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Introduction: Ethnic Issues in Central Asia

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The present special issue reflects the ECMI's renewed interest in Central Asian topics, which grew out of a workshop held in April 2018. The workshop featured prominent international scholars and focused on various aspects of the Central Asian reality (e.g. ethnicity, nationalism, human rights, cross-border issues). This resulted in several publications, intensification of ECMI's cooperation with Central Asian partners, participation in conferences, hosting of interns from Central Asian higher education institutions as well as the organization of further events. Before the reader launches into this issue of JEMIE, as the guest editor of this special issue, together with Aziz Berdiqulov, I would like to offer a set of introductory remarks contextualizing the ECMI's interest in Central Asia and explaining how it is reflected in the following contributions.

Central Asian studies traditionally focus on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Importantly, parts of neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan or China are also frequently included, not only because of the geographic proximity, but also due to a shared history, ethnic and linguistic profiles, or geopolitical

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challenges. This broader approach to the notion of Central Asia has been adopted by ECMI and, to a certain degree, is reflected in the present issue.

But Central Asia's complex geography is not the sole reason for ECMI's focus on the region. Other features of the region as a whole, or of its constitutive countries, are tightly linked to a number of topics of traditional significance for ECMI.

1. Ethnic diversity

Diversity is a common feature of all Central Asian countries, although precise and up-to-date data on ethnic composition is not always available. Nevertheless, significant minority communities can be found across the region. For instance, Kazakhstan has a significant Russian minority concentrated in the northern part of the country; it also has smaller minorities including Germans, Poles and Uyghurs. In Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks comprise 14.6% of the population and are concentrated in the south-western part of the country, which borders their kin state. This area was the site of clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks in 1990, and again in 2010; these are some of the most telling examples of interethnic tensions in the region's recent history.

2. Intersection of political regimes and minority rights

. Most Central Asian governments can be classified as authoritarian, to a greater or lesser extent, with Turkmenistan lying at the most extreme edge of this spectrum. The only non-authoritarian (albeit unstable) exception is Kyrgyzstan which is, however, still rather distant from fulfilling most of the criteria of a mature democracy, with the place of the Uzbek minority posing perhaps the most significant question of its democratic principles. These political leanings naturally affect approaches to ethnic diversity management, recognition of minority communities etc., which in turn provoke research questions involving comparative elements.

3. Identity building

The post-Soviet period is characterized by debates and tensions around identity, which in most cases fit into a classic dichotomy between civic and ethnic approaches. The very names of Central Asian countries imply the existence of numerically superior titular nations; this raises questions about the majority groups' positions vis-à-vis conational minority communities. Kazakhstan's model of a cohesive multi-ethnic nation – a variant of the civic identity approach – is frequently hailed as the most advanced in the region. However, the construction of a civic Kazakh nation is an ongoing project rather than an accomplished fact. It should also be borne

in mind that even Kazakhstan is not entirely free from ethnic tensions and conceptual paradoxes; for example, the policy of repatriating ethnic Kazakhs residing elsewhere can be seen as an attempt to tilt the country's demographic balance in favour of the titular nation.

4. Minority rights and issues per se

Central Asia's ethnic diversity leads to a set of general and classic questions from the field of minority studies. For instance, what is the status of minority communities? Are there any mechanisms/bodies providing minority communities with channels of political or socioeconomic participation? Is education provided in minority languages? Do minority communities operate their own media outlets? What socio-demographic trends affect minority communities? Unsurprisingly, all these questions can be readily applied to particular situations concerning minority communities in Central Asia, such as Tajikistan's failure to recognize the distinctiveness of the Pamiri ethnic group, the unaddressed legacy of 2010 negatively affecting educational opportunities (among others) for Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek community, the persistent significance of informal structures facilitating minority communities' access to authorities and economic resources etc., and the mass emigration of Bukharan Jews to the United States and Israel, which makes the continuous existence of that community in Central Asia uncertain.

5. Minority rights in international contexts (bilateral and geopolitical)

Within this conceptual frame, Central Asia poses two questions of particular significance. The first concerns intra-regional dynamics: can the recent political thaw in Uzbekistan result in a bilateral Kyrgyz–Uzbek solution to the complex situation of each country hosting a significant minority of the other's co-ethnics? A very cautious optimism would not be entirely unjustified, considering the recent progress on the demarcation and delimitation of the shared border. As a side note, it should be mentioned that similar advances have not been made on the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border, where minority issues are also present. However, historical precedents of similar bilateral solutions suggest that what matters is also a favourable broader geopolitical context (as in the case of the Danish-German model of minority rights protection following WWII). The second crucial question therefore deals with this geopolitical dimension, specifically China's role in Central Asia: to what degree does mass repression of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (bordering Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) affect minority rights in the region? This question is of immediate importance due to the presence of a Uyghur diaspora in Central Asian countries, as well as Central Asian minorities in Xinjiang. China's economic dominance in the region

already negatively affects Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's ability to intervene on behalf of their citizens residing in China, not to mention other members of kin communities with no formal ties to their titular nation state. The full extent of the damage to minority rights resulting from these circumstances remains to be seen, but given China's status in the world, the repercussions are likely to be global in scale.

This special issue's contributors address several of the issues identified above. Malika Abdulbakieva demonstrates that minority identity is a highly context-dependent phenomenon. Analysis of two Uyghur diasporas – in Kyrgyzstan and Turkey – reveals a shared set of identity markers; however, their prominence tends to vary by, for instance, the diaspora's main reasons for outward migration, its tenure in a particular host country and the host country's approach towards that community. The author's extensive fieldwork in Turkey, where the diaspora is largely composed of refugees, leads her to conclude that the intensification of China's repressive policies in XUAR in recent decades, combined with the victims' vivid memories of such practices, has led to a generalized hardening of the diaspora's position vis-à-vis its former host state. It has also resulted in a reorientation of Uyghur identity towards its religious dimension and a yearning for religious liberation expressed through widely shared pro-independence aspirations. The Kyrgyz case, where the diaspora can be characterized as a long-standing multigenerational minority community, presents a more complex map of approaches in seeking to balance the cultural and religious components of Uyghur identity. Consequently, the temporal and inherently dynamic nature of diaspora identity is salient in both cases.

Olivier Ferrando's article provides another comparative analysis, this time focused on policies and practices concerning languages of instruction in the Ferghana Valley, a subregion spanning Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The education of minority communities is presented as a very complex interplay between three stakeholder groups: authorities, minority elites and parents of minority children. Interestingly, the educational strategies pursued by minority parents are quite frequently at variance with the ethnicity-based educational offer provided by the authorities, and also run counter to the nationalist-leaning idea of first-language education promoted by ethnic activists and minority leaders. Instead, they often look for educational opportunities that will clearly benefit their children in terms of future professional opportunities or social standing. The article observes that factors such as geographical location and ethnic environment are also important in determining minority parents' educational preferences: less diverse, more remote communities tend toward less civic-oriented identities, and therefore more ethno-centric approaches to education.

Arzuu Sheranova problematizes another important issue in minority studies: is it possible to transfer minority rights protection frameworks from one socio-political and regulatory context to another? Her analysis focuses on the aftermath of the Kyrgyz–Uzbek interethnic clashes of 2010, and the resulting diversity management strategies introduced in Kyrgyzstan under the guidance of the international community. The conclusions are not optimistic. This importation of ready-made solutions did not succeed in Kyrgyzstan for a number of reasons, including insufficient financial resources for Kyrgyz institutions and their consequent lack of capacity, the implementing actors’ superficial understanding of external diversity management frameworks which bore little connection to the social reality on the ground, and the prevalence of ethnic approaches to identity on the part of the dominant ethnic group. Sheranova’s article ought to be read by researchers, as well as staff of NGOs and international organizations considering engagement in the region in order to better understand the local reality, to avoid repeating mistakes of the past and to overcome obstacles faced by predecessors.

Last but not least, Aziz Berdiqulov offers detailed impressions resulting from a thorough read of *Uzbekistan’s New Face*, a volume co-edited by S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell. Although the book under review does not focus directly on Uzbekistan’s contemporary minority issues, its contents certainly provide useful context for anyone trying to grasp the meaning of the reforms recently introduced by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s administration, and their potential implications for issues related to ethnicity.

The hope is that these insightful contributions, more than providing worthwhile reading, will also inspire further research covering this important region.