, 600–700,000 Uzbeks and 100–120,000 Tajiks. But many Kyrgyz have left and continue to leave for work abroad. Maybe things will turn out such that in the future the Kyrgyz won't be the ethnic majority. And what if another ethnic group wants to create a South Kyrgyz republic with its capital in Osh? They'll conduct a referendum and there, you'll find that you've got one more Kosovo, only in Asia. Kyrgyzstan will be split in two. (Pozharskii 2008)

It is easy to dismiss such assertions as the rhetorical excesses of a nationalist politician, whose draft law had given him a moment of brief and short-lived attention; but the assumption, implicit or explicit, that informal land sales represent a greater threat when carried out by people of different ethnicity from the majority Kyrgyz is also found in much more sober and informed analyses. FTI, for instance, in its analytical reports, distinguishes between illegal immigrants from Tajikistan on the basis of ethnicity. Ethnic Kyrgyz migrants who are moving to their 'historical homeland' [*iskonno istorcheskuyu rodinu*] are not a source of concern to the local authorities, the reports argue, because alongside a simplified system for acquiring citizenship, such migrants 'have kinship links with the local population [and] the same

[36]The event alluded to here referred to a violent outburst that emerged between Batken governor Aijigitov and Tajik border guards posted at a mobile border unit in Surh in January 2007. The mobile post was located on a stretch of Tajikistani road that had been loaned to Kyrgyzstan for 49 years (and therefore should not have any border controls). The event escalated into an open conflict, involving the border units of both states (FTI 2007a).

traditions and habits, enabling them to adapt painlessly' (FTI 2007b, 2008). By contrast, ethnic Tajiks who managed to regularise their status through the acquisition of Kyrgyzstani citizenship, were nonetheless deemed to represent a threat to inter-ethnic peace. It is one of the striking features of borderland migration that many Tajik migrants are quite keen to acquire Kyrgyzstani citizenship, not least because having a Kyrgyzstani passport tends to attract less harassment for labour migrants from the Russian and Kazakh police. Yet in its detailed recommendations to law makers and local authorities, FTI warned about the risks of granting citizenship to those ethnic Tajiks who were already *de facto* permanent residents of Batken *oblast*'. If the Tajik immigrants were granted citizenship and were then to invite their kin and friends, the report argued, it 'could destroy the habitual ethnic balance in the given border villages and eventually lead to interethnic conflicts' (FTI 2008, p. 21).

Whilst very different in tone and rhetorical effect, what links the law-maker's initiative with FTI's empirical analysis is an underlying assumption about the relationship between ethnic 'imbalance' and social risk, whether at the level of an individual village, or of the nation state as a whole. This conception is consequential, because as well as essentialising cultural difference, it also tends to justify policies that are aimed at minimising inter-ethnic contact rather than addressing the underlying sources of tension (Reeves 2005; Bichsel 2009). Attempts to construct a school in the Kyrgyz border hamlet of Tashtumshuk, for instance, have been justified on the grounds that children currently have to walk through the Tajik village of Hoji-A'lo on their way to their current school, and that it is precisely whilst walking there that 'small everyday quarrels and fights [*mel'kie bytovye ssory i stychki*]' are liable to break out (FTI 2008, pp. 17–18).

What this kind of equation misses is that such quarrels occur not because of different ethnicity, nor even, as the FTI report argues, because one village is significantly more populous than the other, but because in a context of acute resource shortage and the political over-determination of ethnic difference, it is hardly surprising that children learn to structure antagonism along 'national' lines. Tashtumshuk, after all, was the scene of a raid to root out 'illegal' residents—hardly an initiative conducive to harmonious inter-communal relations or the depoliticisation of difference.

### *Allowing the 'taste of independence': bypass roads*

If official pronouncements are anything to go by, however, precisely this logic of separation seems to underlie the building of two new 'bypass roads' in Batken region. Roads, as Penny Harvey points out in a South American context, are powerful sites for enacting territorial integrity: they 'materialise state and corporate ambition, and transform particular territorial spaces into sites of fantasy and projection for politicians, planners and local people' (Harvey 2005, p. 131). Moreover, what they materialise is not just any old 'fantasy', but a particular conception of the state as bounded, contiguous and extensive. They are 'immobile material entities yet they draw attention to mobility; they have fixed geographical coordinates yet they extend beyond and exceed named places and thus have an air of the translocal about them' (Harvey 2005, p. 131). The symbolic potential is particularly striking when the roads in

question, such as those currently under construction in Batken *oblast*', are explicitly conceived to bypass a neighbouring state. In the Isfara valley, the 'detour' in question is a 23 kilometre stretch of road that creates a loop to the south of the populous Tajik villages of Surh and Chorku, remaining entirely within Kyrgyzstani territory. Moreover, in a striking reflection of the entanglements of the 'international' in statist construction projects, the road is financed with funding of €6.5 million from the European Commission (Anarkulov 2008b; Urumbaev 2007).

Like other bypass roads, the detour around Surh and Chorku was conceived to enable citizens of Kyrgyzstan to pass with ease between different parts of their own state, without risk of customs and border checks at the point that they crossed the border. The mobile customs posts that appear on market day in Chorku are, indeed, a source of considerable local frustration. Taxi-drivers would often lament how cars with Kyrgyzstani number plates would be selected for checks, and were vulnerable to arbitrary 'fees' simply for transporting potatoes or rice between the market and home. As several of my interlocutors pointed out, however, the bypass road around Tajikistan had a secondary aim, by effectively delineating, in a quite literal and visible sense, the hitherto unmarked contours of Kyrgyzstani territory in a zone deemed vulnerable to the border's 'creep'.

Certainly, the official pronouncements that have surrounded the recent road-building projects in Batken have stressed that these stretches of asphalt are as much symbolic as technical. President Bakiev, at an August 2008 presentation of technical equipment acquired by the Ministry of Transport, announced that in ensuring the country's 'transport independence' (*transportnaya nezavisimost'*), the government was simultaneously resolving 'a most important political task': the future stabilisation of the country, and the 'improvement of relations with neighbouring states'.[37] Prime Minister Chudinov celebrated the Day of Auto Transport Workers by announcing that road building projects in the south of the country would turn Kyrgyzstan 'from a country of geographical dead-ends into one of transit' (*iz tupikovoi strany v tranzitnuyu*),[38] whilst the former governor of Batken *oblast*', Sultan Aijigitov, celebrated the detour roads as having finally allowed inhabitants of the region to enjoy the 'taste of independence'. He was quoted as saying:

> On the territory of the *oblast*' are five enclaves, and all communication goes precisely through these enclaves. To tell you the truth, it is precisely for this reason that for already fifteen years now the local population has not yet experienced the taste of real freedom [*vkus nastoyashchei svobody*]. The taste of independence. Such problems can be resolved in one way only. We must build detour roads around these enclaves. (Anarkulov 2008b)

Such, then, is the logic of the 'detour': separate roads as a way of fostering, quite literally, separate paths through the landscape—with this the precondition for a sweet-tasting 'independence'. The problem with this logic is threefold: first, it risks

[37]'K. Bakiev prinyal uchastie v prezentatsii tekhniki, priobretennoi Mintransom', *Kabar*, 4 August 2008.

[38]'I.Chudinov prinyal uchastie v torzhestvennom sobranii ko Dnyu rabotnikov avtomobil'nogo transporta', *Kabar*, 10 October 2008.

FIGURE 6. START OF THE NEW 23KM BYPASS ROAD AROUND CHORKU AND SURH, FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, AUGUST 2008

undermining those mundane spaces of borderland conviviality—of which public transport is as important as it is overlooked—that provide the context within which larger, more consequential issues are resolved. Secondly, and related to this, it tends to reduce the incentives to seek collective solutions to pressing issues of land shortage, pasture and water use. As the UNDP noted recently in a cross-border analysis, the tendency to seek solutions 'through more ethnic separation' rather than 'through improvement in interethnic relations' may be popular with domestic constituencies, but is unlikely to address the underlying sources of tension (UNDP 2006, p. 4). Rather than seeking funding for new roads, for instance, the report recommends investing in existing infrastructure and developing mechanisms for shared use (UNDP 2006, p. 38).

Perhaps most significantly, however, the logic of 'separate roads' serves to politicise space in new ways. In a region where the formal, cartographic border is not visibly demarcated, it is the road that serves as the *de facto* site of stately territorial control, at least as far as ordinary border-dwellers are concerned. It is on roads and bridges that the fixed border and customs posts tend to be sited; it is at the side of roads that mobile border units tend to regulate movement; it is the goods that pass, legally and illegally, along roads that allow the extraction of fines and bribes.

A number of recent reports have highlighted the degree of popular resentment of this everyday securitisation of border space—and the extent to which 'border defence' can morph into the extraction of tribute (Dolina mira 2004; Kadyrova 2005; Kuehnast & Dudwick 2008, pp. 10–18; UNDP 2006, pp. 25–26). In the past it has precisely been the fact of 'transport inter-dependence'—the fact that Tajik citizens depend on passing

through Kyrgyzstani territory and vice versa—that has tended to act as a constraint upon the degree of everyday border enforcement. 'Transport independence' allows for space to be unilaterally militarised in new ways, with unpredictable consequences. It is too early to say what the effects of this will be, but certainly, the tendency to respond to moments of heightened tension by increasing, or threatening to increase, the number of border and customs controls does not bode well for populations here, for whom border-crossing is a fact of life.

## *Conclusion*

This essay has drawn on a concept of 'state effects' to explore recent attempts to 'stabilise the border' and materialise state space in southern Kyrgyzstan. It has argued that the illegal cross-border sale of land and property in the Isfara valley, whilst an empirical process that is indeed a source of concern to local people, has taken on a dynamic in contemporary political discourse in Kyrgyzstan that is quite unrelated to the actual dynamics of co-existence along Batken's borders. It is a discourse, moreover, which is symbolically charged and politically productive. As the previous section has demonstrated, the threat posed by 'creeping migration' from neighbouring Tajikistan has been used to enact the 'encompassing' state in border regions in various ways—through stately beneficence; through raids on homes now deemed 'illegal'; through the materialisation of stately infrastructure; and through the increasing militarisation of borderland space. If we proceed from a recognition that territorial integrity, rather than an *a priori* attribute of the state, is rather a 'precarious achievement' (Ferguson 2006, p. 11), then such interventions come into view as powerful techniques both for spatialising the state and for asserting a particular conception, in a region of ethnic diversity, of the normative relation between 'nation' and 'state'.

In developing this argument, the essay has made a second claim, relating to our analysis of the Ferghana valley. The essay has echoed recent calls to interrogate the reification of ethnicity as a category of analysis in our study of the region (Megoran 2007). Yet it has also sought to explore why it is that, in this particular part of the Ferghana basin at least, ethnicity has come to be so very salient as an everyday 'practical category'. To understand why, the essay has suggested, we need to attend to the particular history of border drawing and re-drawing in this region; the legacies of spatial settlement which sought to 'fix' populations and in so doing 'fix' the border, and the contemporary political economy of land. These historical and post-Soviet dynamics have created a situation where 'ethnicity' and 'territory' are symbolically over-determined: that is, they have come to be so firmly linked in popular and official understandings of this region that the border is 'read' according to the ethnic distribution of villages and homes. It is in this context of over-determination that selling a home to someone of different ethnicity and different citizenship can become tantamount to 'moving the border'. Attending to this history of 'ethnic-spatial fixing' (Moore 2005) is crucial for understanding the potential future dynamics of co-existence in this region.

This in turn has implications for how we theorise 'symbolic politics' in Central Asia. To reduce political action to questions of instrumentality, the essay has argued, is to

occlude much of what gives politics its dynamic force. Specifically, in exploring the dynamics of cross-border relations, an account framed in terms of 'resource shortage' or material needs alone gives us little conceptual purchase on what is at stake at times of heightened tension: why it is that certain people, objects and places can come, quite suddenly and dramatically, to be invested with enormous significance as markers of difference or vehicles for the production of peace.

In exploring the place of the symbolic in Central Asian political life, therefore, we should attend not just to those symbols that adorn school books and public monuments, which are invoked in speeches and reproduced on state regalia to signify national unity, ethnic primacy or state strength. If we proceed, rather, from an expansive account of the symbolic—an approach that recognises our intrinsic competence as humans to represent the world to ourselves through other people and things—then we can begin to attend to the local meanings, including seemingly 'irrational' responses, to interventions that would appear to be purely technical. In the case of the symbolically freighted ribbon of land that lines the Isfara valley, such an approach can help us to grasp something of the dynamic force of the political in everyday life: how it is that a donor-sponsored water pipe can become a symbol of unequal distribution and deliberately targeted in a moment of inter-communal violence (Reeves 2008, pp. 167–96); how a new stretch of tarmac, an apricot tree planted on contested territory, or the appearance of a brightly painted wedding hall at the edge of a village can come to condense otherwise quite diffuse feelings of historical justice and incite talk of ethnic difference; how the sale of a land plot can be transformed into an act of symbolic treachery against the national body; how, under certain circumstances land can transform, suddenly and even violently, into 'motherland'.

It follows from such an approach that we should be wary of the claim that delimitation alone will put an end to ongoing contestation over local assertions of territorial primacy. Bilateral delimitation by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is often held out as a panacea—a technical solution that will stop the border 'creeping' further in the Isfara valley and therefore guarantee peace. The analysis presented here suggests that whilst having a 'clear' cartographic border may indeed help to curb claims upon currently contested territory, delimitation alone will do little to address the pressures that have turned 'creeping migration' into an issue of political capital and will do little to challenge the 'ethnic-spatial' fix that sees nation, territory and state as properly isomorphic. In contexts of acute land and water shortage, the exigencies of daily life are liable to unsettle the logic of state inscription.

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