



In Brief

History and Memory in Kyrgyzstan

Global Centre for Pluralism

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How the past is interpreted and remembered plays an important role in defining the nation and who belongs to it. This brief explores how history and memory have evolved in Kyrgyzstan and suggests how contested historical narratives continue to shape the country's prospects for pluralism today.

Why history and memory matter

In many societies, “nationality” derives from ethnically exclusive characteristics and historic claims. In pluralist societies, however, the idea of nation is uncoupled from ethno-cultural distinctions to accommodate a wide range of human differences.

Within the Global Centre for Pluralism’s evolving pluralism “drivers” framework (see box on page 2), history and memory play a vital role in either shaping or undermining the prospects for pluralism. Although closely entwined and sometimes competing, the Centre views the concepts of history and memory as distinct: *history* represents what the available evidence tells us about the past; *memory* is the set of meanings that people attribute to past collective experiences. Memories are inherently shaped by received narratives and myths. In some cases, these remembered narratives promote respect for diversity; in others, memory can deepen divisions and exacerbate civic exclusion. Understanding the interplay of history and memory in a society is an essential first step to identifying the available pathways to pluralism.

This brief presents highlights from “**History and Memory: Implications for Pluralism in Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana Valley**,” a paper by Dr. Jeff Sahadeo, commissioned by the Global Centre for Pluralism. The paper explores how historical narrative has shaped and reshaped national identity in Kyrgyzstan and continues to influence perceptions of diversity and citizenship today, providing a potential basis for a more inclusive understanding of identity and a new foundation for nation building. The full version of Dr. Sahadeo’s paper can be found at: pluralism.ca under Resources.

Kyrgyzstan: A case study in history and memory

The twin lenses of history and memory shed light on one set of challenges to advancing pluralism in Kyrgyzstan and how this ‘pluralism driver’ might instead serve as a springboard for change. To understand the roots of ethnic conflict in the country, and potential pathways to pluralism, it is important to recognize how ethnicity itself has been consciously shaped in Kyrgyzstan’s recent history — primarily in the Soviet era — as a basis for statehood. These links between “nation” and “ethnicity” have been promoted in post-independence politics, forcing both minority and majority populations to seek security and recognition along ethnic lines.

Diversity, division — and hope for an inclusive future

A former Soviet republic, Kyrgyzstan today is a diverse and divided society that is seeking ways to reconcile majority and minority fears and claims. Situated in a region characterized by authoritarian states, Kyrgyzstan has made strides toward democratic reform since its independence in 1991. In 2010, during an interim presidency that followed violent inter-ethnic clashes, the country voted overwhelmingly to adopt a liberal democratic constitution. And an election in October 2011 resulted in its first peaceful transfer of presidential power since independence. However, ethnic nationalism continues to grow, jeopardizing hopes for peace and prosperity.

In the last century, history was deployed under Soviet rule to delimit and then support the invention of modern Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia’s other new republics. Throughout the region, nation-building narratives anchored in the past have helped to forge discrete ethnic identities which privilege selected groups as state-making peoples. In Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz have played this role.

The Drivers of Pluralism

Sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies

Livelihoods and Well-being

How and whether citizens (male and female) access and benefit from state resources equitably and are able to participate in the market to achieve economic security and well-being

Law and Politics

The governance of diversity in terms of both content (values, laws, policies, programs) and process (institutional mechanisms)

Citizens and Civil Society

Foundations of collective civic identity and the role of civil society in the governance of diversity (i.e., citizens, organizations, institutions, faith institutions, business, media, academia)

Education and Culture

The social/cultural meanings attached to difference (identity) and diversity (the other) and their transmission between and among generations through formal and informal education and other means

History and Memory

The practice of history in a society and the role of inclusive modes of collective remembering and reconciliation as routes to shared citizenship

Regional Influences

Neighbourhood influences and transnational identities as well as the impact of place (urban, rural) on the governance of diversity and the impact of multicultural cities within diverse societies



Multi-ethnic, landlocked and mountainous, Kyrgyzstan shares borders with Tajikistan and the volatile Ferghana Valley to the south, and the much larger states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China

Today, almost three-quarters of the population identify as ethnically Kyrgyz, with Uzbeks the second largest ethnic group. Russians, who made up one-fifth of the country at the end of the Soviet era, now account for less than 7% of the population. In addition to these three largest groups, Kyrgyzstan is home to more than 20 other minorities. Some, such as the Kazakhs, Tatars, and Tajiks have inhabited the region for millennia.

Since the end of the Soviet era, the the Kyrgyz majority and the largest minority group, the Uzbeks, have increasingly dominated Kyrgyzstan's demographics. With a recent history of inter-ethnic strife, Kyrgyzstan today is seeking ways to move forward on a new phase of peaceful and inclusive nation building.

The Soviet era: Elevating ethnicity over family and tribe

As Sahadeo informs us, the terms “Kyrgyz” and “Kyrgyzstan” have evolved over time. Russian expansion into the Ferghana Valley in the nineteenth century interrupted established relations between ethnic groups. The Soviet consolidation of Central Asia's political borders in the 1920s further shifted historical narratives about nation and identity. Soviet rule played a crucial role in defining Kyrgyzstan as a formal political unit and fixing a sense of separate identity among Kyrgyz, Uzbek and other ethnic groups.

The land that ultimately became the Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936 attached mountainous northern lands to southern irrigated farm land. The south was home to settled communities, with the fertile Ferghana Valley among the most urbanized. Soviets differentiated between “Uzbek” and “Kyrgyz” populations primarily on the basis of economic activity: Uzbeks were farmers and town-dwellers; Kyrgyz were pastoralists. This divide overlooked families and villages that practiced both farming and herding in a semi-settled state, and imposed new identities on populations that had long identified themselves in terms of family, village, tribal or religious affiliation.

Over time, administrators, intellectuals, teachers, and others inculcated national identities into Central Asian peoples, solidifying distinctions on the basis of language, culture, dress, food, literature, and history. Standardized written national languages were

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formulated, while ethnographers combed the regions to determine “national” attitudes and behaviours. While formalizing the outlines of distinct ethnicities and using these as the basis for statehood, the Bolsheviks in the mid-1930s also promoted civic harmony among ethnic groups. This was expressed in the slogan “the friendship of peoples.” In this paternalistic vision of Soviet harmony, nationality replaced class as an organizing principle, and Russians became the “elder brother.”

Defining the post-Soviet Kyrgyz nation and state

The shaping of modern Kyrgyzstan began immediately after the Soviet Union’s collapse, elites who had gained power during the Soviet era sought to reshape history and memory to enhance their own status based on ethnic identity. National identities formalized in the Soviet era became the basis for newly independent states.

Askar Akaev, the first elected president of the newly-independent Kyrgyz Republic, led the construction of national and collective histories and memories to cement a new state over the 15 years of his presidency. Kyrgyz historians actively sought new sources to trace the roots of their nation further and further back in time, as a means to strengthen territorial claims. Whereas most Soviet-era historical narratives point to the 13th century as the moment when the Kyrgyz tribe migrated from Siberia to the Tien Shan mountains, post-Soviet Kyrgyz historians looked to Chinese sources to pinpoint a possible 2nd century BCE origin in the region. The historical consensus spread into the political realm when President Akaev declared “2200 years of Kyrgyz statehood” in 2003. This narrative is now standard in teaching the country’s history.

Elevation of the historic epic poem *Manas*



Statue of Manas situated prominently in Bishkek’s main square, in front of the Museum of History

Kyrgyz nationalism has also been reinforced through the elevation of a historic epic poem — *Manas* — which enjoys the status of Homeric legend in Kyrgyz society. Contemporary narratives legitimated by the *Manas* legend portray the Kyrgyz as the state-making people of Kyrgyzstan. This telling of history minimizes or ignores the presence of historic minorities, and fuels contemporary ethnic nationalist claims.

Despite his shifting origins in oral tradition, the legendary hero *Manas* is today credited with reestablishing a rightful homeland in the 16th-17th centuries. In earlier times, the epic had been interpreted in different lights. Early post-Soviet efforts to celebrate the hero did not focus on an exclusive ethnicity. One interpretation considered *Manas* the son of a Tajik princess married to a Uighur, and as such a potentially powerful symbol for a multiethnic Kyrgyzstan. But by the late 1990s, *Manas* was seen as affirming the Kyrgyz as a privileged people. Akaev and others saw *Manas* as not only establishing a great past but also as a guide to culture and morals in the new Kyrgyz nation.

Finding an alternative base of shared memory and experience

History provides evidence for alternative possibilities for Kyrgyzstan. Sahadeo's paper points to historical moments and interpretations that could serve as a more unifying basis for statehood.

Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana Valley have been intercultural meeting grounds for millennia. These lands have changed hands numerous times since Indo-Iranians first mixed with aboriginal peoples around 2000 BCE. Southern Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana Valley emerged as part of the historic "Silk Road" trading route from the 3rd century CE. Turks from the north penetrated Central Asia in the 6th century, followed by Arab raiders who brought Islam and spread control over contemporary western Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyz and Uzbeks also share ancestry: both trace their roots to Chinggis Khan and his invaders, who entered Central Asia in 1219-20, with the Kyrgyz becoming pastoralists and the Uzbeks town and city dwellers in the Ferghana Valley. Trade between them supplied each with vital goods. While both adopted Islam — a further source of shared experience and identity— they differ in their practice of the religion.

The impact of the Soviet inter-ethnic policy of "friendship of peoples" is evident across southern Kyrgyzstan, where Kyrgyz and Uzbeks understand each other's languages and interact easily on an everyday basis, even while living and working in separate spheres – Uzbeks mainly in business and farming and the Kyrgyz more dominant in public administration. Although this tradition of complementarity still privileges the Kyrgyz as a state-making people, it is a potential basis for dialogue on a more inclusive understanding of national identity.

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Looking forward: Harnessing history and memory as a basis for pluralism

Strengthening the foundation for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan is an ongoing collaborative process. It will demand that many institutions, across many sectors, seize opportunities to revisit and reconcile the competing memories and historical narratives of majority and minority groups.

The government presented one such opening with its 2012 concept paper on national unity. Among other measures, it identifies the need for museums to highlight cultural diversity. Its openness to the role of

Pluralism

Pluralism is an ethic of respect for human differences expressed through inclusive citizenship. In pluralist societies, every person is a valued member of the civic nation and an equal constituent of the state.

A commitment to pluralism often requires widening access to citizenship and to nationality – in practice as well as in law. Civil societies and governments must collaborate and each must lead.

research and interaction between outside and local scholars presents a possibility for history and memory to be tapped as sources for pluralism.

Sahadeo proposes various starting points for advancing pluralism in the context of Kyrgyzstan's national, colonial and post-Soviet context. He suggests two possible directions for dialogue and research:

- Examining historical narratives that emphasize a shared past, history, and memory between Kyrgyzstan's peoples – going beyond prevalent memories to unearth and share counter-narratives that resonate in smaller sections of the population; and,
- Understanding and discussing how Kyrgyzstanis have internalized ethnic stereotypes and exclusionary narratives.

Kyrgyzstan may have much to learn from other societies that have experienced inter-ethnic violence stemming from identities and government structures imposed from outside. The experiences of other postcolonial states in Africa and Asia, as well as the former Communist world, may be especially relevant to Kyrgyzstan as it consolidates its democratic development and defines its own path to pluralism.

As the case of Kyrgyzstan illustrates, the state-building process and the exclusion of some ethnic groups from the country's historic nation-building narratives have complicated efforts to develop a shared, civic national identity. Yet Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations in Kyrgyzstan do share experiences and values that, properly nourished, could point toward a future based upon mutual respect. In everyday life, the "friendship of peoples" still resonates. In practice, popular conceptions of this "friendship" include interethnic marriages, language and education rights, and everyday relationships, all factors now strained in today's Kyrgyzstan. Both groups remember and memorialize a golden past, and laud similar traits of leadership, honour, hospitality, and kindness. And a more dispassionate reading of the available evidence suggests that a more pluralistic view of Kyrgyzstani society is possible.

Pluralist societies are not accidents of history. They are products of decisions and investments made in cultivating good governance, strong civic institutions, and public policies that promote respect for diversity. Despite the presence of champions of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan's society, an effective counter-narrative emphasizing shared citizenship, inclusion and cohesion is largely absent. There is a need to revive these narratives, and to draw on them to support change leaders in their effort to advance pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. Beyond fostering dialogue on alternative bases for the nation state, minority views on history and memory could be documented and shared – not just in the academic sphere but through the education system and other avenues that "institutionalize" the nation's civic culture.

The Global Centre for Pluralism is an international research and education centre founded by His Highness the Aga Khan, in partnership with the Government of Canada, to advance respect for diversity as a new global ethic. The Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and civil society can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for successful societies.
