

Nationalism and Economic Underdevelopment the Central Asian Way

Russell Zanca

Northeastern Illinois University

Currently much ferment around Central Asian politics concerns rhetoric, organization, and policy-making that support the broadest integration of the region since the mid-1990s. What seems to be different today is the emerging commitment to regionalism and common values in the service of economic vibrancy. In fact, one could argue reasonably that Central Asian leaders advance ideas and solutions that sanguine westerners predicted would be the most logical guarantor of prosperity given the end of the Soviet system.

Whereas social scientists over the past twenty-odd years have advanced astute arguments about the pros and cons of the new countries' respective nationalist ideologies, it is the contention of this presentation that it has underdeveloped Central Asia as it was bound up not only with authoritarianism but with a variety of ideological claims that stifled trade, commerce, in part forced mass emigration, and ignored the longer term infrastructural and energy needs of the region. Examples and cases will be put forth to demonstrate this claim in conjunction with nationalism itself.

Whether or not emerging closer relationships and commitments to more open borders on the part of regional leaders result in benefits for Central Asia's 50,000,000-plus people remains to be seen. What may be clearer as far as the probability for positive outcomes is concerned would be the reckoning of environmental and ecological challenges coupled with innovative programs that enable wide-scale prosperity. Such innovations have to be based on ideas that go beyond moribund paradigms such as *growth* and *resource extraction*. The presentation will conclude by taking stock of this issue.