



In Brief

Prospects for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan

Global Centre for Pluralism

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Kyrgyzstan has experienced both progress and setbacks in its path towards a more inclusive and peaceful society. This brief analyzes the drivers of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan, and attempts to identify opportunities and entry points for supporting greater inclusion. It draws upon recent research commissioned by the Global Centre for Pluralism on Kyrgyzstan’s prospects for achieving pluralism. Its conclusions are optimistic: there are champions of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan, and openings that can be harnessed to foster a shared and inclusive base of civic identity.

I. Why Kyrgyzstan?

Surrounded by authoritarian states, the Kyrgyz Republic in Central Asia has made significant strides toward democratic development over the past two decades. Yet this multi-ethnic state has struggled to achieve a sense of shared civic identity and nationhood among its people. While Kyrgyzstan held the region’s first free and fair elections in 2010, and has adopted a forward-looking new constitution, the country’s recent history includes two regime changes and violent inter-ethnic conflict. Since its independence from the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has been beset by tensions between the majority Kyrgyz and minority groups – the Uzbeks in particular. These tensions have been exacerbated by economic and regional pressures. Is there a way forward?

Drawing on “Kyrgyzstan: Prospects for Pluralism,” a research paper by Dr. Erica Marat commissioned by the Global Centre for Pluralism, this brief examines the opportunities for and challenges to the development of an inclusive civic identity and nation state in Kyrgyzstan, looking beyond ethnicity to other markers of identity. It uses as its framework a set of pluralism “drivers” defined by the Centre.

II. The drivers of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan

Progress towards pluralism encompasses every aspect of society, including social, political, cultural and economic relations. The Global Centre for Pluralism, in analyzing the underlying factors that shape inclusion and exclusion in societies, applies six drivers of pluralism as outlined in the following box.

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

Livelihoods and well-being

Kyrgyzstan is one of the most impoverished of the former Soviet republics. As an underlying factor that has fueled tensions in Kyrgyzstan, the axis of poverty cuts many ways. Poverty is twice as high in rural areas compared with urban areas, and is unevenly distributed among ethnic groups. According to World Bank data, ethnic Russians have the lowest rates of poverty, while ethnic Uzbeks have the highest.

There are regional differences as well: one-third of the poor live in the southern, Uzbek-dominated Osh region. Women have lost their foothold in the workforce since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the attendant loss of state subsidies that had helped them balance the demands of child-rearing and employment. Household well-being is undermined by persistent gender gaps, both in earnings and in assigned family and economic roles. Youth also struggle to find their place in Kyrgyzstan's sluggish economy.

Kyrgyzstan's once agrarian economy increasingly depends on gold exports and trade, both of which are highly politicized. Attempts to improve market-based competition are undermined by the country's large "shadow economy," whereby a large portion of economic activity is unregistered and evades taxation. Expansion of Kyrgyzstan's hydropower sector is a promising avenue for economic growth, but the successful development of new plants will depend on governance reforms, and may escalate tensions with neighboring Uzbekistan,



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

which depends on Kyrgyzstan's water supply in the summer months.

Remittances from labour migrants provide some economic relief, but migration has serious consequences for family and social life, and for the country's future development prospects. According to the World Bank, over 600,000 Kyrgyz citizens —11% of the total population — live outside the country. While remittances help migrants' families remain in their villages and sustain important social and cultural ties and practices, there are social costs as well. Many children are raised by grandparents, as their parents seek a living abroad.

Pursuing economic growth strategies that tackle the roots of poverty, bringing benefits to women, youth, and ethnic minorities, will be important to create conditions for pluralism to flourish.

Law, politics and policy

Since independence, despite setbacks, Kyrgyzstan has made slow but steady progress in the political sphere toward greater openness and pluralism. Kyrgyzstan's new constitution is inclusive, guaranteeing equal rights to all citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion or gender. It also sets 30% quotas for women, ethnic minorities and young people in the Parliament. But thus far, reality has fallen short of these ideals: quotas and other measures have not yet translated into greater diversity within Parliament.

The constitution nonetheless enjoys broad support — winning 90% approval in a referendum — for its creation of a parliamentary system. Its adoption was followed by peaceful and fair parliamentary elections in 2010 and a smooth leadership transition the following year, respecting the outcomes of the 2011 Presidential election. Kyrgyzstan's political scene is vibrant: twenty-nine parties fielded candidates in the 2010 parliamentary election, with five passing the 5% threshold needed to win seats.

There are several champions of pluralism within Kyrgyzstan's government. The 2012 "Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic," led by the Department of Ethnic, Religious Policies and Interaction with Civil Society, signaled the clear intent of Almazbek Atambayev's administration to promote pluralism following the June 2010 violence.

Local level politics also holds promise for a more inclusive political landscape, with women and minority groups enjoying greater representation in most jurisdictions. Local council elections in 2012 were highly competitive in most parts of the country, and political parties welcomed independent monitoring.

Reforms to the judicial sector will be essential to restore trust between groups in the aftermath of the 2010 inter-ethnic riots. At the same time, people in Kyrgyzstan have a broader conception of justice than simply redressing past grievances. There is an opportunity to build the rule of law and strong judicial institutions to also address fundamental social and economic disparities. Civil society groups are playing a vital and constructive role in highlighting injustices and needed reforms.

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Citizens, civil society and identity

Because it lacks a unifying civic identity, modern Kyrgyzstan is pulled between the insecurities of the majority Kyrgyz and aspirations of minority groups, especially the ethnic Uzbek. But this was not always the case. Pre-Soviet identities in Kyrgyzstan were complex and much less fixed on the concept of ethnicity. The country’s early years of independence were marked by a more inclusive narrative, with first President Askar Akayev advancing civic-based nationhood under the theme, “Kyrgyzstan is our common home.” But in recent years, ethnic nationalism has infused the political sphere, and ethnic claims and stereotypes have been reinforced, privileging the Kyrgyz as the country’s state-making people and overshadowing the many distinctions by which individuals and groups self-identify.

Studies in Kyrgyzstan and other ethnically mixed states have found that even when individuals primarily identify with a given ethnic group, this affinity co-exists with other identities. Language and place-based affiliations — including by region and along the urban-rural divide — are two of the strongest determinants of identity.

A 2013 survey by the OHCHR’s Regional Office for Central Asia points to fertile ground for advancing an inclusive civic identity: it shows that while ethnic Kyrgyz consider ethnicity the most important determinant of identity, particularly in the South (70%), members of other ethnic groups put more emphasis on citizenship. Ethnic Uzbeks put citizenship-based identity (56%) ahead of ethnicity (38%). And despite existing inter-ethnic, regional, gender and economic divides, the survey found that 91% of the population is either “very proud” or “proud” to be a citizen of Kyrgyzstan — significantly higher than in some other multi-ethnic post-Soviet societies. Research suggests that, when ethnic identity is not at stake, deeply individualistic (and positive) identity markers come into play.

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.

Gender to some extent limits the range of identity options for men and women. Young men, who generally enjoy greater social freedoms, are exposed to more varied influences and public spaces than young women. Men have more options for “celebrating masculinities” in sports bars and Internet cafes, while parents are more protective of their unmarried daughters, in part because of the real risks of kidnapping, abuse and forced marriage.

Civil society is dynamic and growing, and plays a positive role in promoting a range of reforms, including tackling policies of exclusion. Urban youth are among the most vibrant proponents of change. Youth groups and activists in Bishkek and Osh, in particular, are tremendous resources for promoting the values of pluralism. In the capital, young activists support parliamentary initiatives on a range of causes, including women’s rights, environmental degradation, judicial and police reform, and urban infrastructure. In Osh, young activists promote multilingual mass media and reconciliation efforts. Civil society groups will be essential partners in any pluralism project.

Education, religion and media

Education, religion and media are all important institutions that could play a positive role in supporting pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. In all three areas, there is both cause for optimism and room for improvement.

Education is essential to shaping the civic sphere and enhancing social mobility, but it has not yet played the transformative role in Kyrgyzstan that it has in many other societies. Language and heritage are two core areas where school curricula could be strengthened to advance pluralism. For both financial and political reasons, the teaching and use of Kyrgyz in the public sphere lags behind, despite the fact that it is the majority language and one of the country’s two official languages — along with Russian. And while the status of the Kyrgyz language remains precarious, nationalists fear that investments in minority languages and heritages would further undermine those of the majority.



Hope for an inclusive future: Children from diverse backgrounds learn together at Aga Khan School in Osh (Photo courtesy of Aga Khan Development Network)

The current administration has nonetheless made modest investments in strengthening the Kyrgyz language: in 2013, it allocated roughly \$213,000 to promote it in schools and government agencies. By addressing fears about the language’s weak status, the government hopes to make linguistic pluralism more acceptable to nationalists. In effect, they must strike a balance between promoting the Kyrgyz language across the country while preserving linguistic and cultural pluralism.

Education systems overall require substantial reinvestment after the country lost much of its education budget upon independence. While the quality of education is poor, particularly in rural areas, literacy is nearly universal, and school attendance rates are close to 90% for both boys and girls. Women are well represented in universities, and their enrolment rates are increasing faster than for their male counterparts.

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Religion is a potential area of common ground, with some 88% of the population, including the vast majority of both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, identifying as Sunni Muslim. As a result of liberal policies toward religious groups in the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan today is relatively tolerant and open to many religions, including various sects of Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other faiths. Despite a number of restrictions put on religious practice in order to counter the perceived threat of extremism, according to the Pew Research Center, 68% of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan say they can freely practice their religion, and over 90% of them believe that others are also free to practice their faith.

Kyrgyzstan’s media environment is also generally free and contributes to debates, with mass media broadcasting a wide range of perspectives from political leaders and civil society. The online universe remains especially open, with several news sites publishing criticism of the president, parliament and government. Authorities rarely interfere with online forums and social networking sites, and public officials are increasingly engaging through social media themselves. Youth activists are also using these freely accessible media tools to popularize the Kyrgyz language and culture, such as by creating a Kyrgyz-language module for Google Translate and making Kyrgyz films about lesser-known folk poets.

History and memory

History provides evidence for alternative possibilities for Kyrgyzstan, as elaborated in “History and Memory: Implications for Pluralism in Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana Valley” by Dr. Jeff Sahadeo, another paper commissioned by the Global Centre for Pluralism, which points to historical moments and interpretations that could serve as a more unifying basis for statehood. Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana Valley, for example, have been intercultural meeting grounds for millennia.

The tensions among ethnic groups owe much to the historical construction of territorially-fixed, ethnic-based identities during the Soviet era. Yet even as they constructed ethnic distinctions and used these as the basis for statehood, the Bolsheviks in the mid-1930s also promoted civic harmony among groups, as expressed in the slogan “the friendship of peoples.” The first president of independent Kyrgyzstan initially promoted separate concepts of citizenship, nationality and ethnicity, before edging towards ethnic nationalism later in his presidency.

Among the central narratives that have played a role in defining identity and statehood in Kyrgyzstan is the historic epic poem *Manas*, which enjoys the status of Homeric legend in Kyrgyz society. While it was used by Akayev to promote inter-ethnic harmony, it has more recently been used to reinforce the state-making status of the Kyrgyz people. Yet there are many historic variants of this oral history, some of which emphasize Kyrgyzstan’s multicultural past and the overlap and exchange among its people. Such hidden histories need to be restored in the public consciousness.

Regional and transnational influences

Kyrgyzstan's prospects for stability, and for building a prosperous and inclusive society, are to no small measure influenced by its proximity to the much larger economies of China and Russia, by the instability and authoritarian regimes in neighbouring countries, and by lingering tensions over borders and transnational influences from other ethnically-based states in the region. As a landlocked and impoverished country, Kyrgyzstan has reason to ensure peace with its neighbours by promoting peace among its many ethnic groups. At the same time, the overall lack of democracy in the region challenges progress towards peace and stability in Kyrgyzstan.

Russian influence in the country remains pervasive. Russian was deemed an official language in post-independence Kyrgyzstan, alongside Kyrgyz, and Soviet influence has lingered in the education system and overall infrastructure of the country. Russia, in addition to being a major investor in Kyrgyzstan, is also home to 90% of Kyrgyz migrant labourers, who account for 92% of the total volume of remittances.

Enhanced trade among neighbours in Central Asia will be vital to building healthy economies and strengthening regional cooperation and stability, all conditions needed for tolerant and inclusive societies. While the mining sector, and gold in particular, accounts for the lion's share of Kyrgyzstan's exports, its burgeoning hydropower sector is one that poses the greatest sensitivities vis-à-vis immediate neighbours. Russia is a major investor in new plants, and Uzbekistan will be directly affected by the impacts of hydro-development on transboundary water supplies. With better management and new electric power plants, Kyrgyzstan hopes to export surplus electricity to Afghanistan, Pakistan and China.

III. Strengthening the prospects for pluralism

Kyrgyzstan has substantial assets on which a more inclusive and pluralistic society can be built. Among them are the deepening roots of democratic discourse, characterized by recent fair and open elections and a dynamic political scene; the wide embrace of constitutional reforms that promise more inclusive representation in democratic institutions; a vibrant civil society; a lively and uncensored mass media; the presence of champions in government actively working towards pluralism; and a shared sense of loyalty to the state of Kyrgyzstan which cuts across ethnicity.

One of the most significant post-2010 initiatives was the government's adoption in 2012 of the "Concept of Development of National Unity and Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Kyrgyz Republic." The concept outlines a vision for embracing "unity in diversity," with diversity defined in terms of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and age groups. Importantly, the concept looks beyond ethnicity in explaining communal tensions to consider the economic, demographic and political transformations in Kyrgyzstan. The openings presented by this Concept have yet to be fully seized upon.

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While the global community has focused on addressing the immediate consequences and roots of conflict in Kyrgyzstan, and economic development pathways that can address growth and livelihoods, there is much else that can be done to nurture a culture of pluralism, working with the assets outlined above.

Some possibilities to advance pluralism in Kyrgyzstan include:

- Working with political leaders, civil servants and members of civil society to strengthen their ability to recognize and advocate for the needs of a wide range of groups – including youth and women, gender and ethnic minorities, and other disadvantaged groups.
- Supporting opportunities for local champions of pluralism to learn from the experience of other diverse nations, such as through conferences, exchanges and formal programs of study.
- Providing expertise and professional development resources to educators and ministry officials to help them develop school curricula that celebrate Kyrgyzstan’s diverse society and promote greater tolerance and mutual respect among groups.
- Supporting a culture of healthy public discussion by convening a variety of forums and building media capacity for independent analysis.
- Building on the aspirations and strengths of Kyrgyzstan’s active urban youth, focusing not just on their job market prospects, but their potential roles as future leaders in a more inclusive and democratic society.
- Supporting greater regional trade and cooperation to enhance Kyrgyzstan’s economic prospects and defuse regional and ethnic tensions.
- Working with government and civil society to reform the judiciary and address lingering tensions over perceived impunity for the perpetrators of ethnic violence in 2010.

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.
