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## “And Our Words Must be Constructive!” On the Discordances of Glasnost’ in the Central Asian Press at a Time of Conflict

*« Et nos paroles doivent être constructives ». Les discordances de la glasnost  
dans la presse d’Asie centrale au moment d’un conflit*

*« И СЛОВО НУЖНО КОНСТРУКТИВНОЕ ». О ДИССОНАНСАХ ГЛАСНОСТИ В ПРЕССЕ  
ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ В ПЕРИОД КОНФЛИКТА*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/3259>

ISSN: 2075-5325

**Publisher**

Éditions De Boccard

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 30 November 2016

Number of pages: 77-110

ISBN: 978-2-84743-161-2

ISSN: 1270-9247

**Electronic reference**

Madeleine Reeves, « “And Our Words Must be Constructive!” On the Discordances of Glasnost’ in the Central Asian Press at a Time of Conflict », *Cahiers d’Asie centrale* [Online], 26 | 2016, Online since 01 November 2017, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/3259>

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## **“And Our Words Must be Constructive!”**

### **On the Discordances of *Glasnost* in the Central Asian Press at a Time of Conflict<sup>1</sup>**

Madeleine REEVES\*

The prestige of [journalism] is falling catastrophically. [...] People are eagerly looking for the figure of an enemy. Of a slanderer (*očernitelâ*) and distorter. Of a mudslinger and a firebrand. Since the signing of the resolution on *glasnost* at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party conference it hasn't got any easier. It's got harder. Since now with one hand you can hang rags from the front of buildings with the slogan “*Perestroika, glasnost, uskorenie* [acceleration]” and with the other hand you can clamp the mouth of anyone wanting to tell the truth (Kozlinksij, 1989).

The possibility, the necessity to speak and write about things that are really occurring – this is the great victory of our *perestroika*. The more openly we

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the French Institute for Central Asian Studies, whose invitation to present at the conference on ‘1989, Also a Key Year in Central Asia?’ was the spur for me to delve further into the Isfara events. Had it not been for conversations with Gulnara Ibraeva and Sarah Amsler about ‘truth’ and authoritative speech in late- and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, I would perhaps never have become so intrigued by the work of the provincial press during *perestroika*. I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and helpful suggestions, and especially to Adi Kuntsman, whose close reading of a draft has spurred this paper in new directions. Any errors of fact or interpretation, of course, remain my own.

will talk about them, the more we collectively benefit, and the fewer will be the gossips, the bureaucrats, the makers of empty promises. But the strength of our word is in truth, objectivity, precision; it is in our exactingness (*vzyskatel'nosti*) and relentless verifying of information (*vyverennosti*). [...] The main thing is clear: the press must concentrate its efforts on deep analysis, on constructive work towards the consolidation of all the forces of society to resolve the burning problems of *perestroika*. [...] We need constructive work. And our words must be constructive (Sajipžanov, 1989).

Studies of the Soviet mass media have often drawn attention to the momentous transformations brought about by the introduction of Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*' [literally 'giving voice'] beginning in 1987.<sup>2</sup> Like the other terms with which it was linked in Gorbachev's early trio of reforms – *perestroika* [restructuring] and *uskorenie* [acceleration] – *glasnost*' was not a new term within the official Soviet lexicon. But its elevation to a guiding principle of Soviet communication, and its adoption within English as a shorthand for the easing of censorship, have meant that the policy of *glasnost*' is often characterised, in popular and scholarly literature alike, as marking a radical shift: from secrecy to openness, from censorship to freedom, from allegorical to authentic speech.

For many contemporary Western observers, the transformation in discursive regime that accompanied Gorbachev's rule was greeted with enthusiasm as a harbinger of liberal transformation that would and should be embraced as much inside the Soviet Union as it was beyond. Ellen Mickiewicz characterised Gorbachev as "start[ing] a revolution in political discourse," that television "magnified and spread" (1997, p. 20). Brian McNair observed of the *perestroika*-era press that "the full panoply of reforms which have occurred since 1985 – *glasnost*', socialist pluralism, rights of access – has arguably resulted in the emergence of a media system which is comparable in its openness, reliability, depth of information, and entertainment quality to those of most western societies" (1991, p. 169).

The impetus for this transformation in political consciousness was often seen to lie in the democratisation of opportunities for uncensored expression, which allowed for the public communication of hitherto private discontent. In her study of Soviet "mythologies of everyday life," Svetlana

<sup>2</sup> As Oushakine (2001, p. 192) notes, the term *glasnost*' has its etymological roots in the idea of voice (*glas*), and thus carries connotations of 'rendering public' or 'giving voice' which the usual English translation 'openness' does not fully convey.

Boym described the "euphoric public sphere" of the first years of *glasnost* and the "graphomania" that accompanied the easing of restrictions upon the publishing and circulation of texts (1993, p. 205). Years of silencing, Boym argues, "created a great need for speaking up and being heard." For the first time, "It became possible to write without thinking of the censor as one's first reader and without elaborating a subtext in the 'Aesopian language' of allusions, metaphors, and anecdotes" (*idem*). James Riordan and Sue Bridger went further still, identifying in the flurry of readers' letters to the Soviet press both an expression of previously repressed feeling and a motor of liberal transformation. Gorbachev's reforms, they argued,

unleashed a veritable outpouring of the soul, a release of pent-up passions, sometimes a burning desire to be part of the changes, sometimes to shout abuse at authority. Of all the institutions and processes of Soviet society under Gorbachev, readers' letters were in the vanguard of actions that helped to break society's totalitarian mold and push the country toward democracy (Riordan & Bridger, 1992, p. 1).

The reasons for such euphoric evaluations are not hard to find. *Glasnost* entailed dramatic shifts in what could be reported, by whom and how, to which audiences through which channels. For the first time in decades, Soviet journalists were able to report on accidents, on loss of life, on policies that failed to work, and on the petty corruption of local officials, and readers, in turn, were able to write critical responses without fear of retribution. As Thomas Wolfe notes in his study of the Soviet press, journalists and their readers were able to see that "the everyday life of Soviet society was, in fact, a vast field of intrinsically interesting events needing representation" that it was the task of the press to investigate (2005, p. 152).

Beyond an expansion of possibilities for uncensored expression, *glasnost* indexed a broader shift in the role of language in society. In a context where the Party-state had interfered explicitly in the material conditions of language and where the consequences of saying the wrong thing – even inadvertently – could be catastrophic, there was a heightened awareness among ordinary Soviet citizens that language had to be handled with great care (Guseinov, 1989; Oushakine, 2000). Caroline Humphrey traces the implications of such consciousness for everyday Soviet speech: the sensitivity it fostered over what could be said and the effects of words in particular circumstances (did one speak of 'the Russian revolution' or of 'October'?); the use of euphemisms and allegories; the heightened intensity

that this gave to jokes and double-entendres, and the playful use of official rhetoric to subvert official meaning. Long after the demise of Stalinism, Humphrey notes, ordinary people “could be as emotionally involved in the official vocabulary as in their own seemingly more natural everyday expressions” (Humphrey, 2005, p. 380). It follows from this metaphysics of language that collective authorship and the avoidance of individual names on newspaper articles were not merely editorial conventions, but should be seen as extensions of a linguistic regime in which, “of all the words in language, ‘I’ could be the most scary to say” (*ibid.*, p. 378).

It is in this context that we should interpret the scale of the discursive shift initiated by Gorbachev’s early speeches. During late socialism, as Alexei Yurchak has demonstrated, Soviet discourse had become increasingly predictable, citational and cumbersome: visual propaganda, collective ritual and newspaper discourse assumed a “hegemony of form” in which accurate repetition of the authoritative discourse trumped substantive content or discursive innovation (Yurchak, 2003 & 2005). The very repetitiveness of Soviet authoritative discourse created both the impression of its immutability and – ironically, perhaps – the conditions of possibility within which dramatic shifts could occur when that discursive regime was finally ruptured. For Yurchak, that rupture occurred with the very first public pronouncements of Gorbachev, who posed questions that “had to be articulated in a discourse other than authoritative discourse” (2005, p. 291). Once the genie of authentic speech was out of the bottle, in this reading, it was very hard to put back. As Ryazanova-Clarke (2008, p. 106) notes in her study of linguistic change during perestroika, for all that Gorbachev was an unlikely revolutionary, the consequences of this discursive shift were more radical than he could ever have imagined, bringing about a “landslide of the norm,” as language itself came to be transformed, with new vocabulary, and the resignification of formerly empty or declarative expressions, testing the bounds of acceptable speech to their limits. Gorbachev, in short, allowed for the emergence of a new discourse not so much by encouraging discontent, but by “challeng[ing] the doxa that state socialism was eternal” (Zavisca, 2011, p. 931).

## Provincialising Perestroika

The account of discursive transformation summarised above, while compelling, raises significant questions about the dynamics of this shift in diverse regional and institutional contexts. The very speed and transformative potential of the changes brought by *glasnost* (a “moment of rupture” in Yurchak’s characterisation (2005, p. 283); a “revolution in political discourse” for Mickiewicz (1997, p. 20); a “heretical break” for Ryazanova-Clarke (2008, p. 104)) can give the impression that transformations in the discursive sphere were at once widely embraced, institutionally unproblematic, and broadly uniform across the Soviet space. Yet studies of Central Asia during perestroika highlight the significantly different tempi of reforms in the Soviet centre and the southern periphery – tempi that had implications for the ways that the “landslide of the norm” unfolded in Osh, in Frunze or in Moscow, in homes and workplaces, as well as in the offices of the provincial press.

One aim of the current article, accordingly, is to advance our understanding of perestroika in Central Asia by looking at tensions over how conflicts – and specifically inter-communal and inter-ethnic conflicts – were reported at a time of high perestroika in the Russian-language provincial press.<sup>3</sup> I draw upon an analysis of newspapers from 1989 at three different levels of the Soviet publishing hierarchy: ‘central’ publications, issued in Moscow for all-Union consumption (*Izvestiâ*, *Komsomol’skaâ Pravda*, *Pravda*), Russian-language newspapers issued in the republican capitals, Dushanbe and Frunze (*Kommunist Tadžikistana*, *Komsomolec Tadžikistana*, *Sovetskaâ Kirgiziâ*, *Večernij Frunze*) and newspapers issued in the provincial cities of Leninabad (today: Khujand) and Osh, respectively in the Tajik and Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) (*Leninabadskaâ Pravda*, *Leninskij Put’*).

Through a case study of a particular inter-communal conflict along the borders of the Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs in the spring and summer 1989,

<sup>3</sup> The question of how these discourses did or did not differ in the Kyrgyz- and Tajik-language provincial press is an important one requiring future research. It lies outside the scope of the current article, however. It is unfortunately the case that collections of Russian-language newspapers appear much better maintained; the extensive corpus of newspapers contained in the newspaper collection of the Russian State Library at Khimki that I consulted to write this article does not maintain holdings of the key Kyrgyz- and Tajik-language provincial newspapers that would be needed for a systematic comparison.

I explore the differentiated, contested and decidedly non-linear work of ‘unmaking’ authoritative discourse. I argue that we need to provincialise our understanding of perestroika: that is, to recognise the plurality of forms and speeds that reforms took in different parts of the Soviet space, and the contradictions and tensions that this fostered over what constituted ‘responsible’ speech and action. If perestroika came late to Central Asia, as observers at the time often noted (see, *e.g.* Rywkin, 1990, p. VIII), how did this play out in the realm of reportage, particularly when central newspapers came to report on events happening locally, often in quite alarmist or emotive terms? More concretely, how might an analysis of the differential reporting of events in the central, republican and provincial press complicate our understanding of how the “revolution in political discourse” signalled by *glasnost* took hold – or failed to take hold – away from centres of political power?

### **Discordant *Glasnost***

In posing these questions, and attending seriously to the anxieties expressed over the stakes of ‘constructive’ reportage by journalists and editors, I seek more broadly to question the model of the subject that informs many accounts of perestroika – and indeed, other moments of collective ‘awakening’ elsewhere, including in the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ (see, *e.g.* Ghonim, 2013). The model of ‘repression and release’ that often informs depictions of the discursive shifts that occurred under Gorbachev (a world of ‘pent-up passions’ and outpourings of the soul) can tend to privilege a model of the speaking, communicating human subject (indeed, often an elite, metropolitan *graphomaniac* subject) who will eagerly and sincerely speak truth to power as soon as previous restrictions are removed.

This is a model, as others have noted, that locates the (liberal) political subject beyond the field of power (Oushakine, 2001). More specifically, as I argue below, it also glosses over the complexities of navigating the new demands of authentic reportage in a context where truth and speculation, rumour and lie are experienced as radically indeterminate – and where material conditions provided few opportunities to facilitate investigation over the simple re-transmission of information from an authoritative centre. These complexities, I suggest, were more acute the further away one was from Moscow. For as historian Thomas Wolfe has shown, the Soviet press

was organised not as a series of interacting agents choosing their own preferred patterns of interaction, but as "an organization of communications from center to periphery that would consist of a flow of instructions, models of behavior, and narratives of conduct whose collective emulation would realize socialism" (2005, p. 18). In this 'radial model' of information transfer, the provincial newspaper was an organ for the transmission of information rather than for independent reportage; the role of the journalist that of instructor and pedagogue rather than investigator.

For all the informal freedoms allowed by *glasnost*, this radial model was still firmly in place right up until the passing of the law on press freedom in June 1990 – by which time editors were largely preoccupied with questions of material survival after central subsidies declined. For a provincial newspaper editor during perestroika, therefore, reporting on current events – particularly those events that were sensitive and socially contentious (as many events of 1989 were) – posed critical challenges. On the one hand, journalists and editors were often expressly condemned by local Communist officials for allegedly 'inaccurate' or irresponsible reportage. Journalists in established republican newspapers were usually Communist Party members and could be pressed upon as such. On the other hand, editors were acutely conscious that the broader societal acceptance of critique often left them open to accusations from their readership of not embracing *glasnost* with sufficient vigour – and thus, of being abandoned by their readers altogether.

This tension between the continued pressure to report 'constructively' as official organs of the Communist Party and yet to respond to the increasing demands of their readership is reflected in a proliferation of meta-commentary on the role of the newspaper in balancing opinion and truth. During the later years of perestroika (1989-1991), republican and provincial newspapers in Central Asia ran questionnaires and explicitly invited letters to the editor, soliciting readers' opinions on the organisation of the publication ("what are your recommendations to the authors' collective of the newspaper?") as well as substantive issues of content: "Your opinion on the position of the newspaper regarding the most important problems of our lives" (e.g. anonymous, 1989a & 1989g). Such questionnaires and 'virtual conferences' (*zaočnye konferencii*) were coupled with extensive reflection on the nature of journalistic practice itself, explicit appeals to the



readership not to be taken in by wildly circulating rumours, as well as some poignant reflections on the new demands that were being placed upon journalists as the supposed vanguard of *glasnost*’ (Krûčkov & Freidkin, 1989). In an August 1989 article entitled, “Send us a Correspondent....”, for instance, M. Sajipžanov wrote with some exasperation about the kinds of demands that arrived at the offices of his provincial newspaper, *Leninskij Put’*, in Osh in the Kyrgyz SSR:

‘I would like you to help me: 1. Undertake repairs to my toilet. 2. Register my grandson with me permanently. 3. Bring my neighbour to their senses. 4. Make the optician cure my eyes.’ ‘I would like you to make the chair of our *kolkhoz* distribute a land parcel to me.’ ‘I demand that the newspaper bring about the review of my court case.’ But alas, a newspaper is not a provider of communal services. Nor is it the passport office. Nor is it a doctor or a court (Sajipžanov, 1989).

Such remarks were often coupled with stern warnings about the dangers of excessive freedom of speech. “We mustn’t forget,” Sajipžanov warned, “that the psychology of free-riding, the psychology of consumerism have nothing in common with democratisation and *glasnost*” (*idem*).

To explore these tensions in more detail, I turn my focus in the second part of this essay to a single case study, the so-called ‘Isfara events’ (*Isfarinskie sobytiâ*): a series of strained, and occasionally violent, trans-boundary disputes along the borders of the Kyrgyz and Tajik Soviet republics in the Isfara valley during the spring and summer of 1989. Often remembered locally as the war or conflict ‘of the spades’ (*vojna ketmen or ketmen uruš*), the Isfara events typically figure only as a footnote within a broader narrative of nationalist awakening and inter-ethnic tension that characterised the final years of the Soviet Union (*e.g.* Glebov & Crowfoot, 1989, pp. 175-176; Tishkov, 1997, p. 74). 1989 was, after all, the summer of protest in the Baltic states at fifty years of Soviet occupation, of rising tension in Nagorno-Karabakh, of violent demonstrations in Tbilisi, and of the passing of new language laws that sought to reverse historical injustices in the use of languages other than Russian in the public sphere. Throughout 1989 Soviet citizens were increasingly exposed to commentaries on the “national question” and the declining state of inter-ethnic relations, just as they were to the realities of bread queues, empty shops and spiralling inflation (*e.g.* Anonymous, 1989c; Mursaliev, 1989). In Central Asia, events in the Isfara valley overlapped with – and, to some degree, appear to have

been intensified by – violent attacks on Meskhetian Turks in the cities of Kuvasaj, Margilan and Ferghana in the Uzbek SSR that led to the forced displacement of tens of thousands of Meskhetians to Southern Russia in July 1989 (TadžikTA, 1989a): events that were described in Britain's *Independent* newspaper in June that year as "the bloodiest in the recent history of the Soviet Union" (Cornwell, 1989, p. 15).<sup>4</sup>

For all of their apparently local significance within a broader summer of (often violent) discontent, the Isfara events of 1989 are nonetheless critical for our understanding of the dynamics of perestroika in rural Central Asia. This local dispute over the right to cultivate an area of barren, 'disputed' (*spornyj*) land between villages at the very edge of the Kyrgyz and Tajik republics threw inter-republican (and not simply inter-ethnic) relations conclusively into public debate for the first time in the republics' Soviet history; specifically, the complex legacy of the 1924-27 national territorial delimitation and the failure of multiple subsequent parity committees to establish definitively where inter-republican borders lay.

While the Isfara events can thus be seen as profoundly mediated – and indeed, to a degree 'shaped' – by the expansion of discursive possibilities afforded by *glasnost*, the differential narration of these events in contemporary newspaper reportage also provides an insight into the tensions that emerged at the time between openness and containment, between guidance and the maintenance of social order. Crucially, the editors of the provincial newspapers *Leninskij put* and *Leninabadskaâ Pravda*, in the oblast' capitals of Osh (Kyrgyz SSR) and Leninabad (Tajik SSR) respectively were having to negotiate a series of complex triangular relationships: with each other (positioned administratively on two sides of a disputed border), as well as with the central Moscow press, and with their own readership – who were clearly often writing in and complaining that the provincial newspapers hadn't yet taken sufficient heed of the new freedoms allowed by *glasnost*. An exploration of what could and couldn't be reported, and the extensive meta-commentary on the dangers of rumour and 'irresponsible speech'

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<sup>4</sup> A full discussion of the so-called "Ferghana events" of June and July 1989 is beyond the scope of this chapter. For a detailed analysis, which examines the chronology of events and the way that conflict catalysed and mobilised local conceptions of ethnicity, see Osipov, 2004.

thus provide a lens into the broader dynamics of discursive deformation at the end of the Soviet Union and tensions over the limits of the sayable.

### The Isfara Events<sup>5</sup>

By all accounts, the spring of 1989 had been a difficult one in rural Central Asia, marked by lower than usual rainfall across the Fergana basin, and exacerbated by crippling problems in the distribution of basic goods. Rationing of milk was introduced, and several basic goods – including school exercise books – required vouchers for their purchase (Petrună, 1989).<sup>6</sup> More significantly, perhaps, the spring of 1989 was a period marked by increasingly vocal complaints, in this region of exceptionally high population density, of the impact of land and water shortages. It was in this context that a long-simmering dispute over the use of so-called ‘unallocated lands’ (*neraspredeleennye zemli*) along the republican boundary between the Kyrgyz and Tajik republics in the Isfara valley took on vocal, and ultimately violent, dimensions.

This was not a new conflict. Historically, the Isfara valley had been a site of social and economic inter-dependence between Tajik-speaking agriculturalists in the valley basin and Kyrgyz pastoralists engaged in seasonal movement between summer pastures and wintering grounds lower down the valley (Buškov, 1995). Several decades of collectivisation, forced resettlement, the so-called consolidation of unpromising (*neperspektivnye*) mountain villages and irrigation-induced expansion of formerly uncultivated lands had created a situation where the *de facto* distribution of settlements, fields, and irrigation infrastructure differed dramatically from the republican borders as they notionally existed at the time of the

<sup>5</sup> The chronology and narrative overview of events in this section draws on published sources and interviews with some of the key actors that I conducted retrospectively in 2004–2005 and 2008. A full, archival history of these events is beyond the scope of this article. Given the argument that I develop in this paper concerning the partial and tendentious mode of some news reportage at the time, and given the tendency for memories of past conflict to be inflected by the dynamics of ongoing tensions, specific dates and numbers of casualties should be treated with some caution. I have, however, sought to provide as faithful an account of the 1989 events as I am available by triangulating multiple source bases.

<sup>6</sup> As Eugene Huskey has argued, rural areas in Kyrgyzstan were “in crisis” well before Gorbachev assumed power. The rural population of the republic had doubled between 1959 and 1989, even as it declined overall in the Soviet Union over the same period. Average monthly salaries were substantially lower than all-Union averages, and many young people reluctantly sought work and shelter in the city (Huskey, 1997, pp. 660–662).

original national-territorial delimitation sixty years earlier. Perhaps more importantly, repeated post-war parity commissions (reportedly 16 of them by 1989) which had been charged with (re-)negotiating the distribution of newly irrigated lands had failed to reach any kind of conclusive determination of where the republican borders lay. Significant here is the fact that the findings of a major parity commission that concluded its work in 1958-59 was ratified by only one of the two republics: the Supreme Soviet of the Kyrgyz SSR ratified its conclusions, but not the Supreme Soviet of the Tajik SSR (Popov, 1989b; Zakirov & Babadžanov, 1989b). By 1989 (and still to this day) large stretches of the inter-republican boundary remained formally undetermined and disputed between what are now two independent states.<sup>7</sup>

Tensions had surfaced periodically in this region as new lands were brought under cultivation through the extension of artificial irrigation, beginning in the 1930s and resurfacing periodically in 1970, 1975 and 1988. The tensions in the 1970s and 1980s were associated with exchanges of land between neighbouring collective farms for so-called long-term use (*na dolgosročnoe pol'zovanie*) that dated back to 1955.<sup>8</sup> An order of the Soviet Ministry of Agriculture in 1955 had authorised a twenty-five-year lease of land from the 100 years of Lenin sovkhoz of the Kyrgyz Batken district to the Pravda kolkhoz of the Tajik Isfara district. The leased land was designated for pasture use, but as the Pravda kolkhoz embarked on new canal construction in 1967, it became possible to extend the reach of cultivation (and eventually, of domestic settlement). This led to significant escalation of tension in 1975, when construction workers hired by the Pravda kolkhoz began moving part of a Kyrgyz cemetery to make way for new cultivation at the entrance to what is today the village of Ak-Saj in Kyrgyzstan. The construction was stopped by force by Kyrgyz villagers, who considered this historically 'Kyrgyz' land, leaving several people injured, and troops being sent to the area from the respective republican capitals (Bichsel, 2009, p. 108; author's interviews in Ak-Saj, Üč-Döbö and Ak-Tatyr, 2004-2005).

This escalation was followed by the arrival of a parity commission that determined the 'new' line of the inter-republican border. It was the legacy

<sup>7</sup> For the contemporary legacies of this indeterminacy, see Bichsel (2009), Reeves (2014) and Shozimov, Beshimov & Yunusova (2011).

<sup>8</sup> For a chronology, see Bichsel, 2009, pp. 106-112.

of these events that became the particular focus of grievance in 1989. The parity commission that followed the 1975 escalation of violence instructed that 316 hectares of the disputed land would be returned to the 100 years of Lenin sovkhos (land that was soon to be built upon as the new ‘strategic’ (*strategičeskij*) border village of Ak-Saj), while 402 hectares, which were being cultivated by the Pravda kolkhoz, would remain part of the Tajik SSR. In addition, a further 282 hectares of land were to be loaned from the 100 years of Lenin sovkhos to the Pravda kolkhoz and designated as a ‘friendship park’ (*Park družby*). While no financial recompense was to be paid, the agreement was that the Pravda kolkhoz would provide the newly established Kyrgyz village of Ak-Saj with water from the Mehnatobod – Ak-Saj canal during the irrigation season at a rate of 450 litres per second. That agreement, which was quite likely impossible to deliver even as it was signed, appears never to have been met. Ak-Saj never received the promised water, and Kyrgyz villagers felt aggrieved that they had effectively transferred the 282 hectares to the neighbouring republic – which by the 1980s came to be cultivated and built upon – ‘for free’ (*darom*).<sup>9</sup>

This was the broader context of grievance and historical indeterminacy within which the Isfara events of 1989 occurred. Beginning in April 1989, at the height of the spring irrigation season, tensions morphed into open dispute a few kilometres downstream from the site of the 1975 escalation, near the Mačai irrigation canal. This canal, built in 1975, drew water from the Isfara river to provide irrigation water to downstream villages. As such, it had so-called ‘inter-republican’ (*mežrespublikanskij*) status, crossing between the territory of the Tajik and Kyrgyz SSRs and providing water to collective farms located in both republics. In early April Kyrgyz villagers from Ŭč-Döbö village in the 100 years of Lenin sovkhos began work desilting, repairing and, according to some accounts, expanding the canal with a view to increasing its outflow of water to newly-allocated land plots.

To Tajiks in the immediately contiguous village of Oktâbr’, on the other side of the republican border (known today by its pre-Soviet name Khodžai A’lo), this restoration work was not innocent. The attempt to increase the outflow from the canal was seen as a precursor to the irrigation of uncultivated land located downstream, including parcels of land that were dis-

<sup>9</sup> Interview with former member of the Ak-Saj state farm administration, July 2008; see also Popov, 1989b.

puted between the two republics. On April 15, several unnamed villagers from Oktâbr' responded to the presence of excavation equipment by setting fire to a railway wagon that had been brought to the site (reputedly left on the territory of the Tajik SSR without the appropriate documentation), and destroying some of the concrete that had already been laid along the line of the canal. Although this immediate dispute seems to have subsided during the month of May (or at least, to have left no traces in the local news paper record), by the end of that month, after several weeks of unsuccessful 'prophylactic' work by the Procurator of Isfara district, upstream villagers in Oktâbr' partially blocked the Mačai canal with boulders. This left several villages of the 100 years of Lenin sovkhos deprived of irrigation water during the critical spring irrigation season, destroying the state farm's tobacco crop and leaving household with their kitchen gardens withering during what was already a year of acute economic hardship (Niksdorf, 1989a).

Party leaders from both Kyrgyz and Tajik republics flew to the scene, and on June 8 the First Secretaries of the Kyrgyz and Tajik republics were recalled from the famous May plenum of People's Deputies that they had been attending in Moscow. These high-level arrivals appear to have had less success than the intervention of local notables who engaged in 'people's diplomacy', creating an *ad hoc* committee with the name 'Friendship' from which ten respected elders on each side were invited to take part. The committee agreed that the disputed land should be simply divided in two, with each side having the right to cultivate half of it without the right of construction. The committee appears to have had some popular legitimacy, but no juridical force (Popov, 1989a).

Relations between the population and law enforcement officials clearly seem to have been strained throughout the summer, particularly on the Tajik side of the border. In a remarkably frank assessment of the situation, the Procurator of Leninabad province wrote in *Leninabadskaâ Pravda* at the end of July about the degree to which his resources had been stretched by the violent response to the resettlement of Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan's Ašt district, leading to a lack of police attention to the events in Isfara (Kanoatov, 1989). Whether as a direct result of this general heightening of tension across the valley following the attacks on the Meskhetian Turks, or for unrelated reasons, the situation in the Isfara valley became increasingly unstable in early July. On July 9, a group of

more than 80 people from Oktâbr' completely cut off the supply of water to the 100 years of Lenin sovkhos from the Mačai canal. Two days later, there occurred a large-scale and seemingly well-organised fight between Tajik residents of Oktâbr' and Kyrgyz living in the village of Ak-Saj, still a relatively new settlement that many Tajiks felt to have been illegitimately established on what was once 'Tajik' territory. Although some local leaders apparently tried to prevent the fight, on July 13, tensions escalated. Hunting rifles and small arms were used during a 9-hour stand-off in Oktâbr', several homes were set on fire in Ak-Saj, 19 citizens were hospitalised with gunshot wounds, 66 soldiers were wounded and one person was killed (Zakirov & Babadžanov, 1989a; TASS, 1989).

In response to this violence, troops were sent in from Dushanbe, a curfew was introduced on the Tajik side of the border, and in Tajikistan a commission was established under the leadership of the Chair of Ministers of the Tajik SSR, Makhkamov, to "liquidate the reasons for the withholding of water" in the Mačai canal and to hold those responsible to account (TadžikTA, 1989c; TadžikTA-Tass, 1989; Ukaz prezidiuma, 1989). Despite these measures, the tension in the valley was only contained when, over a week later, republican leaders from both the Kyrgyz and Tajik republics agreed to establish a joint parity committee with representation from both sides (Anonymous, 1989d). According to the protocol of the meeting between the first secretaries, published in both the Kyrgyz and Tajik press, the parity committee would be charged with "specifying the line of the border between the republics [...] proceeding from the *de facto* existing land use between the republics" (*iskhodâ iz faktičeski složivšegosâ zemlepol'zovaniâ meždû respublikami*). The committee was charged with studying all of the relevant documents since the establishment of the two republics in the 1920s and 1930s, and redefining the current location of the border based on existing land use (Anonymous, 1989f). The committee was given two months in which to conduct its work (Islâmov, 1989), but the results of the committee appear never to have been published, nor to have been ratified by the respective Supreme Soviets of the Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs, creating the conditions for ongoing disputes over the rightful location of the border to independence and into the post-Soviet period (Zakirov & Babadžanov, 1989a). Indeed, it is a bitter irony of history that in May 1991 the new presidents of the Tajik and Kyrgyz SSRs were due to meet



to discuss the findings of the commission, the Tajik side having decided that the only authoritative map that could be used as a reference document dating from 1927 rather than 1955 (Shozimov, Beshimov & Yunusova, 2011, p. 194). The newly-appointed President of the Kyrgyz SSR, Askar Akaev, failed to attend the meeting, however, and the issue remained unresolved as the very institutions of the Soviet state came tumbling down over subsequent months (*idem*).

### Navigating the Limits of *Glasnost*: Narrating and Suppressing Conflict

What was occurring in the Isfara valley was a land dispute in a region of historically indeterminate inter-republican border: a dispute that appears to have been precipitated by specific local factors, including the expansion of artificial irrigation with a view to cultivation of disputed land. In this sense, it was merely the latest iteration of disputes over land that had remained unresolved from earlier decades. The Isfara events, however, were occurring in an environment in which the 'national question' was being debated like never before in the Soviet Union. Throughout 1989, in both the Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs, the fate of the ethno-nation was the subject of intense popular and official commentary. Tajik newspapers featured reflections on the out-migration of the non-titular population and commentaries upon widely-circulating rumours that Tajik girls were being publically shamed for wearing so-called 'European dress' in public space (Khomidov, 1989). In the Kyrgyz republic, the unequal allocation of housing (which many in the titular population felt to privilege historically urban, Russophone communities) was the topic of repeated articles in the republican press – and often much more vocal and provocative letters to the editor (Romanûk, 1989; Baâlinov, 1989).<sup>10</sup>

Equally significant, the conflict was occurring at a moment of heightened meta-commentary in central and republican newspapers about the role of the press *itself* in containing, regulating or exacerbating conflict. For editors and Party officials addressing audiences in the Ferghana valley, the newspaper was clearly seen as much a vehicle for appealing to calm – "Maintain peace in one's home" (*Sokhranit' mir v svoem dome*, Islâmov,

<sup>10</sup> On the social origins of the housing crisis in urban Kyrgyzstan and its links to increasingly vocal nationalist demands, see Huskey, 1997, pp. 661-662.



1989), “Be human!” (*Byt’ lûd’mi!*, Krûčkov & Morozov, 1989), “On the Question of Rumours” (*K voprosu o slukhakh*, Krûčkov & Freidkin, 1989) – as it was for informing of concurrent events. Throughout 1989, journalists often explicitly addressed Party activists and well-intentioned citizens, sometimes in the form of letters from war veterans or members of the ‘cultural intelligentsia’ to avoid igniting inter-ethnic animosity.<sup>11</sup> Headline banners often appealed for ‘calm’ in the realm of inter-ethnic relations, and republican newspapers debated the potentials and pitfalls of having a press that was no longer entirely subordinate to Party control.<sup>12</sup>

These contexts are significant for interpreting the variety of responses to the Isfara events at different moments during the conflict and at different nodes along the ‘radial model’ of communication. For what is striking is not just the range of explanatory logics that were invoked to account for events – was tension in the Isfara valley ultimately attributable to economic insecurity, demographic pressures, the work of local ‘hooligans’, historical oversight in the process of national-territorial delimitation, or the failures of local Party leaders to resolve enduring land pressures? – but also the degree to which ‘conflict’ here should properly be the object of public knowledge and commentary when ‘misguided speech’ might contribute to future escalation of violence.

In this context, perhaps the most striking feature of the reporting on the Isfara events – which represented, after all, some of the most sustained trans-boundary tension to have been seen in either republic in years – was the guardedness of the official newspaper commentary in the Kyrgyz and Tajik republics. Part of the reason for this may simply have been an issue of journalistic access at a time of acute material constraints. The Isfara valley was distant from both provincial centres (Khujand and Osh) and still more from the republican capitals of Frunze and Dushanbe. Kozlinskij, writing for *Večernij Frunze* in October 1989, complained that the material conditions of work were so acute that “chairs would break under visitors”

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the “Appeal to sense” (*Prizyv k razumu*) signed by an assortment of war veterans, party activists and representatives of the intelligentsia urging “wisdom, tolerance and good sense in the delicate and fragile area of inter-ethnic relations” (Anonymous, 1989e).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Ūrij Žukov’s lengthy essay in *Pravda*, republished in *Sovetskaâ Kirgiziâ*, entitled “Freedom of Speech or Everything Goes? On Some Problems with the Autonomous Press” (Žukov, 1989).

and even the most basic material needs in the forms of typewriters, notebooks, mock-ups for articles were lacking. "Nobody dreams of having a dictaphone," Kozlinskij noted, "and nobody has even heard of a computer" (Kozlinskij, 1989).

If anything, these constraints were even more acute in the provincial press, which had few resources to support investigative reporting *in situ*. Yet material constraints alone, do not explain the tentative style of narration of the Isfara events. There was clearly a great deal of editorial uncertainty about what constituted responsible reportage of transboundary conflict that might escalate through their retelling, and considerable political pressure on journalists not to speculate on the causes of tension. In the article quoted above, for instance, Kozlinskij recalled that journalists working for *Večernij Frunze* had been called upon by local Communist Party officials after they had "dared to write an impartial thirty-line account of events in Manas [a village near the capital] who were demanding the recall of their Deputy." Thankfully, Kozlinskij noted, the collective did not give in to the threats and warnings from the Party officials. "Our conscience remained clean. But what about our reputation 'in certain circles'. Is it surprising that in three years we already have our third editor?" (*idem*).

In such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that during the first weeks of the conflict reports of events in the Isfara valley barely figured in the republican press. When they did, they were typically buried deep inside routine descriptions of state visits, from which one had to intuit that anything unusual has occurred. By late May of 1989, for instance, the situation was sufficiently tense in the 100 years of Lenin sovkhos in the Kyrgyz SSR that former school teachers recall the school leaving exam and end of year celebration (*akyrky kongyroo*) both having been cancelled.<sup>13</sup> And yet, the first mention of anything untoward in the valley in the official Party organ, *Sovetskaâ Kirgiziâ*, was not until June 21, a whole month later.<sup>14</sup> Under the headline, "To operate more actively," the small report in the corner of the page described in measured terms the visit of the Chair of the Council of Ministers of the Kyrgyz SSR, Apas Žumagulov, to the 100 years of Lenin

<sup>13</sup> Author's interviews, Ak-Tatyr and Üč-Döbö villages, September-October 2004.

<sup>14</sup> In the Tajik SSR, I found an equally brief reference to the events in the Isfara valley on June 13, at the very end of an interview with the head of the internal affairs department of the oblast' executive committee regarding the attacks upon Meskhetian Turks in neighbouring Uzbekistan (Freidkin & Vakhidov, 1989).

sovkhoz. There was only tangential reference to the events that had precipitated him to leave the Moscow Congress of People's Deputies early. Žumagulov, we are told:

recounted in detail about the work of the deputies from Kirgiziâ at the first Congress of Peoples' Deputies of the USSR and about how the decisions taken there are to be realised in the republic. [He] drew the voters' attention to the fact that in order to improve well-being people had to act together and that it was necessary to do so more actively and decisively. The deputy responded in detail to the numerous questions of the workers concerning the development of rental (*arenda*) and other contemporary forms of land-use in the context of Kirgiziâ, about the perspectives of the cooperative movement, and about inter-ethnic relations in the republic (Anonymous, 1989b).

The tone here and the appeal of the title, addressed to an upstanding citizen and Party activist (“*you* too need to operate more actively”) differs little from the kind of authoritative discourse that characterised the Brezhnev era, with a subtle nod to Gorbachev's concerns with increasing productivity and individual responsibility. Local populations are inveighed to act more resolutely, but we learn little from the reportage about what the local sources of tension were, or the substance of workers' questions regarding new forms of land ownership or the state of inter-ethnic relations.

There was no subsequent reportage over the land dispute in *Sovetskaâ Kirgiziâ* for nearly a month. Indeed, by the time the newspaper reported on events again, on July 16, the situation in the valley had reached critical levels, with water failing to reach the 100 years of Lenin sovkhoz for several weeks due to the blockage of the canal by upstream users, and a curfew in place on the Tajik side of the republican border to prevent the escalation of violence. A report prepared for the Kyrgyz news agency, KirTAG by the correspondent V. Niksdorf, again illustrates how former conventions of reportage were being stretched to accommodate new realities (Niksdorf, 1989a). Under a headline that stressed the normalisation of transboundary relations, “The Situation is Normalising,” Niksdorf's report in fact suggested that relations were incredibly strained. Indeed, while the title insisted on ‘normalisation’, the first sentence in the article stated that tensions between the residents of Batken and Isfara districts had ‘intensified’ (*obostrilis*). On July 13, the report revealed, over a thousand people had gathered in the contiguous villages of Üč-Döbö (in the Kyrgyz SSR) and Oktâbr’ (in the Tajik SSR) in response to Kyrgyz demands to reopen the

water canal, and 200 people from the nearby Tajik village of Vorukh had broken through a police cordon into Ak-Saj, leaving one person dead, and 19 injured (TadžikTA, 1989b) (other reports listed the number of casualties on July 13 as numbering up to 60). For all the drama of these events, the style of reporting was decidedly restrained:

Conflicts over the determination of the boundary between a variety of land parcels, which have been ongoing for a number of years, became notably more intense this year – and in May this year residents of the Tajik village of Oktâbr' unfoundedly (*neobosnovanno*) blocked the canal through which several villages of Batken rajon receive their water (Niksdorf, 1989a).

While the news report clearly placed the immediate source of dispute on the 'unfounded' actions of Tajik residents, the overall framing of the narrative, like others in the Kyrgyz press at the time, made little reference to the broader political history of indeterminate borders. The emphasis of the article, instead, was on the concerted efforts of the police and local authorities in containing the activities of a disaffected and economically marginalised local population:

The party, soviet and economic organs of Kirgiziâ and Tajikistan are taking concrete measures in order to terminate this conflictual situation; they are creating necessary measures for the economic and social development of the two neighbouring districts of both republics, and for the strengthening of brotherly friendship (*ukreplenie bratskoj družby*) of the Kyrgyz and Tajik peoples (*idem*).

If the dominant tenor of reportage in the republican and provincial Party press was of this variety: retrospective ("The situation is normalising"), pacifying ("Difficulties must be overcome"), and with little investigative content, republican and provincial newspapers occasionally contained articles that ruptured this dominant discursive formation. The disjuncture is particularly striking if we compare the central and the provincial press. In the Kyrgyz republic, the only direct reference to the Isfara events in *Leninskij Put'*, the provincial newspaper covering the westernmost Batken district, came in article published on July 22, three months after tensions in the valley began to mount. Under the headline "Friendship won't harm anyone" the article presented a bucolic scene of apricot-drying on the roofs of Batken homes, of hard-working herders and happy farmers inviting journalists in to try their apricot crop. There were, the author noted, "no

traces of anxiety” in Batken, the district centre. In pointed reference to the mis-reporting of events from the central press, the article continued:

To tell you the truth, having read various announcements in the central press on events in this district, I was nonetheless troubled by a feeling of foreboding. I treated everyone around me with care. But all around normal life was carrying on: trade was occurring in the market; shops and videobars were open; outside the shop the Batken people were choosing watermelons; a mother took her son for a haircut... (Zakharov, 1989).

The article explicitly rejected any attempt to analyse the causes of the preceding months’ events or to apportion blame (“that will be left to the appropriate authorities,” *idem*). Rather, Zakharov sought to stress the historic and ongoing ties between the Kyrgyz and Tajik communities, referencing ethnically mixed families and the presence of a sanatorium in Tajikistan where Kyrgyz kolkhoz workers regularly went to rest. There were local economic difficulties to be sure. 1989 had been a difficult year: there was limited rainfall and the region suffered from unemployment. But ultimately, as the deputy head of the Osh department of internal affairs was quoted as saying,

The *oblast’* came to the *rajon* to help. It offered financial support, various questions of trade service and construction have been resolved. By the way, the proposed building in the *rajon* of institutions of light industry will help in some way to remove the sharp social problem – the employment of the population (*idem*).

The article served at once to depoliticise the conflict – by identifying its roots in the local shortage of employment, not in the failures of previous parity commissions – and to reinforce the logic of Soviet institutional hierarchy according to which the ‘centre’ (Moscow) stands above the republics, which in turn assist the *oblast’* to devote attention to needy districts.

There is hope for a successful resolution of the conflict between Tajikistanis and Kirgizstanis [*sic*]. All that is needed is a realistic approach to this from each side. Just before my departure from Batken I found out that the Tajik comrades began to remove the blockage of the canal so as to provide water to the Batken villages. Consideration of several court cases has begun. Significant work in propaganda has been undertaken everywhere (*povse-mestno razvernulas’ bol’shaâ propagandistskaâ rabota*). In village meetings, people’s representatives are being elected, who are beginning to talk to each other and find ways out of the situation that has arisen [...] One wants to believe that everything will be resolved, and what has occurred will remain

a bitter lesson for the future. For the future, all the same, is for friendship (*a buduše vse-taki za družboj*) (*idem*).

Such reportage, reminiscent of an earlier era of authoritative discourse with its calls to brotherly friendship, its didactic manner of communication and its abduction of agency, stands in striking contrast with the assessment published in the central newspaper *Pravda* the following month and reproduced in both *Leninabadskaa Pravda* and *Sovetskaa Kirgiziâ*. Under their heading, "The Border Across the Street," the Moscow-based journalists sent to the Isfara valley to report from the scene provided a much more dramatic narration. The article began by evoking the tense atmosphere they encountered, the polar opposite of the peaceful scene conjured up by Zakharov:

"Don't wake the police, don't send the special forces here! It is terrifying even to imagine what we have set in motion here, how much blood has been spilled, how many houses have been burned to cinders..." We have heard such admissions from Tajiks and from Kirgiz alike, for whom the excessively long-drawn out resolution of the most acute land and water problems almost resulted in mortal combat (*smertel'nuû skhvatku*). Picture the scene. Here is a chain of women and children along the length of the road carrying bundles in their hands and on their heads. They are refugees returning from the mountains or from shelters. [Here are] burned out houses with broken windows, parched kitchen gardens and withered orchards. Here is an irate crowd, which has overturned a minibus; here is a heavy, to say the least, videofilm which shows the stand-off between hundreds of people at the edges of the Üč-Döbö tract. The sequence of images shows how with each hour the danger of bloodshed increased, as neighbours threaten one another, throwing stones and attempting to break through the many-layered chain of armed soldiers and policemen (Latifi & Razgulâev, 1989).

Where local newspapers tended to stress the economic sources of current tensions, Latifi and Razgulâev drew a much bolder conclusion, noting that conflict began not in June, or even in May, but had matured over decades in the repeated redetermination of republican borders:

At the most recent discussions, we were able to see how as one or other side presented a document, the other retrieved from their briefcase or from a folder a 'more accurate,' 'more reliable' or 'older' one. Maps from the 1950s were presented, followed by those from the 1940s, 1930s and 1920s. We looked with interest at the map of 1902. And at a meeting with elders in the village of Oktâbr' we were even presented with a map from the Kokand

khanate. Is it possible to find in such historical thickets a basis for mutual understanding? (*idem*).

Interestingly, the gulf between alarmism and assertions of calm, between claims of ‘normalisation’ and intensification of conflict can be found not just between the central and provincial publications, but even within the same newspaper on different days. In the republican and oblast’ level Tajik newspapers, *Kommunist Tadžikistana* and *Leninabadskaa Pravda*, for instance, detailed and sometimes quite critical explorations of the sources of contention in the Isfara valley can be found, often side-by-side, with assertions that the situation in the valley was in fact ‘calm’ and that what was needed was simply more order and more energy in responding to local needs. On July 18, *Kommunist Tadžikistana* published an article (bylined with the Tajik Information Agency, TadžikTA), under the headline “Painstaking Work is Needed.” In guarded terms, this article identified the sources of tension in economic grievances resulting from water shortages in the context of population growth:

Disputes (*spory*) over the right to use water and land in a variety of areas have occurred as a result of their deficit. The problem hasn’t arisen straight away, but rather according to the growth in population, which has outpaced the reserves of irrigated land. In such conditions each hectare, each litre must be used with absolute care (*s polnoj otdačej*) (TadžikTA, 1989d).

The article criticises the failures of ‘local organs’ to contain the current conflict and asserted that “today sustained, painstaking work is required to hold people back from ill-considered actions” (*ot neobdumanykh postupkov*). The tone and form of the article are evocative of an earlier mode of journalist reportage in which challenges are to be overcome with careful and concerted collective effort. Agency is abdicated, causes uninterrogated, and responsibility for the conflict is left unclear: the current deficit cast as the inevitable outcome of population growth, not the result of unresolved territorial dispute.

And yet the same newspaper the previous month had published an article remarkable for the tenor and critical perspective of its analysis. Under the heading, “Conflict Could Have Been Avoided,” M. Popov, in a three-thousand-word essay, launched one of the first sustained public critiques of the national-territorial delimitation of 1924-25, which made the map of Central Asia appear as though it had been “cut with scissors” and –



the reader is led to conclude – created the conditions of possibility for the current escalation of conflict. The article began with a stark assessment of the current situation:

For almost two months, the Isfara rajon has lived in a state of tension. Here in the village of Oktâbr' the emotions elicited by land conflicts have not diminished. And since we are talking about a parcel of land that borders the Kyrgyz village of Uč-Doba [*sic*], the conflict gained an inter-ethnic tone (*mežnacional'nyj ottenok*) almost from the start (Popov, 1989b).

What is distinctive about Popov's assessment is the linkage of current conflict to historical oversights in the delimitation of the border. He reserved particular critique for the last major round of territorial redrawing, which occurred in 1958. Writing of Oktâbr', he noted of the 1950s that:

There was so much freedom at that time that in 1958 the leadership of the Kalinin kolkhoz in Isfara district even considered it possible to gift (*peredat' v dar*) 144 hectares of land to the Kalinin kolkhoz [*sic*] of Batken district. That stretch of land lies right next to the territory of Oktâbr'. In Kyrgyzstan, ratification of that donation of land went through all the necessary levels, but in Tajikistan, not all the formalities were observed. The presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the republic did not issue a decree in regard to this exchange. But that did not stop the neighbours using the land that was given to them. Today, thirty years later, the short-sightedness (*neobdumannost'*) of that step is particularly stark. The population of the village of Oktâbr' has grown immeasurably. With this has grown the need to increase the number of domestic plots in order to reduce production problems. But now there are no lands remaining along the neighbouring village. How would it be if today you give your friend a fantastic present (*šikarnyj podarok*) but then tomorrow you demand it back since, well, you need it? At the very least you will lose a friend. But precisely these kind of calls could be heard in Oktâbr' concerning the 144 hectares (*idem*).

For Popov, then, the source of current conflict needs to be situated not simply in population growth and the more general shortage of irrigation water characteristic of large parts of the Ferghana valley, but in the failures of an earlier era of socialist internationalism in which calls to brotherly friendship trumped careful attention to the process of inter-republican delimitation.

Perhaps the most outspoken assessment, however, came in an article published one month after Popov's, in *Leninabadskaâ Pravda*. A 3,000-word article under the heading, "Be Human! A Reportage from the Curfew



Zone,” one senses an explicit pushing at the boundaries of reportable speech: one that is all the more remarkable for the assortment of articles by which it is surrounded – articles that in their form, organisation and mode of interpellation continue a mode of authoritative discourse little changed from the Brezhnev era. The authors, Krůčkov and Morozov, note that their task in undertaking the current reportage had been “determined by our readers” who were clearly frustrated that the central press was doing a more thorough job of reporting on events than local journalists. Like Popov, they make an explicit point of criticising the failures of earlier parity commissions, but they go further in calling for a much more encompassing resolution of the indeterminate borders, to be undertaken “at the highest level.” Invoking Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, they depicted the most recent commissions, which had been established in 1985, as:

acting on the principle of Triškin’s coat, when to fix the torn elbows of the coat you cut out a part of the sleeve, and to mend the shortened sleeves you cut away at the coat-tails. They hastily (*v požarnom porádke*) tried to put out the hot-spots without solving the problem in any global way [...] Today we urgently need the borders of land use to be determined in a completely clear and legally rigorous way. We are not just talking here about the redrawing (*perekrojka*) of the borders between two republics, but also about a clear determination of the right to appropriate empty lands. These need to be resolved at the very highest levels. All the preceding republican commissions didn’t resolve anything (Krůčkov & Morozov, 1989).

If the authors were outspoken in their critique of past failures, they were equally critical of the failures of journalists to provide an adequate account of events. In pointed reference to the work of (unnamed) colleagues, Krůčkov and Morozov noted on July 21:

People are fed up with empty words (*govoril’nā*). Newspapers and television often limit themselves to useless, ironed-out announcements and appeals to live in friendship (*ograničivaûtsā bespomošnymi, priglažennymi soobšeniâmi da prizyvami žit’ družno*) (*idem*).

The people of the Isfara valley, they implied, had little time or trust for such forms of outdated speech: the times had moved on and people demanded to know what was *really* happening at the edges of their republic. Krůčkov and Morozov’s article may not strike us as unusual in the context of the broader political mood of 1989: certainly, many articles in the central press were equally outspoken about the failures of empty promises and empty appeals in the realm of inter-ethnic relations. But in

the context of *Leninabadskaâ Pravda* in July 1989 what is remarkable is precisely the way that such speech acts serve to undermine the very coherence of the authoritative discourse by which they are surrounded: it is as though the article is a commentary on the surrounding pages of *Leninabadskaâ Pravda* itself and its sister newspapers in the provinces, full, as they were, with appeals to calm and assertions of order. Indeed, Krûčkov and Morozov's commentary appeared just three days after a warning from the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Kyrgyz SSR, Medetkan Šerimkulov, directed explicitly at journalists, to refrain from provocative or inaccurate reporting:

I would like to say that in interethnic relations what is above all important is consolidation, deep respect for each other, and balance – and journalistic announcements here play an enormous role. They can serve as a means for calming passions (*uspokoeniâ strastej*) or, on the contrary, as a catalyst for emotional explosion (*katalizatorom emocional'nogo vzryva*) (Niksdorf, 1989b).

Šerimkulov was clearly incensed that the central Moscow press had relied exclusively upon reports prepared by the Tajik news agency, TadžikTA, in describing events in the Isfara valley, and he used a (prepared) interview in *Sovetskaâ Kirgiziâ* to make his point. "The information coming out in a variety of central publications contains some questionable assessments and often straightforward factual errors," the article noted. Specifically, Šerimkulov criticised the use of the term "contested territory" (*spornaâ territoriâ*) to reference the land on which the Kyrgyz farmers had commenced construction, and a reference to "contested water" in the previous day's *Komsomol'skaâ Pravda* (Ganelin, 1989):

In my opinion, disputes are being whipped up around issues that are not disputed. If we are talking about the inter-republican borders, then we need first of all to proceed from the *de facto* land use that has arisen between the republics [...] The residents of the Tajik village, Oktâbr' have claims upon a part of the territory of Batken district. Precisely here were envisaged several land parcels for the workers of the 100 years of Lenin sovkhov. They even brought stones to build the foundations for their homes. But when disputes arose, as occurred in the spring, we insisted that they cease any work. What kind of 'appropriation' can we talk of in the given situation? (Niksdorf, 1989b).

Šerimkulov's conclusion was that only through an agreed official narrative, from Kyrgyz and Tajik news agencies, could such inaccuracies be avoided. As quoted by Niksdorf:

At the meetings of the leaders of Kirgiziâ and Tajikistan we talked about the role of the press in illuminating the conflict situation in the two districts of our republics. A correct conclusion was drawn, that information in various publications should not be one-sided. It would be good if [such information] were agreed by representatives of both sides. Precisely in this way we have proceeded in preparing announcements from KirTAG for the republican and all-Union press. I think that not one correspondent will look upon such a move as an attack on the freedom of the press (*kak pokušenie na svobodu pečati*), though it might well help him to avoid mistakes, small or large (*idem*).

## Conclusion

1989 was a year of heightened awareness about the fragility of inter-ethnic relations in Central Asia, and of the capacity of inaccurate or 'misguided speech' to foster its own dynamic of escalation. For many journalists who were also members of the Communist Party, the stakes of maintain peace through 'constructive speech' could not be higher. It is perhaps no surprise that throughout the spring and summer of 1989, provincial newspapers in the Tajik and Kyrgyz SSR carried multiple articles stressing the *non*-occurrence of conflict, the danger of misinformation, the need to be 'vigilant' (*bdtel'nyj*) and to distinguish 'reality from rumour' (e.g. Khomidov, 1989; KirTAG 1989).

Such appeals cannot, I believe, simply be attributed to the inertia of inherited styles of narrative reportage, the conservatism of individual journalists, or the pressures that editors were under from their Party bosses – although all of these aspects no doubt played some role. Rather, as the flurry of editorial commentary concerning the need for 'responsible speech' suggests, journalists and editors were charting a new ground of discursive possibility in a context where unregulated speech was understood to have powerful and unpredictable consequences. Rumour, as Veena Das notes, "occupies a region of language with the potential to make us experience events, not simply by pointing to them as to something external, but rather by producing them in the very act of telling" (2007, p. 108). Journalists appear to have been intensely conscious of the pre-figurative capacity of

language: the risk that reportage might itself enunciate and enact a new reality, hence the considerable, indeed perhaps excessive number of column inches dedicating to showing that a given rumour was false, that "disturbances *didn't* occur" (e.g. Upolovnikov, 1989).

This concern, if we are to take it seriously as more than conservative intransigence on the part of individual journalists, or a response to the long arm of the censor, has consequences for how we interpret the moment of late Soviet discursive decomposition that I have sought to capture in this article. At the end of his magisterial analysis of late socialism, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Alexi Yurchak argues that "Soviet late socialism provides a stunning example of how a dynamic and powerful social system can abruptly and unexpectedly unravel when the discursive conditions of its existence are changed" (2005, pp. 295-296). When viewed from the long range of the Soviet twentieth century, this is undoubtedly true. Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*' was profoundly transformative, allowing for the very foundations of authoritative discourse to be questioned, and thus for the fragility of the Soviet master-narrative itself to be exposed. Viewed closer-up, however, the story begins to complicate. Any rupture explored in microcosm reveals itself to be a multiplicity of much smaller changes, with different tempi and causal sequences. Even avalanches have their internal dynamics.

Through an analysis of reporting on one critical event in the dying years of the Soviet Union I have sought to capture something of that avalanche in motion: the point when a uniform discursive formation is not just disturbed, but gradually unmade. This reportage reveals the fragmentation in authoritative discourse; the emergence not simply of discordant narrative styles between a more experimental central press and a more cautious one in the provinces, but a more profound moment of instability about what exactly the provincial Soviet press can be or *should be*, particularly in a context of competing demands, limited resources and continued pressures from the Communist authorities to stand in the vanguard of 'constructive speech.' It is for this reason that one article in an issue of *Leninabadskaâ Pravda* could serve as a meta-commentary on the worn-out authoritative discourse that dominated the very same issue's other pages; it is for this reason that we can see, side by side, calls for greater press freedom and greater journalistic caution; assertions of growing instability *and* of greater calm; it is in this

light, too, that we should interpret the proliferation of meta-commentary on the dangers of an ‘unregulated’ (*samodeâtel’naâ*) press, and that we can understand Šerimkulov’s gesture to the ‘freedom of the press’ even as his speech urges that journalists from Kyrgyz and Tajik news agencies agree a single narrative before reporting on transboundary conflict.

That such transformations are not uniform should not surprise us: even a ‘landslide of the norm’ evolves over time. And yet, much writing on *glasnost*, whether in euphoric or more critical tones, tends to stress rupture over anguished negotiation; to stress radical shifts in discursive styles rather than the equally striking continuities in modes of narration after the partial lifting of censorship; or to highlight journalistic euphoria over the equally pressing anxiety that ‘truth’ might be *glasnost*’s greatest victim. In part, I have suggested, this is because our analysis of *glasnost*’ still tends to be dominated by an implicit model of repression and release, such that the lifting of censorship will lead, unproblematically, to greater and more open expression (‘graphomania’) and in turn to a more open and liberal society. It is a narrative that resonates with a sensibility in much cultural theory to the small acts of resistance through which power is contested and a broader modality of *hope* (that the pen really might be mightier than the sword) (Jansen, 2014). From the perspective of the Soviet periphery, I have argued that *glasnost*’ should be seen less as a moment of unproblematic opening, of ‘taking voice’ after years of silencing, than as providing an insight into a constituent tension of Gorbachev’s reforms between experiment and control – and its anxious consequences for those journalists who understood their role to be instructing and educating their reading publics in socialist consciousness. For provincial journalists, *perestroika* signalled a discordant, contentious and contradictory process of negotiating ‘constructive’ speech; not simply the lifting of a censor’s stamp – a reality that is instructive for how we might interpret the political affordances and limits of ‘uncensored’ expression in other post-authoritarian contexts today.

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## Abstract

This article explores the unmaking of authoritative discourse in the Central Asian press during perestroika. Studies of the Soviet press have often drawn attention to the momentous changes brought about by Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*' in the second half of the 1980s. This article considers how such changes were reflected in the reporting of one significant event of inter-communal and trans-boundary conflict along the borders of the Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs in 1989. Through a close analysis of the differential reporting of events in central, republican and provincial press, the article argues for the need to 'provincialise' our account of perestroika: that is, to attend to its differential dynamics in different parts of the Soviet Union, and the implications for journalists and editors negotiating the demands of 'constructive speech' at a time of mounting commentary on the relationship between truth, rumour and inter-ethnic conflict.

**Keywords:** perestroika, *glasnost*', rumour, conflict, Isfara events, journalism.

## Résumé

« Et nos paroles doivent être constructives ». Les discordances de la *glasnost* dans la presse d'Asie centrale au moment d'un conflit.

Cet article analyse la déconstruction du discours officiel dans la presse d'Asie centrale sous la perestroïka. Les études sur la presse soviétique ont souvent souligné les bouleversements générés par la politique de transparence (*glasnost*) de Gorbatchev dans la seconde moitié des années quatre-vingt. Cet article examine comment ces changements ont été pris en compte dans la couverture médiatique d'un conflit interethnique et transfrontalier entre les RSS kirghize et tadjike en 1989. Grâce à une analyse approfondie du traitement des événements dans la presse centrale, républicaine et provinciale, l'article défend le besoin de « provincialiser » le récit sur la perestroïka, c'est-à-dire de tenir compte des dynamiques propres à chaque région de l'Union soviétique, et leurs conséquences pour les journalistes et éditeurs face à l'exigence d'une « parole constructive » au moment même où les commentaires s'accumulent sur la relation entre vérité, rumeurs et conflit interethnique.

**Mots clés :** perestroïka, *glasnost*, rumeur, conflit, événements d'Isfara, journalisme.

### **Аннотация**

*«И слово нужно конструктивное». О диссонансах гласности в прессе Центральной Азии в период конфликта.*

В этой статье рассматривается деконструкция официального дискурса в прессе Центральной Азии в период перестройки. Исследования советской прессы часто подчеркнули знаменательные изменения вызванные горбачевской гласности во второй половине 1980-х годов. Данная статья анализирует, каким образом эти изменения были отражены в освещении межнационального и трансграничного конфликта между Кыргызской и Таджикской ССР в 1989 г. Посредством глубокого анализа статей центральной, республиканской и областной прессы утверждается, что настало время воспринимать перестройку более с региональной точки зрения, то есть принимать во внимание динамики каждого региона советского союза и их влияние для журналистов и редакторов с требованием «конструктивной речи» в то время, когда есть вес ряд комментариев по отношению между истиной, слухами и межнациональным конфликтом.

**Ключевые слова:** перестройка, гласность, слух, конфликт, Исфаринские события, журналистика.