

# Behind the Belt and the Road:

The Pamiri People and the  
Hidden Costs of Tajikistan's  
Infrastructure Projects

As Gazeta frequently publishes articles with a focus on the human and community element, we thought it important to highlight a particular story that often goes overlooked amid the broader geopolitical discussions—how large-scale infrastructure projects, like those under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are actually affecting local communities. In this case, we focus on the Pamiri people of Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). This piece draws inspiration from a brief visit to the GBAO in 2022 by one of the authors, who has since developed a deep interest and appreciation for the region and its unique culture.



Text & pictures - Oliver Reschreiter  
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**A**mid the fervor surrounding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Tajikistan stands out as a particularly staunch supporter within broader Central Asia. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has endorsed the BRI, seeing it as crucial for modernizing infrastructure and attracting foreign investment. One such significant project under the BRI is the rehabilitation of the Kulma-Khorog-Dushanbe highway, connecting Tajikistan and China via the Kulma Pass border crossing, Khorog, and Dushanbe. This highway, long neglected since the Soviet Union's collapse, is the only road connecting western Tajikistan and the eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO).

The redevelopment of this key route promises notable advancements in transportation connectivity between China, the GBAO, and Tajikistan and in theory will provide much needed repair work to the highway. Yet, beneath these promises of greater connectivity, questions remain about the actual local benefits the project will deliver.

**N**umbering approximately 300,000 today, the Pamiri people are an Iranian ethnic group indigenous to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO) in eastern Tajikistan. Though ethnic Tajiks also trace their origins to Iranian tribes, the Pamiri community, as the indigenous people of GBAO, have their own distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural identity. The term "Pamiri" emerged in the mid-20th century, referring to a group of people who speak one of several eastern Iranian languages, collectively known as Pamiri languages. Unlike their Tajik counterparts, the Pamiri people are Ismaili

muslims, followers of the Nizari Ismaili Shia branch of Islam, with Aga Khan IV serving as their spiritual leader.

This distinct identity has historically set the Pamiris apart, both culturally and politically, leading to tensions with the central government. In the midst of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Lal'i Badakhshan political party would emerge during the waning months of the Soviet Union, formed with the purpose of advocating for and protecting Pamiri rights. Amid Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s, Lal'i Badakhshan and the Pamiris, allied with





the United Tajik Opposition, faced severe reprisals from pro-government factions, notably the Popular Front. This conflict escalated into a brutal confrontation, compounded by an economic blockade that further isolated the Pamiri region, exacerbating their plight. In response, a significant number of Pamiris who had been residing in western Tajikistan sought refuge in the GBAO, only to face targeted ethnic violence from the Popular Front along the way. Survivors of these events shared their harrowing accounts, solidifying the GBAO's status as a resilient bastion of opposition against the central Tajik government.

Following the end of Tajikistan's civil war in 1997, Emomali Rahmon's government claimed victory but faced significant challenges due to national fragmentation. By the mid-2000s, Rahmon consolidated authoritarian rule by neutralizing former adversaries and extending his authority across most of Tajikistan. However, despite these efforts, resistance persisted in the GBAO, which still bore the scars of war and ethnic cleansing. Amidst continuing efforts by the Pamiri people to pursue their own agency within their own region, Rahmon has pursued a hostile agenda, inten-



tionally neglecting the region while prioritizing development in Dushanbe and his native Danghara region. Since the civil war's end, the central Tajik government has conducted several 'security operations' in the GBAO, targeting dissent through the targeted killings of community leaders. The most recent crackdown in May of 2022, the bloodiest since the civil war, resulted in dozens of deaths and imprisonment of hundreds of Pamiris and the killing of local political leader Muhammadboqir Muhammadboqirov. Due to the information and internet blackout instituted however, the true death toll and events of May 2022 remain uncertain. However, what is known is that since the end of Tajikistan's Civil War, all demonstrations and attempts by the Pamiri people to advocate for their own autonomy have been unsuccessful, always ending in death and imprisonment by the Tajik government.

Rahmon himself has made no secret of his role in these crackdowns saying he person-

*“For the Pamiris, the prospects of benefiting from trade and development are dim.”*

ally authorized the security operation against ‘terrorist elements’. It is perhaps no coincidence that mere months later, construction work would begin on the highway rehabilitation project led by China’s Road and Bridge Corporation under the BRI.

For both Tajik and Chinese authorities, the suppression of dissent in the GBAO will be seen as a positive development. For China, suppressing dissent in the region enables the advancement of its infrastructure projects, thereby deepening Tajikistan’s integration within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Furthermore, the absence of visible dissent (anti-government demonstrations) and stability in Tajikistan is considered crucial from China’s security perspective, as it reinforces what they see as regional stability. For Rahmon, the rehabilitation of the highway will allow the central government to further solidify control in the GBAO, allowing ease of access for government forces deeper into the mountain-

ous region. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, it will also allow Rahmon to further control and profit from Tajikistan’s lucrative and illicit opium trade between Afghanistan and Europe.

**F**or the Pamiris, the prospects of benefiting from trade and development are dim. Rather, it is likely the populace will continue to struggle with intensified government repression. Chinese involvement in the region is poised to solidify Rahmon’s grip on power rather than bring about tangible benefits for the Pamiris. The Tajik central government will likely prioritize keeping visible dissent in the GBAO managed as a means to keeping the door to China’s investments open. Rahmon’s recent visit to the GBAO’s regional capital of Khorog in August 2023 should not be mistaken for a conciliatory gesture; rather, it underscores the entrenched power dynamics that further oppress an already marginalized populace. 

## About Oliver Reschreiter



*Oliver is a current Masters student at the University of Helsinki studying Russian, Eurasian, Eastern European Studies. He completed his Bachelors in European Studies with a thesis on Azerbaijani and EU energy diplomacy. His regional interests lie in South Caucasian and Central Asian affairs, with a particular focus on energy affairs, trade, and development. Outside his studies, he frequently travels between the regions and is a particularly big fan of Plov and Khachapuri.*