

10 Public Construction and Nation-Building in Tajikistan^{1,2}

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Introduction

The present chapter takes as a case study the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan, to illustrate how ruling elites can exploit a large hydraulic infrastructure to propagate their own idea of the nation and gain legitimacy. Conceived by the Soviet administration in the 1960s, the Rogun Dam is a colossal and highly controversial hydroelectric dam under construction on the Vakhsh River.³ With its 335-meter of planned height, the dam will be (once and if it will be finished) the tallest in the world, following the path set by the ‘Dushanbe Flagpole’, the world’s tallest flagpole inaugurated by the Tajik government in 2011 as a symbol of statehood and national pride (BBC Monitoring 2011b). As it will be discussed in the following, the government of Tajikistan (GoT) has heavily charged the Rogun Dam with symbolic meanings, portraying it as an existential matter and placing it at the centre of a rhetorical production that links the fate of the dam with that of the Tajik nation, creating what can be defined a ‘Rogun ideology’. The strong symbolic value attached to the Rogun Dam can arguably be the key to explaining and understanding the GoT’s insistence to realise a costly and out-dated project, one that has also led to the deterioration of Tajik relations with neighbouring Uzbekistan.

Consequently, this study will also outline how the processes of nation-building and dam-building can overlap, since a large dam can be portrayed as a central element in the creation of a national identity. Indeed, thanks to their sheer size and to their ability to tame rivers and dominate nature, major dams⁴ not only physically

1 This chapter is a revised version of an article earlier published in *Nationalities Papers* (Menga 2014a).

2 This work was also supported by Tallinn University within the framework of a FP7/Marie Curie ITN action (Project number PITN-GA-2012–316825).

3 One of the main tributaries of the Amu Darya river, the largest river of Central Asia.

4 The International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) defines a major dam as a dam with a height of 150-meter or more from the foundation, a reservoir storage capacity of at least 25 cubic kilometres and an electrical generation capacity of at least 1000 megawatt. There are more than 300 dams of this category worldwide (Dorcey 1997: 19).

alter the landscape but also shape perceptions and ideas. Drawing on the concepts of hydraulic society and hydraulic despotism (which denote how political elites might increase their grip on power by building and managing hydraulic infrastructures such as dams and networks of canals) (Wittfogel 1957), this study will focus on what Karl August Wittfogel would have defined ‘hydraulic regimes’, i.e. those member of the political and (to a minor extent) commercial elite that might increase their grip on power by building and managing hydraulic infrastructures such as dams and network of canals. Within this category, the focus is further narrowed down to the ways in which the Rogun Dam has been framed in the public discourses disseminated both within and outside the nation. This dual dimension, the national and the international, seems relevant to a project that will have an impact not only on Tajikistan but also on its neighbours, and in particular on Uzbekistan, which is the downstream country in the river basin in which the dam is being built. Therefore, while on the one hand the dam is presented to the people of Tajikistan as a national symbol, on the other hand it is also used to epitomise the assertion of Tajik sovereignty against a foreign rival that wants to impede its realisation.

With all the above in mind, the sources used for this research consist of both official – such as speeches, statements and publicly available government documents – and non-official – such as declarations reported by news agencies and national newspapers – documents. The period under scrutiny starts in January 2005 (when the project was officially restarted by the Tajik government) and ends in June 2014. Data have been collected using a news aggregator, Lexis-Nexis Academic, to analyse the translated transcripts of the flagship news program ‘Akhbor’ provided by the BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit along with the archives of the *Avesta* and *Khovar* news agencies.

The chapter first presents the Rogun Dam, providing an overview of the project and of its expected environmental and political impact. Subsequently, the chapter outlines and analyses the various strategies adopted by the GoT to portray the dam as a matter of national pride and as a vital achievement for Tajikistan.

The Rogun Dam

The Rogun Dam has been conceived as a structure with the dual purpose of storing water for irrigation purposes and of producing electricity. With its 335-meter high structure and a total reservoir volume of 13.3 km³ (Schmidt 2007), the Rogun Dam would be the tallest in the world, and the twentieth for its electricity production (ICOLD n.d.). The project was originally devised by the Soviet Union in the 1960s, and its construction began in 1982. Yet, in 1991, with the breakdown of the Soviet Union and a deteriorating domestic setting for independent Tajikistan, the construction of the Rogun Dam was interrupted. To make matters worse, a devastating flash-flood washed away a large part of the completed work two years later, in 1993, the year in which the first unit should have started to produce electricity (Yerofeyeva 2002).

Yet, in spite of these difficulties, the Rogun Dam has started its second life after Tajikistan's independence, and the newly-born Tajik government and its president Emomali Rahmon repeatedly attempted to resuscitate the project. Eventually, in 2005 the Russian Aluminium Company (RusAl) pledged US\$ 560 million (Interfax News Agency 2005), and construction works at the Rogun site resumed. While the Russians eventually abandoned the project in 2007, the Tajik government allocated resources from the state budget and from its own citizens through an Initial Public Offering, thus keeping the project alive. Nevertheless, in 2012, the government interrupted the construction works (Trend News Agency 2012) to await the results of two feasibility studies carried out by the World Bank (WB) (The World Bank n.d.a) in reaction to the reiterated requests of the Uzbek government, that in the previous years had raised concerns about the seismicity of the Rogun site and a diminished amount of water flowing downstream. While the WB released the long-awaited study in 2014 stating that it is clear that the Rogun Dam will not threaten regional security (The World Bank 2014), as of December 2014 construction works have not yet restarted, although the Tajik government reiterated its commitment to realise the project in June 2014 (Asia-Plus 2014).

Besides its potential catastrophic impact in case of an earthquake,⁵ the Rogun Dam – with its consistent production of hydroelectricity – would partially heal Tajikistan's ramshackle energy sector (The World Bank 2012). Indeed, at present, the country suffers from recurrent energy crises due to its lack of fossil resources and a scarce electricity production. This is combined with Tajikistan's difficult relationship with its key provider of natural gas, Uzbekistan, that tends to impose high purchase prices and uncompromising payment deadlines that result in the cut of gas supplies (Menga 2014b). The 3,600 MW of electricity generated by the Rogun Dam would nearly double the current production of 4,000 MW (The World Bank n.d.b), possibly allowing the country to achieve energy independence. As Emomali Rahmon observed, 'Tajikistan's future development and worthy living standards of the Tajik nation depend on achieving the country's energy independence. And the Roghun [*sic*] hydroelectric power station is a decisive and important step towards achieving the country's energy independence' (BBC Monitoring 2010c).

It is also worth mentioning that Tajikistan – along with the other Central Asian countries – is not at the forefront in the promotion and application of the general principles of accountability and good governance. The country can be defined as a neopatrimonial regime, whose apparent democratic structure is relying on clientelism, corruption, and personalistic rule to guarantee continuity in

5 For instance, the Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, an Uzbek political party and environmental movement that over the years has been particularly vocal about the catastrophic impacts of an earthquake in the Rogun area, tend to link the Rogun Dam with the Vajont dam disaster in Italy, which in 1963 collapsed and caused a tsunami following a massive landslide (The Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan 2011).

power (Sehring 2009, Isaacs 2014). Furthermore, it should also be noted that the hydropower sector is frequently linked with corruption, and by many is actually classified as the most corrupted industrial sector (McCully 2001, Pearce 2007). Therefore, besides the symbolic value of the dam stemming from a fascination of scale and even to a certain *folie de grandeur*, the less idealistic dimension related to corruption and to the redistribution of wealth among the elite cannot be completely overlooked.

At the political level the dam can have an even greater impact. The collapse of the Soviet Union implied that Communism was no longer providing a basis for legitimacy to national governments, and this led former Communist leaders to take a nationalist turn to enhance the perceived legitimacy of their authority (Gleason 1997, Mellon 2010). The symbolism and prestige that can be attached to the world's tallest dam can be used by the Tajik government to disseminate a specific rhetoric aimed at getting legitimation, gaining consensus and diverting attention from more pressing matters.⁶ Even more so, considering that not long ago – in 1992–1997 – a civil war undermined the internal stability of the country weakening the authority and legitimacy of the central government, and heightening clan divisions (Akiner 2001).

And thus, while similar results in terms of electricity production could be obtained by building several smaller dams with smaller – and consequently less internationally controversial – reservoirs (Wegerich et al. 2007), their symbolic effect could not match that of the largest dam of Central Asia (and also tallest dam in the world). The Tajik government has been, and still is, engaged in the construction of other smaller hydroelectric dams, such as the less iconic Sangtuda I dam, a 670 MW hydroelectric power plant also on the Vakhsh River. Interestingly, while this project – realised thanks to a Russian investment of roughly US\$ 720 million – represents the largest foreign direct investment project in Tajikistan to date (Brill Olcott 2012), its construction has not been framed as a nationally cohesive project, and it has actually hardly been included in the public discourse both at the national and especially at the international level.

Creation of the Rogun Ideology

The GoT started disseminating the Rogun ideology after the two exceptionally cold winters that hit Central Asia in 2007–2008 and in 2008–2009, and that engendered a widespread energy crisis in Tajikistan and in Kyrgyzstan, one that was further aggravated by the Kazak and Uzbek withdrawal from the Central Asia Power System (CAPS), officially because of fear of instability in the transmission lines (The World Bank 2012). In those winter months, many Tajik citizens did not have access to electricity and heating, and the situation in the country hit

⁶ Symbolism and the creation of ideologies play a relevant role in Central Asian politics, as it was, for instance, recently illustrated by Polese and Horak (2015) in their analysis of internal politics in Turkmenistan.

the world headlines⁷ (BBC Monitoring 2008). In this moment of crisis, Rahmon decided that it was the right time to convince his citizens of the value of the Rogun Dam, and he thus started to recurrently discuss this issue in his addresses to the nation. As it was observed by Molle, Mollinga and Wester (2009: 264), a ‘classical means of furthering projects is to propose them under the umbrella of politically charged and overriding meta-justifications [. . .] Such meta-justifications typically include national goals or priorities such as food self-sufficiency, national security, ‘modernisation’, or the fight against poverty’.

In line with this, the recurring elements of the internal Rogun rhetoric include the portrayal of the dam as a source of light, heat and progress, a vital and existential issue, and as the only viable solution to solve the country’s energy problems. The tools used to propagate this narrative include national TV and radio and the main state-owned news agencies, which ensure that the project has a constant visibility by duly reporting official statements and declarations on the Rogun Dam. Among the various proponents of the project, the Tajik president has been largely the more active, and his speeches – that often include a reference to the dam – have been at times entirely focused on emphasising the importance of its construction for the glory of the Tajik nation.

This was to a certain extent the case in his state-of-the nation address in 2006 (Rahmon 2006) and particularly in that of 2009, which was broadcast on Tajik Television First Channel:

I want to express my full confidence that with the construction of the Roghun [*sic*] hydroelectric power station we will ensure prosperity for present and future Tajikistan, as well as a happy life for our children and grandchildren. This is because Roghun is a source of endless light which will turn Tajikistan into an ever-shining star in the ancient East! Roghun is prosperity and affluence for present and future Tajikistan, it is unprecedented development for industry and agriculture, and most importantly, it is 24-hour light and heat in every home for our people! This is both a big responsibility or great pride and honour for our generation! A day will come soon when the flag of sovereign Tajikistan and the gold crown of Tajiks’ state will shine with new power in the gleam of Roghun’s light. As a leader elected by you, I am obliged to always care about and serve you.

(Rahmon 2010)

Rahmon presented the dam as a ‘national idea’, something that will symbolise the pride of the Tajik nation both for the Tajiks living in Tajikistan and, ideally, for those living abroad. This last aspect is noteworthy, since due to the nationalities policies carried out by the Soviet Union, more than half of the Tajik population

7 Significantly, when Ukmasho Shirinbekov (the chief engineer of the Rogun project since 2000) was showcasing the project to potential international funders, he apologised for not being able to offer tea, since the town had no electricity to boil the water (US Embassy in Dushanbe 2007).

was left outside of Tajikistan (in large part in the Uzbek cities of Samarkand and Bukhara)⁸ when the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic was created in 1929 (Bergne 2007).

The Tajik president also stressed the inevitability of building the dam if Tajikistan is to solve its energy problems. In 2009, while he was appealing on his citizens to buy shares of the Rogun Joint Stock Company, Rahmon noted that:

Every dignified citizen of Tajikistan is ready to make a worthy contribution to the construction of the Roghun hydroelectric power station because everybody knows that without construction and putting into operation this important energy facility it is impossible to prevent electricity shortage and to ensure further socioeconomic development of the country.

(BBC Monitoring 2009a)

During the public sale of the shares of the Rogun Dam (which was launched in January 2010), the government emphasised the inevitability and existential nature of the dam to convince the Tajik citizens to sacrifice part of their salary to support the project (BBC Monitoring 2010a). Such unusual request – the only other recent case in which citizens were invited to subsidise the construction of a major dam is that of the Grand Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia – was accompanied by frequent TV reports on the progress of the sale, to arguably further involve the population and persuade them to make this patriotic effort. Rahmon made it clear that the shares could be bought only by Tajik nationals, so that the dam could remain entirely Tajik, even mentioning his refusal to sell an alleged 70 per cent to some unspecified foreign investors⁹ (BBC Monitoring 2009c). This later point seems questionable, since the government had been (and still is) actively involved in attracting foreign funding. Indeed, on one occasion, during a speech broadcast on Tajik Television First Channel, the Tajik president noted that ‘by attracting foreign investments, we will certainly build the Roghun power plant which is the only way for the Tajik nation to weather current problems’ (BBC Monitoring

8 When the Soviet Union started to create the Central Asian SSRs (Soviet Socialist Republic), Uzbekistan and Tajikistan corresponded respectively to the Uzbek SSR and the Tajik Autonomous SSR (the Autonomous SSRs were administrative units of a lower status than the SSRs), the latter being part of the larger Uzbek SSR. In 1929, the Tajik Autonomous SSR was transformed to a full-fledged SSR, and its territory was administratively separate from that of the Uzbek SSR. However, the cities of Samarkand and Bukhara remained in the Uzbek SSR, thus originating the dispute on whether the cities should belong to Uzbekistan or to Tajikistan.

9 The insistence on the national nature of large hydraulic infrastructures so to boost patriotism, can also be observed in the other upstream country of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, which is similarly trying to revamp a large abandoned Soviet project, the Kambarata I dam. For instance, in 2008, some members of the Kyrgyz Parliament announced that they were planning to ask the president to formerly label Kambarata an all-nation project, ‘so that people would have spirit and pride in the dam’ (AKIpress 2008). On that occasion, the members of parliament also declared that they were going to contribute to the project with a one-off payment from their salary, another common aspect with the Tajik project.

Central Asia Unit, 2009b). It can therefore be argued that the narrative on the national ownership of the dam has been used only intermittently, and only when it was needed, namely during the months in which the sale took place. One year later, the sale, that in the meantime had attracted international criticism for its negative impact on the Tajik economy (IMF 2010), was interrupted by the government, which as a result gathered only a modest amount (less than US\$ 200 million) (Ergasheva 2011), corresponding to a fraction of the total required (over US\$ 2 billion).

The end of the public sale in 2010, along with the above-mentioned interruption of the construction of the dam in 2012, did not change the nature of the rhetorical discourse disseminated by the Tajik president, which generally tends to become more frequent during the cold winters and the consequent shortage of electricity. In January 2014, although construction works were still halted due to the feasibility studies being carried out by the World Bank, Ramon declared that the government is ‘continuing to build the Roghun hydro-electric power station, which is necessary to us as air’ (BBC Monitoring 2014). The emphasis is again placed on the existential significance of the Rogun Dam: with it, the Tajik nation will strive, without it, it will perish. And following this reasoning, those who want to hinder the realisation of this project, do not want to let the Tajik nation live. For this reason the Rogun Dam has also acquired an international dimension, and the creation of the Rogun ideology at the domestic level has been often linked to foreign policy,¹⁰ and in particular to issues related to the principle of national self-determination and to the historical rivalry with Uzbekistan, as it will be illustrated in the next section.

The International Rogun Discourse

If on the one hand the Uzbek disapproval successfully turned the Rogun Dam into an internationally controversial matter, on the other hand it had the unplanned effect of intensifying the efforts of the Tajik government aimed at building it, as an assertion of its ownership of the water flowing within the country (BBC Monitoring 2011a). It is worth noting that Rahmon and his ministers are in this regard stretching some interpretations of international water law – which is in itself a fuzzy domain – to their advantage. Traditionally, the use of international rivers has been guided by four, universally recognised, principles: i) the Harmon doctrine or absolute territorial sovereignty; ii) absolute territorial integrity; iii) the community theory; and iv) limited territorial sovereignty or equitable utilisation theory (LeMarquand 1977: 12–13). While the Harmon doctrine – which states that a country is absolutely sovereign over the portion of an international water-course within its borders – has now lost relevance as a principle of international water law (Wolf 1999), the Tajik government still insists on this point, claiming

10 See for instance Mayall (1990), for an analysis of how nationalism is related to foreign policy and international relations.

full ownership of its water. According to this principle, the country would be free to divert all of the water from an international watercourse, leaving none for downstream states' (McCaffrey 1996: 549).

Additionally, and going beyond issues related to the politics of natural resources, the building of the Rogun Dam appears – at least in the political discourses of the government – as an assertion of power over Uzbekistan. Uzbeks and Tajiks are the two main sedentary civilisations of Central Asia, and they do share a common culture and traditions, along with a rivalry born out of the geographical delimitations imposed by the Soviet Union in the 1920s (Bergne 2007). As Heathershaw and Herzig (2013) observed, Tajikistan is concerned about preserving its integrity as a nation, and this contributed to the development of Tajik nationalism. And the defence of the integrity of the Tajik nation through a cohesive and iconic infrastructure such as the Rogun Dam is also a recurring element in the discourse disseminated by the Tajik government. In this regard, an illustrative example is that of an open letter sent in 2010 by Akil Akilov, the then Prime Minister of Tajikistan, to Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan. In his letter, Akilov (2010) severely criticised Uzbekistan and its unreasonable views on the Rogun Dam. As a reaction, the Uzbeks cut in half – from 28,000 cubic metres of natural gas per hour to 15,000 cubic metres – their gas supplies to Tajikistan (Agence France Press 2010). Following these events, the Tajik state-owned press observed that Uzbek criticisms have no other effect than uniting the 'people of Tajikistan in the idea of building this vitally important hydropower plant' (BBC Monitoring 2010b).

While the dispute with Uzbekistan has a relevance predominantly at the regional level, there is a further and more international dimension of the Rogun discourse that overlaps with the necessity to normalise the construction of the dam so to mobilise much-needed foreign financial resources. It seems that the Tajik government is making an effort to reposition itself as a politically stable and environmentally responsible country,¹¹ arguably to emancipate itself from the Soviet legacy that made Central Asia an environmentally degraded region. As Feshbach and Friendly noted (1992: 1), '[w]hen historians finally conduct an autopsy on the Soviet Union and Soviet Communism, they may reach the verdict of death by ecocide'.¹²

And thus, starting in 2005, the Tajik government has begun to construct and disseminate the image of Tajikistan as a 'water country' at the forefront in encouraging water cooperation. This has been done by primarily targeting the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) through speeches that promote the Rogun Dam as a regionally beneficial project (see for instance Nazarov 2005; Aslov

11 For an overview of the ways in which transition countries develop their 'country brand' refer to Szondi (2007).

12 Such negative image was further reinforced at the international level by the desiccation of the Aral Sea, one of the worst environmental disasters in history that drew the world's attention to Central Asia perhaps more than anything else (Ferguson 2003).

2007; Rahmon 2008, 2009; Zarifi 2012; Akilov 2013). During the last decade, Tajikistan successfully launched several UN-backed initiatives in the field of water, such as declaring 2005–2015 the ‘International Decade for Action Water for Life’ and 2013 as the ‘International Year of Water Cooperation’. Additionally, the government organises (generally on a biennial basis) a large international conference on water cooperation in its capital, Dushanbe, during which the government presents its views on water management and tries to legitimise its right to develop its hydroelectric potential.

Further initiatives to reinforce this country-branding process include targeting the European institutions and other international organisations by publishing self-funded volumes and magazines. This was for instance the case in 2012, when *The European Times*, a media agency that specialises in promotional magazines, published a 100-pages volume on Tajikistan that was distributed in the European Union Parliament in Brussels (The European Times 2012). Likewise, as it was documented by the website Eurasianet.org, the Tajik government hired a Washington-based lobbying firm to promote the Rogun Dam at the US Congress, and to ‘push back at negative perceptions of Tajikistan perpetuated by neighbouring rival Uzbekistan’ (Trilling 2014). As it was unveiled by the US Department of Justice under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, the lobbying firm Fabiani & Company distributed a document titled ‘A Statement to Educate the Public on the Importance of the Rogun Dam’, in which the positive effects of the dam were largely emphasised (US Department of Justice 2013).

Another significant example is that of Struan Stevenson, a former Member of the European Parliament (MEP) who gained visibility (and generated controversies) for his active support of the Rogun Dam around European Institutions and international organisations (see for instance Stevenson 2011 and 2012). Stevenson’s stance in favour of the Rogun Dam received great visibility in the Tajik media, and his opinions have been used to add credibility and back the Rogun discourse held by the Tajik government at the internal level. The two levels, the domestic and the international, thus work together to support the representation of the Rogun Dam as a national symbol that embodies Tajikistan and its realisation as a nation.

Conclusion

The Rogun Dam, from its inception until today, has had two distinct political and strategic dimensions, before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the Soviets, Rogun was certainly a significant project, but still, it was envisioned only as part of a wider hydraulic mission. For Tajikistan, Rogun has become the centrepiece of its nation-building process, coming to symbolise – at least in the views of its government – patriotism and a national identity. And so, while the dam is far from completion, the discursive construction put in place by the Tajik government to portray it as a national symbol seems, at present, as the most concrete element in the history of the project. Rahmon and his entourage exploited the dam to legitimise their own hold on power and propagate a specific idea of

the nation, one in which Tajikistan asserts its interests as a sovereign country and through the realisation of a mega-structure. While the Tajik president tends to declare that the achievement of 'energy independence is the primary goal of Tajikistan's domestic policy' (Interfax News Agency 2011), the meaning of the Rogun Dam goes beyond its production of hydroelectricity. Like other similar infrastructures that became the end in themselves, rather than the means to an end (Molle et al. 2009), Rogun represents Rahmon's ambitions of building a national identity through a mega-structure. The bond between the Tajik president and his pet project is such that the two appear to share a common fate: if Tajikistan fails in realising the Rogun Dam, Rahmon would also have failed in disseminating his national idea.

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