Study highlights crucial ethnic majority-minority divide in Kyrgyzstan

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In the part of the world that often makes headlines because of religious strife, ethnic divides are no less—and perhaps even more—consequential for political stability and socioeconomic wellbeing.

Members of minority ethnic groups, who are often marginalized politically and economically, differ from members of the ethnic majority in their assessment of interethnic relations and their prospects, according to a new study by Victor Agadjanian, a University of Kansas Foundation Distinguished Professor of Sociology, in the multiethnic nation of Kyrgyzstan, a nation in Central Asia and formerly part of the Soviet Union.

Soviet leaders many decades ago arbitrarily drew administrative borders in Central Asia, placing a large portion of Uzbek-populated areas within Kyrgyzstan, rather than Uzbekistan, where Uzbeks are the majority. In addition to Kyrgyz, Kyrgyzstan's largest ethnic group, and Uzbeks, its largest native ethnic minority, Kyrgyzstan's population includes ethnic Russians and members of other groups of European origin whose ancestors were encouraged or forced to relocate there during the Soviet rule.

Agadjanian analyzed data from a nationally representative survey that he designed and directed in the country in 2011-12, a year-and-a-half after a major outburst of ethnic violence that targeted primarily ethnic Uzbeks.

His research on what he defines as "ethnic optimism" found that representatives of the titular ethnic group, Kyrgyz, demonstrated greater optimism about the future of interethnic relations and the collective prospects of their ethnicity than did members of two main minorities—Uzbeks and those of Russian and other European descent. Yet, at the same time, Uzbeks were not very different from Kyrgyz in their expectations for future overall economic trends in the country. In contrast, Russian and other Europeans were consistently least optimistic than members of the two native groups with regard to the nation's and their households' economic future.

"The results illustrate both the importance of the majority-minority divide and substantial variations across minority groups. As a native group to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks don't have anywhere to go, especially because neighboring Uzbekistan is not very welcoming to them," Agadjanian said. "They have to think about their future in Kyrgyzstan, even despite the experience of overt violence, which may help them suppress some of their anxieties about the future. In contrast, ethnic Russians, even though some of their families had lived in Kyrgyzstan for generations, are always aware of their 'historic motherland,' Russia, to which they can 'return.' Their enduring emotional and, often, practical orientation beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders may influence their views of that country's future."

The findings could provide insight for governments and non-governmental organizations that seek to navigate and mitigate challenging ethnic tensions because they help situate ethnic group experiences and perceptions within a historical context, he said.

"Ethnic tensions are not just pervasive. They tend to exacerbate in a context of major societal transitions, such as that experienced by post-Soviet Central Asia," Agadjanian said. "But different ethnic minority groups may experience these tensions and project them into their vision

of the future differently, depending on their historical background and circumstances."

Agadjanian will present his findings at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

Provided by University of Kansas