Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: London School of Economics and Political Science
Unit of Assessment: 24 Anthropology and Development Studies: Anthropology
Title of case study: Institutional capacity building in the former Soviet Union: the revival of anthropology and the study of religion
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)   LSE research has contributed to institutional capacity building and to the renewal of the study of religion in the former Soviet Union. More specifically, the LSE anthropologist Mathijs Pelkmans has contributed to the training of a new generation of local scholars in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia; he has helped introduce these scholars to contemporary research and to innovative methodologies, and has mentored them in critical social science. As stated in one of the testimonials: "the ultimate value of Mathijs' engagement has been to intensify dialogue between different research, educational, and broadly scholarly traditions, and thereby to facilitate our own efforts to develop a discipline which is relatively new in Central Asia".
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)   **RESEARCH INSIGHTS AND OUTPUTS:**   Pelkmans' research projects have crystallized in a number of publications in which he shows the limitations of approaches that have treated religion as static and backward or have depicted the post-Soviet religious 'revival' as a return to pre-Soviet conditions. He has shown that religious formations are flexible and contingent on political and economic processes, and that religious experience goes through phases of intensification and weakening, thereby challenging prevalent views of religious change in the region. More specifically, his publications address the three following areas of inquiry: Pelkmans [1, 2, 3] address the problematic return of Islam to the public sphere in a Muslim-majority region of the Republic of Georgia, and the intensification of the process of conversion from Islam to Christianity. During the Soviet period, Islam came to have negative associations and Orthodox Christianity came to have "primordial" associations; in a newly independent Georgia, these associations have been further reinforced. These publications show that conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity in this context should be understood as an attempt to realign history and community with a strong sense of national identity.   Pelkmans [4] and McBrien and Pelkmans [5] report the findings of a research project conducted in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan on missionary encounters and dynamics of conversion. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country had become increasingly attractive to foreign religious missions. The research analysed this emerging mission field and theorized the nature of conversion in a 'post-atheist' setting. By seeing conversion as a form of movement in which religious and social boundaries are both crossed and created, the resulting publications demonstrate how conversion dynamics in post-Soviet contexts are entwined with the themes of modernity, morality, and inequality.   Finally, Pelkmans [1] and Hann and Pelkmans [6] discuss the topics of doubt and ambiguity, arguing that while religious and secular convictions can have powerful effects, their fundaments are often surprisingly fragile. In order to understand more fully the role of ideas in social action, one has therefore to take into account how doubt can be repressed (in order to produce conviction) and how belief-systems collapse. Pelkmans has developed this analytical perspective to explain the temporary appeal of religious nationalism and Pentecostal Christianity. He has also given numerous lectures and talks on these topics, and completed an edited volume titled *Ethnographies of Doubt* (2013) [7].   **KEY RESEARCHER**: Pelkmans has been employed as Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology since 2007 and as Senior Lecturer since 2011.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Pelkmans, Mathijs (ed.) (2009a) *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, modernisms, and technologies of faith in the former Soviet Union*. Berghahn Books. Available from LSE.
2. Pelkmans, Mathijs (2010) 'Religious crossings and conversions on the Muslim – Christian frontier in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan'*, Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 19 (2): 109-28. DOI: 10.3167/ajec.2010.190209.
3. Pelkmans, Mathijs (2012) 'Chaos and Order along the (Former) Iron Curtain', in H. Donnan and T. Wilson. *The Blackwell Companion to Border Studies*, pp. 269-82. Wiley Blackwell. Available from LSE.
4. Pelkmans, Mathijs (2009b) 'The transparency of Christian proselytizing in Kyrgyzstan', *Anthropological Quarterly* 82 (2): 423-46. DOI: 10.1353/anq.0.0058.
5. McBrien, Julie and Mathijs Pelkmans (2008) 'Turning Marx on his Head: Missionaries, 'extremists,' and archaic secularists in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan', *Critique of Anthropology* 28 (1):87-103. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28054/
6. Hann, Chris, and Mathijs Pelkmans. 2009. 'Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, nation-state and (post)socialism', *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (9): 1517-41. DOI:10.1080/09668130903209111
7. Pelkmans, Mathijs (ed.) (2013). *Ethnographies of Doubt: Uncertainty and Faith in ContemporarySocieties*. I.B. Tauris. Available from LSE.

Evidence of Quality: articles 2, 4, 5 and 6 appeared in peer-reviewed journals. Books 1 and 7 and book chapter 3 were published by respectable academic publishers.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Well into the 1990s and 2000s, scholarship on religion in the former Soviet Union was still heavily influenced by the legacy of Soviet 'scientific atheism' and by more recent nationalist trends. Although universities began to offer courses in religion and to open Religious Studies units, these were often staffed by former lecturers of 'scientific atheism,' or by those who approached religious phenomena through a biased nationalist perspective. This situation stifled the study of religion, just at the time when religious dynamics in the region were in need of robust and critical analysis.

Against this background, Pelkmans has contributed to the training of a new generation of local scholars, exposing them to cutting-edge research on religion (his own included), introducing them to innovative research methodologies, and mentoring them in a critical approach to the social sciences. Starting in 2008, Pelkmans has worked closely with Social Science Departments in three Universities (in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia), has provided prolonged academic and professional guidance to eleven scholars from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Armenia, and has given personal consultations and feedback on the research projects and written works of approximately fifty scholars from across the region. He has undertaken this work under the aegis of the Open Society Foundations (OSF), which recruited him because of his pioneering research on post-Soviet religious change. He was involved in three specific programmes: the Academic Fellowship Program (AFP), the Regional Seminar for Excellence in Teaching (ReSET), and the Central Asian and Caucasus Research and Teaching Initiative (CARTI). His activities and their impact are described in more detail below.

Capacity-building with Institutions of Higher Education: Pelkmans has worked with The American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Kyrgyzstan, The Tbilisi State University in Georgia, and The National University of Mongolia to help develop the teaching and research profile of their Social Science Departments, especially in the field of Anthropology. For example, while serving at AUCA as an 'International Scholar' between 2008 and 2013, Pelkmans assisted the Anthropology Department in making a radical shift in its curriculum away from its traditional and narrow focus on Kyrgyz folklore and towards a more critical engagement with wider and contemporary societal issues such as development, migration, globalization, and, importantly, religious change [A,B]. According to Dr. Elmira Shishkaraeva, AFP Regional Manager for Central Asia and Mongolia, "Dr. Mathijs Pelkmans played a key role in designing, structuring and descri[bing] the concept of 'three

tracks'...1) History and Archeology, 2) Culture and Identity, and 3) Development Studies", which now form the structure for the department [A]. In addition, Pelkmans helped design a new undergraduate degree offering a wide range of courses across these three tracks [D].

Training anthropologists: Between 2010 and 2013, Pelkmans served as a 'core faculty' member of the Regional Seminar for Excellence in Teaching (ReSET), a three year training programme attended by 25 (mostly junior) lecturers from universities throughout the former Soviet Union [E]. Participants were trained in the practice of ethnographic research, with a thematic focus on 'Contemporary Anthropological Approaches to Religion and Secularism', for which several of Pelkmans's own publications [1, 2, 3, 7] were used as course material. Pelkmans gave a total of 12 lectures, held private consultative sessions with participants on their research and teaching activities, and moderated a number of discussion groups. In addition, he delivered training sessions on teaching skills, academic writing, and publishing.

Professor Ketevan Khutsishvili at Tbilisi State University in Georgia observed that Pelkmans' "lectures, seminars, and workshops were very well received because they helped the scholars to move ahead in their own research projects and their teaching" [F]. Some programme participants introduced new courses in their home universities on the Anthropology of Religion and designed and carried out their own research projects in this area. Dr. Emil Nasritdinov describes the impact at AUCA: "Mathijs helped us to strengthen our teaching on a range of topics in anthropology, such as development, political anthropology, migration, and especially religion. Over the years he has given my colleagues and me individual feedback on course syllabi and held consultations to further develop them. In my own case, Mathijs helped me to put together the course on development and he provided helpful input in the course on religion. Moreover, through giving guest lectures (five times in my courses), and two workshops with our faculty on teaching practices, he gave us many ideas for research-led teaching" [B].

Mentoring anthropologists: Pelkmans has also acted as an International Scholar in the context of the AFP programme [G]. The aim of this programme is to partner International with Returning Scholars, to enhance the latter's academic research and publication profile and, more generally, to increase their international exposure and reputation [H]. As 'International Scholar' for the OSF's Central Asia Research and Training Initiative (CARTI) (2007-2009, 2011-2014), Pelkmans provided research supervision of Ph.D. students and university lecturers in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Tbilisi (Georgia), Yerevan (Armenia), and Astana (Kazakhstan).

Beyond this, Pelkmans has continued to mentor five anthropologists working at American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, articles by these scholars have been published in such peer-reviewed journals as *Ab Imperio* [I] and *Transnational Social Review* [J]. Pelkmans's mentoring role has been instrumental in bringing the articles to publishable quality, thereby enhancing the reputation and authority of the scholars involved [B,H]. Professor Emil Nasritdinov believes that "These types of collaboration are particularly important in our department, given that most of our faculty is relatively junior and developing their skills as researchers and writers…I believe that it is through his example, his encouragement and his constructive criticism for quite a few years, he is making an important contributing [sic] in helping our department to raise its research profile as a whole" [B].

Pelkmans was also appointed Facilitator of the Anthropology Disciplinary Group of the AFP (2011-2013), which involved playing a central role in linking anthropologists to scholars elsewhere and coordinating the content of three-day study meetings held twice a year. In this capacity he initiated a collaboration between Returning Scholars in AUCA and the National University of Mongolia by facilitating exchanges between the two departments. This led to a unique collaborative writing project on 'Post-Communist Spirituality' to which each scholar is submitting an article and which will be submitted as a collection for a special issue of the journal *Inner Asia* (co-edited by Sneath and Pelkmans) later in 2013 [H]. According to Serhiy Zaitsev, OSF's Regional Manager, "The role of Dr. Pelkmans is indispensable in this process, as he regularly coaches the scholars in rigourous research methods, appropriate academic writing style, and effective publication strategies. All this greatly contributes to local academic capacity building in general and, more specifically, to the

seven Returning Scholars becoming reputable, internationally-known researchers" [H]. Because of this "productive long-term collaboration" [A], Pelkmans was asked to support scholars writing for a special issue on post-Soviet industrial towns in another collaboration involving OSF, AUCA and the Center for Independent Social Research of the Russian Federation.

Improving capacity-building programmes: In 2012 Pelkmans was asked by the Open Society Foundations to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the Academic Fellowship Program, which had been active in 18 countries since 2004. He was asked to outline a strategy for how its effectiveness could be enhanced within, and extended beyond, the regions of the former Soviet Union [K]. Co-authored with the former US Ambassador to Georgia and Belarus, the evaluation was informed by Pelkmans' own experience as an International Scholar and included a comprehensive set of programme benchmarks for guiding and assessing future progress. The report was positively received by AFP's Academic Advisory Council, and its recommendation for geographic expansion are already being implemented through pilot projects in Burma, Tunisia, and Sierra Leone. In addition, in 2011 Pelkmans served as 'Consultant' at OSF's 'Fellows Orientation and Research Design Workshop' of the Central Asia Research and Teaching Initiative (CARTI), held in Istanbul.

Overall impact: In terms of the overall impact of Pelkmans' involvement in the former Soviet Union, Dr. Emil Nasritdinov observed that "I think I speak also for my colleagues when I state that the ultimate value of Mathijs' engagement has been to intensify dialogue between different research, educational, and broadly scholarly traditions, and thereby to facilitate our own efforts to develop a discipline which is relatively new in Central Asia. It is important that his involvement was not restricted to a few visits, but has been on-going for almost five years, and will continue in the foreseeable future. It has been through sharing his expertise in teaching and in research that Mathijs has made his contribution" [B]. Clearly, these scholarly activities do not produce instantaneous effects that can be precisely measured; they are nonetheless crucial to a future generation of social scientists, who will themselves have impact on the religious dynamics at play in their region, e.g., through more nuanced and critically engaged discussions of religious phenomena in their classrooms or through rigorous empirical studies of religious phenomena.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)
All Sources listed below can also be seen at: https://apps.lse.ac.uk/impact/case_study/view/85

A. Testimony by Regional Manager, Academic Fellowship Program, Open Society Foundations, Central Asia and Mongolia. This source is confidential.
B. Testimony by Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, American University. This source is confidential.
C. Three new curriculum tracks at AUCA: https://www.auca.kg/en/anthropology_/
D. Anthropology courses at American University of Central Asia: https://www.auca.kg/en/courses_anth/
E. Description of ReSET program: http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/grants/regional-seminar-excellence-teaching and overview of ReSET projects: http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/reset-projects-2003-2012.pdf
F. Testimony by Professor, Institute of Ethnology, Faculty of Humanities, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. This source is confidential.
G. Academic Fellowship Program brochure: http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/afp-brochure-20110823.pdf
H. Testimony by Regional Manager, Academic Fellowship Program, Open Society Foundations, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia. This source is confidential.
I. Ab Imperio article: http://abimperio.net/cgi-bin/aishow.pl?state=showa&idart=3128&idlang=1&Code=
J. Transnational Social Review article: http://www.budrich-journals.de/index.php/tsr/article/view/11068
K. This source is confidential.