The Demographics of Ethnicity: Implications for Project Support in Central Asia

The study on which this dissemination note is based points to the need for awareness of the sensitivities surrounding interethnic relations in the Central Asian countries in future World Bank operations in the region. Two main reasons account for this. First, the political identities of many peoples of Central Asia are more closely aligned to ethnic affiliation than to nation states. Second, projects that will require the acquisition of land will need to be cognizant of historical claims and counterclaims based upon ethnic considerations. States' boundaries have been changed periodically during the twentieth century, both to accommodate the political expediencies of the former USSR as well as to divide and rule the various ethnic groups. The newly independent countries of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (see map)—each include a number of different ethnic groups, in addition to more recent immigrants, such as Russians, Germans and Ukrainians. The total population of the five countries was approximately 49 million in 1989 and is expected to have reached some 60 million in 2000.

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Until recently, the most striking ethnic cleavage in the region was that between ethnic Russians and Central Asian national groups; however, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries are now adapting themselves to three major transformations after seven decades of Soviet rule: political independence, economic restructuring, and a loss of specialized manpower resources with the departure of Russians and other Europeans. The independence of the countries is, however, somewhat limited by economic turmoil and Russia's doctrine of holding itself responsible for the safety of Russians in the territories of the former Soviet Union.

Many believed that following the Soviet Union's demise the differences between indigenous Central Asians would be less salient that those characterizing the relationship between Central Asians and Russians. This has not turned out to be the case.

The contentious mix the "ethnicity factor" presents today is largely a result of the Soviet legacy. To the inhabitants of the vast regions of Central Asia—Moslem descendants of Turco-Mongol and Persian peoples—taken over by the Russians, the concept of a national identity was a completely foreign one. By creating five distinct national entities the Soviets not only intended to modernize the people of Central Asia, but recognized the threat the strong Pan-Islamic movement of the 1920s posed to Soviet dominance over the region. In carving out the territories, the Soviets ensured that sufficient ethnic diversity was included within each boundary to prevent the emergence of a powerful, unified force with anti-Soviet tendencies. To reinforce this divide and conquer strategy, the Soviets redrew the countries' national boundaries a number of times during the 1920s and 1930s. This not only further confused the problem of national and ethnic identity, but fostered deep resentments that are at the root of many of today's conflicts.

Under the Soviets the Central Asian people experienced sharp cultural discontinuities caused by the massive inflows of two major groups of immigrants.

The first group comprised Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars, Armenians, and others during 1926-59 to implement the Soviets' industrialization and collectivization programs. Not only did these ventures establish control over the Central Asian countries' economies, but over many aspects of their society and religion. The second group resulted from Stalin's deportation policies, which forcibly relocated Crimeans, Germans, Koreans, Turks, and others in the region. While some cultural convergence of this ethnic mix resulted from the mass media, schools, and so on, this was insufficient to inspire feelings of commonality, and in the case of ethnic Central Asians was limited to those living in urban areas.

The critical implication for development interventions of the history of this region is whether or not national politics take precedence over ethnic politics.

**Ethnic Composition**

The table shows the distribution of the major ethnic groups in the Central Asian countries. The countries can be divided into three groups based on the proportion that root ethnic groups represent in the national population as follows:

- **Group 1**, in which root ethnics are a predominant majority: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan
- **Group 2**, in which root ethnics make up half of the population: Kyrgyz Republic
- **Group 3**, in which root ethnics are a minority: Kazakhstan.

The dominant minority groups in all the countries are ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Russians. In 1989 Russians outnumbered the Uzbeks as minorities in all the countries except Tajikistan. As concerns Central Asian minorities, Uzbeks invariably outnumber all other Central Asians and are often influential in certain economic sectors, such as small-scale business, and in the country's religious life.

The Russian settlement of Central Asia was a hierarchical penetration into the capitals and industrial centers, with all movements controlled by Soviet administrators, planners, and ministries, except for the
Russian settlement in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic, which because it predated the Soviet revolution also penetrated into rural areas. The following three distinct periods characterize the changing demography of Russians in Central Asia:

- **1926-59**: Russians and other Slavs poured into Central Asia and established Russian control over all aspects of the region’s economy and society.
- **1959-89**: more Russians left Central Asia than arrived, especially from urban Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The modified ethnic distribution profile was particularly striking in Kazakhstan, where ethnic Kazaks finally outnumbered Russians.
- **After 1989**: while data are scanty, the evidence indicates that while many Russians left the region, many other stayed, though possibly moving to another Central Asian country such as Kazakhstan, perhaps because of the difficult economic conditions they would have encountered had they returned to Russia. The main reasons those that left did so were fears for their safety following a series of inter-ethnic conflicts in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan and constitutional amendments passed by the Central Asian countries that declared their national language to be the official state language. Most of those outmigrating were highly educated urban professionals of working age.

The Russians overwhelmingly settled in urban areas, which reinforced uneven development of the Russian and indigenous populations as those in urban areas benefited from higher quality education; better employment opportunities; exposure to new ideas; and superior services, especially health services. However, current rates of population growth and the increasing rural-urban migration of Central Asians, coupled with the gradual departure of Russians and other Europeans, will result in a more even demographic balance.

**Social and Economic Dimensions of Ethnicity**

While the increase in population of ethnic Central Asians in comparison to that of non-Central Asians varied by country, in all cases, from 1959 onward, all the countries witnessed not only impressive growth in their overall populations, but dramatic increases in the demographic base of ethnic Central Asians. This was caused by (a) a substantial difference in birth rates between ethnic Central Asians and Soviet Europeans, (b) the growing tendency among Russians to leave Central Asia, and (c) a strong
resistance among indigenous Central Asians to leaving their countries.

Except for Kazakhstan, all the countries are moderate to high fertility societies. Given the countries' critical economic problems, population growth is likely to result in hindrances to development, growth in unemployment, and tremendous pressure on resources. Nevertheless, many governments continue to provide women with incentives to bear large numbers of children. Meanwhile, the health conditions associated with childbearing continue to deteriorate as indicated by infant and maternal mortality rates. As concerns education, the gap between urban and rural dwellers in educational attainment is significant.

The growth in unemployment is likely despite vacancies in jobs requiring specialized, highly skilled manpower. These jobs are disproportionately held by Russians and other non-Central Asians. Whether this disproportionate representation is due to the lack of comparable skills among the indigenous population or to preferential treatment given to Russians and other Europeans is unclear. However, the Soviets' intent to "russify" economic development in the region clearly indicated that economic modernization was intended to by-pass most ethnic Central Asians. Thus the more industrial the country, the greater the dependence on non-Central Asians.

Ethnic Tensions and Conflicts

Tensions and conflicts are not only politically significant, they also affect development interventions. Thus World Bank staff should be aware of the particular sensitivities governing inter-ethnic relations in the Central Asian countries because some of the conflicts revolve around land disputes, control over resources, and residential patterns. Their implications therefore become decisive factors in decisions relating to the location, design, planning, and implementation of land resettlement programs, infrastructure projects, and other activities.

The Reassertion of Islam

With the demise of Soviet-sponsored atheism, Islam's resurgence in Central Asia has been pervasive, with 55 million Central Asians regarding themselves as Moslems. Two issues are relevant here. The first is whether this reborn Islam can act as a unifying force within the region. The second is whether Central Asian countries are vulnerable to an Islamic takeover. The longer current regimes provide fertile grounds for continuing dissatisfaction, the more likely ethnic Central Asians are to turn to radical Islam as offering the best prospects for change.

Recommendations for Bank Support in Central Asian Countries

This report has two main findings: first, that the Bank take a cautious approach to project initiation and development in sensitive areas, taking account of past disputes and current tensions; and second, that the Bank needs to conduct rapid pre-project appraisals and social assessments related to ethnicity and build these into the identification, design, and development phases of projects supported in Central Asia. Appraisals will provide the database on ethnicity needed for project preparation, and the social assessments will entail systematic investigations of social processes and other factors related to ethnicity that could affect the impact and sustainability of development interventions.

The following six areas are recommended for Bank support. These are areas that require technical assistance to ensure that the benefits of development intervention reach all ethnic groups and are distributed equitably.

- Develop an ethnicity-specific database
- Provide social safety nets for disadvantaged social groups and the unemployed
- Reinforce a proactive labor market policy to ensure ethnic equity in employment and income earning
- Improve levels of preparedness and resourcefulness to meet effectively the challenge of a competitive and open economy
- Effect linkages between human resource development and specialized manpower needs for all ethnic groups
- Improve women's reproductive health.