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Reflections on social and religious diversity in Kyrgyzstan and implications for pluralism: papers by Askar Mambetaliev, Negizbek Shabdanaliev and Myktar Tagaev

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The project through which these papers were produced is premised on the understanding that social and religious diversity is not the same thing as pluralism. Diversity is a fact about a population; pluralism is a value affirming that *diversity strengthens* a society, as the Global Centre for Pluralism has emphasized. The fact of diversity in a region or country is necessary for the value of pluralism to take hold in that society. But diversity alone is not enough, because diversity could lead to tension and conflict as well. One overall question for this panel is, what does Kyrgyzstan's diversity mean for building pluralism?

The papers in this panel offer historical perspective on how different ethnic and religious groups lived in the past on the territory of today's Kyrgyz Republic. They show that various kinds of peoples lived, worked, traded, socialized, celebrated, and played together for centuries without enduring problems. These studies certainly show that interethnic and inter-religious co-existence was not only possible, but formed a mostly stable and taken-for-granted state of affairs for a long time. There is even evidence in the papers that this condition of mixing was valued positively by the population, given the borrowing of cultural practices and linguistic expressions between groups, and the inviting of friends and neighbours from other ethnicities to celebrations. This reveals a form of pluralistic attitude in times past: differences were valued as good, as enriching everybody.

However, history is valuable to thinking about pluralism, not just by revealing the fact of diversity in earlier times. It is not enough to say that different ethnic groups used to live together peacefully. We also have to be aware of how the very idea of ethnicity is understood yesterday and today. That's because the concept of ethnicity itself has changed. Today, most in the former Soviet Union understand ethnicity (or "nationality") as implying a set of characteristics: an ethnic group has its own distinct history, language, territory, customs, mentality, and even destiny that are essentially fixed. Many problems of interethnic relations today are made worse in part because of these assumptions about what every ethnic group is and must have. Before the 20th century, however, Central Asians did not understand themselves according to these modern ideas of what an ethnic group is and does. Some papers of this panel are set in this earlier time, when the very idea of ethnicity was more opened-ended, flexible, and possibly fluid.

If it is true that the way people understand ethnicity is itself a product of history, then this awareness has practical consequences today. It shows that assumptions about the needs and interests of ethnic groups today are not fixed. If there is tension or conflict, we should not assume ethnic groups must think of themselves as groups of unified interest or destiny. Instead of thinking in terms of zero-sum competition between groups, people could perhaps begin to think

about the common good of the society. This realization would be one step in turning the fact of diversity toward building pluralism.

Turning to this panel's papers, **Askar Mambetaliev** covers many topics in "Pluralism in Kyrgyzstan", which starts by looking at secondary sources about historical sites and museums to find material evidence of a diverse past. The paper turns to various data to assess the state of pluralism since post-Soviet independence. It looks at the growth of religious sentiment and practice, based on published surveys. It considers the trade-offs of promoting either the languages of distinct groups to preserve identities, or the national language to promote national unity. The essay moves to the importance of education in inculcating tolerant attitudes to children, changes in ethnic composition in Kyrgyzstan due to population movements, religious discrimination, and the specific interethnic situations of three regions of focus. It concludes with recommendations, centered on increasing mutual knowledge of other groups.

Negizbek Shabdanaliev writes about "The Role of Ancient Petroglyphs in the Study of the Development of Kyrgyz Religious Understandings", which offers a rich, detailed account of the various religious systems seen since from ancient times on the present-day territory of Kyrgyzstan. He surveys concepts and practices related to Tengri-ism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam across the centuries, citing works from archaeologists, philologists, historians, and ethnographers. The wide and long historical view reveals the astonishing diversity of religious traditions on this land.

Myktar Tagaev's paper, "Social and Religious Xenophobia as a Policy Instrument of the Soviet Union: History and Lessons Learned (1929-1936). The Case of Southern Kyrgyzstan" offers an expert historian's account of a little known part of early Soviet rule: the deliberate promotion of xenophobia as a means of administrative control, spurring production, and achieving the political objectives of the period. The author argues that Soviet authorities failed in the end toward their attempts to promote xenophobia. The study calls attention to the facts that hostilities between social groups are not necessarily "natural", but can be mobilized by authorities or elites for political purpose. This constitutes a reminder that political context is crucial in understanding interethnic and interreligious relations, and that hostile tensions are *not* an inevitable fact of diversity.