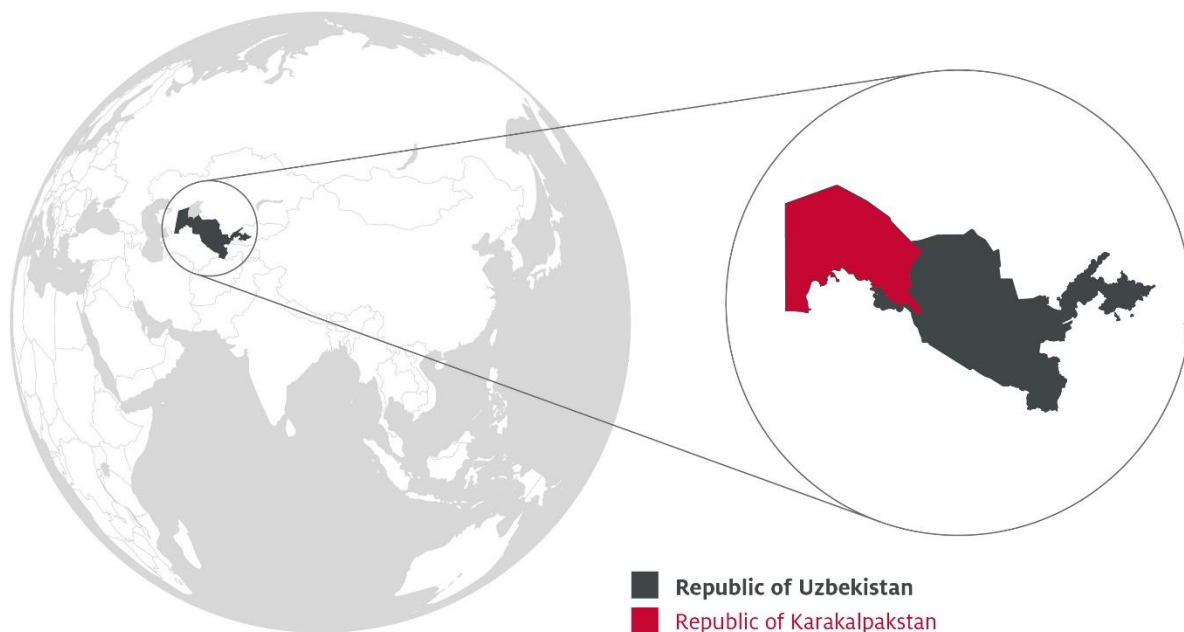




Asymmetry by Design: Deciphering Karakalpakstan's Autonomous Status

Ivan U. Kłyszcz

May 2024



Recommended citation:

Kłyszcz, Ivan U. 2024. "Asymmetry by Design: Deciphering Karakalpakstan's Autonomous Status". In *Autonomy Arrangements in the World*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57749/d527-0d88>.

Autonomy Arrangements in the World

www.world-autonomies.info

Scientific Board: Prof. Balveer Arora, Prof. Gabriel Bădescu, Prof. Yonatan T. Fessha, Prof. István Horváth, Prof. Tove H. Malloy, Prof. Joseph Marko, Prof. Francesco Palermo, Prof. Vello Pettai, Prof. Johanne Poirier, Prof. Cheryl Saunders, Prof. Markku Suksi

Project team: Sergiu Constantin, Ljubica Đorđević-Vidojković, Karl Kössler, Anna-Kira Pirhofer, Levente Salat, István G. Székely, Alexandra Tomaselli, Jakob Volgger

Project partners:

- EURAC Research, Institute for Minority Rights, Institute for Comparative Federalism and Center for Autonomy Experience (Bolzano/Bozen, Italy)
- European Centre for Minority Issues (Flensburg/Flensborg, Germany)
- Babeş-Bolyai University, Center for the Study of Democracy (Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, Romania)
- Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities (Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár, Romania)

© The author, 2024



This publication is under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Contents

1. Essential Facts and Figures

- 1.1. Republic of Uzbekistan
- 1.2. Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan

2. Autonomy and State Structure

3. Establishment and Implementation of Autonomy

4. Legal Basis of Autonomy

- 4.1. The 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty of Karakalpakstan
- 4.2. The 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution
- 4.3. The 1993 Incorporation Agreement and the Bilateral Agreements
- 4.4. The 1993 Karakalpakstan Constitution

5. Autonomous Institutions

- 5.1. The Supreme Council (*Jokargi Kenes*)
- 5.2. The Cabinet of Ministers
- 5.3. The judiciary

6. Autonomous Powers

7. Financial Arrangements

8. Intergovernmental Relations

9. Inter-group Relations within the Autonomous Entity

10. Membership, "Quasi-citizenship" and Special Rights

11. General Assessment and Outlook

Bibliography

List of abbreviations

About the author

1. Essential Facts and Figures

1.1. Republic of Uzbekistan

The Republic of Uzbekistan is Central Asia's most populous country and a successor state of the Soviet Union. Its territory occupies approximately the space between the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, two important bodies of water for the region. Administratively, the country is divided into 12 regions (*viloyat*), one country-level city (i.e. the capital, Tashkent), and one autonomous republic (i.e. Karakalpakstan¹). The official language is the Karluk Turkic language Uzbek (closely related to the Uyghur language). Uzbekistan's post-independence trajectory has been one of gradual reform away from Soviet institutions, with many features of Soviet-style authoritarianism remaining in place.

Since at least the 13th century, Turkic-speaking peoples migrated to the space between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. These groups did not identify themselves by the modern-era categories of nationality or ethnicity but by religion and political allegiance, a reality that would persist well into the 18th century. Moreover, the political powers to which they pledged their loyalty were not of the same nature as the European nation-states of the modern era (Keller 2019, 6). As the Russian Empire incorporated the territories of the Central Asian region, the Bukhara Khanate—the approximate predecessor to Uzbekistan—was made a vassal of Saint Petersburg. While preserving many trappings of statehood, the vassal was seen as an inferior and pliant servant of the Russian Empire, and not as a full constituent of the empire (ibid., 76). Under Soviet rule, Bukhara changed boundaries several times and was transformed from a dynastic, plurinational imperial vassal to a would-be self-determined mono-national (Uzbek) Socialist Soviet constituent (Khalid 2015; Keller 2019, 159). In turn, ethnic belonging was reinforced as a fundamental identity in Uzbekistani Soviet society. As a territorial entity, Uzbekistan had what in the Soviet system was called a *titular* nationality, namely, an ethnic group that could claim the territory as their *homeland* on the basis of demographic weight.² This system was the keystone of Soviet territorial governance and it led to the creation of the federal republics and other sub-state administrative divisions where the Russian majority did not make up the vast majority of the population.³

Like the other five states of Central Asia, Uzbekistan engaged in measured reforms after the Soviet collapse. On the one hand, post-1991 reform did away with many features of the Soviet system, most

¹ *Qaraqalpaq* is the correct transliteration, namely, from Karakalpak language itself. *Karakalpak* is the transliteration from the Russian language. I have decided to retain the Russian transliteration because, so far, it is the most commonly used in English-language scholarship on the region.

² There is a vast literature about nationalism and the Soviet system of governance. Here I particularly draw from Martin (2001), Hirsch (2014) and Goff (2021).

³ There were—and are to this day—many territorial autonomies that have a titular nationality that does not have a demographic majority. In Russia, cases such as the Komi Republic and the Republic of Adygea are illustrative, as is Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan.

importantly the role of the Communist Party and the planned economy. On the other hand, along broader trends in Central Asia, one-party rule was preserved, with a nominal opposition created to contribute to the facade of a functional electoral democracy (Cummings 2013, 62–66). Between 1989 and 2016, the country was ruled by Islam Karimov. After independence, the country developed under the concept of self-reliance (*mustaqillik*), which in practice amounted to autarky, authoritarianism, bilateralism in foreign policy and technocratic rule (Fazendeiro 2017, 27–28). Under Karimov’s personalistic rule, corruption and oppression were rife. Following his death in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the second president of Uzbekistan. Upon entering office, Mirziyoyev implemented a number of reforms characterized by scholars as “authoritarian upgrading” as they have been concentrated on the economy and not on democratization (Lemon 2019). Some improvements have been made in human rights matters, taking the country away from the excesses of the Karimov period, but the Uzbekistani government is still far from meeting its own rhetoric on human rights (Human Rights Watch 2021). Across international rankings of democracy and political freedoms, Uzbekistan’s scores are consistently near the bottom, albeit with slight improvements since 2016 (Freedom House 2022).

There has been no population census in Uzbekistan for decades, so there are only estimates of the demographic profile of the country. The last systematic census took place in 1989 as part of the all-Union Soviet census. In that year, the population of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR) amounted to 19,905,000 people, of which 71% were Uzbek,⁴ 8% Russian, 5% Tajik and 16% other (Cummings 2013, 55). Since then, all population numbers have been the product of estimates. The population of the country, according to the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, amounted to a total of 33,905,800 people on 1 January 2020.⁵ A census is scheduled to take place in 2024 (United Nations Population Fund 2024).

1.2. Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan

According to Article 85 of the Uzbekistan Constitution, “[t]he sovereign Republic of Karakalpakstan is part of the Republic of Uzbekistan” (*Suveren Qoraqalpog’iston Respublikasi O’zbekiston Respublikasi tarkibiga kiradi*). The Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan is one of the two territorial autonomies of Central Asia.⁶ It covers approximately 37% of Uzbekistan’s total surface and is the country’s largest single administrative unit. It is located to the north of the rest of the country, it borders Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and is Uzbekistan’s region that is the closest to the sea. The Autonomous Republic

⁴ I use *Uzbekistani* to refer to that which belongs to the state and *Uzbek* that which relates to the nationality and ethnic group. In this sense, an ethnic Karakalpak of Karakalpakstan may be considered an Uzbekistani but never an Uzbek.

⁵ Statistical State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, *Demographic situation January-December 2019* (*Demograficheskaya situatsiya v yanvrye-dekabrye 2019*). The data is available online at https://stat.uz/uploads/docs/demografiya_dekabr_rus.pdf (accessed March 6, 2024).

⁶ The other autonomous region in Central Asia is Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan.

of Karakalpakstan has 16 municipalities (*rayon*) and one municipal-level city, Nukus. The Karakalpak and Uzbek languages are the official languages of Karakalpakstan although Kazakh and Russian are also widely spoken by officials and the population in general. The territory of Karakalpakstan has a natural gas reserve and it covers the southern side of the Aral Sea. The partial disappearance of the Aral is an environmental catastrophe that affected the lives and livelihoods of all inhabitants of the region.

Karakalpakstan has the Karakalpak ethnic group as its *titular* nationality. The name *Karakalpak* means “black hat”,⁷ and it was used to refer to the particular costume worn by the peoples of the area. In the last hundred years or so, the Karakalpak ethnic group has diverged from other Central Asian Turkic groups by their language, a Kipchak Turkic Karakalpak language, different from Uzbek (a Karluk Turkic language) and Kazakh (also a Kipchak language). Their origin as a distinct group is not known with precision and some even claim that it was a Soviet invention meant to divide the Turkic peoples of the region (Chmykh et al 2021, 68). In the 16th century they began to appear in the sources as a distinct group divided into tribes and loyal to the Nogai Horde. By the 18th century, the Karakalpaks moved to the Aral Sea basin and later they settled the region along the Amu Darya river delta. This territory was ruled at the time by the independent Khiva Khanate, corresponding roughly to the territory of today's Karakalpakstan (Akiner 1983, 339). Since the creation of the Karakalpakstan polity in 1924, a sense of belonging to a distinct nationality took root among the Karakalpaks. Thus, the bulk of the Soviet era saw the transformation of this formerly semi-nomadic society into sedentary and Soviet lifestyles (Peterson 2019, 2). The consolidation of ethnicity as a primary identifier would be illustrated by the creation of the *perestroika*-era nationalist Karakalpak movements, such as *Halk Mapi* (The People's Interest) (Horák 2014). The fact that the Karakalpaks are a distinct nationality has been acknowledged by Uzbekistan, including during the Soviet period.⁸ Today, language is an anchor for the Karakalpak identity, and a key factor in their continued distinctiveness (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018).

The 1989 Soviet census established the population of Karakalpakstan at 1,212,207 people, of which 32.8% were Uzbek, 32.1% Karakalpak, 26.3% Kazakh and 1.6% Russian (Hanks 2000, 940). Growing natality rates and diminishing infant mortality rates are behind the population growth estimated since 1989. Unofficial estimates released by opposition researchers put today's population at about two million with over 60% of the population being ethnic Karakalpaks (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). Further complicating these estimates is the large-scale Karakalpak emigration to other countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Russia, with immigration to Karakalpakstan

⁷ Because of this, another way to transliterate Karakalpak is Kara-Kalpak.

⁸ It could have been different. In neighboring Tajikistan, the Pamir ethnic minority of the Gorno-Badakhshan region used to be considered *mountain Tajiks* and not a distinct group (see Kłyszcz 2023, 506).

from abroad being negligible. New arrivals from the rest of Uzbekistan are more plentiful as the central government invests in developing the region. Some have interpreted this and the overestimation of ethnic Karakalpak residents as evidence of a covert policy by Tashkent to alter the demographic profile of Karakalpakstan (Pannier 2015). Nevertheless, assimilation may not happen soon as there are indications that the number of ethnic Karakalpaks abandoning the Karakalpak language for Uzbek is negligible (Hanks 2000, 943).

2. Autonomy and State Structure

According to the Constitutions of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan, Karakalpakstan is both a sovereign state and a part of another sovereign state. This overlap makes it difficult to distinguish the precise outline of Karakalpakstan's autonomy. Moreover, Uzbekistan is a highly centralized unitary republic. It has two levels of government: local and central (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001, 473–75). The central government is defined by the extreme concentration of power in the executive. This authority was codified in the 1992 Constitution.⁹ The president's power is unchecked by any other authority or branch of government (Melvin 2004, 41). This system has implications for our understanding of Karakalpakstan's autonomy and its blurred scope. On the one hand, Karakalpakstan's autonomous status is codified in the Uzbekistan Constitution. As mentioned above, according to the Constitution of Uzbekistan, Karakalpakstan is a sovereign republic that "is part" (*tarkibiga kiradi*) of Uzbekistan. Moreover, Karakalpakstan has a constitutional right to hold an independence referendum according to Article 89 of the Uzbekistan Constitution (as amended in 2023),¹⁰ further asserting its sovereignty. This renders the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan into a constituent of Uzbekistan that enjoys a different legal framework for self-government when compared to Tashkent or the regions (*viloyat*). In addition, the Karakalpakstan elites also have their own local patronage networks, albeit they are considered to be the least influential ones in the country (Minchenko, Petrov and Kazancev 2013). On the other hand, the wide range of power and unchecked authority of the central government means that the Karakalpak elites are held to the authority of Tashkent regardless of constitutional protections. Moreover, the Uzbekistan Constitution itself specifies in Articles 86 and 87 that all laws in Karakalpakstan must conform to those of Uzbekistan.¹¹ In sum, in spite of having many features of a territorial autonomy and even of a self-standing state, Karakalpakstan's autonomy cannot be said to function in terms of having a scope of autonomous government.

⁹ Articles 10, 89, 93 and 94 of the 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution prior to the 2023 amendments. Currently these are, respectively, Articles 10, 105, 109, 110, of the Uzbekistan Constitution.

¹⁰ Article 74 of the 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution prior to the 2023 amendments.

¹¹ Articles 71 and 72 of the 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution prior to the 2023 amendments.

3. Establishment and Implementation of Autonomy

How to understand the status of Karakalpakstan as a “sovereign democratic republic” that is also “part” of (or included into) a sovereign state? This status is grounded in the 20th century constitutional and political history of Karakalpakstan, and broader former-Soviet Central Asia. The processes of national delimitation prior to the Second World War are at the roots of today’s seemingly paradoxical status of Karakalpakstan. The consensus view of the administrative divisions in Soviet Central Asia of the 1920s was for many years that they were meant to maximize central control and paid no attention to local realities. According to this interpretation, Soviet policy was nothing but the application of a divide-and-conquer strategy. Yet, with the emergence of new archival research, this paradigm has been challenged. As Khalid (2016) argues, the creation of Uzbekistan—and of the other Central Asian Soviet territories—in 1924 belies the divide-and-conquer theory (see Kłyszcz 2023, 513).

The creation of Karakalpakstan’s autonomous status arguably precedes the creation of Karakalpakstan itself. During the Russian Civil War (1917–1924), Central Asia experienced a period of fragmentation and revolt, with only gradual Bolshevik consolidation. As soon as the Bolshevik takeover of Khiva Khanate took place, the new Bolshevik authorities proclaimed the creation of the Khorezm People’s Soviet Republic. Further south, the newly proclaimed Bukharan People’s Soviet Republic set out a proposal to Moscow that would become the basis for the future national delimitation of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR). The principle of this proposed delimitation demanded the gathering of all sedentary and Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia—considered as members of the Uzbek nationality—into the UzSSR. This way, the emerging UzSSR would consist of all the Tsarist and pre-Tsarist cities between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya. Most of the territory of the Tsarist vassal known as the Khanate of Khiva—the predecessor of today’s Karakalpakstan—did not fit into that narrative for it had no similar history of sedentary life. Only the city of Khorezm (the city today called Khiva) had a sedentary background, unlike the broader Khanate of Khiva, to which the city of Khorezm belonged. Nukus—Karakalpakstan’s capital and largest city today—was a small settlement at the time. In this context, Khorezm was taken over by the Bolsheviks in 1920 as workers’ revolution was proclaimed there in that year. Thereafter, Khorezm was incorporated into Bolshevik Russia as a *treaty republic* and not a full constituent of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).¹² This status maintained a degree of separation of the republic from the rest of Bolshevik Russia. Indeed, the *treaty* or *People’s Republics* at that time had their own currency and economy, thus enjoyed more autonomy than the more closely controlled Turkestan (Khalid 2016, 186–90; Keller 2019, 159–62).

¹² At the time, the Soviet Union was yet to be proclaimed and the polity of the Bolsheviks was the RSFSR.

The path for transforming the *treaty republic* into Karakalpakstan runs through the national delimitation process in Central Asia. This was a political and not technocratic process with deep roots in the region's local elites and social movements. Particularly important after the settlement of Soviet power were the negotiations and contentions between the Turkeistani and Uzbek Soviet elites—as well as the central government—and their respective national projects (Khalid 2015). The proclamation of the 1924 Soviet Constitution meant the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Union Republics (e.g., the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, among 14 others) and the level of territorial autonomies to which Karakalpakstan belonged. The UzSSR was created in 1924 and it consisted of the territories of today's Uzbekistan and all of Tajikistan's territory of today, but without Karakalpakstan (except for the city of Khorezm) and without the northern territories east of Karakalpakstan. The Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was at the time a territorial autonomy of the UzSSR. In this sense, territories with an autonomy status have been a constant in the last century of Uzbekistani history. In 1924, the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Province (*oblast*) was also created on the basis of the Khorezm People's Republic as a constituent of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KaSSR), itself part of the RSFSR. Its regional center was Turtkul, where it would remain until the move to Nukus in 1932 (Chmykh et al 2021, 68).

In 1930, Karakalpakstan became a direct subject of the RSFSR, and in 1932, it was elevated to *Autonomous Republic* status. The upgrade gave Karakalpakstan its autonomous institutions and rights to develop a Karakalpak cultural policy and receive its own funding stream from Moscow (Horák 2014). This upgrade has been interpreted by some Karakalpakstan scholars as a stage in the national development of the Karakalpaks (Akhundzhanov 1993, 20). Pianciola (2019, 5–8) argues that by the late 1920s economic expediency became the driving factor for Karakalpakstan's detachment from Kazakhstan in 1930. Namely, the key role was played by Stalin's collectivization policy and Karakalpakstan's marginal role in Central Asian agriculture. The 1930–1933 famine—known in Kazakh language as *Asharshylyk*—killed approximately 40% of all ethnic Kazakhs but did not affect Karakalpakstan to the same extent. The reason was partly thanks to that region's lack of connectivity and the small role it played in the economic planning of the Soviet Union (ibid., 11–14). In 1936, Karakalpakstan was transferred to the UzSSR where it would remain ever since. The rationale for this transfer had top-down elements, as well as horizontal debates among Kazakh and Uzbek Soviet authorities. The latter claimed Karakalpakstan for themselves, owing to linguistic or ethnic proximity. Connectivity played a role as well, as railway links between Karakalpakstan and the UzSSR were the largest investment for the region in the Five-Year Plan (Akiner 1983, 340; Akhundzhanov 1993, 24; Khalid 2015, 274–75; Pianciola 2019, 7–8; Yerniyazova 1993, 12).

Since the transfer of Karakalpakstan to the UzSSR, the broader pattern of Karakalpakstan's autonomy status has been simultaneous recognition as an autonomous and distinct jurisdiction that nonetheless is expected to agree with central authorities. Karakalpakstan has had its autonomous status enshrined in the 1937 and 1978 UzSSR Constitutions and the 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution. It is worth noting that the 1927 UzSSR Constitution (at a time when Karakalpakstan was not yet a constituent of the UzSSR) included a distinct chapter for the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan,¹³ which laid the ground for Karakalpakstan's future status in Uzbekistan. The 1937 UzSSR Constitution contained two chapters on the governance of Karakalpakstan¹⁴ and two articles specifically on the autonomy of Karakalpakstan. These two articles state that Karakalpakstan has its own autonomous institutions, that UzSSR laws apply to them, and that in the case of a dispute, UzSSR authority would make the last decision according to Articles 20 and 21 of the 1937 UzSSR Constitution. The chapters provide an outline of the operation of the Karakalpak government and its relationship with the UzSSR (Akhundzhanov 1993, 25). The 1978 UzSSR Constitution specified that Karakalpakstan is a self-standing actor that operates outside of the limits of the jurisdiction of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the UzSSR.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Karakalpakstan Constitution was meant to *agree* with those of the two supra-national bodies the republic belonged to, with only the "peculiarities" of Karakalpakstan to be taken into account.¹⁶ The all-Union Soviet Constitutions also mention Karakalpakstan as an autonomous entity. The 1936 and 1977 Soviet Constitutions mention the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Karakalpakstan as a constituent of the UzSSR.¹⁷

Today's autonomy status of Karakalpakstan is most immediately shaped by the reforms that followed the Soviet collapse. In the UzSSR and the newly independent Uzbekistan, the early reform process was shaped by power struggles and Karimov's authoritarian consolidation (Melvin 2004, 30–35). In the process, many elements of Soviet ideology were discarded upon Uzbekistan's independence, such as Marxism and the goal of building Socialism. However, the nationalities' principle of national delimitation was kept and adapted to the needs of Uzbekistan's early post-Soviet leadership. The

¹³ See Chapter 8 of the 1927 UzSSR Constitution. A Russian version is available online at <https://shosh.uz/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Konstitutsiya-Uzbekskoy-SSR-1927-g..pdf> (accessed March 6, 2024).

¹⁴ See Chapters 5 and 6, from Articles 57 to 73 of the 1937 UzSSR Constitution. A Russian version is available online at <https://shosh.uz/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Konstitutsiya-Uzbekskoy-SSR-1937-g..pdf> (accessed March 6, 2024).

¹⁵ Articles 78 to 81 of the 1978 UzSSR Constitution address Karakalpakstan. A Russian version is available online at [https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=391018_konstituciya_\(osnovnoy_zakon\)_respubliki_uzbekistan_\(prinyata_19_04_1978_g_na_vneochednoy_shestoy_sessii_vs_ruz_devyatogo_sozvyva\)](https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=391018_konstituciya_(osnovnoy_zakon)_respubliki_uzbekistan_(prinyata_19_04_1978_g_na_vneochednoy_shestoy_sessii_vs_ruz_devyatogo_sozvyva)) (accessed March 6, 2024).

¹⁶ Article 78 of the 1978 UzSSR Constitution: "The Republic of Karakalpakstan has its own Constitution, corresponding to the Constitution of the USSR and the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan and taking into account the peculiarities of the autonomous republic." (*Respublika Karakalpakstan imeet svoyu Konstitutsyu, sootvetstvuyushhuyu Konstitutsii SSSR i Konstitutsii Respubliki Uzbekistan i uchityvayushhuyu osobennosti avtonomnoy respublikii*).

¹⁷ Article 26 of the 1936 USSR Constitution. An English version is available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/constitution/1936/1936-constitution.pdf> (accessed March 6, 2024).

Article 85 of the 1977 USSR Constitution. An English version is available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/constitution/1977/constitution-ussr-1977.pdf> (accessed March 6, 2024).

preservation of the nationalities' principle of delimitation may have facilitated the preservation of Karakalpakstan as a constituent of Uzbekistan. Yet, there is an underlying, fundamental uncertainty about Karakalpakstan's constitutional status. In 1990, Karakalpakstan declared its sovereignty. What followed is scarcely documented and frequently omitted from present-day official accounts of Karakalpakstan's history (e.g., Koshanov and Ametov 2015). In 1990, many constituents of the USSR declared their sovereignty. This process varied from region to region, with some proclaiming sovereignty to extract concessions from Moscow, and some making declarations of *de facto* independence (e.g. Chechnya). Which sense was meant in the case of Karakalpakstan is not known exactly, but for a brief period, Nukus was operating independently from the central government in Moscow (Akhundzhanov 1993, 29), which was losing control of the entire Union. As evidence of this, in late 1991, Karakalpakstan changed its name from the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Karakalpakstan to the Republic of Karakalpakstan. This symbolic change was followed by a comprehensive replacement of the system of governance. Crucially, the top authority would no longer be associated with the Supreme Soviet but reside in the newly created President of Karakalpakstan. This move effectively represented a transition from a parliamentarian to a presidential system of governance in the autonomous republic. The first president of Karakalpakstan was Dauletbay Shamshetov, founder and leader of the first Karakalpak political party, "People's Will" (*Khalik Mapi*). He was elected by the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan in February 1991. He would stay in power until 20 February 1992 (Fadeyeva n.d., 5). How popular these moves were—most notably to seek independence—is impossible to gauge today, although some scholars claim that the declaration did not receive popular support (Kłyszcz 2023, 508–10; Schlyter 2005, 159).

Up to that point, Karakalpakstan appears to have had a measure of *de facto* independence and the grounds for claiming *de jure* independence (Olmos 2020). What happened during the years following Shamshetov's rise and downfall is little understood and primary sources are scarce. The official narrative, however, is that Tashkent saw in Karakalpakstan a "self-standing" (*samostoyatelno*) "state" (*gosudarstvo*) with which union was never in doubt. Karakalpakstan was recognized as "sovereign" in the 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution, in Article 70 prior to the 2023 amendments (Yernyazova 1993, 1). Later, Uzbekistani sources would refer to Shamshetov as "Chairman of the Republican Provisional Organizing Committee" operating from 1991 to 1992 (e.g., Ametov 2016), or not mentioning him at all (e.g., Koshanov and Ametov 2015, 19–20). Such accounts also omit the rationale for the declaration of sovereignty and the role of bottom-up organizations in mobilizing the cause of sovereignty. Other accounts about those critical years suggest that Karimov persuaded the Karakalpakstani elite to drop their independence aspirations in favor of joining Uzbekistan. It is rumored that this was carried out through public relations campaigns directed at the Karakalpakstani elites, co-optation and secret

negotiations (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). At some point, Shamshetov left power and the presidential regime ended. The reasons are not known but intra-elite fighting has often been considered a key reason for the reincorporation of Karakalpakstan into Uzbekistan (Yılmaz 2022, 265). In 1993, the authorities of Karakalpakstan agreed to join their region to Uzbekistan's sovereign government under the condition of an independence referendum being held 20 years later. The referendum never took place, with no acknowledgement from the Tashkent or Nukus authorities. These conditions have rendered many observers to refer to Karakalpakstan's autonomy as a sham (Hanks 2000, 941) or at least as an ambiguous constitutional reality (Danilin 2021).

In 2022, the reformist drive by Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev (in power since 2016) sought to redress this constitutional ambiguity. Instead of granting Karakalpakstan a genuine scope for autonomous governance, Mirziyoyev opted for the opposite. Driven by his ambition to centralize and consolidate his authority in his second presidential term, Mirziyoyev pursued an opaque constitutional amendment programme. In June 2022, it was revealed through a leak that the amendments would officially abolish the autonomous status of Karakalpakstan, undo the region's right to an independence referendum, and have Tashkent rule the territories of Karakalpakstan directly, like other regions (*viloyati*). Large demonstrations against this proposal followed throughout Karakalpakstan, and especially in Nukus. By 2 July, Mirziyoyev announced that Karakalpakstan's status would be preserved, though the demonstrations were severely repressed and their organizers punished (Kłyszcz 2023, 511–12). The constitutional amendments were adopted in May 2023 without direct changes to the legal framework of Karakalpakstan. The 2022 events demonstrated the ambiguity of Karakalpakstan's place in Uzbekistan's constitutional order, the lack of constitutional protections for Karakalpakstan's autonomy against the central authorities. However, the 2022 events demonstrated *e pur si muove*, the relevance of the autonomous status to Karakalpakstan's population.

4. Legal Basis of Autonomy

The autonomy of Karakalpakstan is based on several key documents: the 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty of Karakalpakstan, the 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution, the 1993 agreement between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan (which provided for an independence referendum to be held 20 years later) and the 1993 Karakalpakstan Constitution. I present them here in chronological order. A word of caution is needed at this stage too; the harshness of the one-man regime of Uzbekistan is not grounded on the harshness of the laws but on their interpretation (Melvin 2004, 40). This is especially relevant when discussing repression but also relevant when discussing the asymmetry in the

relationship between Nukus and Tashkent. The Mirziyoyev constitutional amendments of 2023 did not introduce substantial changes to the legal basis of Karakalpakstan's autonomy.

4.1. The 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty of Karakalpakstan

By 1990, numerous constituent governments of the Soviet Union made declarations of *state sovereignty* which were later interpreted as declarations of independence.¹⁸ Karakalpakstan was no exception. Indeed, on 14 December 1990, the Declaration of State Sovereignty was adopted by the Supreme Soviet of Karakalpakstan. This would go on to be considered Karakalpakstan's independence day (Pannier 2015). The Declaration of State Sovereignty was published in official local newspapers but today is inaccessible through official state websites. Some versions likely supplied by exiled activists have emerged online, with one available on the OSCE website.¹⁹ According to this document, the Declaration assigned to Nukus all authority in state matters in Karakalpakstan, including all relevant responsibilities acquired from international accords and treaties entered by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR).²⁰ It also called for the establishment of state institutions, citizenship, control over natural resources,²¹ and more. The Declaration also established a rarity in the future post-Soviet space: the right for Karakalpakstan to secede from the USSR and the UzSSR.²² The rationale for sovereignty is partly grounded on the Aral Sea disaster (Micklin 1988), seen as evidence of poor governance from the central government and a biased perspective towards the Karakalpak minority.

The Declaration is not mentioned in any fundamental documents in Uzbekistan or Karakalpakstan today. Yet, its role in the formation of Karakalpakstan's autonomy today is acknowledged in official publications on the region's history. In fact, in the official Uzbekistani narrative, Uzbekistan's president Karimov supported the declaration and Karakalpakstan's sovereignty, he himself being in Nukus on the day of the adoption of the document (Koshanov and Ametov 2015, 19–20). Outside of official interpretations, the declaration has been regarded as establishing *de jure* independence that failed to materialize into consistent sovereignty without Uzbekistani interference (Olmos 2020). Along that trend, relations between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan would go on not as between two sovereign states but between center and region (Veretilnyk 2020, 122).

¹⁸ In some cases, such as in Estonia, these declarations were of "re-independence".

¹⁹ This supposed version of the 1990 Declaration is available online in Russian at https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/8/430853_1.pdf (accessed March 6, 2024).

²⁰ Article 1 of the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty.

²¹ Articles 1, 8 and 6, respectively of the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty.

²² Article 7 of the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty.

4.2. The 1992 Uzbekistan Constitution

The adoption in December 1992 of the Uzbekistan Constitution established the grounds for the administration of the country, such as the creation of Parliament (*Oliy Majlis*) and the regional governments (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001, 474–75). It also confirmed the supremacy of the newly created position of president of Uzbekistan—Karimov’s role (Melvin 2004, 33). The 1992 Constitution was substantially amended in 2023. Provisions concerning Karakalpakstan changed from Articles 70–75 to Articles 85–90. The Constitution states that Karakalpakstan is part of Uzbekistan in Article 85 (Article 70 until 2023) and a part that is different from all other territorial administrations in Article 83 (Article 68 until 2023). The Constitution also grants the right for Karakalpakstan to secede from Uzbekistan in Article 89 (Article 74 until 2023), which was a right that Karakalpakstani elites negotiated for during the early 1990s (Chmykh et al 2021, 69). In addition, the 1992 Constitution establishes in Article 98 (Article 83 until 2023) that the Karakalpakstani Supreme Council has the right to propose country-wide legislation at the Uzbekistani parliament, but in practice that right is never used (Fadeyeva n.d., 11). The Constitution also establishes the ways in which Uzbekistani law and authority supersede those of Karakalpakstan. First, according to Article 144 (Article 119 until 2023), the prosecutor of Karakalpakstan can only be appointed in agreement with the prosecutor-general of Uzbekistan. Second, Article 133 (Article 109 until 2023) stipulates that the Constitutional Court of Uzbekistan ensures that the Constitution and laws of Karakalpakstan comply with the Constitution and laws of Uzbekistan. Additionally, according to Article 134 (Article 110 until 2023), the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan has the right to supervise the administration of justice of the “inferior courts”, which would include the courts of Karakalpakstan. Further ways in which Tashkent’s authority supersedes that of Nukus in Karakalpakstan matters are codified in the Karakalpakstan Constitution (see below). Finally, the Uzbekistan Constitution does not specify the ways in which relations between Tashkent and Nukus are mediated (Chmykh et al 2021, 67). Its Article 90 stipulates that the relationship between Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan is regulated by bilateral treaties and agreements,²³ and any disputes are to be settled through reconciliation.

4.3. The 1993 Incorporation Agreement and the Bilateral Agreements

In January 1993, Nukus and Tashkent agreed on the status of Karakalpakstan, namely, confirming its belonging to Uzbekistan. They also agreed that a referendum on Karakalpakstan’s status would take place 20 years later, with the option of full independence. These—and presumably other commitments—were part of a supposed Nukus-Tashkent agreement that is unknown. First, there is no information about the signatories. As Shamshetov was ousted from power by mid-1992 it is difficult

²³ Article 1 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution contains a similar provision.

to assume that he was the leading signatory of the Karakalpakstani side. Second, no text of this agreement has surfaced. Some have even speculated it may have been just a verbal agreement, between some elites from Karakalpakstan and Tashkent (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). Finally, its contents are unknown, only the referendum point is believed to have been guaranteed in said agreement. The independence referendum never took place. The year 2013 came and the authorities in Tashkent did not even acknowledge that such a vote was meant to happen. There is no public information regarding agreements and treaties signed by Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan that regulate their relationship (ibid. 2018). Many questions remain open about the contents of the 1993 agreement and the decisions made around it, such as why Karakalpakstan was made “part of” Uzbekistan as a territorial autonomy and not as a confederate state (Veretilnyk 2020, 123) among others.

4.4. The 1993 Karakalpakstan Constitution

The Constitution of Karakalpakstan is the fundamental document of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. Adopted in 1993 after the reincorporation of the republic into Uzbekistan, it sets out the normative framework for all laws in the region. The Constitution establishes in Article 1 that Karakalpakstan is a “sovereign” state that is “part” of Uzbekistan.²⁴ An analysis of the Constitution points to the paradoxes that emerge from the dual formulation of being a “sovereign” state and “part” of another sovereign state.

The 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty stated that it was meant to be taken as the basis for the future Constitution of an independent Karakalpakstan.²⁵ When drafting the 1993 Constitution, Karakalpakstani scholars took into consideration the background of the Soviet-era fundamental laws of Karakalpakstan. In the process, they found that little research was done by then about Karakalpakstani constitutional law and legislative processes in general (Yernyazova 1993, 3–5). Some Karakalpakstani scholars have adopted a teleological perspective of Karakalpakstan’s constitutional history, seeing in each subsequent fundamental law—i.e., the 1927, 1937, 1977 and 1994 regulations—an evolutionary process in national consolidation (ibid., 9–10). The first fundamental law of Karakalpakstan was the 1 November 1926 Special Provision adopted by the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KaSSR), establishing the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Region (ibid., 9). Since Karakalpakstan at the time was not a republic, it did not have its own Constitution. Later on, a number

²⁴ A Russian version of the Karakalpakstan Constitution is available online at <https://joqargikenes.uz/ru/qar-res-konstituciyasi> (accessed March 6, 2024).

²⁵ Article 11 of the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty.

of laws were passed in 1932, establishing the foundations for the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic.²⁶

The paradox of Karakalpakstan being a sovereign state within another state is evinced in the 1993 Karakalpakstan Constitution. The commitment to Karakalpakstan's sovereignty is visible in the document. The Constitution stresses in its preamble the adherence of Karakalpakstan to the principle of state sovereignty and to the development of Karakalpak statehood. This is further evinced by the granting of the right to secede from Uzbekistan through a region-wide referendum according to Article 1 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution, the right to establish its own administration and government according to Article 3, and its own national symbols according to Article 5 (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). On the other hand, the Karakalpakstan Constitution itself acknowledges the supremacy of Uzbekistan's law over Karakalpakstan's. This supremacy is *expressis verbis* "absolute" according to Article 15 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution.

5. Autonomous Institutions

As a sovereign republic, the system of government in Karakalpakstan exhibits many features typical of independent states. In addition to having its own flag and anthem, Karakalpakstan has legislative and executive branches of government, as well as its own judiciary.

5.1. The Supreme Council (*Jokargi Kenes*)

Article 1 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution defines Karakalpakstan as a sovereign and democratic state. The Supreme Council (*Jokargi Kenes*)²⁷ is where the legislative power resides, making it the foremost autonomous institution of Karakalpakstan. According to Article 10 of the Constitution of Karakalpakstan, the Supreme Council is the democratically elected representative body of the people of Karakalpakstan. Political parties in Karakalpakstan are the same as those in the rest of the country. Uzbekistan's legislation explicitly prohibits ethnic or religious parties, thus there are no official political parties advocating specifically for Karakalpak rights (Melvin 2004, 34). Article 69 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution determines that the Supreme Council consists of 65 deputies elected for five-year terms. They represent Karakalpakstan's legislative branch of government and have the authority to vote on and propose legislation. The chairman of the Supreme Council is elected by these representatives and plays the role of representative of Karakalpakstan and the foremost authority of the republic.

²⁶ For example, the Decree "On the Council of People's Commissars of the Kara-Kalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" and the Decree "On the Regulations of the Council of the People's Commissars' Session of the Kara-Kalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" (Yernyazova 1993, 10).

²⁷ The Supreme Council is sometimes transliterated also as *Jokari Kenes*.

The Supreme Council has its roots in a succession of parliamentary bodies that have governed Karakalpakstan since the Soviet era. After becoming an autonomous republic in 1932, Karakalpakstan established its own Supreme Soviet, the predecessor of today's Supreme Council. The Supreme Soviet was renamed Supreme Council as part of Karakalpakstan's move towards sovereignty in 1990. After a brief interlude of a presidential regime in 1991 and 1992, the chairman of the Supreme Council became again the head of the executive, sealing a parliamentary style of government until today. The first election of the Supreme Council took place on 25 December 1994, the same day as the election for the Uzbekistani parliament. The Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan is thus a unique institution in the post-Soviet space, for it is an exception in a region dominated by presidential-style regimes, including in Uzbekistan (Veretilnyk 2020, 121). However, it is the central government that has the authority to establish the powers of the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001, 474).

The chairman of the Supreme Council is also a rather *sui generis* figure in the Karakalpakstan government. According to Article 81 point 1 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution, the function of the chairman is to ensure interaction between the executive and legislative branches of government while not explicitly belonging to either one. In fact, Article 81 point 5 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution determines that the chairman of the Supreme Council proposes to the Supreme Council, in agreement with the president of Uzbekistan, the candidate for the position of the chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers—the actual executive power of Karakalpakstan. Moreover, the chairman of the Supreme Council is tasked with simultaneously ensuring the application of Uzbekistan's laws and Karakalpakstan's laws, as stipulated by the Karakalpakstan Constitution in Article 81 point 3.²⁸ This influential figure, however, does not function autonomously from Tashkent, as indeed its state role is to enforce central government policy. Moreover, according to Article 80 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution, a vote by the Supreme Council is insufficient for electing its chairman as it also requires concurrent approval from the president of Uzbekistan.

5.2. The Cabinet of Ministers

Article 11 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution enshrines the principle of separation of powers. The executive authority is vested in the Council of Ministers, comprising 12 ministries overseen by a chairman who holds a position equivalent to that of a prime minister (Olmos 2020). The Council of Ministers is formally an autonomous institution of Karakalpakstan. All cabinet members are appointed by the Supreme Council and, according to Article 70 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution, they must receive Tashkent's approval (Veretilnyk 2020, 122). Moreover, all executive positions in

²⁸ The numerous functions of the chairman of the Supreme Council are listed in Article 81 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution.

Karakalpakstan are subject to Tashkent's staff rotation practices. To avoid the emergence of regional centers of power, Karimov devised a system whereby senior officials would serve in positions for only a limited duration before being reassigned to a new role in a different location. Karakalpakstan's top officials, despite its autonomy, were also subject to this staffing system (Melvin 2004, 43). The supremacy of Tashkent in these decisions has resulted in, among other things, ethnic Uzbeks being overrepresented in the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan (Fadeyeva n.d., 13). Finally, the chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers also serves as a member of the cabinet of the president of Uzbekistan, as stipulated by Article 114 (Article 98 until 2023) of the Uzbekistan Constitution. This dual role ensures the chairman's close connection to Tashkent.

5.3. The judiciary

Article 101 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution (as amended in 2021)²⁹ specifies that the judicial system of the republic consists of the Court of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the Administrative Court of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, interdistrict, district (city) courts for civil cases, district, city courts for criminal cases, interdistrict economic courts and interdistrict administrative courts. The Court of the Republic of Karakalpakstan is the highest judicial authority in the field of civil, criminal and economic proceedings.

Karakalpakstan has its own judicial framework, in principle separate from that of Uzbekistan, yet it is under constant monitoring by Tashkent (Hanks 2000, 941). Judges are appointed by the Supreme Council (*Jokargi Kenes*) of Karakalpakstan based on the proposal of the Supreme Judicial Council of Uzbekistan. Karakalpakstan's courts are headed by chairpersons and vice-chairpersons appointed by the Supreme Council upon the proposals of its chairman. These proposals are agreed with the president of Uzbekistan and are based on recommendations from the Supreme Judicial Council of Uzbekistan (Berdimuratova 2020, 280).

According to Article 108 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution, all legal proceedings are to be conducted in Karakalpak, Uzbek, or the language spoken by the majority of the population in the respective area. People involved in court proceedings who don't know the language in which they are being conducted have the right to an interpreter and to address the court in their native language.

6. Autonomous Powers

According to Article 1 of its Constitution, Karakalpakstan is a "sovereign" (*suverenli*) state that "is included" (*quramina kiretuġin*) in Uzbekistan. In practice, however, there is no power-sharing between

²⁹ A Russian version of the Karakalpakstan Constitution (as amended in 2021) is available online at <https://jogargikenes.uz/ru/qar-res-konstituciyasi> (accessed March 6, 2024).

the authorities in Tashkent and Nukus. The Karakalpakstan Supreme Council is a rubber-stamping body and all its legislative projects come from Tashkent. Similarly, all appointments of senior officials are decided in Tashkent. The chairman of the Supreme Council is a member of the Uzbekistan parliament, whilst the chairman of the Council of Ministers of Karakalpakstan is also a member of the Uzbekistan cabinet (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). Karakalpakstan's limited autonomy can be illustrated by looking at its international relations. While territorial autonomy is sometimes accompanied by vigorous external relations and their institutionalization (see Sharafutdinova 2003), in Karakalpakstan that is not the case. Karakalpakstan has a measure of international engagements but these do not reflect autonomy. At a glance, several engagements could suggest that Karakalpakstan's government is able to pursue international engagements autonomously. For example, Karakalpakstan has a Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade that engages foreign investors. Additionally, it has been argued that the republic has enjoyed an international presence thanks to its cultural and touristic appeal (Jollibekova 2019). In practice, however, economic and cultural institutions are closely monitored by Tashkent and their activities do not reflect an autonomous perspective on international affairs. The Ministry of Investment of Karakalpakstan does not operate under a law passed by Karakalpakstan's Supreme Council but under a decree issued by the president of Uzbekistan concerning the stimulation of foreign trade.³⁰ Article 17 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution is the sole provision dealing with external relations and specifies that international scientific, cultural and foreign economic relations of the republic must be carried out in accordance with the legislation of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan. In sum, external relations are but one element of autonomous government where Karakalpakstan's lack of effective autonomy is revealed (see Veretilnyk 2020, 121).

Karakalpakstan's distinctiveness within Uzbekistan is most notable in matters regarding language. Karakalpakstan's population is only one-third Uzbek, and while that language is widely spoken, the number of Karakalpak and Kazakh-speakers has not diminished. Historically, Karakalpakstan's legal framework supported the preservation of the Karakalpak language. In 1989, the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Karakalpakstan enacted a law affirming the republic's authority in all linguistic matters (Schlyter 2005, 160). There is a long-standing foundation for linguistic autonomy. Upon its establishment as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Karakalpakstan was among the only three autonomous republics of the USSR with constitutional articles on state language (Yernyazova 1993, 11). Today, parents can choose the school of their children based on language preference (Fadeyeva n.d., 12), public administration functions in several languages, and court proceedings may be held in

³⁰ Decree of the president of the Republic of Uzbekistan no. UP-5643 of 28 January 2019 on measures to improve the management system in the areas of investment and foreign trade.

Karakalpak and other languages spoken in Karakalpakstan (Berdimuratova 2020, 280). However, this differentiated language policy may reflect Tashkent's measured approach to integrating Karakalpakstan rather than genuine autonomy. There are several indications of this. First, similar to other state bodies, the top-level staffing of Karakalpakstan's Ministry of Education requires approval from Tashkent. Second, a significant part of the ministry's tasks is to implement state-wide policy in education matters, with little consideration for Karakalpakstan's specific needs. Third, schools in minority languages have been a feature of the Soviet system of territorial autonomy, and frequently the only form of minority rights afforded under Socialism (Kolstø 2002). Finally, the aforementioned 1989 Soviet-era law was diluted in 1995 as Tashkent imposed a new writing system for the Karakalpak language for it to be closer to the Uzbek writing system (Schlyter 2005, 160).

7. Financial Arrangements

Opacity in state finances is a recurrent feature in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan. Because of this, it is impossible to assess the arrangements between Nukus and Tashkent regarding budget allocation in an accurate manner. Yet, there are some indications that suggest a high degree of central government control just the way this control is exerted elsewhere in Uzbekistan. These indications resemble the fundamental paradox of Karakalpakstan's constitutional status. On the one hand, there are elements indicating that Karakalpakstan is administering its own finances as a sovereign government. The 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty states that the Republic of Karakalpakstan has the authority to establish its own budget and administer its own finances.³¹ The 1993 Karakalpakstan Constitution, adopted after the republic's reincorporation into Uzbekistan, maintains this financial arrangement: the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan, upon the proposal of the Council of Ministers, approves the republican budget and reports on its execution.³² The budget is then distributed to republican and local budgets by the government of Karakalpakstan.³³ Finally, the republic has its own Ministry of Finance that drafts the republican budget and monitors the republic's finances. On the other hand, the legal framework itself undermines this apparent sovereignty. The Uzbekistan Constitution sets out several ways in which Uzbekistani institutions exert control over the budget of Karakalpakstan. First, according to Article 148 (Article 122 until 2023) of the Uzbekistan Constitution, the budget of the state includes that of Karakalpakstan—i.e., from Tashkent's point of view, there is no Karakalpakstan budget separate from Uzbekistan's. Second, there is no specific taxation system in Karakalpakstan since the Uzbekistan Constitution stipulates in Article 149 (Article 123 until 2023) that the country has a single

³¹ Article 5 of the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty.

³² Article 70 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution.

³³ Article 118 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution.

taxation system and the right to determine taxes belongs to the parliament of Uzbekistan. Furthermore, in practice, the central government has consistently made all macroeconomic policy decisions, leaving no room for the autonomous republic to decide its own policy (Bektemirov and Rahimov 2001, 474–75). At the institutional level, the Ministry of Finance of Karakalpakstan officially operates under the Ministry of Finance of Uzbekistan and can only make suggestions to Tashkent about Karakalpakstan’s finances. Finally, it is worth noting that corruption imposes a toll on Karakalpakstan’s finances, in ways that further stress the asymmetry in the relationship with Tashkent. Indeed, it has been reported that surpluses from the region’s mineral wealth are frequently transferred to Tashkent, straining the republic’s finances (Chmykh et al 2021, 72). In sum, the evidence points to a high degree of central control over Karakalpakstan’s state finances.

8. Intergovernmental Relations

The relationship between Nukus and Tashkent is, according to the law, regulated by the agreements signed between the two republics. These agreements are not public and their content is unknown (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). Therefore, the legal basis for Karakalpakstan’s incorporation into Uzbekistan and the specifics of the relationship between Nukus and Tashkent remain unclear. Few aspects of this relationship are publicly known. For example, Karakalpakstan has two senators in the Uzbekistani parliament, who do not have special voting rights or additional weight due to the republic’s autonomous status. Additionally, Karakalpakstan has a permanent representative (*predstavitelstvo*) in the Uzbekistani cabinet of ministers. This representative is tasked with observing all decisions made at the cabinet level concerning Karakalpakstan. Reportedly, the representative can sometimes be involved in negotiations with the cabinet but in a discreet manner only (Fadeyeva n.d., 11). Finally, the supreme authority of Karakalpakstan has the right to propose legislation at the Uzbekistani parliament, as stipulated by Article 83 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution.

The relationship between Tashkent and Nukus is primarily mediated by the relationship between the president of Uzbekistan and the chairman of the cabinet of ministers of Karakalpakstan as stipulated by Article 114 (Article 98 until 2023) of the Uzbekistan Constitution—and has therefore direct access to the Uzbekistan president. Because of the high degree of regime personalization, there are no publicly known or legally codified procedures governing this relationship. Understanding this relationship would require an approach akin to *Kremlinology* and an in-depth examination of interpersonal connections and their role in the broader patronage networks of Uzbekistan. However, interactions between the two main authorities in Nukus and Tashkent are illustrative of the dynamics of power relations between them. In October 2020, Murat Kamalov was elected as the chairman of

the Supreme Council of Karakalpakstan. At that time, the Karakalpakstani state media announced the new position of Kamalov in a report that featured numerous quotes from Uzbek president Mirziyoyev but none from Kamalov. The respective article stressed the 10 priorities of the new socio-economic development agenda for Karakalpakstan and not the election or the new chairman of the Supreme Council (Karakalpakstan News Agency 2020a). Subsequently, in November 2020, a new three-year development programme for Karakalpakstan was unveiled at the Karakalpakstan Supreme Council by Mirziyoyev. This programme offered large-scale public investment in infrastructure and other areas of the economy for Karakalpakstan. Kamalov, then chairman of the Supreme Council, was not mentioned at all in the press releases (Karakalpakstan News Agency 2020b). After the July 2022 protests, Mirziyoyev lambasted the leadership of Karakalpakstan, accusing them of failing to address the region's economic difficulties (Putz 2022). On 26 August 2022, the president of Uzbekistan oversaw the election of Amanbai Orynbayev, Karakalpakstan's former minister of internal affairs, as the new chairman of the Supreme Council.

Because of the opacity of the regime, it is difficult to interpret these interactions conclusively. However, they suggest the primacy of the Uzbekistan government over the supreme authority of Karakalpakstan.

9. Inter-group Relations within the Autonomous Entity

Karakalpakstan has not witnessed the emergence of armed insurgencies like in other minority regions of the post-Soviet space. Similarly, it has seldom witnessed overt inter-group violence. Even during the period of uncertainty and recalibration of regional politics of the early 1990s and the large-scale 2022 protests, Karakalpakstan did not experience violent, inter-ethnic conflict over the direction of the region (Fadeyeva n.d., 13). This is not to say that violence plays no role in inter-group relations. Most of the violence affecting inter-group relations is related to top-down repression of Karakalpak nationalism and activism, as well as any discussion of Karakalpakstan's constitutional status. There are other central government policies that impact inter-group relations, raising concerns among observers and Karakalpaks about state-backed ethnic favoritism and of Tashkent's neglect of the region. The Karakalpaks traditionally have not organized their communities around the neighborhood (*mahalla*) unlike the Uzbeks. Tribal affiliations continue to play a significant role in Karakalpak society. The *mahalla* is a rather imported institution heavily influenced by Soviet welfare policies. Nevertheless, the governments of Karakalpakstan and Uzbekistan have sought to implement this institution within the Karakalpak communities (Schlyter 2005, 165). Finally, it is worth noting that most of the members of the Karakalpakstan Supreme Council are ethnic Uzbek, a point of contention for Karakalpaks

(Fadeyeva n.d., 13). According to some Karakalpak activists, the combination of ethnic favoritism and persistent repression turned Karakalpakstan into the “Xinjiang on the Aral” (Danilin 2021).

10. Membership, "Quasi-citizenship" and Special Rights

Like other issues, the constitutional status of Karakalpakstan’s residents has ambiguities that are ultimately resolved by Tashkent’s supremacy. The 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty states that citizens of the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic would be considered citizens of the new Republic of Karakalpakstan.³⁴ Yet, according to the Constitution of Karakalpakstan, there are no special rights for the residents of Karakalpakstan. Indeed, the uniformity of Uzbekistan citizenship is explicitly enforced in Karakalpakstan. According to Articles 21 and 26 of the Karakalpakstan Constitution, a “citizen of the Republic Karakalpakstan” is a citizen of the Republic of Uzbekistan and has the right to free movement throughout the territory of the country. In practice, there are no separate identity documents or rules and procedures for Karakalpakstan’s *citizens*. The Constitution of Karakalpakstan itself does not refer to regional citizenship or residence when dealing with welfare, personal rights and freedoms, political and socio-economic rights as well as obligations of the citizens.³⁵ However, some informal practices of central authorities seem to provide indications of potential regional differentiation. According to Horák (2014), residents of Karakalpakstan received a different treatment when it came to settling in Tashkent city and region. Usually restricted for residents of the rest of the country, the central authorities have allowed it for Karakalpakstani residents. This policy may be an implicit acknowledgment of the economic problems the autonomous republic faces, pushing people into emigration (*ibid*).

11. General Assessment and Outlook

What does it mean for Karakalpakstan to hold autonomous status while simultaneously being described as "sovereign" and "part of" Uzbekistan, a different sovereign state? As Khalid (2015, 274–77) argues, the making of Uzbekistan was driven by a “*Chaghatayist* project” aimed at creating an Uzbek Turkic nationality and developing it into a greater Bukharan state. The incorporation of Karakalpakstan into Uzbekistan in 1936 was part of the success of this project of restoring Bukhara’s historical losses and making a Soviet republic including all major cities of the region as well as a strategic hinterland. This assessment of Karakalpakstan’s autonomy confirms that the *Chaghatayist* project had no room for a truly autonomous Karakalpakstan. At the same time, however, territorial

³⁴ Article 8 of the 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty.

³⁵ Articles 22–50 of the 1993 Karakalpakstan Constitution.

autonomy has a long history in Uzbekistan—from the times when Tajikistan was a constituent of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR) to today—so the concept of autonomy is not new for Tashkent. Nonetheless, the autonomy of Karakalpakstan has not prevented the hollowing of its sovereign institutions and the coercion of its population through formal and informal means. In particular, the trend of deinstitutionalization of territorial autonomy in Uzbekistan goes along the lines of the broader hollowing of institutions under the personalized regime of Karimov (Melvin 2004, 30–31). Nukus has no exclusive sphere of action that can reliably operate outside of Tashkent’s monitoring and active involvement. The 2022 events confirmed the lack of constitutional guarantees for the region’s autonomous status and reaffirmed the power of the Uzbekistani executive to appoint Karakalpakstan’s leadership and shape policy in the region. The legal grounds for Karakalpakstan’s incorporation into Uzbekistan remain unclear as the 1993 *agreements* are not public. This opacity and asymmetry also extend into the realm of informal politics, as the patronage networks led by the central government appear to be stronger than those of Karakalpakstani elites. In other words, there is no local competing pole of power and authority—whether formal or informal. Scholars who have assessed the scope of Karakalpakstan’s self-governance system generally agree that it does not reflect a truly autonomous institutional arrangement (Hanks 2000; Olmos 2020; Veretilnyk 2020).

How to assess Karakalpakstan’s autonomy? As Schlyter (2005, 185) notes, Uzbekistan features a highly blurred boundary between state and society, characterized by a one-dimensional relationship from the former to the latter. This hampers the effective functioning of the self-rule system of a would-be territorial autonomy like Karakalpakstan. Neither politics nor administration can be considered autonomous or different from the rest of the country. The status of territorial autonomy can thus only be understood retroactively, considering the politics that surrounded Karakalpakstan’s incorporation into Uzbekistan. That Karakalpakstan has remained part of Uzbekistan since 1991 points to the continued strategic and geopolitical value of this region for Tashkent.³⁶ What happened in the early 1990s was a confirmation of the Soviet-era autonomous arrangement, with territorial autonomy functioning as a symbolic concession to the independence aspirations of the Karakalpaks. One can only speculate whether Karakalpakstan’s 1993 incorporation would have taken place the way it did without the continuation of the autonomous status from the Soviet into the post-Soviet era.

This assessment must color our understanding of the 2022 events and our expectations about Karakalpakstan’s future as an *autonomous entity*. It is hard to envision change from above. Tashkent is generally seen as neglectful of Karakalpakstan. Some in the region interpret the Aral Sea disaster—partly caused by neglect—as a “Karakalpak problem” (Hanks 2000, 949). In response, the central

³⁶ This argument was made at the "Territorial Autonomies in Non-Democratic Regimes. Examples from Central Asia" seminar held at the Åland Islands Peace Institute, 5 October 2021.

authorities have invested in water management and other economic projects albeit with limited impact (Chmykh et al 2021, 71). Karakalpakstan remains one of Uzbekistan's poorest regions. Then, repression remains an essential feature in Tashkent's approach to Karakalpakstan. Repression has targeted every aspect of Uzbekistan's society, blocking any bottom-up initiative other than among exile groups. Even discussing the status of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan can draw the authorities' attention and lead to detentions with charges of secessionism (Human Rights Watch 2014). Additionally, the respect of language rights—the one point where the distinctness of Karakalpakstan is reflected at various administrative levels—has been hard to gauge. Whilst Karakalpaks do not seem to be abandoning their language, the number of Karakalpak-language schools has been diminishing with Uzbek language schools remaining the same (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018).

Three avenues for change appear clear at this moment: further centralization, external events and further ecological disaster. First, Tashkent might return to its plans to abolish Karakalpakstan's autonomy. The withdrawal of the constitutional amendments in 2022 resulted in the preservation of Karakalpakstan's status, but not in its reinforcement. For example, Tashkent retained the authority to directly appoint the region's leadership as it had done before. Eventually, the leadership in Tashkent might try again to change the status of Karakalpakstan and centralize authority even further. Second, external events can have an impact on the paths that Karakalpak dissidents and secessionists may take. The 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence gave secessionist groups new impetus (Horák 2014). The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea revitalized a part of the nationalist movement based abroad, in hopes that Moscow would annex Karakalpakstan along the lines of the RSFSR between 1932 and 1936, or at least offer support to their ambitions (Tynan 2016). Finally, continued environmental disaster is another potential source of shocks to the system. Indeed, the Aral Sea catastrophe has fueled the secessionist agenda from the beginning to this day (Hanks 2000; Chmykh et al 2021, 70). Further environmental degradation may continue to drive the exodus of Karakalpaks. Some estimates put the Karakalpak population living in Kazakhstan—many fleeing from repression—at 300.000 (International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies 2018). For the time being, the Tashkent government has chosen to retain the facade of Karakalpakstan's autonomy. It serves as a sink for the region's aspirations of self-determination and potential territorial claims by Kazakhstan (Hanks 2000, 950; Kłyszcz 2023). This policy gives a function—in Tashkent's eyes—to Karakalpakstan's otherwise symbolic autonomy.

Bibliography

- Akhundzhanov Laziz. 1993. “Formation and development of national statehood in Karakalpakstan” (*Stanovlenie i razvitie nacionalnoy gosudarstvennosti v Karakalpakstane*). Abstract of thesis defended at the Institute of Philosophy and Law Named After I. L. Muminova. Tashkent.
- Akiner, Shirin. 1983. *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union*. London: Kegan Paul International (2016 Routledge reprint).
- Ametov, Temurbek. 2016. “The social-political processes in Karakalpakstan in 1989-1993”. In *International Scientific Review*, 19 (29): 13–15.
- Bektemirov, Kuvatbay and Eduard Rahimov. 2001. “Local government in Uzbekistan”. In *Developing New Rules in the Old Environment*, edited by Igor Muntean and Vasile Popa, 469–520. Budapest: LGI/OSI Europe.
- Berdimuratova, Gulnaz. 2020. “Constitutional principles of the judiciary of the Republic of Karakalpakstan”. *Bulletin of Science and Practice (Byulleten nauki i praktiki)* 6 (1): 278–82.
- Chmykh, Elizaveta, Eugenia Dorokhova, Hine-Wai Loose, Kristina Sutkaityte, Rebecca Mikova, Richard Steyne, Sarabeth Murray, and Grazvydas Jasutis. 2021. *Mapping Fragile Areas: Case Studies from Central Asia*. Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance.
- Cummings, Sally. 2013. *Understanding Central Asia: politics and contested transformations*. London: Routledge.
- Danilin, Nikita. 2021. “Xinjiang on the Aral. A blogger from Karakalpakstan talks about life in the most depressed region of Central Asia” (*Sintszyan na Arale. Bloger iz Karakalpakstana — o zhizni v samom depressivnom regione Centralnoy Azii*). *Mediazona Tsentralnaya Asia*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://mediazona.ca/article/2021/04/19/blackhats>.
- Fadeyeva, Lyubov. n.d. “Karakalpakstan”. *Identity World*. Accessed March 6, 2024. http://identityworld.ru/maps_aera/profile/karakalpakstan.pdf.
- Fazendeiro, Bernardo. 2017. *Uzbekistan’s foreign policy: the struggle for recognition and self-reliance under Karimov*. London: Routledge.
- Freedom House. 2022. “Uzbekistan”. *Freedom in the World 2022*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uzbekistan/freedom-world/2022>.
- Goff, Kristia. 2021. *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hanks, Reuel. 2000. “A Separate Space?: Karakalpak Nationalism and Devolution in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan”. *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 (5): 939–53.
- Hirsch, Francine. 2014. *Empire of nations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Horák, Slavomír. 2014. “Separatism in Uzbekistan? Karakalpakstan after Crimea”. *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12979-separatism-in-uzbekistan?-karakalpakstan-after-crimea.html>.
- Human Rights Watch. 2014. “Until the Very End”. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/09/25/until-very-end/politically-motivated-imprisonment-uzbekistan>.

- Human Rights Watch. 2021. “Q & A: Uzbekistan’s 2021 Presidential Election”. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/13/q-uzbekistans-2021-presidential-election>.
- International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies. 2018. “Karakalpakstan: a Little-Known Autonomy in the Post-Soviet Central Asia”. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.icelds.org/2018/05/10/karakalpakstan-a-little-known-autonomy-in-the-post-soviet-central-asia>.
- Jolibekova, Indira. 2019. “Development of international cultural relations of the Republic of Karakalpakstan”. *International Journal on Integrated Education* 2 (5): 105–08.
- Karakalpakstan News Agency. 2020a. “Ten priorities identified for the next three years” (*Opredeleny desyat prioritetov na blizhayshie tri goda*). Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://kknews.uz/64967.html>.
- Karakalpakstan News Agency. 2020b. “Three-year development program to be implemented in Karakalpakstan” (*V Karakalpakstane budet realizovana trekhletnyaya programma razvitiya*). Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://kknews.uz/67074.html>.
- Keller, Shoshana. 2019. *Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Khalid, Adeeb. 2015. *Making Uzbekistan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Khalid, Adeeb. 2016. “National consolidation as Soviet work: The origins of Uzbekistan”. *Ab Imperio* no. 4 (2016): 185–94.
- Kłyszcz, Ivan Ulises. 2023. “Gorno-Badakhshan and Karakalpakstan since 1991: understanding territorial autonomy in Central Asia”. *Central Asian Survey* 42 (3): 500–17.
- Koshanov, Bakhyt and Temurbek Ametov. 2015. *Essays on the recent history of the Republic of Karakalpakstan (Ocherki noveyshey istorii respubliki Karakalpakstan)*. Karakalpakstan: Qaraqalpaqstan.
- Kolstø, Pål. 2002. “Territorial Autonomy as a Minority Rights Regime in Post-Communist Societies”. In *Can Liberal Pluralism be Exported?: Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe*, edited by Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski. London: Oxford University Press, 200–19.
- Lemon, Edward. 2019. “Mirziyoyev’s Uzbekistan: Democratization or Authoritarian Upgrading”. *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/lemonrpe4.pdf>.
- Martin, Terry. 2001. *The affirmative action empire: nations and nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Melvin, Neil. 2004. *Uzbekistan: Transition to authoritarianism*. Taylor & Francis (eBook).
- Micklin, Philip P. 1988. “Desiccation of the Aral Sea: A water management disaster in the Soviet Union”. *Science* 241: 1170–76.
- Minchenko, Evgeny, Kirill Petrov and Andrey Kazancev. 2013. *Dossier. Uzbekistan’s Investment Potential (Doklad. Investicionnyi Potentsial Uzbekistana)*. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Institut Politicheskoy Ekspertitsy.
- Olmos, Francisco. 2020. “The curious case of the Republic of Karakalpakstan.” *The Foreign Policy Centre*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://fpc.org.uk/the-curious-case-of-the-republic-of-karakalpakstan/>.

- Pannier, Bruce. 2015. “No Celebration For Karakalpakstan’s Independence Day”. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/karakalpakstan-independence-day-uzbekistan/27435839.html>.
- Peterson, Maya. 2019. *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia’s Aral Sea Basin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pianciola N. 2019. “The Benefits of Marginality: The Great Famine around the Aral Sea, 1930–1934”. *Nationalities Papers* 48 (3): 513–29.
- Putz, Catherine. 2022. “In Karakalpakstan, Mirziyoyev Oversees Selection of New Regional Leader”. *The Diplomat*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/in-karakalpakstan-mirziyoyev-oversees-selection-of-new-regional-leader/>.
- Schlyter, Birgit. 2005. “The Karakalpaks and other language minorities under Central Asian state rule”. In *Prospects for democracy in Central Asia*, edited by Birgit Schlyter, 157–87. Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul.
- Sharafutdinova, Gulnaz. 2003. “Paradiplomacy in the Russian regions: Tatarstan’s search for statehood”. *Europe-Asia Studies* 55 (4): 613–29.
- Tynan, Deirdre. 2016. “Brittle Uzbekistan Hopes for a Controlled Succession”. *International Crisis Group*. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/brittle-uzbekistan-hopes-controlled-succession>.
- United Nations Population Fund. 2024. “Uzbekistan gears up for first census in thirty years, with support from Belarus”. Accessed March 6, 2024. <https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/news/uzbekistan-gears-first-census-thirty-years-support-belarus>.
- Veretilnyk, Oleksandr. 2020. “Problems of the Formation and Development of Statehood of the Republic of Karakalpakstan” (*Problemy stanovleniya i razvitiya gosudarstvennosti Respubliki Karakalpakstan*). *Nova Polityka Wschodnia* 26 (3): 114–32.
- Yernyazova Gulzabira. 1993. *Development of Legislation on the Legal Status of the Republic of Karakalpakstan and Problems of its Improvement (Razvitie zakonodatelstva o pravovom statuse Respubliki Karakalpakstan i problemy ego sovershenstvovaniya)*. Thesis defended at the I. M. Muminova Philosophy and Law Institute, Tashkent.
- Yilmaz, Serdar. 2022. “Boundary, Water, and Security Issues in the Context of Karakalpakstan”. In *Conflict Areas in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, edited by Göktürk Tüysüzoğlu and Arda Özkan, 259–74. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

List of abbreviations

KaSSR – Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

RSFSR – Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

UzSSR – Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic

About the author

Ivan U. Klyszcz is an analyst and researcher specialized on core issues of international security, notably great power competition, the grand strategy of major powers, and Russian foreign policy. His academic interests cover those topics, as well as territorial autonomy in Eurasia and in non-democratic regimes. In recent years, the research of Dr Klyszcz has focused on Moscow's engagements with the countries of the so-called *Global South*, with particular focus on Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. Since September 2022, Dr Klyszcz is Research Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), a leading policy think tank in the Nordic-Baltic space. His research has been extensively cited in international media (Al-Jazeera, BBC, Deutsche Welle, France 24), quoted by peer researchers, and attracted the interest from diplomats, governments and major NGOs. Further information is available at www.ivanklyszcz.com.