«One of the key problems of state-sponsored urban projects in Uzbekistan is that there is little understanding of the relevance of the projects for the population», – notes Dilmira Matyakubova, independent researcher and specialist in urban planning, in her special article for CABAR.asia.

- Today Uzbek authorities are committed to branding a new image for the capital through repositioning it as a state that is different from the previous authoritarian rule, which significantly damaged the reputation of the country;
- The realization of such a large project as «Tashkent city», in turn, is involving the demolition of public buildings and residential structures in the old town area of Tashkent;
- The process of demolition and relocation of residents in the territory has started before the lawful date of six months, which results in non-compliance of legislative norms, apart from the residents’ grievances;
- There is a real danger to historically significant places through “beautification” of them for the sake of tourism;
- The process of urban-planning does not involve civil engagement to allow population to express their opinions and it lacks the considerations of public needs.
The practice of re-branding capital cities by leaders in order to demonstrate their influence is observed throughout Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan’s former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev had branded his capital, Astana, which now named after himself, as «Nursultan». In Turkmenistan, Turkmenbashi (first president of Turkmenistan) had put enormous efforts to eternalize his name in Ashgabat through large-scale constructions to illustrate a cult of personality. Although Uzbekistan’s first president did not express a desire for a cult of personality in capital’s physical spaces, he had ensured to leave a legacy of an iron-fist leader of a strong personality that later materialized in forms of monuments.

There is an argument that, narratives of nation branding often reflect the choices of political elites as they imagine the \textit{brand}. It often proposes a ‘westernized’ version of a country or a city, highlighting features that will appeal to developed countries with a view to promote tourism, trade and economic investment.\textsuperscript{[i]} Today, the current Uzbek president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev is committed to branding a new image for the capital through repositioning it as a state that is different from the previous authoritarian rule, which significantly damaged the reputation of the country. Soon after he has taken the office, Mirziyoyev initiated an ambitious plan of transforming the center of the capital city, Tashkent, into an international business locus through a project named «Tashkent city». The president Mirziyoyev stated, “through the project Tashkent city, we should declare about ourselves.”\textsuperscript{[ii]} He views the role of the city as a tool to promote a new \textit{brand image} for the country that is ‘modern’ and open.
to foreign business and investment. Although the project was initially scheduled for ten years, the government’s aim is to complete it in four years period to exhibit the current administration’s commitment to progress before next presidential elections.[iii]

Mirziyoyev’s team he has built for himself applauded the initiation. The Cabinet of Ministers issued a Decree «On measures to improve the architectural appearance and improvement of the central part of Tashkent, as well as creation of appropriate conditions for the population and visitors to the capital». Accordingly, the project Tashkent city started early December 2017. It occupies 80 hectares (3.1 square miles) along the main streets, Navoi and Islam Karimov Avenues (former Uzbekistanskaya), which link Olmazor and Furkat Streets. The project “relies on foreign and local investments, donations, loans, and other sources of funding. It aims to construct an industrial park, eight business centers, shopping mall, a congress hall, hotels, restaurants, and a cultural center, as well as high-rise residential apartments.”[iv] The estimated cost of the project is 1.3 billion and it relies on foreign and local investments, charities and funding. The directorate who is responsible for the project has drawn some investment and currently, both local and foreign investors are involved in the fulfilment of the project in several phases.[v]

**Grievances over mahalla**

The realization of such a large project as «Tashkent city», in turn, is involving the demolition of public buildings and residential structures in the old town area of Tashkent. The houses in the mahallas (traditional neighborhood) have been demolished moving the residents to the outskirts of the city. The people in the mahalla area have been living in the center for centuries. Their houses have raised many generations that made them feel attached to the space. It was rather an emotional practice for them. On top of that, they have been given a short notice to vacate their places. Although the Article 4 of “Regulations on the Procedure for Compensation of Damages to Citizens and Legal Entities due to Seizure of Land for State or Public Needs” (2006) ensures the six months’ notice of residents by the khokimiyat (city administration) in written, in fact, the residents were given 10 days to leave their houses.[vi]
Normally, in traditional settlements, average size of a family is larger than families in districts of multi-storey apartments. The family that includes father, mother, two or three sons or daughters (before they get married) and daughter-in-laws live together in a hovli (traditional house) with a backyard. The law on property provides full protection of rights of citizens to equal replacement of the property with same size and value with timely notice. According to Article 4 of Regulations (2006) on the “procedure for compensation of damages to citizens and legal entities due to seizure of land for state or public needs”, khokimiyat (city administration) of respective districts (cities) must notify property owners, in written. Besides, in addition to written notification, copies of decisions of the Council of Ministers and regional City councils or Council of Tashkent on seizure of land and demolition of housing must be provided. A group of residents in O’qchi mahalla expressed their grievances:
We were not given any written notice about demolition of the area. The BTI (Bureau on
Technical Inventory) just came to inform us verbally. The news just killed us. The whole mahalla, neighbors, are dispersed around the city. We will not be able to see each other anymore. Of course, we would like to have houses in this area if only they could build them. However, as we see, there is no opportunity. We were offered some places, but we did not like the places we have seen.[viii]

However, the Decree (2017) on Tashkent city sets its own deadlines for holding inventory of residential and non-residential buildings slated for demolition.[ix] The process of demolition and relocation of residents in the territory has started before the lawful date of six months, which results in non-compliance of legislative norms, apart from the residents’ grievances. Aside from the traditional sites of the city, there is a reconstruction plan all over Tashkent. The multi-storey residential buildings are also target for either demolition or reconstruction. A resident of Mirzo Ulugbek District voiced her concern about saving her neighborhood: “We have a common misfortune – we want to preserve the history of our Tashkent ...We live on C-2, we want our district to be saved. Our conservatory, the 50th school is very dear to us, houses that were built very efficiently. We pay for utilities and make repairs ourselves. From the khokimiyat we did not see any sign of support. We write to the portal (in the name of the president – ed.), khokimiyats and mahalla committees do not help us, they rather close the case. We are not fools. We want you to hear us,”[x] she said.

People may have been wondering why, in this country, even after having replaced an authoritarian leader with a relatively liberal one, there is still no sign of getting better. The key issue is that the approach to planning, either urban or rural remains the same, a blunt top-down method!

**Social stratum or how can population benefit from Tashkent city?**

Through announcing 2019 year as a «Year of Active Investments and Social Development», he set a clear objective of attracting large-scale investments for re-planning and re-transforming infrastructure ‘to increase the living standard of people.’ In his address to people, Mirziyoyev stressed that “everyone should work to attract investment in the country.”[xii] In 2019, the government aims to exploit investments in the amount of 138 trillion soms, which is 16% more than in 2018.[xii] By July 1, with the assistance of domestic and foreign experts it is planned to develop a draft presidential decree approving the Concept for the Development of Urbanization in Uzbekistan until 2030, including the creation of new cities and satellite cities due to integrated housing construction. CA-News wrote a review of the Tashkent city project and how its execution is taking place and that the corruption might be involved in the process.

While it is important to examine the process of urban planning, it is also equally important to understand and estimate the extent of the population’s ability to benefit from such mega urban planning projects as Tashkent city. It is also important for the government to be aware of the social strata of the society while envisioning large-scale planning projects.
The middle class in Uzbekistan forms only about 28–30% of the population, which means that only this portion of the populace is able to afford non-food items such as, for example, purchasing real estate (housing or land), improving living conditions, etc. The proportion of middle class reserve is the largest, 45–48%, and this group is the one that under certain conditions could rise into middle class or fall into the poor segment. Many people who form the middle-class reserve “are workers with low qualifications who are employed in industries such as agriculture, construction, trade and services, or work in unregistered businesses.”

This means that, this group of people barely are able to benefit from the reconstructed or newly built houses, commercial buildings. More than 50% of the total household consumption falls into the middle class reserve, low-income populace and the poor. A much greater portion of these populations’ expenditures goes to foodstuffs and only little segment to non-food goods and non-consumer services, whereas the share of the middle class in the total household consumption is only about 40%. In light of this, it is sensible to postulate that the only small proportion of the population is able to ‘benefit’ or make use of what the mega project, Tashkent city will offer in near future.

In developing countries, the share of the middle stratum is about 60% and in Uzbekistan, the number should double in order to reach this percentage. Main challenge in the medium term will be to increase incomes, especially the incomes of those who are part of the middle-class reserve though structural economic reforms.[xiii] It is reasonable that the government is eager to build a business environment, favorable to foreign business and investment. However, it needs to consider supporting private sector development, which will create jobs and incomes for those who are in between of the middle class and the poor.

**Regional re-branding and ‘Beautification’**

Recognizing the lack of accountability in the local governance, Mirziyoyev proposed direct elections as a way to connect local authorities with people. In August 2017, the code on local and regional elections was amended to allow direct elections of *khokims* of regions and *khokim* of Tashkent city. For nearly three decades, the local bureaucrats have been directly implementing orders from the top rather than listening to their constituents’ concerns.
However, has this culture changed, or do still *khokimiyats* continue to deliver orders with no respect of peoples’ concerns?

As an example, following the amendment, in the center of Fergana, on the main street, demolition of the two-storey residential houses has started, while there were people inside. On January 30 of this year, the residents of the house №32 noticed the excavator bulldozing their house while they were still inside.[xiv] A deputy from the *khokimiyat* of the city ‘explained’ their actions as follows:

“Do not take offense at us. We have an order from the *khokimiyat* to demolish the house with an excavator... We work where the residents already have left their houses. If they are still there, we tear down from a different side. Because investors are coming!“[xv]

Apparently, knocking down a house hastily while there are still people in it, seems a regular practice for local *khokimiyat’s* bureaucrats, as far as, there is an urgent order from the *khokim*, and that investors are coming to build a hotel for $98mln.[xvi] This is how local the government ‘justifies’ their barbaric and illegitimate actions, which pose a threat to the lives of the citizens and violate their basic human rights. Besides, “bulldozing of private properties and historical buildings is threatening Mirziyoyev’s efforts to attract foreign investors and tourists to boost the country’s struggling economy, and to create favorable conditions for Uzbek businesses,”[xviii] writes *The Guardian*. The demolition of a three floor residential building in central Tashkent has ignited the public discontent. The *House of the Train Driver* in Tashkent, acknowledged by international experts “as a valuable example of early Soviet architecture in central Asia,”[xviii] was one of the many other residential buildings in Tashkent that faced wreckage as a part of the city renovation scheme. However, the residents of this house found an original way to raise awareness of its predicament. “Instead of protest rallies, we held fashion shows, festivals, and outdoor markets,”[xix] said one of the residents.

On the other note, cultural buildings or monuments shape the way people imagine history and relate to national identity. Aside from the capital, in regional cities of the country, the level of appreciation for historical, architectural heritage and objects of cultural significance is detrimental. There is a real danger to historically significant places through ‘beautification’ of them for the sake of tourism. An example is Samarkand where due to inappropriate restoration and unprofessional approach, some objects in old city were included to the list of architectural objects, which require a reinforced monitoring by UNESCO in 2008.[xx]
Besides, The World Heritage Committee expressed concern following the reconstruction of the Historic Centre of Shakhrisabz that caused irreparable alterations and added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2016. The Historic Centre of Shakhrisabz is located on the Silk Road in southern Uzbekistan. Over 2,000 years old, Shakhrisabz, was once the cultural and political centre of the Kesh region in the 14th and 15th centuries.\[xxi\] The practices of ‘modernizing’ the historical sites by surrounding them with tourist attractions or commercial structures put in danger of the uniqueness and historic value of those areas.

**Conclusions**

One of the key problems of state-sponsored urban projects in Uzbekistan is that there is little understanding of the relevance of the projects for the population. The process does not involve civil engagement to allow population to express their opinions and it lacks the considerations of public needs. While aiming to ‘improve living standards of people’ through large-scale projects, the state planners have neglected the interests of the very people whose lives they promised to improve.

In conclusion, whatever countries attempt to **pull in** (investors, tourists, business, students, talented entrepreneurs etc.) and whatever they try to **push out** (products, services, policies, culture, and ideas) depends on the country’s image. It is hard for a country to achieve their nation branding goals if the country’s reputation is damaged or weak. According to a policy advisor, Simon Anholt, rather a symbolic action that illustrates country’s values and
principles can contribute to improvement of a reputation and build a better *brand image* for the nation.[xxii] In order to improve country’s *brand image* globally, the Uzbek government needs to commit for larger and conscious reforms not for the sake of an *image*, rather for the sake of truly improving and ensuring human rights protection, rule of law, civic engagement and preservation of its historic-cultural heritage.

**Recommendations:**

- Engage civil society in urban/rural planning: Establish regular public council meetings independent from *khokimiyat* or *mahalla* committees to discuss planning matters.
- Consider examining social layers of the society in planning and development: the government to ensure relevance of the projects to meet the needs of the different social groups in the society.
- Raise the awareness of the population on housing rights: Educate people of their property rights so that they can stand for them themselves in case of infringement; provide legal assistance through civil society institutions.
- Work towards increasing the percentage of middle class: Encourage the growth of the middle class reserve into the middle class so that the greater portion of the populace is able to benefit from the large-scale urban planning projects.
- Preserve cultural heritage through enforcement: UNESCO to include traditional old part of the cities (Tashkent and regions) in the list of cultural heritage in order to preserve the unique identity of the cities.
- End ‘beautification’ process for the sake of tourism and ensure appreciation the individuality of the historical sites around the country.

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[iii] Interview with Abdujabbor Abduvakhitov, a senior official at Foreign Ministry, March 2018.


[v] “Stroitelstvo Tashkent City planiruetya zavershit v techenie chetirex let” https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/06/05/tashkent-city/

“Polozhienie o poriadke vozmezhenia ubitkov grazhdanam i yuridicheskim litsam v sviazi s iziatiem zemelnix uchastkov dlya godusardstvennix i obshestvennih nuzhd”, NormaUz, 2006, https://nrm.uz/contentf?doc=105171_polojenie_o_poryadke_vozmeshcheniya_ubytkov_grajdanam_i_yuridicheskim_licam_v_svyazi_s_izyatiem_zemelnix_uchastkov_dlya_gosudarstvennyh_i_obshestvennyh_nujd_(prilojenie_k_postanovleniyu_km_ruz_ot_29_05_2006_g_n_97)&producer


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