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## **NGOs at the Crossroads in Post-Soviet Women's Writing from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan**

### **Abstract:**

This paper examines how post-Soviet women writers assess post-Soviet NGOs within the orientalisising politico-cultural whirlpool of Russo-Soviet and Western dictates that govern their activities, focusing on Kazakhstani writer Lilja Kalas's *The Fund of Last Hope: A post-Colonial Novel* (2013), Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi's *From Vorobyshek with Love* (2007) and Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova's *Tajik* (2007). I argue that rather than taking a side within the post-Soviet power struggles or remaining passive objects in the political power games of their nations, these writers use their personal insights into the workings of NGOs to expose the post/neo-colonial tendencies in the agendas of each political player. The paper breaks new academic ground by placing post-Soviet women writers from the regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia in dialogue with each other and approaching their work through a postcolonial lens. As a result, it offers a more sophisticated and balanced understating of both the Soviet experience and the current political, social and cultural developments in the post-Soviet region.

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### **Introduction**

This paper is based on the observation that post-Soviet nations often find themselves at the crossroads of Western and Russian political and cultural dynamics. They are thus prone to a triple fracturing as they negotiate their identity in relation to not only the 'ex-coloniser' – Russia and their countries of origin, but also Europe and the United States. At the forefront of the issue are NGOs such as charities and aid agencies, both Russian and Western, that vie over influence in the region. I examine how post-Soviet women writers from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan assess NGOs' role in their nations' construction of post-Soviet identities.

Kazakhstani writer Lilja Kalas's *The Fund of Last Hope: A Post-Colonial Novel* (2013)<sup>1</sup>, Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi's *From Vorobyshek With Love* (2007)<sup>2</sup> and Tajik author Eleonora Kasymova's *Tajik* (2007)<sup>3</sup> explore how the complex neo-colonial dynamics in the authors' countries are reflected on a microcosmic level in the organisation and activities of

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<sup>1</sup> Lilja Kalas's *The Fund of Last Hope: A Post-Colonial Novel* (Lira Plius, 2013) available at: [[http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio\\_book/?art=6561819](http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=6561819)] [PDF] (accessed 10/04/2019)

<sup>2</sup> Rena Yuzbashi's *From Воробышек with love* (Baku: Sada, 2007) [PDF] Available at: [<https://www.livelib.ru/book/1000700773-from-vorobyshek-with-love-rena-yuzbashi>] (accessed 10/04/2019)

<sup>3</sup> Eleonora Kasymova, *Tajik* (2007) Available at: [<https://www.proza.ru/2016/02/22/278>] accessed on 10/04/20

post-Soviet NGOs. The authors suggest that the NGOs' dependency on the West and their inability to divorce themselves from Russo-Soviet influences lead to the self-orientalising, contradictory and inefficient practices that jeopardise the justification for their existence. In addition, the authors examine how NGOs also remain trapped in the confusing and orientalising politico-cultural whirlpool of Russo-Soviet and Western dictates on gender. They suggest that the multiplicity of influences on the region exacerbate the divide within women's communities and often limit the positive impact of gender activism. The fact that the theme of NGOs preoccupies these women writers, unlike their male counterparts, is significant in itself.<sup>4</sup> Rather than taking a side within the post-Soviet power struggles, women writers use their personal insights into the workings of NGOs in order to expose the post/neo-colonial tendencies in the agendas of each political player. As a result, they acquire a much-needed agency and subvert the object position to which women tend to be relegated in the political power games of their nations.

### **Post-Soviet NGOs as Objects of Russo-Soviet and Western Neo-Colonialism**

The history of Russian imperialism fits the customary models of colonialism and imperialism, based as they are on nineteenth-century Western Europe, only approximately. Two important constituents of the Russo-Soviet project were the insistence on Russian exceptionalism (particularly as Russification took hold in the late nineteenth century) and an abiding sense of inferiority relative to the West. The paradoxical result was that orientalism – despite an insistence, from the late nineteenth century, on Russia's legitimacy as a 'Eurasian' power – was at least as prevalent as in the West – indeed, could acquire a compensatory tinge as a demonstration of superiority over the 'Eastern' powers. 'Eurasianism' tended to represent the territories to the east of Russia's historic heartlands as natural places of Russian dominance and to represent their inhabitants according to traditional orientalising stereotypes, while also insisting that Russia was not an 'empire' of the ordinary kind, a rhetoric that remains dominant in the post-Soviet period.<sup>5</sup>

In turn, the inherent contradictions of Russian Orientalism complicate the interaction between the 'colonisers' and the 'colonised', further unsettling these already unstable and unfixed categories. Of central importance too, however, are the ambitions of Western powers (the US and EU countries particularly) to achieve their own ends – and particularly the encouragement of so-called 'transition' (economic, political, cultural) -- across post-Soviet space. Post-Soviet countries thus find themselves under the influences of intertwining and conflicting Russo-European interests. Madina Tlostanova aptly summarises this political conundrum:

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<sup>4</sup> So far my research has not led me to any fictional works focusing on NGOs written by male post-Soviet authors. One reason for this might be the predominance of women in the NGO sector, as I note later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Viacheslav Mozorov's argument that post-Soviet Russia justifies its imperialistic tendencies by promoting its identity as a supposedly 'subaltern' empire. Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

It seemed that after the collapse of the Soviet power, one could expect the revival of indigenous epistemologies, alternative models of being and also different gender discourses. However, this never happened. The ethnic elites of the newly independent states continued the economic, social and cultural discrimination of their own people, hiding behind the neo-liberal or ethnic-nationalist values and continuing to practice self-deprecating intellectual dependency on Western modernity. It is a result of the external imperial difference with its secondary Eurocentrism as the constitutive element that spreads over the colonized as well as the colonizers.<sup>6</sup>

Olga Zubkovskaya similarly argues that the disintegration of the Soviet Union changed the content, but not the mechanism for the functioning of the development discourse.<sup>7</sup> If previously the method of solving the problem of ‘underdevelopment’ was understood to lie in forced economic modernization, which should have led to the formation of democratic societies, from the beginning of the 1990s, the priority shifted to the formation of a civil society which would contribute to economic modernization.<sup>8</sup> However, the concept of ‘civil society’ remains understood according to western standards, it is ‘reduced to the opposition mechanism of control over the market and the state, resulting in the support of NGOs of a particular type’.<sup>9</sup> It is to this trend of direct transplantation of western ideologies to the post-Soviet context that Zubkovskaya attributes the proliferation of local elite NGOs which are weakly connected to the societies whose interests they are meant to represent.

The number of NGOs has in fact mushroomed in the post-Soviet space. Since early 1990s foreign funders such as USAID, OSCE and EU have launched countless development projects aiming to play a central role in democracy promotion and civil society development in Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> According to OSCE, ‘[a]ssisting the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia in particular continues to be a priority for the Organization’.<sup>11</sup> The next section will demonstrate how, according to post-Soviet women writers, the ‘secondary Eurocentrism’ alluded to by Tlostanova is particularly evident in the NGOs funded by such organisations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Madina Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race and Religion in the Russian/(Post) Soviet Constructions of the “Orient”’, *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise*, 2.2 (2008), pp.1-11, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Olga Zubkovskaya, ‘Применима ли и как западная постколониальная теория для анализа постсоветского феминизма (на примере категорий советского и постсоветского «востока»)’, [Primenima li i kak zapadnaja postkolonial'naja teorija dlja analiza postsovetskogo feminizma (na primere kategorij sovetskogo i postsovetskogo ‘vostoka’) *Гендерные исследования* №18, 2008, pp. 177-199 [<http://genderis.ru/primenima-li-i-kak-zapadnaya-postkolonialenaya-teoriya-dlya-an.html?page=5>] (accessed 10/04/2019), p.181.

<sup>8</sup> Zubkovskaya, ‘Primenima li’, p.181.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.181.

<sup>10</sup> Baktybek Kainazarov, ‘The EU Engagement in Democracy Promotion in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case Study of the Kyrgyz Republic – Prospects and Challenges’, *Przegląd Politologiczny*, 2018, 27–40, p.27.

<sup>11</sup> OSCE Report ‘NGOs in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Development and Co-operation with the OSCE’, October 2000, available at: [<https://www.osce.org/odihr/16686?download=true>] (accessed 10/04/2019)

<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying that Russia and China also have extremely high interests in the region, however, Russian and Chinese-funded NGOs rarely feature in these works since, as Baktybek Kainazarov points out, neither of the regional players is interested in civil society development and democracy promotion in the region. See Kainazarov, p.32.

### Lilja Kalaus's *The Fund of Last Hope: A Post-Colonial Novel* (2013)

The complex melting pot of political influences on the development of post-Soviet countries finds its fictional microcosm in the fictional NGO in the Kazakhstani author Lilja Kalaus's novel *The Fund of Last Hope : A Post-Colonial Novel* (2013). Kalaus illuminates how NGOs in Kazakhstan are operating within the power-play of three major pressure forces – local government, Russia and the West. The author herself comes from an eclectic ethnic background – Estonian and Crimean. In addition, while growing up in Kazakhstan, she was no foreigner to Russian culture and writes in Russian.<sup>13</sup> The events of her novel take place in the year 2011 in the imaginary country Burkutstan, an allegory for Kazakhstan and focuses on the employees of a foreign-funded NGO 'Last Hope', in particular the centre's newly appointed Russian crisis manager Oleg Korshunov and a local staff member Asja.

The fictional NGO 'Last Hope' was inspired by Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan (SFK), an Almaty-based non-governmental organization established by the Open Society Foundations in 1995, where Kalaus used to work.<sup>14</sup> The NGO claims that its mission is to encourage an open society in Kazakhstan to 'promote public policies to safeguard fundamental human rights; ensure budget transparency and accountability; and increase social activism and tolerance within society'.<sup>15</sup> In the novel, George Soros finds its prototype in the character of Vertigo Vertloletti, the fund's benefactor idealised by certain employees of the fund as a 'supreme god of the old Greek pantheon'.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, 'the legendary king of the stock market' Vertoletti is about to close the fund, without warning its employees. To oversee the smooth running of the closure, Vertoletti sends a Russian professional Oleg Korshunov to the fund, officially as a 'crisis manager', and unofficially as his eyes and ears. When Vertoletti meets Korshunov he is mysteriously smoking a cigar and comes across as man with a gangster-like physiognomy. As he reveals the reasoning behind the fund's closure to Korshunov, he conveys alarmingly unsympathetic views on Burkutstan: 'Burkistan is a dead weight tied to the saddle of a strong rider. Who will be this rider, Russia or China, I'm not interested . . . I want everything to go smoothly. I don't need bad press' – he tells Korshunov.<sup>17</sup> Vertoletti considers Burkutstan forever doomed to depend on bigger political players. His comments expose the potentially selfish motives of western funding bodies who might have no real sympathy for the countries they claim to be helping, nor any true interest in their development.

The official reason that Vertoletti offers for closing the fund is that Burkutstan is a rich, self-sufficient country.<sup>18</sup> However, Oleg's friend Ripley reveals the political reason behind the fund's closure, the plan of bringing about a supposedly democratic revolution in the country which would be called 'an apple revolution'.<sup>19</sup> His revelation hints at the politically manipulative nature of Western puppeteer-style involvement in the region. The name Ripley evokes the eponymous character of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) who

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<sup>13</sup> My interview with Lilja Kalaus, Almaty, June 6, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 'Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan - Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan'

<[http://en.soros.kz/about\\_us/soros\\_foundation\\_kazakhstan](http://en.soros.kz/about_us/soros_foundation_kazakhstan)> [accessed 25 October 2017].

<sup>16</sup> Kalaus, p.25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.154.

is an international con artist, and fortifies the NGO's association with the realm of bluffing. The name of the fund, 'Last Hope', also indicates that foreign investors posit themselves as the saviours and the only remaining hope for their target country. The multinational pun of Vertoletti, Italian in form and Russian in meaning (vertoljot means helicopter in Russian), similarly suggests the multiplicity of influences on the region, and perhaps how foreign donors monitor, or helicopter-parent the developing world.

While the fund's name is English, its setting, 'a square Soviet yard' where the children's playground has been usurped by cars, is typically 'Eurasian'. This hints at a rocky road of Westernisation in the country because of its culture of negligence and survival of the fittest fostered by (relative) poverty.<sup>20</sup> It is as if time has frozen in the organisation, and Oleg cannot tell whether the interior of the lobby has deliberately been decorated in the vintage style of socialist art, or whether has changed there since Soviet times.<sup>21</sup> In the director's room, several busts 'either representing the fathers of Marxism and Leninism or the previous directors of the fund' also signal the blurry location of the NGO at Soviet and Western crossroads.<sup>22</sup>

Oleg's approach to the fund, like Vertoletti's, is purely exploitative. He regards his new position as a stepping stone for a 'real job and real money'.<sup>23</sup> A Russian professional who has worked in the West, he exemplifies a foreign 'expert' who comes to a country of which s/he has little understanding. Western aid groups often tend to rely on practitioners with even less knowledge of the post-Soviet region, such as political activists from U.S. communities or British civic organizers, to implement strategies for building democratic institutions that were developed in Western capitals, without taking into account how local activists, given local historical legacies, will receive recommendations.<sup>24</sup> Svetlana Shakirova points out the commonality of this problem in post-Soviet countries:

The symbolic association of Western knowledge/education/English language with capital is still taken for granted [by Western Organisations] . . . Having arrived for a week, the expert first asks naive questions about the local situation, demonstrating the lack of basic knowledge about the country's history, geography and culture, and then gives recommendations to local political and administrative structures.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, as part of his mission, Oleg undertakes superficial research on the country. He casts an orientalist and demeaning view at the organisation, and by extension Burkutstan, evaluating it as 'a hellhole, a real province'.<sup>26</sup> He looks down on the employees, comparing them to 'monkeys'.<sup>27</sup> In his politically extreme, racist, even fascist reflections on people from the ex-Soviet republics, he justifies the science of eugenics, and considers non-Russian

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>23</sup> ibid., p.48.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Elizabeth Mendelson and John K. Glenn eds., *The Power and Limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. by (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.3.

<sup>25</sup> Svetlana Shakirova, 'От неутешительного диагноза к эффективным стратегиям' [От neuteshitel'nogo diagnoza k jeffektivnym strategijam], 2006, available at [[http://caucasia.at.ua/publ/iz\\_zhurnala\\_quotdialog\\_zhenshinquot/stati/ot\\_diagnoza\\_k\\_strategijam\\_2006/8-1-0-11](http://caucasia.at.ua/publ/iz_zhurnala_quotdialog_zhenshinquot/stati/ot_diagnoza_k_strategijam_2006/8-1-0-11)] (accessed 10/04/2019)

<sup>26</sup> Kalaus, p.10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.21.

‘marginal’ nations as flawed and inferior.<sup>28</sup> He thus echoes typical colonial discourses justifying imperial civilising missions by the necessity of helping out nations with supposedly inferior traditions, cultures and religions. As is often the case with orientalist approaches, Oleg’s aversion is also accompanied with a degree of exoticisation of, and fascination with the country, he admires its nature, feels at peace, and enjoys the local humdrum.<sup>29</sup> Of all foreign places he has visited ‘only here . . . in this ass-end of nowhere, this Asiatic provincial swamp did he feel a strange peace . . . it felt as good as wearing cosy old slippers’.<sup>30</sup> He similarly evidences orientalist preconceptions on the beauty of Burkut women whom he considers ‘quite special’.<sup>31</sup>

Oleg’s approach to the Burkut NGO offers a perfect case-study of what Tlostanova calls ‘the external imperial difference with its secondary Eurocentrism as the constitutive element that spreads over the colonized as well as the colonizers’.<sup>32</sup> Oleg orientalises Burkuts through ‘secondary Eurocentrism’, identifying himself as European and reinforcing his own insecure identity by othering Burkuts as ‘Asiatics’. But the ‘secondary Eurocentrism’ evoked by Tlostanova also affects Burkuts who, in their turn, also self-orientalise. The female protagonist Asja, for instance, idealises Russian culture, considering it superior to Burkut culture. As she reconstructs in her mind her treasured trip to Moscow she recalls how monuments of old Russia, old street names and cobblestones evoke agedness and tradition, qualities which Asja identifies as markers of civilisation. The odour of Oleg’s perfume and the smells of Moscow metro all merge into one in her imagination, hinting at her fascination with Oleg’s Russianness.<sup>33</sup> She argues that her colleagues should be grateful to have Oleg’s company. The ‘classy’ Oleg will ‘show the fund’s simpletons how it’s really done’.<sup>34</sup> In addition, she considers ‘pure’ Russian spoken by the metropolitans such as Oleg far superior to the ‘fat, lazy, provincial’ *koine* version of Russian spoken by her and her fellow provincial simpletons at the fund.<sup>35</sup> Asja’s internalised orientalism reveals the persistence of the privileged position of Russian language and culture in post-Soviet Burkutstan (Kazakhstan).

The rhetoric of Burkutstan’s provincialism and its self-orientalising tendencies recurrently find their microcosmic channels in the operation of the imaginary fund. For instance, one of the employees Taras evidences this self-orientalising attitude when he argues that on his way to future success in Europe, Oleg will earn points in a country that is ‘the lowest of the low’, perhaps with the only exception of Mongolia.<sup>36</sup> Other employees criticise Burkut modernity, arguing that the undemocratic Burkutstan is lagging behind other post-Soviet countries, even Russia where, they point out, Putin had the decency not run for presidency for a third time. ‘All around there are colour revolutions, people gathered in squares? But us? We are a swampland!!’ – they bemoan.<sup>37</sup>

Listening to Gul’ka’s rhetoric, the female protagonist Asja wonders whether the political changes which Gul’ka evokes are sweeping over the post-Soviet nations in one uniform

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.43.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.44; p.48.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>32</sup> Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p.8.

<sup>33</sup> Kalaus, p.111.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

wave, that perhaps ‘all these “they” might in fact denote the same people’.<sup>38</sup> The implication here is that while all the mentioned countries are independent, they appear to be steered by the same political actors who are following the same agenda, one of quickly fabricating democratic facades. International organizations have in fact spent millions of dollars to promote democratization in Central Asia, for instance USAID spends more than \$11 million annually in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan alone.<sup>39</sup> The pressures on Burkutstan to achieve ‘democracy’ are heightened by not only Western pressures, but the awareness of political developments, such as the ‘colour revolutions’, in other post-Soviet countries with which Burkutstan has to measure up. That these fast-track democracies are often superficial in nature becomes apparent in Asja’s assessment of her society’s attitudes towards sexual minorities. She argues LGBTQ+ people should consider themselves lucky if they manage to survive in her city’.<sup>40</sup>

The activities of the fund reflect many of these self-orientalising patterns and suggest that despite pressure from the West, they are equally dominated by the influence of the Soviet past, and Russian neo-colonial interests in the region. While the fall of communism opened promising challenges for the development of democratic and liberal political systems in the post-Soviet region, as Gregory Gleason argues ‘Central Asian countries did not fight for their independence’ and inherited the Soviet political culture, whereas the NGO sector played a key role for regime changes movements in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>41</sup> Aleksei Davidovich Ivanov, a special guest invited from Moscow to lead a training session at the fund, makes it clear in his speech that in line with the Soviet rhetoric, he views Russia as Burkutstan’s older brother which will guide the country and protect it from ‘Western puppeteers’ and ‘Judaising heretics’:

For three hundred years, Great Russia and Burkutia have lived together as friends! . . . I am not afraid to declare publicly that in spite of all this independence of yours . . . we, the Russian people, are always ready to lend a helping hand to our smaller brothers!<sup>42</sup>

Despite inviting a Russian speaker with obvious neo-colonial leanings, the fund attempts to raise the issue of sovereignty in the collective consciousness of the Burkut public. Thus, for instance, they commission a gruesome circus performance which satirises Burkut society’s dependency on Russia. In the performance, the artist feeds chickens while singing mantras, draws a five-pointed star on the floor and proceeds to cut the chicken’s throats. He then uses the to make an emblem of Russia and reverently bows to it.<sup>43</sup> The grotesque act of sacrificing chickens at the altar of a five-pointed star, which also happens to be the symbol of communism, parodies Burkut subservience to its former master, whose power is in turn parodied by its emblematic eagles mockingly displaced by chickens.

The fund’s confusing and contradictory messages are evident in another of their funded projects. The ambitiously titled ‘The Renaissance of the Golden Horde’ aimed to build a

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<sup>38</sup> Kalaus, p.120.

<sup>39</sup> Mendelson and Glenn, *The Power*, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Kalaus, p.116.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory Gleason, *Central Asian States: Discovering Independence* (West view Press: 1997), p.32. Quoted in Baktybek Kainazarov, ‘The EU Engagement in Democracy Promotion in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case Study of the Kyrgyz Republic – Prospects and Challenges’, *Przegląd Politologiczny*, 2018, 27–40, p.34.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.

<sup>43</sup> Kalaus, p.27.

patriotic youth camp that would ironically be inspired by Soviet *shabashkas* (seasonal work) and principles of the friendship of the peoples'.<sup>44</sup> The activities would foster patriotism among the youth and help young people in their 'quest for the roots'.<sup>45</sup> In real life, a similar youth project, a two-day youth camp *Zhas*, has been supported for the last decade by Soros-Foundation Kazakhstan, sometimes with the added support of the OSCE.<sup>46</sup> In post-Soviet Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili similarly introduced youth summer camps to promote patriotic feelings. At the time, some observers saw these camps as essential to forging a single Georgian identity and state nationalism after decades of Soviet rule.<sup>47</sup> But ironically, the camps, like the fictional youth camp in Kalaus's novel, were reminiscent of Soviet youth organisations. In fact, the design of Kalaus's fictional camp site includes a fountain which symbolically links the activities of the NGO with Russia and the Soviet Union. With its *khorovod* of naiads and nymphs, the fountain would resemble the famous Soviet fountain Druzhba Narodov celebrating the unity of the sixteen Soviet republics in the VDNKh ('Exhibition of Economic Achievements') park in Moscow.<sup>48</sup> The instructions of the design explaining that the fountain's mermaids would lean down to the water 'akin to cute Russian willows' similarly signal the lingering fascination with and fondness of Russian culture and the desire of emulating it.

It is significant to note that the project fails miserably. Its colossal budget is abused by young people who spend it on fancy notebooks, elite call girls and ski holidays in the Alps, before they move on to management schools abroad.<sup>49</sup> The management of the fund is handed over to a bogus native intellectual Savva Jurodcev who appropriates the remainder of the grants, hands over organisational duties to his friends and heads off on a tour in the Dead Sea. Jurodcev then hypocritically turns to a tabloid where he denounces 'rotten liberal films like the notorious Fund of Last Hope funded by the bloody money of the stock speculator Vertigo Vertoletti, and deliberately sowing discord in a cohesive Burkut society'.<sup>50</sup> The camp's failure highlights how local elites and intellectuals are responsible for many of the country's problems and cannot be victimised as unsuspecting targets of local or Western organisations. Similar corruption and the culture of exploiting public sectors which sabotage ambitious projects of democracy-building are also in large part an inheritance of the Soviet system. The case of the youth camp demonstrates that '[h]istorical legacies of the decades of communist rule account in part for the poor functioning of fragile new institutions', rather than solely the strategies of international NGOs.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, foreign funding cannot escape criticism, as OSCE itself points out in its report on NGOs in Central Asia and the Caucasus:

The influx of international aid . . . has also had some unfortunate results. The new-found possibilities for funding have in a few cases led to the establishment of NGOs solely to seek donor funding. Furthermore, international attention has in some cases also resulted in a divisive competition for funds within the NGO community.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp.28-29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp.28-29.

<sup>46</sup> 'OSCE Programme Office Supports Annual Youth Camp in Kazakhstan | OSCE', available at <<http://www.osce.org/astana/192761>> [accessed 11/04/2019].

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Kalaus, p.31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>51</sup> Mendelson and Glenn, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> OSCE report, p.9.

Thus, Burkut NGOs in the novel are portrayed as being at the mercy of various neo-colonial forces, as Western demands for democracy, Soviet legacies and Burkutstan's desire to gain political sovereignty both determine and complicate their efficiency.

### **Rena Yuzbashi's *From Vorobyshek With Love* (2007)**

Azeri author Rena Yuzbashi's *From Vorobyshek With Love* suggests that Azerbaijan is facing similar pressures as Burkutstan (Kazakhstan) when attempting to define a sovereign political path. Yuzbashi currently lives and works in Moscow, where she moved after receiving higher education in Baku and Europe. Her mother is a teacher of Russian language and literature, and like Kalas she can boast close familiarity with Russian culture.<sup>53</sup> Her novel centres on the protagonist affectionately referred to as Vorobyshek, a woman in her thirties who works in an NGO in Baku. The novel is written in the form of Vorobyshek's emails sent to her friends and colleagues. Like Kalas, Yuzbashi evokes the pressures faced by post-Soviet countries in terms of catching-up with western standards of democracy, and questions the readiness of her country's politico-economic systems to correspond to western modernity, whether concerning important political phenomena, such as elections, or comparatively minor issues such as the state of the arts, or public services. She recurrently deplores the condition of the public sector, mocks the incompetence of her superiors who are as selfish as the employees and benefactor of 'Last Hope'.

As we saw, Burkuts' criticism of their modernity tends to escalate into self-orientalism as they identify themselves as inferior to Russia. That one of the leading positions in the fund is taken up by a Russian man who considers Burkuts worthless savages hints at Burkutstan's subservient position vis-à-vis its former master. On the other hand, Vorobyshek's criticism of her country's modernity is often tongue-in-cheek and more light-hearted. Even though she is constantly measuring up her country against Europe, she never suggests that Azerbaijan is inferior to Russia. Her suspicion that Azerbaijan might be better off pursuing its own independent course and taking an active role in world politics and diplomacy, for instance through its willingness to help developing countries, pre-empts Azerbaijan's current position as more politically self-sufficient than that of Kazakhstan.

Like Asja, Vorobyshek evidences a soft spot for Moscow, but manages to assess Russia, and especially its foreign policy, with a degree of caution and suspicion. She cannot hide her affection for the ex-imperial centre with all its quirks and shortcomings, its bookstores, streets and coffee shops where coffee is never hot, or its cafes where a piece of cake costs the same as a six-course dinner for eight in Baku'.<sup>54</sup> And yet, she realises that her country has to tread lightly not to antagonise Russia, especially after witnessing the experiences of neighbouring countries such as Georgia.<sup>55</sup> The narrator recalls the 2006 crisis in Russo-Georgian relations when Russia reacted to Georgia's pro-Western orientation through punitive actions – the placement of a ban on imports of Georgian wine in Russia, breaking of financial links, increased gas prices, as well as deportations of Georgians from Russia – actions which the European Court declared as having been in violation of the European Court of Human Rights. Her spirit is politically independent, as evidenced by her sadness over the

<sup>53</sup> Rena Yuzbashi's personal page, available at <https://yuzbashi.livejournal.com/profile> (accessed 11/04/2019)

<sup>54</sup> Since page numbers are unavailable in the electronic edition, I am indicating the date of emails which contain the quotes. The current one is (6/01/2007)

<sup>55</sup> (2/10/2006)

fact Russia called off Russian diplomats from Georgia instead of calling off the Russian troops.<sup>56</sup> Her sentiment signals a critical approach to Russia's foreign policies and her solidarity with the neighbouring country rather than blind allegiance to Russia. Later, when she visits Moscow, she again alludes to Russia's anti-Georgian policies, parodying how Russians banned Georgian wines or changed the names of Georgian dishes to strip them of their national context'.<sup>57</sup> She also criticises Russia for absurdly homogenising Transcaucasia and recalls how she is detained and extensively questioned in a Russian airport just because she is 'a citizen of a country which borders with Georgia'.<sup>58</sup>

Vorobyshek recognises that Russian interests in the region complicate the country's EU ambitions, and that Azerbaijan has to engage in a tricky power balance game, especially due to its resources of oil which 'has always been a relevant theme for foreigners'.<sup>59</sup> As Murad Ismaylov points out, the country's foreign policy must balance itself between the West and Russia on one hand, and the Moslem world and Israel on the other.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, Vorobyshek considers Azerbaijan's European path problematic. First of all, she doubts that Azerbaijan is ready to correspond to European standards. Implying that the parliament lags behind EU standards and meets them only superficially, she jokes that 'all parliamentary meeting rooms have been repaired and now meet European standards, meaning the rooms, not the parliament'.<sup>61</sup> Vorobyshek is constantly measuring up Azerbaijan against Europe. In one email, she implies that Azerbaijan is not as politically relaxed as other Western European countries.<sup>62</sup> In another, she criticizes European food.<sup>63</sup> But in general, she is more critical of Azerbaijan. She criticizes poor food on Azeri airlines and 'oriental' transport etiquette contributing to hellish traffic jams.<sup>64</sup> She also points out the lack of progress in technological developments and questions her employer when he proposes technology training sessions in the regions. She jokes that these trainings on 'Modern communications' would only be relevant if one considers landlines as belonging to modern communications'.<sup>65</sup> She also criticises the corruption in state institutions such as the sanitary epidemiological reconnaissance service [sanepidemstancia] which attempts to financially exploit her.<sup>66</sup> Culture does not escape her reproach either, for instance she ridicules the visitors of a contemporary art exhibition:

It was difficult to imagine people more distant from modernity than our functionaries of the art sector. And our businessmen? I've never seen a more hilarious spectacle than a man of fifty with gold cufflinks, watches and teeth, and a latest model speaker in his hands, gazing at the Apollo statue from plastic bottles.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> (10/10/2006)

<sup>57</sup> (30/11/2006)

<sup>58</sup> (6/01/2007)

<sup>59</sup> (29/08/2006)

<sup>60</sup> Murad Ismayilov, 'Postcolonial Hybridity, Contingency, and the Mutual Embeddedness of Identity and Politics in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Some Initial Thoughts' *Caucasus Analytical Digest* (77.14), (2015) 7 – 14, p.12.

<sup>61</sup> (04//10/2006)

<sup>62</sup> (11/09/2006)

<sup>63</sup> (08/02/2007)

<sup>64</sup> (6/09/2006); (07/02/2007)

<sup>65</sup> (4/07/2007)

<sup>66</sup> (25/12/2006)

<sup>67</sup> (04/10/2006)

Vorobyshek's doubts in relation to the EU also stem from her Euroscepticism. On the one hand, she makes a promise that on her work trip to Paris she will 'make a good impression' on Europe and thus help Azerbaijan's EU ambitions.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, she questions the viability of her mission, since she considers her country's positioning in relation to Europe as peripheral. When Bulgaria and Romania join the European Union Vorobyshek experiences mixed feelings. While she hopes that perhaps Azerbaijan might have a chance to join too, she wonders whether seeking EU membership would entail 'holding out a hand like a poor relative begging at the EU door'.<sup>69</sup> 'We have to seriously consider, do we really need all of this? – she wonders.'<sup>70</sup> According to Vorobyshek seeking membership of the European Union would place Azerbaijan in a position of a beggar entering a master-slave paradigm, suggesting that even upon joining other European countries, her country's position would be one of weakness, dependency and inferiority. It is for this reason that Vorobyshek wonders whether an alternative, not necessarily European course might serve as a better option for the country which has only just emerged from its previous 'master'.

In fact, recently Azerbaijan has been steadily growing both self-sufficient, not least because Western democratic discourse, akin to Russian neo-imperialism, has come to be seen by Azerbaijan's political elite as constraining the Azerbaijani state in its ability to exercise 'full' sovereignty and enjoy autonomy in its domestic and foreign policies.<sup>71</sup> Through organising and hosting various events of international magnitude the country has made efforts 'to position itself as a crossroads and bridge between civilisations and, as such, as an emerging leader and world centre in promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue across the globe'.<sup>72</sup> This eagerness to become an important world player is apparent in the country's willingness to help developing countries from the position of strength. Vorobyshek boasts, for instance, that Azerbaijan has committed itself to implementing all the goals of the Million Development, one of them being the provision of drinking water to 'third world' countries.<sup>73</sup> She also parodies how the president emphasises his country's sovereignty in his diplomatic visits. She jokes: '[i]nterestingly, whichever country our president goes to he always begins his address by stating that this country was one of the first to recognize Azerbaijan's independence. I have counted fifteen such countries'.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the country's best efforts, the protagonist suggests that Azerbaijan is still far from achieving complete cultural and economic self-sufficiency, as is well epitomised by one of her flights with the national airlines: 'the TVs is showing an American film with German captions, the radio is broadcasting Italian music, the meals are Turkish, and, since I am flying from Moscow, all the announcements are in Russian. Welcome to Azerbaijan!'.<sup>75</sup>

Similar tendencies of inefficiency due to multiple influences govern her own organisation which, like 'Last Hope', is funded by foreign benefactors whom she teasingly describes as

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<sup>68</sup> (20/08/2006)

<sup>69</sup> (29/09/2006)

<sup>70</sup> (29/09/2006)

<sup>71</sup> Murad Ismayilov, 'Power, Knowledge, and Pipelines: Understanding the Politics of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy', *Caucasus Survey*, 2:1-2, (2014) 79 – 129, p.90.

<sup>72</sup> Ismaylov, 'Power', p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> (19/12/2006)

<sup>74</sup> (13/12/2006)

<sup>75</sup> (13/04/2007)

‘bloodsuckers’.<sup>76</sup> Vorobyshek’s boss Pasha is depicted as incompetent and governed by selfish motivations. He is reluctant to spend money on charitable actions, such as helping homeless children. Vorobyshek has to carefully manipulate him into taking steps that benefit society. Pasha, finally agrees to help the children’s home after Vorobyshek reluctantly complies to his whims. Pasha instructs Vorobyshek that the children’s home should send him and the NGO a thank you letter, and that Vorobyshek has to ensure personally that these letters are also sent to the head office in Geneva. Pasha realises that his act of seeming altruism will benefit his public image and earn him brownie points from western donors.<sup>77</sup> In another instance, Vorobyshek ensures that his training in Italy receives the right publicity through coverage in national news, and once more highlights Pasha’s inefficiency by reminding him that it is important that he recollect the name of the organisation which conducted the workshop!<sup>78</sup> Pasha’s predecessor seems no better than Pasha as it transpires that he nepotistically demoted the hardworking Vorobyshek in favour of his niece.<sup>79</sup> Vorobyshek is equally critical of the efficiency in the public and bureaucratic sectors. For instance, she is stunned by the incompetence of some of her countries’ diplomats who are clueless about how NGOs work. She recollects her shock upon having had to explain to one of these diplomats ‘the basic concepts of working with public organisations, the diaspora, and the history of the conflict [presumably the war in Nagorno-Karabakh]’.<sup>80</sup>

Therefore, through humour, but also brutal honesty, Yusbashi exposes Azerbaijan’s challenges in catching-up with western standards of democracy and questions the readiness of her country’s politico-economic systems to correspond to western modernity. Like Kalas, she suggests that post-Soviet countries and, by extension, their NGOs, still have a long way to go before transcending self-orientalism, defining an independent path, and working out an effective bureaucracy.

### Post-Soviet NGOs and Gender Orientalism

It is important to note that most employees in post-Soviet NGOs are women. After the removal of the Soviet quota system, the number of women in official positions declined sharply, making NGOs a popular path for public participation for women who were excluded from these positions.<sup>81</sup> Western donors’ preference in supporting women’s initiatives and organizations also contributed to women’s predominance in the NGO sector.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, women’s gender identity in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus represents one of the most central, complex and contested issues in the region, arguably more so than in post-colonial countries. If the ex-colonies of the West have to mainly decolonise themselves from Eurocentric racist epistemologies, women in the Caucasus and Central Asia face a double

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<sup>76</sup> (17/08/2006)

<sup>77</sup> (9/01/2007)

<sup>78</sup> (12/02/2007)

<sup>79</sup> (14/09/2006)

<sup>80</sup> (15/09/2006- 16/09/2006)

<sup>81</sup> Armine Ishkanian, ‘Gender and NGOs in Post-Soviet Armenia’, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 18 (2000), 17–21, p.17.

<sup>82</sup> Armine Ishkanian, ‘Gender and NGOs in Post-Soviet Armenia’, *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 18 (2000), 17–21, p.17.

burden due to their subjection to multiple modernizing and colonizing agents.<sup>83</sup> Three key influencers emerge within this scheme – the Russo-Soviet system, the West, and the local post-colonial regimes. As a result, gender discourses in Central Asia and the Caucasus can be characterised by a tripartite scheme which sees women as ‘forever climbing the stairs of modernity — from traditionalism through the Soviet half-traditional, half-modern model to the Western liberated female’.<sup>84</sup>

As Madina Tlostanova points out, in the Soviet period, ‘[t]he artificial superfluous nature of Soviet ideology, and its deeper close links with the project of modernity/coloniality, became particularly obvious in the gendered forms of orientaling’.<sup>85</sup> Contrary to the official rhetoric of the project aimed at the creation of the Soviet woman who would be racially, ethnically, culturally, or religiously unmarked, biological generalizations, cultural constructions, and racial and religious prejudices flourished unrestrained, clashing with the Soviet multicultural ideologies.<sup>86</sup> Women from Central Asia and the Caucasus were seen as Russia’s exotic and Oriental Others that needed to be liberated and civilised by the imperial centre, or the older brother of Soviet republics. *Hudjum* – the massive Soviet campaign to liberate and unveil Central Asia Muslim women stands as one example of this civilising mission. The Soviet Orientalist rhetoric persists today and remains particularly evident in Russian culture, most notably on films on immigration.<sup>87</sup>

The second major influence on post-Soviet gender constructions emerges from the West, most notably in the form Western-funded charities and NGOs. As Tlostanova points out, these NGOs often negate or ignore the ‘achievements’ of the Soviet gender project, preferring to see the post-Soviet locales as a ‘tabula rasa which remained outside of history and modernity waiting for the (correct) Western liberation to come’.<sup>88</sup> As part of this approach, local epistemologies, especially the tradition of Islam, often remain ignored. As Olga Zubkovskaya notes, the majority of funding for political activism in the region is allocated in relation to the economic and legal status of women.<sup>89</sup> In contrast, organizations formed around cultural, especially religious, identity receive almost no funding.<sup>90</sup> USAID, the largest donor in the region, emphasizes that religious, primarily Muslim, organizations have almost no chance of financial backing.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to the persisting legacies of Soviet gender policies, women in the post-Soviet context have to deal with the nationalist discourses of their local patriarchal regimes. These discourses are ‘characteristic of young postcolonial nations that permit only specific ideas and propagandistic models of national culture, mentality, creativity, and religiosity’ and

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<sup>83</sup> Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (New York: Springer, 2010), p.200.

<sup>84</sup> Madina Tlostanova, ‘Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional Coalitions’, *BALTIC WORLDS*, pp.38-43, p.42.

<sup>85</sup> Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> See for instance Larisa Sadilova's film *Ona [She]* (2013) where a Russian women mentors Tajik immigrant Maya and ‘liberates’ her by stripping a headscarf off her head and clothing her in a tank top and jeans.

<sup>88</sup> Tlostanova, ‘The Janus-Faced’, p.8.

<sup>89</sup> Zubkovskaya, ‘Primenima li’, p.193.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.193.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.193.

closely associate patriarchal values with so-called tradition.<sup>92</sup> Like Western NGOs, these local regimes often ignore that women's subjectivity 'is a hybrid, trans-cultural and trans-value product, which cannot be fixed within the primitive dichotomy of the paranji versus the mini-skirt'.<sup>93</sup> Deliberate ignorance of conflicting subjectivities and fluid gender models in Central Asian and Caucasian locales, for instance the neglect of the fact that the 'Russian imperial model worked in parallel with the Afghan, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic modernization influences', works to reinforce the stable binary opposition of modernity versus tradition.<sup>94</sup> Thus, gender discourses in peripheral Eurasia 'often remain in the grip of progressivism and developmentalism', Tlostanova points out.<sup>95</sup> As she continues,

As a result, we have a complex configuration of re-orientalizing on various levels — from the West and Western mainstream gender discourses, from their local self-orientalized caricatures that still strive to squeeze Central Asia or Caucasus into the procrustean bed of ready-made stereotypes, and from the new nation-state which is once again just using the woman as a banner of its nation-building.<sup>96</sup>

This eclecticism of post-Soviet gender discourses is echoed in the diverse female collective of Kalas's fictional fund 'Last Hope'. One employee, Camilla Djakopovna, is as a typical soviet working woman, 'outstanding workaholic with extensive experience', dressed 'in a polished style of the wives of the first Bolsheviks'.<sup>97</sup> Another, Maira, epitomises Burkut women's cultural confusion as she wears her hair in what appear as 'sloppy Uzbek plaits or overly neat dreads'.<sup>98</sup> The fact that her hair is too underdone to fit the criteria of a typical Central Asian hairstyle and, in contrast, too perfectly done-up to qualify as dreadlocks, serves as a metaphor for women who, by not trying hard enough, or by trying too much, cannot accurately reproduce either Western or Eurasian cultural markers and end up in an in-between cultural realm which caricatures both.<sup>99</sup>

The employees of 'Last Hope' thus find themselves at identity crossroads and are subjected to multiple re-orientalising. Their anxieties and identity crisis manifest itself in their struggle to determine the exact meaning of a free woman in independent Burkutstan. Burdened by the necessity to correspond to Western gender theories and assumptions, they subscribe to hiddenly Orientalist stereotypes and re-orientalize themselves by playing the role of 'the eternal Other (a native informant or a native instrument of feminist imperialism)'.<sup>100</sup> Their anxieties become evident in the exchange between Asja's female colleagues which arises after Asja turns down their offer to join in the social activities due to her household chores. As one of the colleagues Gulka tells Asja off for being backward, another colleague Zorka interrupts her. In a dialogue that ensues, Zorka and Gulka reveal their internalised orientalist views on womanhood, as well as a distorted vision of feminism.:

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<sup>92</sup> Tlostanova, 'Postcolonial', p.42.

<sup>93</sup> Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p.8.

<sup>94</sup> Tlostanova, *Gender*, p188.

<sup>95</sup> Tlostanova, 'Postcolonial', p.42.

<sup>96</sup> Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p.8.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Asja's mother in law's room smells 'either of Chanel Number 5, or *Krasnaya Moskva* (popular Soviet women's perfume) nauseating Asja and reflecting the headspinning mixture of cultures within the already variable Soviet model of gender identity.

<sup>100</sup> Tlostanova, 'The Janus-Faced', p. 8.

‘Well, would you look at our Mother Teresa, damn it, aren’t you ashamed,? – Gulka stamped her foot angrily – We’re supposed to be the liberated women of the East for god’s sake, and you’re constantly disgracing us, you sucker!’

“‘Liberated’”? As if ... - snorted Zorka . . . – Piss off then, join Alla Lvovna, she just got new donors – Muslim Feminist League.

‘Screw you! - retorted Gulka . . . What the hell are you on about? Muslim feminists? Don’t make me laugh...’<sup>101</sup>

That reconciling Islam with feminism is inconceivable to these women suggests that they have a thwarted understanding of both the religion and the social movement in question. Their dismissive attitude towards Islam serves as a reminder that ‘[s]oviet modernity destroyed the complex and nuanced models of interaction between the indigenous thinking and Islam which had been refined in these locales in the centuries of Muslim influence’.<sup>102</sup> The adjective that the women use when talking of ‘the freed women of the East’ is also telling. These women do not consider themselves as free, or having been free, but rather as having been liberated. They thus posit themselves in an object position, steered by their liberators, either the Soviets, or Western NGOs. Having received superficial training on western dictates of modernity and gender equality, these women are struggling to reconcile their acquired knowledge with the discourses of Soviet and post-Soviet dictates on gender.

### **Eleonora Kasymova’s *Tajik* (2007)**

Eleonora Kasymova’s novel *Tajik* (2007) examines the challenges and issues that can arise when local women belonging to the elites and working in NGOs attempt to transfer the training which they received from the west to their female compatriots, as they do in Kalaus’s fictional fund ‘Last Hope’, and unknowingly become instruments of native feminist (neo)imperialism. In addition, the novel highlights that despite some female NGO workers’ genuine intentions, corrupt post-Soviet bureaucracy severely limits the NGOs’ potential for positive change.

Kasymova highlights that the already complex disjunction between ‘traditional’ and ‘western’ gender norms is further exacerbated by class divisions in Tajik society. Women working in post-Soviet NGOs, who mostly belong to cultural elites, have university degrees and access to western organisations due to their English language skills and previous experience of working with foreigners, often fail to grasp the needs of working class women.<sup>103</sup> Kasymova explores this divide through her female’s protagonist’s dealing with an NGO. The protagonist Kumri is a woman from a Tajik village who has to provide for her seven children after her husband goes missing since his emigration to Moscow in search of employment. In order to find him, Kumri turns for help to an NGO in the capital, Dushanbe. There she meets the leaders of the women’s committee, Sabokhat and Zulfyia. The leaders take interest in Kumri’s story and visit her and other women in her village.

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<sup>101</sup> Kalaus, p.15.

<sup>102</sup> Tlostanova, *Gender*, p.200.

<sup>103</sup> Zubkovskaya, ‘Primenima li’, p.182.

When Sabokhat and Zulfyia meet the local women find out more about their lives, the women explain sarcastically that theirs is not a life, but a ‘mere existence’.<sup>104</sup> Sabokhat is surprised by this complaint. ‘With a clever face’, she instructs women that every person is a master of her fate, and if one wants to be happy, one has to create happiness.<sup>105</sup> Unsurprisingly, Sabokhat’s approach creates friction among the group. ‘You live in the city and don’t know about our life’ – Kumri explains to Sabokhat. She informs her that women in the village face a double burden as there are no men left, since most of them have gone to earn money in Russia.<sup>106</sup> But Sabokhat remains unable to shake off her scepticism. Economic migration is not the exclusive problem of Tajikistan, besides, ‘men surely send their earnings back to their families? And surely not everyone has emigrated? – she responds.<sup>107</sup> When Sabokhat is informed that indeed all men have left, Sabokhat’s tone becomes less sceptical and more sympathetic. As women tell Sabokhat about their own experiences, how some of their husbands remarried in Russia, or disappeared without trace, Sabokhat is overwhelmed and taken aback. She realises that she has come to these women with preconceived ideas and misconceptions, and that her training might not be adequate for dealing with problems which have roots in serious and large-scale economic and political problems:

Sabokhat turned her eyes to the corner and swallowed nervously. She felt ashamed. When setting out to the hamlet on a mission to agitate local women to fight poverty and laziness, she never imagined that the problems she would confront would much bigger than women’s problems.<sup>108</sup>

As local women apologise for their brutal honesty and show empathy for Sabokhat’s misguided position, their humble stance further exacerbates Sabokhat’s feelings of guilt. ‘Ashamed of her didactic speech’, she meekly replies that she is the one who should apologise.<sup>109</sup> Through Sabokhat’s mistakes, Kasymova suggests the dangers of a top-down approach to local women, and an aggressive or didactic imposition of western feminist dogmas. Through Sakhobat’s and her colleague Zulfyia’s encounter with Kumri and her friends, the author suggests that an accurate understanding of women’s role in Tajik society, as well as an ability and willingness to tailor feminism to local needs are essential for NGO workers.

Sabokhat’s colleague Zulfyia appears more attuned to the intricacies of her mission. She opts for more a gentle approach and appeases women by claiming that ‘women are the keepers of the family hearth’.<sup>110</sup> Not only does her statement recognise that contrary to Sabokhat’s misconception, women are hardworking, but it also implies that their dedication is paying homage to local village traditions which should not necessarily be dismissed as patriarchal and oppressive. At first, her encouragement appears counter-intuitive to those feminist perspectives that want to see women empowered beyond their household realm. Nonetheless, Zulfyia’s strategy of appeasement proves a wise move as women become willing to listen to what Zulfyia has to say. They evidence particular eagerness to learn about their rights, ‘after all, it was common belief till now that women only had duties’.<sup>111</sup> ‘The conversation proved

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<sup>104</sup> Kasymova, *Tajik*, p.25.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

so interesting, that many began to make plans about fighting injustice . . . and then the talk grew smoothly into a discussion of women's role in the family, parenthood, and life more generally'.<sup>112</sup> Rather than feeling intimidation, or hostility, reactions often induced by the activities of western NGOs in post-Soviet Central Asia, these women become actively engaged in the negotiation of their role in their families and societies. In general, women in these societies, especially rural settings, tend to suspect feminism more broadly as an expression of cultural imperialism and orientalism, since, as Ol'ga Zubkovskaya points out, 'in the process of knowledge transfer the 'West' is often presented as norm, whereas the 'East' – as a deviation from it'.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Zulfyia is convinced that with the Soviet civilising project, the ideology of which was secondarily derived from Western Oriental beliefs, Tajikistan got rid of 'the veil, widespread ignorance, savagery, and all the accompanying passions'.<sup>114</sup> Her argument echoes the typical Soviet orientalist rhetoric on Russia's mission to liberate Central Asian women from the supposed wilderness, patriarchy and perversion, in short, of their 'Eastern' ways. Zulfyia echoes the stance of the NGO workers in Kalas's fictional fund 'Last Hope' who also consider themselves as 'the liberated women of the East'.<sup>115</sup>

In fact, despite her kind intentions, like Sakhobat, Zulfyia fails to fully grasp the sheer magnitude of women's problems. Like Sakhobat previously, she comes to realise from bitter personal experience that NGO activities are limited by the complex political, economic and social circumstances of her country's postcolonial reality. The turning point in Zulfyia's worldview occurs as she joins local women as they complete their part-time jobs and gets assigned to clean the home of local cotton industry magnate Rustam. Once she arrives at the house, the luxury of which she finds overwhelming, Zulfyia is greeted by the sleazy Rustam who attempts to rape her. Zulfyia reveals her true identity as a prosecutor and finally stops the oligarch's advances with the threat of a lawsuit. Zulfyia learns by bitter experience that one can never understand and empathise with the fate of oppressed women from a safe bubble of the office. 'As part of her work in the prosecutor's office, she had investigated many cases of rape, but really, she never let women's misfortune get to her. Now, it seemed, she was facing her reckoning'.<sup>116</sup>

Zulfyia's astonishment continues as she engages in an eye-opening conversation with the oligarch. Rustam reveals that he is used to sexually exploiting women who come to clean his house. He justifies his actions by suggesting that he is heroically stepping in to fill the void left behind by emigrant men, and that he gives women both the much-needed physical attention and financial assistance. He advises Zulfyia to 'come down from the clouds' and hypocritically reveals to her the ugly underbelly of provincial life hidden from city dwellers. He tells her how all around 'there's poverty and hopelessness', how women sell themselves in order to survive, how all of Zulfyia's 'preaching is seriously at odds with life. . .'.<sup>117</sup> Like Sabokhat before her, Zulfyia is overwhelmed to discover her ignorance of women's problems in the regions and is deeply concerned of the future of the next generation of women:

Zulfyia was silent. As she digested the information she had received, she felt ashamed that there was so much she did not know when working with women's issues in the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>113</sup> Zubkovskaya, 'Primenima li', p.182.

<sup>114</sup> Kasymova, p.30.

<sup>115</sup> Kalas, p.15.

<sup>116</sup> Kasymova, p.29.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p.31.

committee . . . The real trouble was that it had not occurred to anyone to bring down the barrier between cities and villages, to come to grips with life at the bottom of the social ladder and to do everything possible so that the nation . . . did not rot away as it did currently. Zulfiya shuddered at the thought that a certain percentage of women, however small, found itself at the bottom in its struggle to survive. This meant that several future generations would perceive life through a distorted mirror.<sup>118</sup>

Like Sabokhat, Zulfiya realises that the activities of the NGO are also closely tied to and limited by the economic realities of the country. She wonders whether her fund's initiative to redistribute funds from wealthier provinces to poorer villages merely leads them to turn in circles, rather than effect fundamental changes. She comes to the sombre conclusion that no NGO can help the country as long as it remains in a dire economic state:

Throwing humanitarian aid from one poor village to another – how can this solve the problem? Zulfiya understood that there was no other way out. In times of famine, hardship, poverty, no government programs can protect the people. There can be only one way out – improving the country's economy. In the meantime, fraudsters, thieves and other unscrupulous gangs like Rustam are destined to cash on the vulnerable poor.<sup>119</sup>

Zulfiya's sorrow grows further when she learns that Rustam is not alone in preying on vulnerable women in the village. Batyr, the man in charge of bringing aid from the city to local women in the form of second-hand clothes, acts as an under-cover pimp. When poor unsuspecting women come to collect the clothes, he personally handpicks and delivers them to clients like Rustam who then set the terms for their subsequent exploitation.

Critics of NGOs have pointed out that donor-politics often lead to the de-politicisation of women's activism.<sup>120</sup> Zulfiya and Sakobhat both come to the realisation that their work is far removed from political activism, meaning that the potential for positive impact is severely limited in their NGO. Even if Zulfiya goes through a staggering awakening after her encounter with Rustam, when she returns to the city, she reverts to her mode of depoliticised activism. One major reason for this is local corruption which also permeates her NGO. Zulfiya decides to keep silent on Rustam's abuses, fearing that, as the cotton magnate Rustam warned her, she would fail to prove anything and only create problems for herself. Above all, she is concerned of her own reputation, and is revealed that at least Rustam 'did not kick her out with a scandal' and thus 'forever slander' her.<sup>121</sup> By refusing to speak out, she becomes part of a system which she considers a leftover of the Soviet past, where every man looks out for his/herself, and thus feeds the system of oppression. When she asks her colleagues if they know Rustam, they all reply that he is a 'good', 'decent' man.<sup>122</sup> Their response suggests that either her colleagues are guilty of fateful ignorance of the abuses that they should be aware of, or that they are holding silence over them, like Zulfiya.

Zulfiya does shows genuine concern for women and loathes herself for feeling so helpless against those who hold power, of entertaining the doomed possibility of 'strangling the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.54.

<sup>120</sup> Zubkovskaya, 'Primenima li', p.182.

<sup>121</sup> Kasymova, p.54.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p.54.

powerful with her bare hands'.<sup>123</sup> Her colleagues' actions, however, confirm the criticism that the donor-structure of NGOs fosters unhealthy competition for resources between elite groups who often do little or nothing to help their target groups.<sup>124</sup> They also justify the suspicion that Kumri's mother-in-law holds against NGO workers in the city. She tells Kumri that these women are only capable of 'coming to the village, 'gathering a crowd, and calling local women lazy', that all they care about 'up there' is 'how to better put lipstick, and what outfit to wear'.<sup>125</sup> The mother-in-law's comments on insurmountable class differences and NGO workers' approach to their charitable projects as pastimes are proven correct by Zulfyia's colleagues. When the women's committee meets after Zulfyia's visit to the village, the writer reveals that not all members are driven by altruistic goals and that some of them are more concerned about travelling abroad. When the leader Sonya declares that she needs to choose a delegate for a seminar abroad and selects Zulfyia as the most qualified candidate, one of her colleagues complains that Zulfyia went to Belgium, and that she, an employee with an MA degree [kandidat nauk] and an extensive experience of working on women's issues, has to be picked instead. After the meeting, the vice-chair tells the leader that there is one more contender for the trip, 'a wife of someone from the president's close circle' and that it was 'futile to discuss the issue in the first place . . . all the decisions are made up there [the higher echelons]'.<sup>126</sup> The incident demonstrates that even women's organisations are not immune to nepotism and pressures of the wider political system.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how the general political trends in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are reflected in the politics of local NGOs. The often aggressive efforts of direct transplantation of western epistemology to the region are hindered by the legacies of the Soviet colonial past, persisting Russian political presence in the postcolonial present, as well by the nationalist agendas of the new local regimes in the case of Burkutstan/Kazakhstan, and by attempts, sometimes successful, of charting a unique and rather more sovereign political path in the case of Azerbaijan. This complex whirlpool of political influences limits NGOs' positive effects on their target locales. In addition, NGOs are often subjected to gender Orientalism, which in terms fosters an unhealthy rural-urban divide among women's communities. Thus, the analysis of the novels revealed that one of the defining characteristics of post-Soviet postcoloniality – 'the external imperial difference with its secondary Eurocentrism as the constitutive element that spreads over the colonized as well as the colonizers' – is acutely pronounced in the functioning of NGOs in post-Soviet Kazakshtan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.

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<sup>123</sup> Kasymova, p.54.

<sup>124</sup> Zubkovskaya, 'Применима ли', p.182.

<sup>125</sup> Kasymova, p.50.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p.55.