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# Pluralism in Kyrgyzstan

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The future of Kyrgyzstan is in need of finding pluralism models from the nation's history and the identification of existing problems, as well as ways to solve them. After all, none of us—if we were a member of a minority—would like any group in our own country to try to dominate or assimilate us, as has repeatedly happened in the past. Fortunately, Kyrgyzstan's history has examples of pluralism models. Museum artifacts also testify to this. During several historical periods, ethnic and cultural pluralism along the Silk Road was more pronounced than they are today. The terms “Silk Road,” “Eurasia” and “Central Asia” imply communication and connection. Therefore, since Kyrgyzstan is located in the middle of the Silk Road and Eurasia, it will always be central to the intersection of different peoples and religions, which obliges us to be tolerant and open. This should be viewed as a regional advantage, not as a threat to our identity.

To determine the current condition of pluralism amongst different ethnic and confessional groups, I conducted personal interviews, developed a

questionnaire and recorded my observations. I found cases of discrimination that are hindering Kyrgyzstan's development. These findings are valuable for Kyrgyzstan in the sense that they give leaders and activists the opportunity to focus on specific problems. In addition, this research contains a number of proposals on how to maintain pluralism in Kyrgyzstan. After all, there are only a few analytical publications on this topic in the local languages. Yet, there are enough materials confirming the fact that various peoples have lived in the territory of Kyrgyzstan throughout its history.

Thus, the existing literature and archaeological findings indicate that, in the past, highly “diverse” peoples lived in Kyrgyzstan, just as now. These peoples made both progress and mistakes in living together. Their experiences can serve as useful lessons for the modern population. Still, of course, there are many challenges in today's relationships, just as in any human society. Therefore, this paper offers useful solutions to these issues in Kyrgyzstan.

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## II. THE HISTORY OF PLURALISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

Different groups of people have coexisted in Kyrgyzstan since ancient times. Archaeological findings confirm that the populations of the ancient towns of Tarsakent and Nevaket, which were located in the present-day Chui Valley, were multi-lingual and multi-confessional. Fire worshipers, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Shamanists lived side by side.<sup>1</sup> This is evidenced today by Kyrgyz names and geographical names in Kyrgyzstan related to Biblical and Qur’anic texts. However, with the collapse of Genghis Khan’s empire, the once very successful and heterogeneous confederations began to turn into mono-confessional associations. Along with this tendency, by the 19th century, the Kyrgyz had reached the point of survival: internecine strife was replaced with the fight against Kokand and later Russia. The northern Kyrgyz had invited the latter to defend themselves from their neighbours. Only in the 19th century did Germans and Slavic peoples start to arrive, and they too impacted the local cultural landscape to a certain degree.

In the middle of the 8th century, Muslims, like several other religions of the Middle Ages, often solved their “sacred” issues with the help of the sword. As a result, following the Arab invasion of Central Asia in the 8th century, the Turkic Khaganates began to disintegrate. Even the settled Sogdians, who had occasionally changed their religion, complained of the invaders’ oppression. However, the massive incursion of missionaries and merchants led to the conversion of the settled peoples of southwest Central Asia to Islam, who spread it among the nomadic peoples of the north. Still, until the 13th century, Tengrism, Shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam coexisted in Semirechye. The Middle Eastern Nestorians played a special role in the promotion of education and medicine.<sup>2</sup> Later, even the Muslims cooperated with them and patronized them on the orders of the Prophet Muhammad himself.<sup>3</sup>

In the 12th century, the Nestorians established major centres of religion in the Chui Valley. Some of their gravestones (with Turkic names) have survived to this day.<sup>4</sup> Genghis Khan married his sons to women from different religions, including Nestorian and Muslim women. The elites demanded that their subordinates respect local laws and customs, regardless of religious views. They also promoted religious tolerance. Waging war in the name of religion was alien to Turko-Mongol rulers. The khans hired Nestorian and Buddhist teachers for their children. As a result, a family’s children could practise different religions.<sup>5</sup> Tolerance bordering on syncretism remained a defining feature of nearly every Central Asian belief system until nearly the end of Genghis Khan’s empire.

In the 13th century, Catholics repeatedly sent ambassadors to the Central Asian khans proposing to unite, though European Christians did not perceive the Turko-Mongolian Nestorians as Christians, since the latter differed greatly from Catholics in their external attributes. European missionaries (for example, William of Rubruck) saw the Nestorians as pagans, though they wrote that the Nestorians believed in the basic postulates of the Bible and did much charity work. The Catholics of that time did not realize that European Christians had long ago left the Bible and returned to their pre-Christian roots. The Templars, for example, were pseudo-Christians who left bitterness in the memory of Arabs, Persians and even Orthodox Christians, though enmity was not sown by religion, but in the name of religion. In addition, some local customs which the Turko-Mongol Christians observed were unacceptable for European Christians. For example, it was common among the Turko-Mongol rulers of the Nestorian faith to have several wives at the same time. Catholicism, in this respect, was antipodean to Nestorianism—its priests were forbidden to marry. Therefore, Catholic proposals to unify were perceived by the Nestorians and the Eurasian khans as a call for submission. Orthodox Christians, unfortunately, saw the Nestorians as competitors

for Eurasia, and therefore called them heretics. Their view has not changed to this day. However, the prince of Rus', Alexander Nevsky, preferred to join the Mongol-Tatars and not the Catholics, since, in my personal opinion, the former were at least tolerant toward different religions. For example, some sources point out the friendship between prominent Orthodox princes and Genghis Khan's Nestorian great-grandchildren.<sup>6</sup>

In the 19th century, Protestantism started to spread in Central Asia. Even though there was no resistance from local authorities, German Mennonites did not have significant success among Central Asian populations until the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR). However, compared to Tengrism, Nestorianism and Islam, European Christianity was not able to achieve significant success during its long stay in Central Asia.

In the 20th century, by the will of God and Stalin, the ethnic composition of the Chui Valley's population suddenly became quite varied. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union forcibly suppressed faith in God, which provoked a backlash in such a way that, for most ordinary Kyrgyz, the world was divided into the "faithful" and "infidels." I remember the teachings of the older generation who said that "infidels" would go to hell and Muslims to paradise. According to my grandfather's stories, the "infidels" even wanted to kill Jesus, but the angels saved him. These myths would have consequences, and we now live among a generation that has absorbed these instructions. Hostility was successfully suppressed by the state, but it emerged after the USSR's collapse. However, this period of atheism also allowed for some rationality in relation to religion. At the beginning of the 20th century, among the Kyrgyz elite there was a pronounced rejection of Muslim priests, which is reflected in the works of *zamanists* (enlighteners). Well-known Kyrgyz *akyns* (bards) derided *ieshans* and *kalps* (Muslim clerics), calling them hypocrites and deceivers.

In sum, the period of flourishing pluralism in the Chui Valley continued with some interruptions until the 13th century, and the period between the 14th and 20th centuries was characterized by war, illiteracy and poverty. The 18th and 19th centuries, when civil strife was frequent, were particularly sad for the Kyrgyz. By the 19th century, the population of the Chui Valley had experienced severe wars and economic problems. Thus, there was no religious pluralism during the 19th century. However, I do not presume that the coincidence of a period of extreme population degradation and pluralism's disappearance was an accident (or a regular occurrence). The fact remains that, in Kyrgyzstan, pluralism has always been followed by peace and prosperity.

### III. PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF PLURALISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

Based on historical experience, we can conclude that pluralism has always been one of the main pre-conditions for the well-being of Kyrgyz and other peoples in Eurasia. The modern Kyrgyz people are the result of a mixture of different peoples and cultures. This is reflected in tribal names, which were completely different peoples several centuries ago. For example, Naimans, Kypchaks, Kereis, Merkits, Sarts and others were independent peoples, some of whom spoke different and mutually incomprehensible languages, and even practiced different religions. However, as a result of long coexistence, different groups formed today's Kyrgyz people. In my opinion, modern Kyrgyzstan's many ethnicities will eventually merge into a single nation if peaceful coexistence is ensured. Unfortunately, there are some people who misunderstand the development of a nation, viewing our country through the prism of one ethnic group's

exclusivity, thereby pushing away other ethnic groups from integrating into a single nation. The historical development of this approach was almost always followed by socio-economic problems. For example, the Kyrgyz faced many difficult political and socio-economic problems between the 15th and 20th centuries because religious and national pluralism had disappeared from the Semirechye territory in the previous centuries. As history shows, maintaining pluralism for several decades ensures at least the same number of years of national prosperity, which, under its own inertia, lasts for several decades even if a dictatorship is established. This theory is confirmed by Kyrgyzstan's ancient and modern history. Moreover, understanding pluralism along the Silk Road includes the freedom not only of Muslims, but Christians as well.

In the religious policy sphere, the main law of the Kyrgyz Republic proclaims freedom of religion. This is a significant achievement. According to the results of my survey, an important problem hindering pluralism is an attempt to instill in people's consciousness that Christianity is for Europeans, and Islam is for Turkic-speaking and Persian-speaking peoples. This approach is completely contrary to the teachings in Islam and Christianity's primary sacred books. Moreover, suppressing freedom of conscience will lead to religious illiteracy, religious fascism and, ultimately, political collapse. Religious egoism will follow the growth of (demonstrative) piousness among the uneducated that are not tolerant of freedom of belief. We have faced this threat. For example, in the mid-1980s, few of my classmates expressed their religious beliefs. A decade later, almost all of my students began to emphasize their belonging to the "traditional" religion and its "truthfulness" compared to other faiths, though they had never studied sacred books. The idea of the "truthfulness" of any one religion inspires many to belittle other views. They themselves do not study sacred books. Instead, they believe the myths and slander of their charismatic mentors who often sow hostility wrapped

up in "beautiful" sermons. The concept of freedom of conscience implies that the citizens have the right to choose other religions. Otherwise, the freedom of religion proclaimed in our Constitution has no merit. Perhaps, the problem described here is currently the main threat to the future of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan.

In the sphere of inter-ethnic policy, the Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan is called upon to assist the government in maintaining harmony in the country. According to the survey conducted within this project's framework, the main problem for some nationalities is language policy. While in large countries like the United States, Germany and Russia there is only one de facto official language, in Kyrgyzstan at least two languages compete for this role. In southern Kyrgyzstan three languages vie for this role. The situation is aggravated by the fact that, if in the former countries the preservation of the "ancestral language" of large ethnic groups is guaranteed by the existence of other countries where their language is the main one, the Kyrgyz language has only one guarantor country.<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, an increase in Kyrgyz and Uzbek nationalism led to some tension in the country. Fortunately, this is receding, but it has left painful wounds. In recent years, the outflow of ethnic minorities has decreased compared to the early period of independence when large groups rushed to their historical homelands. It is a sign that those who have remained in Kyrgyzstan are those who either feel more comfortable living here rather than in their homeland, or those who cannot afford to leave. According to National Statistic Committee data, in 2014, a negative net migration rate (in other words, the difference between immigrants and emigrants) was observed in the direction of Russia (-6,847 people), Kazakhstan (-1,340 people), as well as Germany (-60) and the US (-40). The share of other countries near and far is minor (fewer than -20 people). At the same time, immigration from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China exceeded emigration to these countries. Despite the fact that among our respondents there is still a wish to leave Kyrgyzstan, we have observed a steady decline

both in the number of people coming to and leaving Kyrgyzstan since the early 1990s. A sudden increase in emigration was observed only after the revolutions. In the period from 2009 to 2015, among the largest ethnic minorities, the number of Russians decreased and the number of Uzbeks increased.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 is based on National Statistics Committee data and shows only those nationalities that underwent change during the 2009–15 period. The + and - signs mean an increase or a decrease, respectively, and numbers indicate change in the relative density percentage of ethnic groups compared to the country's total population. Changes in ethnic groups that are not listed here are statistically insignificant (and is why they are not included in the table). As can be seen in Table 1, representatives of the “traditionally” Central Asian ethnic groups (except for Azerbaijanis) are rising in number and the ethnic groups of Eastern European and Caucasian origin (Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians and Chechens), as well as Germans, are decreasing in number.

Russians are divided into those who want to leave but cannot and those who are not going anywhere, i.e., “I was born here and I’m not going anywhere.” Nevertheless, the survey results show that the desire to leave remains high among Russians. However, most Russians are glad that Kyrgyzstan has joined the Customs Union with Russia. The number of other ethnic groups, including Georgians, Armenians, Latvians, Estonians and others, is too small to draw any conclusions. If we consider this matter on the basis of religion, a majority of emigrants are mostly followers of Christian denominations. During my conversations with the population, some details that were not included in the official statistics came to light. For example, the actual nationality of some

citizens differs from the official one.

The questionnaire included questions on discrimination based on ethnic, linguistic and religious grounds, as well as employment discrimination. Almost no one believes that it would be better if people of different nationalities, languages and religions lived separately in their neighbourhoods (mahallas). Still, 12% of the Russians and 6% of the ethnic Kyrgyz questioned stated that they faced discrimination in all of the aspects listed. If we group them by religious affiliation, Orthodox Christians (4%) and Protestants (2%) complain of facing all types of discrimination. The other nationalities did not claim that they faced discrimination in any of the listed areas, namely, religion, professional activities, language and nationality.

An indirect sign of religious discrimination is the fact that among religious groups, almost everyone has a desire to leave, especially Protestants, Orthodox Christians and non-religious citizens. The bulk of Baptist Germans has already left Kyrgyzstan, leaving behind Russian and Kyrgyz Baptists who feel discriminated against by Muslim leaders in many spheres of life. Most Protestants indicated that they face discrimination because of their religion. Many self-identifying Christians also felt discrimination in terms of language or nationality. Of the Kyrgyz who said they faced discrimination in all of the areas listed, some are Protestants and noted facing discrimination for their practice of another religion. However, no one who identified in the questionnaire as Muslim or Orthodox indicated the existence of discrimination on religious grounds. Almost all Russians go to church occasionally, but do not promote their faith and use respectful words toward Islam. According to some respondents, the leaders of the Orthodox Church and

*Table 1: Nationalities that underwent changes during the 2009–15 period*

Kyrgyz	Uzbeks	Russians	Tatars	Ukrainians	Azerbaijanis	Germans	Chechens
+1.8	+1.2	-1.6	-0.1	-0.2	+0.1	-0.1	-0.1



the main mosques in Kyrgyzstan are trying in every possible way to “discredit” other peaceful confessions, though this trend does not promote religious pluralism and contradicts the principles of democracy.

Practicing Muslims are more protective of their religion than Orthodox Christians and Protestants. The extent of “religious protectionism” differs depending on national and religious affiliation. For example, some Uighurs and Chechens do not want to discuss freedom of religion. “There are no people among Uighurs who converted into other religions,” said one of the leaders of a Uighur organization. Most of the Middle Eastern peoples dressed in religious attire also negatively react to questions on the human right to change religion. And Protestants, like radical Muslims, consider only their interpretation of the Bible to be correct. However, Protestants do not resort to aggression in discussions, though they have many disagreements on minor issues within their most diverse movements. According to my observations, many Protestants mistakenly believe certain norms of Western culture to be biblical, though, in fact, they contradict each other. Therefore, Protestantism would appear as a purely Western interpretation of the Bible and Orthodoxy as a Russian (or Slavic, though Slavs also have their own cultural components) one.

Nevertheless, some ethnic groups do not persecute their members because of their faith. For example, Germans and Ukrainians do not mind their members’ choice of faith. There is real religious diversity among the representatives of one ethnic group at the Korean Diaspora Center in the Peoples’ Assembly of Kyrgyzstan: an Orthodox Christian, a Buddhist and a non-believer woman cheerfully greeted me. Moreover, they accept each other for what they are. “Koreans practice various religions,” said an Orthodox Korean who was baptized as a child. “Everyone has the right to choose his/her religion!” Like most groups in the assembly, Koreans do not want to leave Kyrgyzstan.

Those who complain about linguistic discrimination are mostly Russians, Uzbeks of Osh City and Uighurs of the Chui Valley. Many Russians believe that there are no problems in the religious sphere, but the imposition of the Kyrgyz language irritates them. Almost all Russians both in the Chui Valley and Osh City complained about language discrimination. During my conversations with a number of Russians, I observed that some are a little nervous when it comes to close connections of the Kyrgyz with other Turkic-speaking peoples. I believe that this attitude is a result of Soviet-era policies, which opposed the unification of the Turkic-speaking peoples. It is probable that such a policy was followed because of fears of a repetition of Russia’s 300-year struggle against Turko-Mongolian invaders. However, it was the Golden Horde of Turko-Mongols that contributed to the creation of a unified Russian empire and other Eurasian states. Uighurs in Chui Oblast and Uzbeks in Osh City also complain about language discrimination. Nevertheless, unlike Russians leaving for Russia, Uzbeks and Uighurs have no desire to leave for Uzbekistan or parts of China. “We have representatives in the parliament and we publish a newspaper in the Uighur language. Our homeland is here and we will not go anywhere,” said an elderly Uighur living in the so-called Uyghur Square in Bishkek.

Ethnic discrimination may be indicated by the fact that some minority group members have changed the nationality listed on their passports. For example, Meskhetian Turks, while reluctant to return to their historical homeland as there a lot of Armenians, often clash with nationalists in Russia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the Chui Valley, some Turks register themselves as Azerbaijanis. They are mainly engaged in trade and maintenance services. Very few parents send their children to college or university. They were particularly alarmed by the 2010 events and do not want to see a repeat of such events. There are many people in the Chui Valley who have indicated a different ethnicity on their passports. Many Germans,

Ukrainians and others register themselves as Russians. This could be regarded as a legacy of the USSR.

Interestingly, in Issyk-Ata District, Germans and Chechens do not complain of discrimination based on language or nationality, though their languages are completely different from Kyrgyz. Moreover, many Chechens and Germans know Kyrgyz. Among Chechens and Germans there are many inter-ethnic marriages, particularly among Germans. Unfortunately, children of such families no longer speak Chechen and German. The remaining Germans, about 9,000 people who are descendants of the first settlers who came to Kyrgyzstan in 1883, are assimilating and losing their language. An example of this German assimilation is taking place in the village of Ivanovka. A woman working in the bazaar, whom I interviewed, considers herself to be Russian and Orthodox despite the fact that her parents are German.

According to the survey results and my interviews, Russians and Uzbeks face discrimination while seeking employment. Only 12% of Russians (less than the other groups) said they did not face discrimination in employment or while starting up a business. They think that it is easier for the Kyrgyz to work for the government and engage in business, as they have many connections. Uzbeks follow the Russians. Only 42% of the Uzbeks surveyed believe that there is no discrimination. Interestingly, half of the Kyrgyz feel discriminated as well. Meskhetian Turks as well as Uighurs do not. Russians and Uzbeks commonly believe that it is easier for the Kyrgyz to engage in entrepreneurship and land a government job. Most Dungans and Turks believe that higher education is needed in order to work for the government. For them, education is not important, especially for girls, because it does not guarantee employment. “Our girls are being prepared for marriage rather than getting an education,” said a Dungan woman in a hijab sitting at a sewing machine in a private business in the village of Ivanovka. “There is no sense in getting a higher education because if you do not have connections in

higher [government] bodies, you will not get a job anyway,” said a 50-year old man.

The situation across Kyrgyzstan varies, as each region is culturally and politically different. Politicians often divide Kyrgyzstan into the northern and southern regions. However, not all regions of Kyrgyzstan are multi-confessional or multi-ethnic. Those settlements where diversity exists possess very distinctive traits. For example, the cultures of Osh or Cholpon-Ata are not representative of Kyrgyzstan as a whole, as they are located in different regions of the country, and consist of different ethnic and religious groups. Chui Oblast, which is the top destination of internal migration from all parts of the country, also differs from other regions. Therefore, to study the situation on the ground, settlements were chosen in three different regions of the country: Osh, Kant (and nearby villages) and Cholpon-Ata.

During my conversations with the residents of the villages situated along the Silk Road between Bishkek and Ivanovka, I noticed people have relatively warm feelings toward each other. “Are there Russians among your customers?” I asked a girl who was selling Shoro drinks near a bazaar in Ivanovka. “Everyone, even foreigners, come to me [to buy things],” she replied. There are Kyrgyz, Dungan and Russian workers in the Ivanovka market. The latter often have German, Ukrainian, Kyrgyz and Dungan relatives. People here are more tolerant of different religions than in Bishkek: “Everyone has the right to believe in whatever he wants.” In the corner of the bazaar, I noticed a young man with a European ethnicity who flirted with Asian girls for nearly half an hour. And, in Novo-Pokrovka, an elderly Russian woman whose late husband was German is trying to live in peace with everyone. Among her friends and relatives there are Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Protestants. In Krasnorechka, a 55-year old woman does not want to go to Russia, even though her children have already bought an apartment in Moscow and moved there. She thinks positively of all religious groups, including

Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Baptists. “People of different nationalities and religions should live together. If they live in separate villages, there can be fights between the villages. In addition, it is far more interesting when you live together,” said a 60-year old Kyrgyz teacher from the village of Internatsionalnoye. Also, she is comfortable with her daughter-in-law’s Protestantism.

Regarding languages, most of the teachers at this school in Krasnorechka said there should be state and official languages, but noted that ensuring the equality of other languages would be problematic. “Since we live in Kyrgyzstan, we should have a primary language, otherwise misunderstandings and scandals are inevitable,” they said. At the same time, among them was a Kyrgyz woman who does not speak Kyrgyz. She speaks only Russian. It seemed to me that she was not happy to discuss languages. A vast majority of my respondents said they do not study the sacred books of their religion, not to mention the scriptures of other religions. “I am a Muslim and I am happy with it,” said a young Kyrgyz woman in Kant who was not wearing a headscarf. In her view, Islam is the right religion, so it is not necessary to study the books of other religions. She thinks Baptism is some sort of a derivative of many other religions. To my question about marriage between Chechens and Orthodox Christians, a young Chechen man whom I met in Bishkek responded by saying: “I would marry a Russian woman no problem.” Older Chechens are trying to keep in touch with the Chechen Republic. According to many respondents, local leaders do not want confrontations with Orthodox Christians. “If you live separately, you end up fixating on your own problems. We need to know about each other. Germans must know the Kyrgyz culture, the Kyrgyz must know about Germans,” said Anatoly Petrovich, head of Kant’s German Center. “In my childhood, we played and went to school together. No one said I was a German. I have a lot of Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek friends and ethnicity was never a problem. If something seems to be interfering with our culture,

we should not worry. It is not a big deal.” Anatoly Petrovich believes that all problems, especially the ones we have now in Kyrgyzstan, start with domestic squabbles and turn into inter-ethnic clashes.

The City of Osh has been home to different nationalities and cultures for centuries. The main problem in Osh is not inter-faith relations, but inter-ethnic relations. The absence of inter-faith conflicts is not an indicator of tolerance; it is a sign of the Christian population’s emigration. However, mono-confessionalism has not reduced the tensions in Osh. On the contrary, it has taken on an ethnic dimension. Many try naively to shift responsibility to imaginary enemies and think that the source of conflict is not Osh residents, but outsiders. Whatever the cause, there is still separation between Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz in markets and in places of permanent residence as well as in various professions. “Let there be a president from the north of the country. If a southerner becomes president, we will again have nationalism,” said an elderly Uzbek man who works as a seller in a bazaar. “What does an Uzbek do? He works in the markets, restaurants and so on,” continued the elderly man. “And what about the Kyrgyz? They are either civil servants, police officers or out of work.” A young Kyrgyz woman believes that all the houses in the city are occupied by Uzbeks, that’s why the Kyrgyz live in apartment houses. “We have always lived in our homes. At some point the Kyrgyz started to descend from the mountains,” stated an Uzbek woman who was standing nearby. When I asked questions in Kyrgyz, all of the Uzbeks in Osh responded in good Kyrgyz. Today, some Kyrgyz are worried that the Kyrgyz might lose control of Osh where most of the inhabitants have always been Uzbeks. One of the Uzbek communities is located right in the centre of Osh, but is not considered to be a part of the city. “The decision to leave this mahalla out was politically motivated; it was done to make sure that Osh is not handed over to Uzbeks,” said one of my Kyrgyz interviewees. According to him, Uzbeks want to create an autonomous region of Osh within Uzbekistan. However, not all Kyrgyz in



Osh think that way.

A Russian student at the State University listens to all the lectures in Kyrgyz, but responds to questions and writes her essays in Russian. “Everything starts in the family. They bring up their children based on their own attitudes towards other nationalities.” A couple of young girls said, “Indigenous Kyrgyz are normal. The aggressive Kyrgyz are the ones from the countryside.” I suppose by “normal” the girls meant Russian-speaking Kyrgyz because they can at least communicate with these people. An overwhelming majority of Russians do not complain about Islam, but do not seek to learn the Kyrgyz language. Moreover, there are more and more Russian converts to Islam. All of the Russians with whom I spoke think favourably of Uzbeks. “They respect me more,” said an elderly Russian woman. Many Osh residents, particularly Uzbeks, work in Russia. However, none of my Russian respondents were interested in the causes of the conflict that has been going on for many years.

In addition, very few people in Osh have read the Qur’an. Among my companions there were many people who consider themselves Muslims, but do not consistently comply with religious requirements. “I have high blood pressure, so I rarely go to the mosque and do not pray at home,” said a retired Uzbek, as if to justify it. A middle-aged Kyrgyz man said that it is possible to combine alcohol and Islam. “I first purify my blood from alcohol. Only then do I pray,” he uttered as he showed me a lot of videos on Islam on his phone. A young Kyrgyz man considers himself to be from Alai, despite the fact that his parents have lived in Osh for 20 years. To my question about whether he knew where the Russian church was in the city, he replied affirmatively. But my other question, “Have you ever been to a Russian Church?” clearly shocked him. “Why would I go there?” he said, as he looked into my eyes with suspicion. Some have doubts about the existence of Baptists. Those who have heard about them have distorted, mostly negative views. Another middle-aged man who goes to a Protestant

church believes that God will send those who will not accept their teachings to hell.

In Cholpon-Ata, a vast majority of the population are Kyrgyz and Russian. There are also representatives of almost all of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) nations. Due to the fact that the city lives off tourism, there is a high level of tolerance. There is a mosque, an Orthodox church and a Baptist church. The local museum has artifacts on all of the local traditional religions, including Nestorianism, which was a popular religion of the Central Asian nations almost until the 15th century. Cholpon-Ata is another city that is a clear example of pluralism in Kyrgyzstan.

## IV. PROPOSALS ON PRESERVING PLURALISM

A survey conducted among students in eight European countries has shown that one of the main pre-conditions for a peaceful coexistence of people of different faiths, namely, knowledge about religions, is very important. Most of the respondents would like to have classes on religion in schools. European students also appreciate religious diversity in their societies, though some have biased views about other religions. Basically, they do not mind being peers with those of other religious beliefs, but most of them interact with students of the same religious culture, even if they live in societies where various religions coexist. What’s interesting is that while European students show tolerance in the classroom, the level of tolerance is much lower in everyday life. In general, European students believe that peaceful coexistence of different religions is indeed possible.<sup>9</sup>

A number of American philosophers believe that dialogue is possible under the following conditions: an openness to dialogue and changes in thinking;

adherence to a particular religion; the recognition of some sort of common underlying connections among religions; the possibility of mutual understanding among religions; the ability to recognize the truths of another religion<sup>10</sup>; and a willingness to adapt them to one's own religion. In the foreword to one of Jewish writer Magonet Jonathan's books, Prince Hassan bin Talal lists the following guidelines for dialogue:

Begin with commonality; emphasize the association between theology and practicality; recognize the political and economic dimensions of inter-faith dialogue; ... embracing the principle of no coercion; upholding the right to proclaiming one's own religion; reconsider the content of education; ensure a free flow of information; be courageous in looking afresh at, first, our own, and, second, each others' texts, heritage and history; accept responsibility for words and action at all levels; develop a civilized framework for disagreement.<sup>11</sup>

Usually, the authors of ideas on the clash of civilizations are very often subjected to criticism here, at least among my colleagues in universities. The dictatorship of one religion or ethnic group does not suit almost any of those interviewed within this project's framework, with the exception of religious extremists and ultra-nationalists. They have optimistic forecasts about the future: that there will be peace, inter-faith dialogue and no war. However, there are problems in Kyrgyzstan, and more stringent methods than what we have now may serve as a solution to the problems of pluralism. These include the establishment of a democracy with protective means for the rights of individuals and minorities. In this case, tolerance is provided by strong civil institutions and the rule of law. For example, in Turko-Mongolian ancient history, including, of course, the Kyrgyz, the observance of the customs and laws of the khan implied religious pluralism. Genghis Khan would never allow a ban on religious freedom among his subjects. Violation of this rule was punished severely. Another option is the development of education, especially liberal education,

which takes into account the realization of the imperfection of human understanding of many eternal questions.<sup>12</sup> Such consciousness would preclude claims about possessing absolute truths by individuals or religions. The third solution is mass education on the basics of all scriptures and educating people to be tolerant towards others' right of choice, even if he or she (un)consciously chooses some sort of "heresy." At the same time, every citizen should be aware of the inevitability of punishment for resorting to (sacred) violence.

I believe that the State Agency for Religious Affairs would serve the people more effectively if it employed representatives of all faiths. It would be fairer if the Parliament primarily supported religious minorities and stopped trying—as is often done—to pass off Bolshevism (the dictatorship of the majority) as democracy. It would be even better to give at least the main religions a place in the Parliament. Precisely on the same principle, it is necessary to introduce a program of religious studies for schools that will teach the basics of religions because, according to experts, children should know about other religions in order to understand each other and live in harmony. The need for religious education is indicated by the fact that most people are not properly informed about other religions. Many of the respondents who were interviewed within this project's framework, for example, associate only Orthodox believers with Christianity, and hardly accept Baptists and other Protestant movements as Christian. The same is happening with respect to other religions.

Unfortunately, as the results of the survey show, only Christians and Protestants, who are ethnic Kyrgyz or Russian, think knowledge is important in developing tolerance. Unwillingness to know about other cultures does not promote mutual understanding and education. In this regard, the Germans are an exception. They believe that in addition to state control, knowing about the culture and religion of other nations living next to you is good for tolerance. It is necessary

to work more with some ethnic groups who, while living in a multi-confessional society, do not want to understand another point of view when it comes to religion. For example, Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks believe they do not need to know about other religions. The former considers state control to be the only solution to save the world, while the latter does not trust the government. To solve such problems, the Parliament needs to work closely with the Ministry of Education and Science. I propose giving the standard state curricula more flexibility so that they meet the needs of local communities. In other words, there should be more space for variation in the curriculum. Even the state component of the curricula needs to be made more responsive to the specific requirements of individual regions.

Surveys among the most active citizens with different views who live in Bishkek and the surrounding areas show that they have certain perceptions of people with different religious views. They also have criteria for determining such images. When asked to describe the positive traits of good people with a different faith, the respondents gave the following answers: “they are tolerant towards everyone; do not promote their religion; set a good example; promote tolerance towards others; provide counseling; live with good intentions; congratulate during religious festivals; treat all people as they would like to be treated; know the distinctive features of other religions, but do not do anything, just go on about their lives.” There were also the following responses: “In general, inter-faith peace and inter-ethnic peace is possible only when people live together, intermarry. As long as kindergartens are separate, life is separate, cemeteries are separate, the world remains very fragile;” “It does not matter what your religion or nationality is, the important thing is what kind of a person you are, your morality, ethics.” I believe that these criteria are universal in any advanced society and could be introduced into educational programs.

However, some believe that when an instructor who professes another religion teaches religious studies,

it does not promote pluralism, but leads to the development of false beliefs about religions among children. Therefore, subjects related to religions should be added to the national curriculum, and accompanied by well-considered educational and methodological materials that do not allow subjectivity on the part of teachers. In addition, religious studies should be taught not by one instructor, but by several, who represent not only Muslims and Orthodox Christians, but also Protestants and other religions. Variation should be provided at least in the form of guest lectures. From my experiences, I know that the worst teachers of religious studies in secular institutions are believers and the best are Russian communists, since the latter are at least neutral when it comes to religion.

The German community, which was one of the largest minorities in Chui Region for 100 years, could be considered a role model of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional consent. During their entire history in Kyrgyzstan, there has not been a single case of Germans clashing with any other ethnic or religious group. Germans living in Kant believe that in order to improve inter-faith peace, people must know about each other's religions and be tolerant towards everyone. König Anatoly Petrovich, head of the German community in the Issyk-Ata District, believes that putting someone above someone else is wrong: “God created everyone equal, in his one's own image and likeness. We are all like God, and we are all equal,” he said. Petrovich continued,

When people respect national, cultural and religious traditions, they live in peace and harmony. Therefore, we, Russians, Kyrgyz and Germans, have to think with our own heads. Then we will live in peace and harmony. Take the village of Internationalnoye. Only Germans used to live here. In the neighbouring villages Bozbarmak and Jarbash, there were only Kyrgyz. When I was a kid, my father was a supplier. We used to go there and the Germans would speak Kyrgyz, and the Kyrgyz would speak German, because they lived in brigades, and the brigadier could be a Kyrgyz or a German.

Anatoly Petrovich is not a religious man, but says his father was a Lutheran and his mother was a Tatar. His wife is Russian and his children are Orthodox Christians. The Koreans are another ethnic group that has never participated in inter-ethnic clashes. Koreans can be representatives of all religions or no religion, but they accept each other without question.

In the history of Islam, there were cases when the Caliphate listened to Nestorian civil servants and even collaborated with the Nestorian Christians of Eurasia, as it needed the intellectual support of the Nestorians who had become a minority by the end of the reign of Genghisids. Moreover, Muhammad had Nestorian friends, doctors and scientists, and supported them.<sup>13</sup> Even the Qur'an has allusions to the idea of "listening to the people of the book" (2:62, 2: 136, 3: 115, 5:69, 5:82, 29:46, etc.) Both the Bible and the Qur'an have verses that call for respecting each other: "... and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, 'We are Christians.' That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant" (Surah 5, Ayah 85/89) and "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:39).

Of the settlements known for their diversity, Kant, the villages of Rot-Front and Novopokrovka, and the city of Cholpon-Ata are exemplary. These settlements have never experienced ethnic and religious conflicts. The villages of Novopokrovka, Ivanovka, Krasnorechka and Osh City are also diverse, with many people open to all nationalities, but from time to time they experience conflicts. Sometimes negative rumours are spread in these places. However, we cannot say that peace is more fragile in Osh than in homogenous regions. "Those who were brought up in the USSR do not engage in fights. [Nowadays] nobody is educating our youth. There used to be clubs, but now there is nothing," said a group of Dungan sellers who took part in my survey. Uzbeks consider Osh to be their historical homeland and live in their own ethnic communities (*mahallas*). They are not planning on

going anywhere. When you discuss the latest ethnic conflict in Osh with Uzbeks, it stirs both their interest and a sense of pain. Almost all of my respondents believe that it is better to live together to avoid inter-ethnic conflicts. "If I could, I would mix up all the inhabitants, so there would not be Uzbek, Kyrgyz or some other *mahallas*," said a young Uzbek. Despite the fact that there is some mistrust between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, many of my respondents want peace. There are also many Kyrgyz and Uzbeks who are optimistic [about the future]. They understand that many dishonest politicians will still try to use the people of Osh in their own interests, so they are looking for ways to prevent instability, and are promoting peace in word and action. Therefore, in problematic cities, there is a need to: gradually reduce segregation in settlements (this applies only to Osh), in choosing jobs, and in the business sphere (this applies to all other settlements); to develop educational programs about the need for pluralism and diversity; and to improve citizens' consciousness about belonging to one and the same country. At the same time, representatives of the titular nationality, especially those from the regions, need to be educated to prevent radicalization and to support a progressive spirit of inclusive nation-building.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on lessons learned in our history and the history of other countries, it is necessary to continue to develop a culture of peaceful coexistence. There are many examples of peaceful coexistence in the territory of Kyrgyzstan as well as bitter experiences of injustice in relation to pluralism. The remains of ancient cities, such as Tarsakent, Suyab and Nevaket, can tell us much more, because they are memorials of both good and bad experiences of coexistence as well as mutual relations among different groups of people.<sup>14</sup> The

connection between Genghis Khan's religious policy—in which all nations were free to choose any religion—and his successes, as well as the consequences of his great-grandchildren's religious policies, could be the subject of many dissertations. Undoubtedly, respect for ethnic and religious minorities is the lot of noble peoples and a guarantee of their prosperity.

Today, just like in the past, religiously and ethnically diverse peoples reside in the Chui Valley. They live relatively peacefully. The settlements from Bishkek to Ivanovka have a warm atmosphere of mutual trust, tolerance and optimism. There is no segregation of ethnic and religious groups. Different peoples live together in these places. Some ethnic groups have never participated in inter-ethnic clashes. These are Germans, Koreans, Ukrainians and Uighurs. Among Germans, Koreans and Ukrainians, one can see a kaleidoscope of world religions. This does not lead to any internal quarrels or external divisions.

The situation in Osh is a little worrisome. There is still division among ethnic and religious groups. However, during the survey and interviews, a majority of ethnic groups indicated mixed communities as one of the prerequisites for peace. Most people, regardless of their ethnicity, are religious only in appearance—very few people are interested in the basic sacred books of their own religion. As for their neighbours who profess other religions, several respondents answered by saying that they “do not want to take the trouble” to learn about them. Such attitudes contribute to distorted perceptions of other ethnic groups and religions. Such views can accumulate over time and be used by instigators. Therefore, it is necessary to take measures to improve the level of trust among different ethnic and religious groups.

The examples of peaceful coexistence of people of different religions and ethnic groups that we found in Issyk-Ata District and in Osh, as well as various theories and recommendations on how to enhance pluralism in a particular country or even an area could

be useful in furthering the country's development. There is also a need to address some other aspects that were identified as a result of our surveys and observations. These aspects include introducing pluralism by increasing people's awareness of the cultures and religions of all communities that currently exist in the country. As almost all of the respondents pointed out, it is also necessary to promote mixed communities, especially in Osh. Unity in diversity must be the slogan for the next decade, and relevant programs should be implemented, including educational programs and special laws. This is the only way to prepare the population to resist various instigators who want to use people for their own selfish purposes.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John England (2002), *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia* (Delhi: Cambridge Press), 47–50.

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<sup>3</sup> Galina Khizrieva (2011), “Mezhreligioznyy Dialog” [Interfaith Dialogue], accessed 8 August 2016, <http://www.islam.ru/content/analitics/30200>.

<sup>4</sup> Lyudmila Zhukova (1994), *Iz istorii drevnikh kul'tov Sredney Azii* [From the History of the Ancient Cults of Central Asia] (Tashkent: Glavnaya redaktsiya entsiklopediy), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Kemp (2000), *Steppe by Step* (London: Monarch Books), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Askar Mambetaliev (2013), *Sled Khrista na Shelkovom puti* [The Footprints of Christ on the Silk Road] (Bishkek: Janizak Print), 45.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Patten and Will Kymlicka (2003), “Introduction: Language Rights and Political Theory: Context, Issues, and Approaches,” in *Language Rights and Political Theory*, edited by Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 22, 38.

<sup>8</sup> National Statistics Committee (2015), Ethnic Composition of the Population, accessed 7 July 2016, <http://www.stat.kg/en/opendata/category/312>.

<sup>9</sup> The European Commission (2011), “Pluralism and Religious Diversity, Social Cohesion and Integration in Europe,” accessed 7 June 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/project\\_synopses/pluralism-and-religious-diversity\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/project_synopses/pluralism-and-religious-diversity_en.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Cornille (2013), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons), 21–44.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Magonet (2003), *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (New York: I.B.Tauris), viii.

<sup>12</sup> George Soros (2009), *The Crash of 2008 and What it Means: The New Paradigm for Financial Markets* (New York: Public Affairs), 7–10.

<sup>13</sup> Khizrieva (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Irina Pavlova (2012), “Krasnorechenskoye gorodishche – artefakt ne fakt” [The Krasnaya Rechka Settlement – Artifact is Not a Fact] 24.kg, 15 May 2012, accessed 6 June 2016, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/128808-krasnorechenskoe-gorodishhe-artefakt-ndash-ne-fakt.html>.

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