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The Historical Formation, Ethnodemographic Characteristics, and Geopolitical Significance of the Sokh Enclave

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Abstract: This article analyzes the historical formation and geopolitical significance of the Sokh enclave. During the study, it is highlighted that the Sokh region emerged as an enclave as a result of the national-territorial delimitation policy during the Soviet era, and its impact on border relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is examined. The article substantiates the Sokh region's important role in geopolitical processes in Central Asia and emphasizes that interstate cooperation and an integrative approach are crucial in resolving problems associated with enclave territories.

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1. Introduction

The Sokh region is considered one of the most unique territories of the Fergana Valley due to its distinctive nature, mountainous landscapes, and favorable climate. Although this territory is part of Uzbekistan, geographically it is an exclave surrounded by the territory of Kyrgyzstan. For this reason, Sokh has continued to face a number of problems related to transportation, border issues, and freedom of movement up to the present day [1]. In particular, the periodic closure of borders, the strengthening of controls, and various transboundary issues have had a significant impact on the lives of the local population. At the same time, Sokh is regarded as one of the important regions of Central Asia not only geographically but also geopolitically. This is because the region possesses strategic importance as an area where the interests of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan intersect. The artificial borders formed as a result of the national-territorial delimitation policy implemented during the Soviet period continue to cause certain territorial disputes and debates to this day. Therefore, the Sokh region is considered one of the important research objects in studying the political, economic, and ethnic relations of the region [2].

2. Materials and Methods

In the process of preparing this article, extensive use was made of the scientific works, monographs, articles, statistical data, and encyclopedic sources of both local and foreign scholars who conducted research on enclave and exclave territories. In particular, the scientific views of researchers such as Nick Megoran, Evgeny Vinokurov, and Rashid Gabdulhakov regarding enclave territories in the Fergana Valley were analyzed. In addition, scientific articles related to border problems, ethnodemographic processes, and the geopolitical situation in Central Asia were also studied [3].

During the research process, the methods of historicism, comparative analysis, geopolitical approach, and systematic analysis were applied. In particular, the historical formation, geographical location, ethnic composition, and transboundary problems of the Sokh region were analyzed from a socio-political perspective. At the same time, the present-day geopolitical significance of Sokh was highlighted on the basis of statistical data, historical maps, and scientific theories related to the region. The study also analyzed, on the basis of scientific sources, the factors influencing the emergence and development of enclave territories, as well as their impact on relations among the states of Central Asia [4].

3. Results and Discussion

Sokh is a foothill region located in the southern part of the Fergana Valley and surrounded by the Batken Region of the Kyrgyzstan. Administratively, it is a separate district within the Fergana Region. Its area is 220.7 square kilometers, and as of January 1, 2025, its population consisted of 86,094 people. Its foreign trade turnover amounted to 12.8 million US dollars in 2024. This accounted for only 0.6 percent of the total regional indicator. Moreover, production is limited, and the region remains economically highly dependent on the mainland state [5]. In addition, the territory possesses certain economic and political characteristics. Since enclave territories are geographically located within another state, they occupy an important position from a geographical point of view. In particular, the dispersion of populations in such enclave and exclave territories plays a significant role in economic and ethnic aspects.

The Central Asia region includes the states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. For a long period, this area has been regarded as one of the regions where various conflicts and tensions have been observed. One of the main reasons for this was that the policy of national-territorial delimitation carried out during the former Soviet rule did not sufficiently take into account the historical economic integrity of the territories. As a result, the artificially created borders later gave rise to numerous border and territorial problems. According to the academician Vasily Vladimirovich Bartold, in Central Asia, the commonality formed on the basis of a unified economic and хозяйственный system of the region is more significant than national differences [6]. Consequently, enclave territories began to emerge in the region due to the division of territories. In this process, ethnic, religious, social, and economic relations were not sufficiently considered during the partition, and therefore transboundary problems continue to remain an important issue to this day.

The Sokh exclave is the largest fully enclosed enclave in the Fergana Valley. The term "Sokh" in the Sogdian language means "beautiful" or "pleasant." This territory is part of Uzbekistan and is located in the northern part of the Alay mountain range and the western area of the Katran Mountains. The enclave is completely surrounded by the Kadamjay and Batken districts of Kyrgyzstan. The territory is situated along the upper and middle course of the Sokh River, stretching nearly 40 kilometers from north to south and from 2 to 12 kilometers from west to east. Maps dating back to the 1950s depicted the Sokh territory as directly connected to Uzbekistan. However, after the northern part of Sokh was transferred to the Kyrgyz SSR by Moscow in 1955, the territory became separated from the mainland state and took the form of an enclave [7]. For this reason, the separation of the Sokh region from other territories, particularly by mountainous barriers, has contributed to socio-political processes and territorial conflicts within the region.

According to historical maps, until the middle of the twentieth century the Sokh territory was directly connected with Uzbekistan. However, as a result of territorial changes carried out by the Soviet government in 1955, the northern part of Sokh was transferred to the Kyrgyz SSR, and thus the territory became separated from the mainland

state and turned into an enclave. This separation negatively affected the economic and social development of the region for many years. Although the geographical isolation of Sokh created problems related to infrastructure and economic development in the region, important programs aimed at the development of the territory have been implemented in recent years [8]. In particular, as a result of the comprehensive socio-economic development program designed for 2020–2021, significant growth was observed in industrial production, the service sector, and the volume of investments. According to researchers, the Sokh region possesses sufficient economic and natural potential, and through its effective use, the territory could be transformed into one of the important economic centers of the Fergana Valley [9]. In this regard, it can be said that studies conducted by specialists have shown that the development of the enclave territory has progressed with difficulty because its borders are separated by mountainous terrain.

As is known, Sokh is considered an exclave for Uzbeks and an enclave region for the Kyrgyz. From this perspective, it can be observed that geopolitical issues have at times contributed to ethnic tensions between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz peoples. In addition, difficulties related to the movement of the population across the border have occasionally led to various conflicts, which in turn has resulted in the strengthening of border controls [10].

According to the scholar, national differences did not play a major role in the political life of Central Asia. On the contrary, the artificial political and administrative division of the region, which had historically and naturally functioned as an integrated space, created problems related to the use of water, land, flora and fauna, as well as natural resources. In particular, this situation can clearly be observed in enclave and exclave territories formed within the Fergana Valley, such as Sokh, Shohimardon, Vorukh, Sarvak, Chongara, Jangail, and Western Qalacha [11]. In recent years, relations between Uzbekistan and neighboring states have improved, and problems concerning borders, water resources, and transportation have gradually begun to be resolved. In particular, under the initiative of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, border checkpoints were reopened and interstate cooperation was strengthened. As a result, certain enclave-related issues between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also found solutions. One such example is the Barak enclave, whose issue was resolved in 2018 through a territorial exchange agreement between the two states. The Sokh enclave is one of the largest exclaves in the region and, although it belongs to the territory of Uzbekistan, it is completely surrounded by Kyrgyzstan. This situation creates various difficulties for the local population in matters related to transportation, trade, freedom of movement, and security. During certain periods, the closure of borders or the strengthening of border controls has negatively affected the lives of residents. The conflict related to power transmission lines in the Sokh region in 2013 also demonstrated how sensitive the situation in the area remains [12].

Up to the present day, two different perspectives have existed among the population of the Sokh region. The first is related to the influence of the ethnic identity of the Uzbek population, while the second concerns the importance and sensitivity of border issues. Even today, Sokh is characterized by very harsh winters and cool summers, which provide a pleasant environment for the local people. Due to these climatic conditions and seasonal variations, the living conditions of the population are considered relatively favorable.

The states of Central Asia still face a number of pressing issues, including water distribution, transboundary crime, environmental problems, poverty, and ethnic conflicts. In particular, the enclave and exclave territories of the Fergana Valley represent one manifestation of the region's complex geopolitical situation. Organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Eurasian Economic Union serve to promote regional cooperation. However, according to experts, the states of Central Asia have not yet fully formed into a unified political and economic space [13]. This is largely because the territory, which historically functioned as a single

economic region, was divided by artificial borders, thereby creating interstate problems. At the same time, efforts are also being made to strengthen integration processes among the countries of the region.

The author particularly emphasizes that the population of Sokh mainly consists of Tajiks. According to the research, more than 99 percent of the region's population is made up of Tajiks. The population speaks the Tajik language, and education in schools is also conducted in Tajik. Even the local newspaper, "Sadoi Sokh," is published in Tajik. For this reason, nearly 30 percent of the borders between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are still considered disputed territories today. This situation frequently causes tensions and conflicts in border areas [14].

Kyrgyzstan has a 1,300-kilometer border with Uzbekistan and a 990-kilometer border with Tajikistan, and some of the largest exclaves in Central Asia are located within its territory. Among them, the Sokh exclave belonging to Uzbekistan was considered the largest, covering an area of 238 km², while the Vorukh exclave of Tajikistan occupied 97 km². In the regions adjacent to the Fergana Valley, nearly one quarter of Uzbekistan's population, one third of Tajikistan's population, and almost half of Kyrgyzstan's population resided. Therefore, the division of territories into enclave regions has become a major geopolitical and border-related problem in the region.

Researchers emphasize that during the Soviet period the borders between the republics of Central Asia were not clearly and fully defined. The use of resources such as land and water was also organized in an irregular and interdependent manner. As a result, after independence, various disputes and conflicts emerged in enclave territories such as Sokh and Vorukh. In addition, the fact that borders were depicted differently on certain maps has continued to complicate territorial issues up to the present day [15].

The conflict that occurred in Sokh in 2013 is also highlighted. This incident arose as a result of tensions between Kyrgyz border guards and the local population. Following the conflict, border checkpoints were temporarily closed, railway transportation was suspended, and tensions in relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan intensified. Some Kyrgyz politicians even proposed the construction of a concrete wall around Sokh. The region's economy is mainly based on agriculture, while a large proportion of young people migrate to Russia in search of employment. One of the main causes of such problems is the uneven distribution of the population, since Sokh is largely mountainous, which creates difficulties in settlement patterns. In particular, many residents live close to mountainous areas, where frequent rains and floods during winter make living conditions relatively difficult.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence and present condition of the enclaves and exclaves formed in Central Asia were largely shaped by the national-territorial delimitation policy of the former USSR. During the Soviet period, ethnic, geographical, and economic factors were not fully taken into account in the process of administratively dividing territories, which later resulted in transboundary problems, territorial disputes, and geopolitical tensions that continue to exist today. In particular, the Sokh region stands out as one of the most complex exclave territories in Central Asia. Ethnic diversity, historical settlement patterns, and political factors played an important role in the formation of Sokh. Although certain problems related to transportation, borders, and freedom of movement still remain in the region today, the strengthening of interstate cooperation in recent years has created opportunities for the gradual resolution of these issues.

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