



Kyrgyzstan Dialogue

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Introduction

At a time when societies around the world are characterized by diversity, finding ways to live together peacefully is proving to be the key challenge of the 21st century.

Kyrgyzstan is also faced with this challenge. It has witnessed political strife in the recent past, intertwined with inter-ethnic divisions that manifested in a violent conflict. Although the situation appears to be calm on the surface, deep-rooted causes that fuel fragmentation and division continue to persist.

Kyrgyzstan has taken several promising steps since the breakdown of pluralism in 2010, including the establishment of parliamentary democracy and constitutional reforms. The presence of democratic norms, history of peaceful co-existence, openness to ideas and a vibrant civil society together present a strong opportunity for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan.

At the same time, there are several challenges. Much more remains to be done towards building an inclusive nation where each person can realize her or his full potential without the fear of violence, discrimination or exclusion. Lack of political leadership in support of pluralism, pervasive impunity and poor governance are obstacles to peaceful co-existence.

Against this backdrop, the Global Centre for Pluralism convened an international dialogue in Istanbul, Turkey on October 19-20, 2013 to discuss the prospects for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan.¹

The convened group comprised of experts from Kyrgyzstan, as well as internationally representing Kyrgyzstan's government, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, academics and researchers.

The objectives of the dialogue were two- fold:

- to engage in a discussion about the opportunities and challenges for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan, with a view to understanding the concept in the unique context of the country; and
- to help identify ways in which an organization like the Global Centre for Pluralism could contribute to advancing pluralism in the country.

This report discusses the insights from the Istanbul dialogue.

¹ This dialogue was held under the Chatham House Rule.

Pluralism Drivers

Pluralism is an ethic of respect that values human diversity. Rejecting division as a necessary outcome of diversity, pluralism instead seeks to identify the qualities and experiences that unite people and to forge a shared stake in the public good.

Based on initial research and experience, GCP has outlined some pluralism drivers – factors that tend to drive societies toward cohesion or fragmentation. These include:

- Livelihoods
- Law and politics
- Citizens and civil society
- Education and culture
- History and memory
- Regional influences²

The interplay of these drivers and their influence in shaping Kyrgyzstan’s journey has been explored in two papers commissioned by the GCP. These papers, which have served as background knowledge for the Centre’s approach and engagement in Kyrgyzstan thus far, were presented to the group of experts for discussion.

Dr. Jeff Sahadeo’s *History, Memory and Identity in Kyrgyzstan and the Ferghana Valley* assesses the role of history and memory in the making of identity in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the impact of these historical legacies on perceptions of diversity today. The paper examines how history has been deployed in the last century to support the invention of modern Kyrgyzstan. It focusses in particular on the development of a narrative of ‘ethno-genesis’, which was employed to forge discrete ethnic identities and delimit the

² Beverly Boutilier, “Defining Pluralism”, *Pluralism Papers* No.1, January 2012.

boundaries of the new republics, which in turn refashioned centuries of relationships of co-existence and local modes of understanding identity. The new national histories are enforcing their own sense of difference, but one that does not take into consideration common historical problems of Central Asian peoples. The ‘othering’ discourse is creating further distance between people instead of highlighting the many things they share.

Dr. Erica Marat’s *Kyrgyzstan: Prospects for Pluralism* provides an overview of the social, cultural, economic and political diversity of Kyrgyzstan and analyses the challenges and opportunities for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. Based on documentary and field research, the report covers major political events in Kyrgyzstan from the 1920’s through to 2013, as well as the complex interaction of collective and individual identities based on socio-economic development, residence, education, age, language, gender and religion. Marat concludes that despite significant challenges, there are prospects for enabling pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. She emphasizes, however, that given its unique context, Kyrgyzstan must find its own path to pluralism.

Opportunities and Challenges for Pluralism in Kyrgyzstan

The group’s discussion regarding the challenges and opportunities for pluralism in Kyrgyzstan touched upon several themes. These are explored below:

History / Identity

A key question during the discussions was “When can I proudly call myself ‘Kyrgyzstani’?” This at once caught the challenge of recognizing and respecting

diversity (as opposed to the person calling themselves ethnic Kyrgyz), while upholding the common allegiance to the country. It touched on the difficulty of consolidating a sense of national identity amidst multiple and competing versions of history.

Participants recognized that the predominant historical narrative in Kyrgyzstan is about the Kyrgyz people in their land, and limits the role of minorities. The ‘titular ethnicity’ was the main ethnic group in the land and laid claim over the territory through historical projections of the past, language, and other commonalities which are rooted in ethno-genesis. Such a frame has tended to foster rigid, rather than flexible or fluid notions of identity.

Participants also discussed how identities became ‘crystallized’ within this historical context i.e. particular presentations of identities were held to be representative of a group of people. The group emphasized the history of co-existence amongst peoples in Kyrgyzstan, and stressed that a discussion of identity should not be limited to specific categories, but rather take into account the complex interconnections and interaction between different kinds of identities.

The discussion also raised a related question—how can you create conditions in which people feel confident with their own identity, without limiting the expression of that identity? In other words, what is required to ensure that the promotion of pluralism serves to embrace rather than constrain the expression of identities?

Democracy / Politics

Politics has an important role to play in furthering pluralism. The participants agreed that there was currently a lack of political will to tackle the challenge of pluralism. Positive messages from the political leadership are

important, but in the present environment, politicians appear to be reticent to discuss difficult questions for fear of a backlash.

Consolidation of democracy is an immensely challenging task, and one that requires a long term sustained commitment. However, while recognizing that Kyrgyzstan’s democracy is still in a nascent stage, participants emphasized the importance of introducing pluralism into the debate now so as to strengthen the commitment to democracy and inclusion.

The recent introduction of the *Concept of the Development of Unity and Inter-ethnic Relations* is a step forward in this direction. This document discusses ways to bridge inter-ethnic divisions in the country and foster greater cohesion. The development of concept, which reflects some of the key debates in Kyrgyzstan’s society, was a three-year process and involved dialogue and compromise amongst a variety of stakeholders. The concept also supports the National Sustainable Development Strategy (2013-2017). Implementation of the concept, including securing sustained political will and resources is the next challenge.

Rule of Law / Governance

As the discussion continued, the participants focused on deficits in rule of law and governance as obstacles to pluralism. The failure of the state to guarantee basic rights for its citizens is a serious failure of governance. There is a constitutional and legislative framework in place, including in the form of the new Concept on inter-ethnic relations. However, the main challenge in Kyrgyzstan is that of implementation. That said, some participants noted that the presence of democratic norms and processes is itself a positive force, and should not be discounted.

The absence of justice for the violence in 2010, as well as the continuing culture of impunity was also identified as an obstacle for peace and pluralism. According to the participants', the judicial system is not seen as impartial, which is hampering people's confidence in state institutions. Therefore, an effective and impartial judicial system is necessary not only to address the grievances of 2010 but also for rule of law and good governance in Kyrgyzstan, which would check against discrimination and facilitate pluralism.

One participant noted that the people of Kyrgyzstan were searching and striving for dignity. However, the challenge was the failure to articulate this quest for dignity, in terms of the greater common good. Similarly, there was a yearning for justice— not only in relation to inter-ethnic relations but at a fundamental level. The participant suggested that in order to get away from a zero-sum mentality, the nation needs to develop a sense of common stakes.

Engagement to develop these common stakes, however, must go beyond formal participation. Activities that outline a common vision and promotion of respect for diversity must have a lasting impact on the way people interact and view their lives.

Economy

The participants also explored the potential of common economic interests as driver of pluralism. One participant recalled that before 2010, Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzstan felt they had more opportunities than their relatives in Uzbekistan, as well as more freedom of thought, and cultural expression. In southern Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were benefitting from economic opportunities and there was some indication that the shared economic interests might create stronger bonds between the two ethnic groups. Although this has changed, the

question was whether such common ground could be found again and whether it could contribute to greater cohesion.

Others felt however, that the effect of shared economic interests was overstated. One participant noted that in the late 2000s the picture was more complex and some Uzbeks wanted to remain in Kyrgyzstan, while others felt that they would have greater benefits in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, it was argued that wealthier Kyrgyz and Uzbeks had different access to economic resources and opportunities. The Kyrgyz could mobilize state structures to protect their interests more easily, while Uzbeks did not usually have the same opportunity and had to rely on informal or social networks to secure economic interests. Economic opportunities, some participants suggested, created little solidarity between the two groups.

Language

Language is a means through which people participate in public life. Therefore, the question of language is an important one in Kyrgyzstan, and one that has become highly politicized.

Participants agreed that bilingualism was a potential source of strength in Kyrgyzstan. While participants recognized the importance of learning Kyrgyz (the state language) for nation-building, they also emphasized the importance of maintaining space for minority languages in the country. Further, the potential role of international languages such as English was also emphasized- both as a driver of cohesion as well as a route to enhanced economic opportunities.

Translating the ideas of pluralism into the local context and languages was emphasized as a promising exercise. For example, there are tropes and phrases in local languages that strongly suggest an ethic of peaceful

coexistence, but these need to be explored, understood and revived more fully within their contexts. Doing so may, in the long term contribute to a counter-narrative to the exclusionary narratives that are currently prominent.

Participants noted that the creation of the National Committee for the State Languages, under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic was a positive development.

Education

Although a long term and multi-generational initiative, education is an area that many participants saw as an immensely important driver for Pluralism.

Many participants stressed the need for pluralism to be introduced into universities and to foster students as leaders of change. One participant recalled that after the 2010 breakdown, there was an intellectual fog—students and faculty at universities couldn't talk about what had happened and why it had happened. There was a need to address the 'intellectual vacuum' and draw intellectuals into the discussion.

Participants stressed that education is critical to promoting respect, and suggested a number of different ways in which this could be promoted. While some suggested working at the kindergarten level to inculcate pluralistic values from a very early age, others emphasized the importance of changing attitudes of the youth. Some participants stressed the importance of working with educators particularly in the field of history and social sciences to develop methods and approaches to integrate concepts of pluralism into the curriculum. Higher education institutions were highlighted as providing a unique opportunity to reach educators, youth but

also a wider audience to foster a positive and constructive narrative. Finally, some suggested fostering 'local change agents' or people responsible for leading change in the communities where they are based, who would be able to contextualize pluralism in their own environments.

The use of innovative media, such as TEDx events to spread the ideas of pluralism was also discussed.³ Such platforms provide opportunities for people to share their experiences, exchange views and engage in a conversation about important issues.

Religion

Several participants touched on the issue of religion as a driver of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. The number of faiths is growing in the country, while at the same time the appeal of more extreme or fundamentalist interpretations of religion is also increasing in some quarters. The state is seeking to strike a balance between respecting the right to freedom of religion, and guarding against violent expressions. Participants recommended that GCP should include religious leaders in its consultations. In some cases, religious leaders have tremendous influence and may also become agents of change who can promote pluralism.

The Way Forward

Participants felt that the Centre's core mission—based on comparative knowledge exchange, education in its broadest sense and dialogue

³ For more on TEDx, visit <http://www.ted.com/tedx> (accessed 16 November 2013). TED started as a conference in 1984 bringing people together from technology, education and design (TED) and has grown since then. TED's mission is 'ideas worth spreading'. TEDx talks continue this work by stimulating dialogue through locally organized events.

would be valuable in Kyrgyzstan. They offered several suggestions for ways in which Kyrgyzstan could make progress towards greater inclusion.

Contextualizing Pluralism

The concept of pluralism is already present in Kyrgyzstan, inherent in the nation's history of different peoples living together peacefully. However, the concept of pluralism needs to be contextualized— what does it mean in the unique context of Kyrgyzstan? Which existing narratives that have a resonance in society reinforce the concept? How could they be translated and communicated in plain language so as to be easily understood and shared?

Investing in research and dialogue processes to enable this process of translation and contextualization, drawing on a network of scholars, academics and local change agents in Kyrgyzstan was therefore, proposed as an promising avenue for engagement.

Sharing Comparative Knowledge

Although a unique context, Kyrgyzstan is not alone in the challenge of pluralism. On particular issues such as language policy or multi-cultural education, the experience of other countries may indeed be instructive. Are there lessons from other experiences that may be pertinent and useful in the Kyrgyzstan case?

Fostering Dialogue

Finally, participants noted that Kyrgyzstan needed space for dialogue and discussions about pluralism— both metaphorical and physical space. Public spaces like bazaars, street squares and schools need to be safe spaces for dialogue. At the same time, opinion-shapers in the country— from the media, academia or

elsewhere needed to be engaged in the process of dialogue. There is a strong exclusionary narrative in Kyrgyzstan today but there are also champions of pluralism. More opportunities for positive and constructive dialogue would enable those voices in support of pluralism to influence and shape public opinion. This kind of leadership for pluralism could help Kyrgyzstan's society in the long-term.

Conclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism hopes to be a 'destination for dialogue' about pluralism and the Istanbul dialogue marked an early, but significant step in this direction. It was successful in enriching the discussion about pluralism in Kyrgyzstan – including the strengths, weaknesses and prospects for pluralism.

Representing a variety of perspectives, participants in the Istanbul dialogue raised important questions about Kyrgyzstan's history and path, and offered ideas for ways in which it could move towards greater inclusion. The participants of the Istanbul dialogue are a network of champions of pluralism, with the potential to affect positive change in Kyrgyzstan.

The ideas discussed during the Istanbul meeting, and the valuable relationships established with the participants, will help shape GCP's engagement with Kyrgyzstan in 2014 and beyond. The GCP is immensely grateful to the Istanbul dialogue participants for their time, insights and candour.

Participants



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Guest Speaker:

H.E. Roza Otunbayeva, Former President of the
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