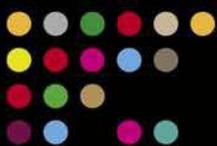


Turmoil in Kyrgyzstan: A Challenge to Russian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Chronic instability in Kyrgyzstan has become a problem for Russia's Central Asia policy and a test case of Moscow's ability to act as a guarantor of regional security. This paper focuses on the Russian government's response to recent developments in Kyrgyzstan, from the coup of April 2010 to the presidential election in October 2011. It shows that Moscow tried to project its influence in Kyrgyzstan mostly by economic and propagandistic leverage. The paper provides a "balance sheet" of Russia's recent achievements and failures in Kyrgyzstan and argues that Moscow faced important constraints in dealings with Bishkek and has been only partially successful in advancing its interests in Kyrgyzstan.



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Introduction

Russia's Central Asia policy in the first decade of the 21st century has often been analyzed in terms of Moscow's "strategic reassertion" in the region.¹ Indeed, Russia managed to consolidate its military presence in Central Asia and to launch two projects of military-political and economic integration: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC).² As the country's economy recovered from the malaise of the 1990s, millions of migrants from Central Asia came to work in Russia, thereby creating a new bond of economic interdependence between Russia and its southern neighbours. From 2001 to 2008, the volume of trade between Russia and the five countries of the region more than quadrupled, increasing from \$ 6.3 billion to \$ 26.8 billion.³

However, Russia's overall record in Central Asia offers a mixed picture. The countries of the region expanded the spectrum of their foreign relations, both strategically and in terms of oil and gas exports. As a result of Washington's engagement in Afghanistan, the US continued to be an influential and, in fact, indispensable actor in Central Asia. Economically, China has steadily increased its presence in the region, through the rapid expansion of trade as well as by means of substantial investment in oil extraction in Kazakhstan and in Turkmenistan. While Russia succeeded in consolidating its alliance with Kazakhstan and bringing Astana into the Russia–Kazakhstan–Belarus Customs Union, other countries of the region were increasingly difficult to deal with. Uzbekistan withdrew from the EurAsEC and reduced its participation in the CSTO to an all but formal membership, Turkmenistan diversified its gas exports and Tajikistan turned into a recalcitrant and demanding

¹ This paper benefitted from comments made by Dennis Nottebaum (University of Münster) and a review conducted by Mark Rhinard (Swedish Institute of International Affairs).

² See Roy Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asian Policy", *International Affairs*, # 2 2004, pp. 277-293; Ingrid Opdahl, "A Crucial Sphere for Our Security". *Russia in Central Asia after 9/11*, Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies, Oslo, 2005, p. 172-176; Sergei Luzyanin, *Vostochnaya politika Vladimira Putina. Vozvrashchenie Rossii na "Bol'shoi Vostok" (2004 – 2008 gg.)* (Vladimir Putin's eastern Policy. Russia's Comeback to the "Greater East" (2004 – 2008), AST Vostok-Zapad, Moscow, 2007.

³ Calculated on the data from International Monetary Fund, *Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook*, IMF, Washington, D.C., 2009.

partner. Another challenge for the Russia's Central Asia policy emerged from Kyrgyzstan, traditionally one of the most loyal and least problematic of Russian allies.

In April 2010, five years after the ouster of Kyrgyzstan's first president Askar Akayev, the country again witnessed an unconstitutional change of power. The violent overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was followed by a rise in ethnic and social tensions. In June, Kyrgyzstan was shattered by wide-scale pogroms in Osh and Jalal-Abad, the first outbreak of violence of such magnitude and ferocity since 1990. The country underwent a hasty transition to a parliamentary republic and planned for a presidential election.

Today, Kyrgyzstan has become the least stable and predictable of the five Central Asian states. A small and poor country, it is an integral element of the Central Asian regional security complex, being tightly interdependent with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and, to a lesser degree, Kazakhstan, in military, political, societal, economic and environmental sectors.

The turmoil in Kyrgyzstan is increasingly posing a challenge for Russia which sees itself and is generally regarded by others as Central Asia's security guarantor and the most influential external actor in the region. As Kyrgyzstan moved from one crisis point to another, Russia had to choose between intervention and non-interference, and to make this choice hastily and in an uncertain environment. At the same time the Kyrgyz attempt to develop a parliamentary republic is a test of Russia's ability to advance its interests in a country with a polycentric ruling elite and a fluid political milieu. It is on these challenges and Moscow's responses to them that this paper will focus. While it gives a brief account of Kyrgyz developments from April 2010 to September 2011, it does not seek to narrate or explore them in detail .⁴

⁴ For a detailed analysis of Kyrgyz developments from April to June 2010 see International Crisis Group, *Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses*, Asia Briefing # 102, Bishkek / Brussels, April 27, 2010; International Crisis Group, *The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan*, Asia Report # 193, Bishkek / Brussels,

This paper begins with the analysis of Russian policy objectives in Kyrgyzstan. Then, it seeks to shed light on instruments at Russia's disposal to exert influence in Kyrgyzstan and what constraints Moscow faces in its dealings with Bishkek. The paper proceeds to trace the Russian response to Kyrgyz political developments and the outbreak of ethnic violence in the country as well as Moscow's handling of regional and international repercussions of the developments in Kyrgyzstan. In conclusion, it discerns the basic dilemma faced by Russia in Kyrgyzstan and summarizes the achievements and shortcomings of Moscow's post-Bakiyev policies toward its turbulent ally.

Russian Policy Objectives in Kyrgyzstan

Although most documents spelling out the fundamentals of Russian foreign policy do not explicitly mention Kyrgyzstan, they devote sufficient attention to the post-Soviet space to allow for a deduction of major policy objectives that Russia pursues in Kyrgyzstan. The whole of the post-Soviet space is proclaimed to be a priority of Russian foreign policy and a part of the world where Russia aspires to become a "leading force in the development of a new system of inter-state political and economic relations". Central Asia is perceived as a rather specific segment of the former Soviet Union, the one where risks of "destabilization" are particularly high and international rivalry is intensifying. Moscow's vision of Central Asia is heavily securitized, and it is the country's military and security elite that shapes the understanding of Russian interests in the region.

Russia's policies in Central Asia have often been fragmentary, reactive and even self-contradictory, but an analysis of both the practical steps and public statements of Russian officials allows for the grouping of Moscow's fundamental policy objectives

August 23, 2010; Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, http://www.k-ic.org/images/stories/kic_report_english_final.pdf; Neil Melvin, Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence, Central Eurasia Project, Occasional Paper Series # 3, http://www.soros.org/initiatives/cep/articles_publications/publications/occasional-paper-3-20110307/OPS-No-3-03-05-2011.pdf

in Central Asia around the notions of influence and stability. The Russian leadership believes that it is vitally important for Russia to keep military alliances with Central Asian states, to retain the ability to sway their major foreign policy and economic decisions to Russia's advantage, and to limit the extent to which other major powers can challenge Russia's predominant position in the region. At the same time, as Russia has plenty of foreign policy concerns in other parts of the world and its military and economic resources are both dispersed and limited, it needs to avoid costly and protracted interventions in Central Asia. Therefore, it is in the Russian interest to have in place Central Asian political regimes and societal structures that are stable and capable of coping with intra- and inter-state contradictions and the pressure of transnational challenges. Russia seeks to maximize the benefits of being a regional security guarantor and to minimize the costs of acting in this capacity.

Russian objectives in Kyrgyzstan mainly derive from this small and poor country's role as an element of the regional picture and from Moscow's broader geostrategic and transnational considerations. Russia aims at:

- Stabilizing Kyrgyzstan, or at least preventing it from complete state failure and implosion, and containing the transnational threats proliferating from and through Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's lapsing into incessant political upheavals, anarchy, ethnic violence and territorial disintegration would jeopardize a fragile status quo in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and could lead to a regional meltdown, exacerbating threats to Russia's own security and putting much strain on its military and economic resources, thus undermining its capacity to act in other arenas of foreign policy activities. Russia is worried about Kyrgyzstan's role in the transit of Afghan drugs, the growing popularity of radical Islamic ideology among the Kyrgyz youth and evidence of the country's territory becoming a safe haven for Islamic militants.
- Retaining Kyrgyzstan as a loyal and predictable foreign policy partner, a compliant member of Moscow-led multilateral institutions and a country which does not defy its neighbours;

- Maintaining its military facilities in Kyrgyzstan which are an integral part of Russia's regional military posture.

The fact that Kyrgyzstan has a substantial Slavic minority adds another dimension to Moscow's concerns about the stability of the country. Russia has never been preoccupied with the difficulties its compatriots in Central Asia had to face in post-Soviet times and its support of them has mostly been limited to muted declarations. However, a deterioration of political and social conditions for Russians in Kyrgyzstan would surely trigger negative publicity in Russia and tarnish the image of the Russian leaders as "strong" and resolute statesmen. Therefore, the preservation of the status quo for the dwindling and ageing Slavic minority in Kyrgyzstan is also a highly desirable policy objective.

Economically, Kyrgyzstan is hardly significant for Russia. It accounts for a tiny fraction (0.2 %) of Russian trade turnover and the accumulated direct investment from Russia totaled just \$90 million by 2010. However, some Russian companies, including Gazpromneft, banks and mobile operators, are active in Kyrgyzstan, and the Russian government is interested in controlling the Dastan factory, a producer of torpedoes for the Russian Navy.

Russian Influence in Kyrgyzstan: Instruments and Constraints

Kyrgyzstan is commonly, and in many respects justifiably, believed to be heavily dependent on Russia. The countries are bound by a military alliance and a shared membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), institutions where Russia plays a leading role and which are endowed, at least de jure, with solid structures and substantial elements of supranational decision-making. Since the early 1990s, both Russian and Kyrgyz officials have persistently characterized their bilateral relations in most positive terms.

Russia also possesses important military facilities in Kyrgyzstan. Since 2003, it maintains an airbase in Kant, near Bishkek, with 10 aircraft and the military personnel of 500. Additionally, it has a navy liaison center in the Chu region, a testing facility at the Issyk-Kul lake and two military seismic laboratories. Kyrgyzstan is part of the Russian-controlled CIS United Air Defense System. The country's military is dependent on Russia for deliveries of arms and equipment and the training of officers.

Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan is economically tightly linked to Russia. According to Kyrgyz government data, in 2009 Russia was the country's top foreign trade partner, accounting for 27 % of its total turnover (11 % of exports and 36 % of imports). Russia is the largest supplier of oil and oil products to Kyrgyzstan and one of the country's chief creditors. More than half a million Kyrgyz work in Russia, with their remittances estimated at around 27% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP.

Russia maintains a substantial presence in Kyrgyzstan's information space. Russian TV and radio channels, newspapers and websites are easily accessible and popular in the country. Russian has the status of an official language in Kyrgyzstan, and the capital is still a Russian-speaking city. The political, business and cultural elite is generally inclined to communicate in Russian.

Russia has the potential to provide Kyrgyzstan with support and protection vis-à-vis Bishkek's much larger and more powerful neighbours. It has a close, multi-faceted and remarkably stable partnership with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan's leading foreign investor and third largest trade partner. Moscow is believed to be able to exert pressure on Uzbekistan, a neighbour with which Kyrgyzstan has contradictory and sometimes conflicting relations. The alliance with Russia is seen as probably one of the few means for Kyrgyzstan to escape the gradual transformation into an economic satellite state of China, a prospect the country's elite finds realistic and very alarming.

It should not be overlooked that Russia has accumulated some "symbolic capital" in Kyrgyzstan. It is perceived as a friendly, familiar and potent force, and it gives the

impression, especially against the backdrop of Kyrgyzstan's political turbulence and social malaise, of a secure, stable and economically attractive country. Russia is widely seen as Kyrgyzstan's indispensable ally, and it has become common for Kyrgyz politicians to search for the approval of high-ranked Russian officials and to position themselves as having reliable "connections" to Moscow

However, Russia faces serious constraints in its dealings with Kyrgyzstan. Its military contingent in the country is too small to have an impact on the ground. Any military operation in Kyrgyzstan would be very complicated logistically and highly unpopular among the Russian public. Kyrgyzstan has important foreign policy connections that by-pass Russia, in particular with the US, China, and Turkey, and its political elite is susceptible to pressures and incentives from several centers of power. Dealing with Kyrgyzstan, Moscow cannot but be mindful of the interests and possible responses of the US, China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and has to take into consideration the implications of its actions for Russia's reputation in the eyes of its European partners and for the cohesiveness and future prospects of the CSTO and EurAsEC.

Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, a psychological predisposition among Kyrgyz policymakers to look to Russia for support, to expect Moscow's active involvement in their domestic affairs and to exaggerate its capabilities is both Russia's asset and a constraint on its behaviour. In Kyrgyzstan's heated political atmosphere, bursting with conspiracy theories, rumours and forebodings of looming disasters, Russia has to take precautions to avoid misperceptions and misinterpretations of its actions, intentions, and statements.

Russia and Political Turbulence in Kyrgyzstan

By the mid-2000s Kyrgyzstan had entered a long period of social and economic malaise and political turmoil. In March 2005 the rigged parliamentary election provoked large-scale public unrest that prompted Askar Akayev, the first post-independence president and once a champion of democratic and market reforms, to

give up power and leave the country. An alliance between Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Felix Kulov, representing the southern and the northern parts of the country, replaced Akayev's family rule, with Bakiyev becoming president and Kulov appointed prime-minister.

The "Tulip Revolution", as Akayev's ouster came to be known, did little to untangle the knot of Kyrgyzstan's problems. It was followed by an upsurge in corruption, illegal seizures of land and property, frequent and chaotic government reshuffles, constitutional revisions and the widening of societal rifts. In 2007 Bakiyev dismissed Kulov and tried to expand and consolidate presidential power. He instrumentalized conflicts among the leaders of the opposition, intimidated or bribed his opponents and established his own political party that gained an absolute parliamentary majority in December 2007.

Bakiyev's Ouster

In July 2009 Kurmanbek Bakiyev was triumphantly reelected for a second presidential term, gaining 76% of votes with a turnout of 79%. The president's reelection was followed by a rampant campaign to concentrate the political power and most valuable economic assets in the hands of Bakiyev's extended family and close associates. A Central Agency on Development, Investment and Innovation was established with the responsibility for infrastructure projects and economic development programs and a direct supervision over the country's financial institutions. Maxim Bakiyev, the President's youngest son, was appointed the Agency's director. In February 2010 the *Kyrgyztelekom*, a phone system operator, and the *Severelektro*, a company supplying electricity to the north of the country and the capital, were sold at ridiculously low prices to entrepreneurs known to be the younger Bakiyev's business partners. The president initiated constitutional amendments interpreted as a step to facilitating the transfer of power to his son.⁵ The ruling

⁵ International Crisis Group. Asia Briefing № 102. Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses. Bishkek / Brussels, April 27, 2010, pp. 2-4.

family's control over the security structures was reinforced. The Drug Control Agency was disbanded – as some experts believe, to consolidate the ruling family's control over drug trafficking.⁶

These steps were taken at a time of exacerbating economic hardships and shrinking remittances from labour migrants. In early 2010 tariffs on electricity and heating were doubled. At the same time, although the Bakiyev regime dominated the parliament and the judiciary, the political atmosphere in the country remained liberal enough to allow for the dissemination of public resentment and protests. The media, though experiencing ever greater pressure from the authorities, still enjoyed a higher degree of freedom than anywhere in Central Asia. The country had a bunch of opposition figures with strong local bases of support.

It was at this very time, when the ruling family lost economic assets and concentrated power, when it also lost the support of Russia – Kyrgyzstan's crucial foreign partner. Bakiyev's foreign policy became so mercurial and overtly mercantile that Kyrgyzstan could no longer be seen as a loyal and reliable ally. Bishkek had developed a record of broken promises. The Russian leadership was deeply vexed at Bakiyev's reversal on his pledge to close the Manas air base. Subsequently, Kyrgyzstan promised that Russia would get a second military base in the country, but no agreement was reached as Bishkek and Moscow differed on the location of the base and the conditions of its functioning. At the same time, Russia was annoyed at Bishkek's willingness to host a US-funded anti-terrorist training center in the southern Batken region. Kyrgyzstan failed to comply with an agreement to pass 48% of stocks of *Dastan* factory to Moscow in exchange for the repudiation of \$180 million of Kyrgyz indebtedness. Bishkek's recalcitrance was personified in Maxim Bakiyev who was known to speak

⁶ Aleksandr Shustov, "Kirghiziya: gosudarstvo i narkotiki" (Kyrgyzstan: the State and Drugs), February 26, 2011, <http://www.fondsk.ru/news/2011/02/26/kirgizija-gosudarstvo-i-narkotiki.html>

of Russia and Russian leadership in derogatory tones and to be involved in an illegal seizure of a Russian company's assets.⁷

In the first months of 2010 the relations between Moscow and Bishkek rapidly deteriorated, reaching the lowest point in the post-Soviet history. Russian officials began to openly accuse the Kyrgyz authorities of mispending Russian credit and made it clear that a promised loan for the construction of Kambarata-1 hydroelectric station would be withheld.⁸ In February 2010 president Putin declined to meet the visiting Kyrgyz prime-minister, and the session of the bilateral Inter-Governmental Cooperation Commission for which the latter had come ended in a clear and humiliating failure for the Kyrgyz delegation.⁹ In response, Bishkek hinted that it would ask Russia to pay rent for the Kant air base or even consider closing the facility¹⁰, threatening to undermine the whole strategic and political pattern of the Russian presence in Central Asia. Russia had to act to avert a looming foreign policy crisis.

In March, as popular protests in Northern Kyrgyzstan unfolded and the anti-Bakiyev opposition united, Russian media, including the First TV Channel and the leading daily *Izvestiya*, both closely linked to the government, launched a campaign of heavy criticism against Bakiyev and his family.¹¹ In response, Kyrgyz authorities began to block Russian-language news web sites, ignoring the statement of concern issued by the Russian Embassy.¹² On April 1, the Russian Customs Service imposed a duty on

⁷ International Crisis Group. Asia Briefing № 102. Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses. Bishkek / Brussels, April 27, 2010, pp. 5-6.

⁸ Sergei Rasov, "Moskva Bishkeku ne verit" (Moscow does not believe Bishkek), Politcom.ru, February 26, 2010, <http://www.politcom.ru/9670.html>

⁹ Elena Avdeyeva, "Kak Daniyar Usenov skazki rasskazyval. Prem'era Kyrgyzstana ne prinyal ni glava pravitel'stva Rossii, ni dazhe vitze-prem'ery" (How Daniyar Usenov told fairy tales. Kyrgyzstan's prime-minister was accepted neither by the Russian prime-minister, nor even by vice-premiers), Belyi Parus, March 1, 2010, <http://www.paruskg.info/2010/03/01/21027>

¹⁰ Marat Laumulin, "April 2010 in Kyrgyzstan As Seen from Kazakhstan", Central Asia and the Caucasus, № 3 2010, p. 37.

¹¹ David Trilling, "Russian Press Bashing Bakiyev", Eurasianet.org, March 29, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav033010.shtml>

¹² Kommersant, April 8, 2010, p. 7.

oil and oil products exported to Kyrgyzstan, citing the country's non-membership in the Russia – Kazakhstan – Belarus Customs Union as a reason. This decision pushed up the gasoline prices in Kyrgyzstan by 20%.¹³

Russia's moves sent a clear signal to the Kyrgyz political elite, undermining much of what had remained of the regime's legitimacy and reputation and casting serious doubts over its viability. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Russian leadership had masterminded Bakiyev's ouster. It is much more likely that Moscow sought to press Bishkek into acquiescence rather than to topple the government. However, in Kyrgyzstan Russia's steps could easily be interpreted as the determination to change the regime. While it is certain that Russian officials maintained contacts with some of the key opposition leaders, the rapid collapse of Bakiyev's government was rather a result of spontaneous, chaotic developments and a public outrage than of the opposition's activities.

Russia's reaction to the events in Bishkek was remarkably swift. On April 8, the day after Bakiyev left Bishkek, Putin had a telephone conversation with Rosa Otunbayeva, the head of the interim government established by the leaders of several opposition parties, and offered material assistance to the new authorities. As Putin's press secretary explained, Moscow saw Otunbayeva as a "de facto head of the executive power in Kyrgyzstan".¹⁴ Russian officials, experts and media unanimously put the blame for the events on Bakiyev and his associates. A few days later the Russian government decided to disburse \$50 million to Kyrgyzstan and promised to cancel the duty on oil exports to the country.¹⁵ At the same time Russia made it clear that full-scale economic cooperation with Kyrgyzstan could be resumed only after the establishment of a legitimate government.

¹³ Asyl Osmonaliyeva, "Russian Export Duties on Oil, Cutoff of Deliveries Cause Hardship in Kyrgyzstan", May 08, 2010, http://centralasiaonline.com/cocoon/caii/xhtml/en_GB/features/caii/features/main/2010/05/08/feature-03

¹⁴ Kommersant, April 9, 2010, p. 1.

¹⁵ Kommersant, April 15, 2010, p. 8.

As Bakiyev fled to the south of the country and tried to mobilize his supporters in resistance to the interim government, Russian leadership intervened in the situation, acting in concert with Kazakhstan and, unusually, in consonance with Washington. Meeting on the sidelines of a nuclear security summit, the presidents of the three countries discussed the Kyrgyz events and agreed that Bakiyev should resign.¹⁶ Putin and Nazarbayev pressed Bakiyev to agree to submit his resignation and persuaded the interim government to allow him to leave the country, with Kazakhstan providing an airplane for the deposed president.

The Russian leadership was clearly satisfied to see Bakiyev's ouster and did not hesitate to shower caustic remarks on the former president. It was the first time since the early 1990s that Russia happened to be so well-disposed to the illegitimate change of power in the post-Soviet space, and Bakiyev's fate could be a warning to Russia's disloyal allies. Moscow's early expression of support to the interim government and its insistence on Bakiyev's removal from Kyrgyzstan were critically important to infuse at least some legitimacy in the new authorities and to soothe the heat of the moment.

The Interim Government

Russia did not have a replacement for Bakiyev in hand and there is no evidence to suggest that it tried to influence the decisions on the composition of the interim government. None of its five leaders had a reputation of being pro-Russian or having good connections to Russia's power structures. Russian experts and media were skeptical about the new leaders' competence and suspicious of their future foreign policy choices.

The new authorities dissolved some of the institutions formed under Bakiyev and revoked many of the former administration's decisions, including those on privatization. The ground was prepared for a redistribution of power and control over

¹⁶ Dmitry Medvedev's Press Conference, April 16, 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/news/7479>

the key economic assets and security structures. But the interim government became a venue for a bitter power struggle, with its key members pursuing different, if not contradictory, agendas. An uneasy compromise on the configuration of power was reached in May: Otunbayeva was appointed president for 1.5 years, but was barred from running in the next presidential election. A draft of the new constitution envisaged that Kyrgyzstan would be transformed into a parliamentary republic.¹⁷ A referendum on the new constitution and Otunbayeva's nomination was set for June 27.

Moscow did not remain indifferent to Bishkek's reform attempts. The Russian leadership saw the parliamentary form of government as inappropriate, even dangerous, for Kyrgyzstan, as an amplifier of instability and an undesirable example for other countries in the region¹⁸. In mid-May president Medvedev appointed Vladimir Rushailo, a member of the upper chamber of the Russian parliament and a former executive secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States, to a position as special envoy in charge of the development of Russian – Kyrgyz relations. His responsibilities included coordinating the activities of Russian governmental agencies and representatives in Kyrgyzstan, informing the president of the developments in the country and advising to the Kyrgyz leadership.¹⁹ In particular, Rushailo's assignment was to help Bishkek with drafting a new constitution.²⁰

The latter mission almost immediately turned out to be beyond Rushailo's capabilities, as the key figures of the Kyrgyz political elite, each of them lacking the resources that could guarantee an ascendancy to the presidential position, needed the

¹⁷ Draft of the New Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1272294780>

¹⁸ Prof. Alexei Malashenko, a Russian expert on Central Asia, noted Moscow's strong psychological aversion to the parliamentary form of government, saying that the Russian elite "wants to deal with concrete people". (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, June 30, 2010, p. 7).

¹⁹ "Prezident RF otpravil uspokaivat' Kirgiziyu svoego spetspredstavatelya – eto Vladimir Rushailo" (Russian President Sends Vladimir Rushailo, His Special Envoy, to Pacify Kyrgyzstan), Newsru.com, May 14, 2010, http://www.newsru.com/russia/14may2010/rushaylo_print.html

²⁰ "Rushailo pomozhet Kirgizii s konstitutsiei" (Rushailo Will Help Kyrgyzstan with the Constitution), May 14, 2010, <http://www.bfm.ru/news/2010/05/14/rushajlo-pomozhet-kirgizii-s-konstituciej.html>

flexibility provided by the institutional arrangements of a parliamentary republic. Despite the admonitions from Russia, the interim government persisted in rejecting the presidential form of government. Thus, Moscow and Bishkek openly disagreed on a highly important issue, and the limits of Russian influence on Kyrgyzstan were clearly exposed.

The Russian leadership's conviction that the parliamentary form of government is doomed to be inherently unstable and transient in Kyrgyzstan apparently made Moscow adopt a wait-and-see policy vis-à-vis Bishkek. The major bilateral issues were suspended, and Russia clearly chose to invest as little as possible, both in political and economic terms, into the new government in Bishkek. Notably, the duties on oil exports were not waived.

On June 27, 91% of Kyrgyz voters approved the new constitution. The official Russian reaction was outspokenly skeptical. President Medvedev remarked that he did not quite imagine "how the parliamentary republic model would work in Kyrgyzstan" and warned against the danger of the country's disintegration. "We'll see what will come out of it", he concluded, giving, perhaps involuntarily, a succinct definition of the Russian policy towards the Kyrgyz troubles.²¹

The Parliamentary Republic

The interim government was dissolved after the referendum and followed by the "technical" administration headed by Otunbayeva. Perceiving her government as weak, inefficient and transitory, Russia all but reduced cooperation with Bishkek to deliveries of humanitarian aid, waiting for the parliamentary elections set for October 10, 2010.

²¹ Arkadiy Dubnov, "Nabor vozmozhnostei. Rossiiskii president usomnilsya v perspektivah parlamentskoi respubliki v Kirgizii" (Range of Opportunities. Russian President Is Doubtful of the Parliamentary Republic's Prospects in Kyrgyzstan), June 29, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1277791200>

The Russian factor figured prominently in the election campaign. The major parties competed in emphasizing their “connections” in the Russian political elite and promising brilliant prospects for Kyrgyz-Russian relations. At first, the Russian leadership acted cautiously, trying to spread the risks and encourage several contenders simultaneously. Almazbek Atambayev, Omurbek Babanov and Temir Sariyev, leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the “Respublika” and the “Ak-Shumkar”, visited Moscow in September and had meetings with high-ranking Russian officials; in particular, Atambayev was received by Putin, Babanov and Sergei Naryshkin, the head of presidential administration.²²

By the end of September, however, Russia decided to intervene with the campaign more resolutely and picked a clear favourite. Moscow’s choice was Felix Kulov, the leader of “Ar- Namys” party, a former prime-minister under Bakiyev and vice-president under Akayev. Among the principal contenders, Kulov, a militia general, had the most long-standing ties with the Russian security establishment. Not surprisingly, he was vociferously critical of the parliamentary form of government, pledging to restore the powerful presidency. In a very unusual move, Kulov was granted a televised reception by Medvedev who said that Russia was “an interested observer” in the election willing to see “a strong, responsible and authoritative” government in Kyrgyzstan.²³ “Edinaya Rossiya” signed an agreement on cooperation with “Ar- Namys”.²⁴

It was at that time that Russia sent a clear message about which party it disfavored. *NTV*, a Russian television channel, broadcast a compromising video of Omurbek Tekebayev, the leader of the “Ata Meken” party reputed to be a “pro-American” politician and known as the main proponent of the parliamentary form of government.

²² Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Kyrgyz Politicians Rush to Moscow after Winning Election”, <http://kyrgyzstan.carnegieendowment.org/2010/10/kyrgyz-politicians-rush-to-moscow-after-winning-election/>

²³ *Kommersant*, September 23, 2011, p. 7.

²⁴ Ar-Namys Party, September 22, 2010, <http://www.ar-namys.org/read/1885.html>

Tekebayev reacted unwisely, promising to deal with NTV “like Saakashvili”, thereby associating himself with the Kremlin’s worst enemy.²⁵

A more complicated challenge was the “Ata Jurt” party mainly composed of Bakiyev’s former supporters from southern Kyrgyzstan. “Ata Jurt” took an openly nationalistic, anti-Uzbek stance, and its leadership was believed to be connected with drug traffickers. However, it tried to position itself as another pro-Russian force, devoting a special chapter of its programme to the partnership with Russia and pledging to evict the US from Manas. Despite these overtures and the party’s support of the presidential form of government, Moscow distanced itself from “Ata Jurt”.

The election resulted in a surprise for experts and a disappointment for Russia. Unexpectedly, “Ata Jurt” came out first, receiving 8.7 % of votes. The SDP was second, with 7.8 %, and “Ar-Namys” only third, with 7.6 %. “Respublika” and “Ata Meken” also crossed the 5 % barrier, with 6.9 % and 5.5 % respectively.²⁶ Moscow’s and Astana’s support for Kulov did not yield the results that Russia and Kazakhstan had hoped for.

It took two months for the winners to decide on the configuration of a governing coalition. In mid-December, SDP, “Ata Jurt” and “Respublika” reached an uneasy compromise and distributed ministerial portfolios and the positions of regional governors among themselves. Atambayev was appointed prime-minister, Babanov became his first deputy and co-chairman of the Kyrgyzstan – Russia Intergovernmental Cooperation, and “Ata Jurt”’s representative was elected speaker of parliament. An intensive cooperation with Russia was declared one of the centerpieces of the coalition’s programme.

²⁵ “Kreml’ vsyacheski stremitsya povliyat’ na ishod parlamentskih vyborov v Kirgizii” (The Kremlin Tries to Influence the Parliamentary Election Outcome in Kyrgyzstan by All Means), October 10, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1286699940>

²⁶ These numbers are low because the votes were dispersed among 29 parties.

Russia's assessment of the new power arrangement in Bishkek was cautiously optimistic. The key portfolios in the spheres of foreign policy, security and economy were assigned to the people familiar to the Russian elite and supposed to be quite loyal to Russia. Atambayev, in particular, had an experience of serving as prime-minister in 2007 and as deputy head of the interim government. Believed to have established a working relationship with Putin, he was seen as a rather good choice. At the same time the Russian leadership had serious doubts about the viability and coherence of the ruling coalition and, after Bakiyev's reversal of the Manas closure decision, was inclined to be suspicious of Kyrgyz politicians' credibility.

At the end of December Atambayev visited Russia and promised a prompt resolution of all the major bilateral issues. To encourage the new government, Moscow agreed to cancel duties on oil exports to Kyrgyzstan starting at the beginning of 2011.²⁷ However, Russia made it clear that it looked forward to practical steps and concessions on the part of Bishkek.

It turned out soon that the new government's performance proved Russia's doubts and suspicions. It did not have enough authority and coherence to resolve the issues important to Moscow. Moreover, some of its members apparently had political calculations and business interests that were quite different from Russian expectations. In February, after the session of the bilateral Cooperation Commission had ended with no results, Russia decided that the time was ripe to put some pressure on Bishkek, and the duties on oil exports were reintroduced.

Meanwhile the governmental coalition faced its first crisis, provoked by the allegations that Babanov was involved in a raid attack on *MegaCom*, a Russian mobile and telecommunications company. Claiming to be indignant at Babanov's misconduct, "Ata Jurt" threatened to leave the coalition and demanded Atambayev's

²⁷ "Rossiya otmenila poshliny na nefteprodukty dlya Kirgizii" (Russia Cancels Duties on Oil Products for Kyrgyzstan), Lenta.ru, January 20, 2011, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/01/20/poshlini/>

and Babnov's dismissal. The idea to impeach Otunbayeva and to call an early presidential election began to be discussed.²⁸

Facing the prospect of Kyrgyzstan's being engulfed by a new wave of political instability, Russia lent its support to Atambayev's government. A visit of the prime-minister to Moscow was arranged, and Russia waived the export duties again, reducing the volume of deliveries to prevent Kyrgyzstan from reselling oil to Tajikistan. Moreover, a \$30 million credit was disbursed to Bishkek. Again, Atambayev made lavish promises to resolve Russian concerns²⁹. The coalition government avoided collapse, and the country's political elite got down to preparations for the presidential election.

Russia's Reactions to Ethnic Violence in Kyrgyzstan

The immediate consequence of the regime change in Kyrgyzstan was the heightening of inter-ethnic tensions. In the suburbs of Bishkek the impoverished Kyrgyz youth began to seize land and houses from Meskhetian Turks, Dungans and Russians. The interim government managed to restore the order near Bishkek within a few days. The Russian Foreign Ministry voiced concern over the looting of Russians' property, but Moscow took no steps to protect the Russian minority.³⁰ Predictably, the numbers of Russians leaving Kyrgyzstan increased sharply.³¹

The interim government faced a more complicated challenge in the south of the country. The local Kyrgyz elites of Osh and Jalal-Abad were closely linked with

²⁸ Arkadiy Dubnov, "Parlamentskiy krizis v Kirgizii perenositsya" (Parliamentary Crisis in Kyrgyzstan Postponed), March 18, 2011, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,14922842,00.html>

²⁹ "Rossiya dayot Kyrgyzstanu besprotsentnyi kredit v \$ 30 mln. A "Gazprom" kupit 75% aksii "Kyrgyzgaza" (Russia gives Kyrgyzstan an interest-free loan of \$ 30 million, and "Gazprom" will buy 75% of "Kyrgyzgas" stocks), March 19, 2011, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1300545240>

³⁰ Grigoriy Mikhailov, "Russkie v Bishkeke opasayutsya pogromov" (Russians in Bishkek Are Afraid of Pogroms), April 16, 2010, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2010-04-16/1_bishkek.html; David Trilling, "Inter-Ethnic Tension Rattles Bishkek", April 20, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/60891>

³¹ "Ethnic Russians Flee Violent Kyrgyzstan As Violence Worsens", RIA Novosti, June 11, 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20100611/159393951.html>

Bakiyev's regime and unwilling to subordinate themselves to the interim government where "northerners" were in a clear majority. The leaders of the Uzbek minority saw the situation as an opportunity to enhance their status and supported the new administration. Thus, political divisions were reinforcing territorial, clan and ethnic contradictions. On June 10, 2010 tensions between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek communities in Osh burst into wide-scale clashes. The perspective seemed imminent that violence would engulf the whole of the country and spillover into the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley, provoking the implosion of Kyrgyzstan and a regional meltdown. On June 12, as violence spread to Jalal-Abad, the interim government acknowledged that "military forces from the outside" were needed and asked Russia to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan.³²

The Russian leadership faced a difficult dilemma. Sending Russian troops to southern Kyrgyzstan would mean a costly and protracted involvement in a civil conflict that would be highly unpopular in the eyes of the Russian public. It would be detrimental to Russia's relations with Uzbekistan and would almost inevitably expose Russia to wide international criticism. At the same time, turning down Bishkek's request could mean losing a chance to prevent an all-out disaster in Central Asia – the outburst of intra-state and trans-border violence that would likely require either a later intervention at a much larger scale or a hasty withdrawal from the region.

Moscow decided in favour of non-interference, hoping that the situation would return to normalcy by itself or at least would be contained within Kyrgyzstan's borders. Russia stated that the violence in Osh was Kyrgyzstan's internal affair and the Kyrgyz authorities should "cope by themselves"³³. The matter was referred to the CSTO, but

³² "Kirgiziya ofitsial'no obratilas' k Rossii za mirotvorcheskoi pomoshch'yu" (Kyrgyzstan Officially Asks Russia for Peacekeepers), June 12, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1276331820>.

³³ "RF ne vidit uslovii dlya otpravki mirotvortsev v Kirgiziyu" (Russia Does Not See Conditions for Sending Peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan), June 12, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1276363860>; "Kigiziya sama dolzhna spravlyat'sya". B. Obama i D. Medvedev soglasovali pozitsiyu po Oshu" ("Kyrgyzstan Should Cope by Itself". Obama and Medvedev Agree on a Position on Osh Events), June 25, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1277415120>

the option of military intervention was clearly excluded, since Moscow did not call for an emergency summit, preferring to convene a consultative body, a meeting of the secretaries of national security councils³⁴. The secretaries went no further than promising to help Bishkek with military equipment and material. The interim government cancelled its appeal for peacekeepers, but asked Russia to provide troops for the defense of “strategic objects”, such as dams and factories.³⁵ Russia refused to accommodate this request as well.

The tide of violence in Osh and Jalal-Abad was soon reversed, due to internal self-regulatory mechanisms (in particular, the role of the community elders), the firm, although belated, steps taken by the interim government and the unexpectedly reticent reaction of Uzbekistan. A fragile and superficial stability was restored, and Russia’s refusal to interfere turned out to be well advised. However, Russia’s reputation as a regional stabilizer and guarantor of stability was severely damaged. For future contingencies, Russia’s involvement was to be taken as less likely and more limited than many of the regional and outside actors had expected. As if to convey this message more unambiguously, Russia signaled at the end of June that it was no longer seeking to establish a military base in southern Kyrgyzstan.³⁶

The events of June 2010 catalyzed nationalist sentiments among the Kyrgyz public. Nationalism got incorporated into the mainstream of Kyrgyzstan’s political debate, and a growing part of the country’s political elite turned to nationalist rhetoric³⁷. Another consequence was the reinforcement of autonomist and even overtly separatist

³⁴ Interestingly, the interim government did not ask for CSTO’s military intervention, citing its differences with the CSTO’s Secretary-General on who should represent Kyrgyzstan in the Organization as a reason.

³⁵ “V OON podtverdili zapros Kirgizii na vvod rossiiskih voisk” (UN Confirms Kyrgyzstan’s Request for Russian Troops), June 19, 2010, <http://www.newsland.ru/news/detail/id/520510/>

³⁶ Kommersant, June 28, 2010, p. 5.

³⁷ Rosa Otunbayeva acknowledged that the upsurge of nationalism was dangerous for Kyrgyzstan. See “Rost natsionalisticheskikh nastroyenii tait ugrozu dlya molodoi kirgizskoi demokratii” (The Growth of Nationalist Sentiment Threatens the Young Kyrgyz Democracy), Belyi Parus, June 8, 2011, <http://www.paruskg.info/2011/06/08/45093>

tendencies in the south of the country. In fact, the authorities of the Osh province emerged out of the situation with greater autonomy and distance vis-à-vis Bishkek.

Both trends are deeply worrisome for Russia. The upsurge of nationalism might increase the likelihood of conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbours, make it a less compliant foreign policy partner and build up pressure on the country's Slavic population. Moscow tried to convince Bishkek that greater activism and resolution on the part of Kyrgyz authorities was necessary to stem the tide of nationalism and expected other external actors, in particular the US and the EU, to share its concern about the Kyrgyzstan's tilt to nationalism. The accelerated drift of southern provinces away from Bishkek risks their transformation into a "grey zone" of illicit activities and a hotbed of transnational threats. While Kyrgyzstan's eventual break-up came to be regarded as an increasingly probable scenario by some of Russian experts and policymakers, the general understanding is that it would be unmanageable, disruptive for the whole regional order and detrimental to Russian interests.

Russia – Kyrgyzstan Relations after Bakiyev: At a Standstill

If there had been expectations of a breakthrough in Kyrgyz – Russian relations after Bakiyev's ouster, they quickly faded away. In fact, the new authorities were unwilling and hardly able to make concessions to Russia on bilateral issues of major importance. Having just a few bargaining chips, Bishkek policymakers were inclined to continue to stick to them for as long as possible. Acting in a fluid, competitive and polycentric domestic environment, they were very likely to face heavy criticism for acquiescence and risk their positions. Moreover, the new authorities balked even at the resolution of relatively minor issues, conveying a message of incoherence and rivaling business interests.

One of the issues of high importance for Russia was the consolidation of its military presence in Kyrgyzstan. Moscow intended to unite the five military facilities it

possessed in Kyrgyzstan under the umbrella of a joint military base and to replace the existing bilateral arrangements with a single agreement effective for 49 years. The issue had been discussed by Medvedev and Bakiyev in August 2009, and the Kyrgyz president reportedly agreed to the Russian proposal in principle, but Moscow and Bishkek failed to agree on the leasing price and status of the base.³⁸

In September 2010 the issue appeared on the agenda again. The Kyrgyz defense minister paid a visit to Moscow, and it was announced that the parties reached an understanding almost on everything. The agreement was to be concluded for 49 years, with the possibility of 25-year prolongations. It was envisaged that Russia would pay for the leasing of the base with the deliveries of arms and military equipment. The Kyrgyz defense minister was confident that the document would be signed in March 2011.³⁹

However, the agreement did not materialize. Reportedly, Kyrgyzstan insisted on the right to denounce it at any time, a provision hardly acceptable for Russia.⁴⁰ Apparently, Moscow and Bishkek disagreed on the leasing price as well, and the issue was postponed.⁴¹

The Kyrgyz authorities were inconsistent and slow in removing other irritants from bilateral relations. Repeated pledges to pass 48% of *Dastan* stocks to Russia in return for the repudiation of some of Kyrgyz debt remained empty promises, as the parties differed in their evaluation of this asset; especially unhelpful were reports that the Kyrgyz government was considering the possibility of selling *Dastan* to Turkey.⁴²

³⁸ International Crisis Group. Asia Briefing № 102. Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses. Bishkek / Brussels, April 27, 2010, p. 12.

³⁹ “Bishkek soglasilsya ne povyshat’ arendu dlya voennykh ob’ektov Rossii” (Bishkek Agrees Not to Increase Payments for Russian Military Objects”, RIA Novosti, September 16, 2010, http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20100916/276190981.html

⁴⁰ Kommersant, March 22, 2011, p. 8.

⁴¹ Deirdre Tuynan, “Rossiya i Kirgiziya Otlozhili Podpisanie Oboronogo Soglasheniya” (Russia and Kyrgyzstan Defer Signing the Military Agreement), Eurasianet.org, September 24, 2010, <http://russian.eurasianet.org/node/31295>

⁴² Kommersant, February 18, 2011, p. 7.

Bishkek was unwilling or incapable to stop the smuggling of duty-free petrol to Tajikistan. Even the issues of relatively minor importance seemed to be intractable: for months, the Kyrgyz authorities were not able to find a solution for MegaCom, a troubled Russian company, or to provide a new building for the Russian Trade Mission in Bishkek..

For its part, the Russian leadership was clearly distrustful of Bishkek and unwilling to invest much money and efforts in bilateral relations, preferring to wait for the end of post-Bakiyev transition. Conspicuously, no visits of senior government staff from Russia to Kyrgyzstan took place between April 2010 and September 2011, except for Sergei Naryshkin's ceremonial attendance for the celebration of the 20th anniversary of Kyrgyzstan's independence. Rushailo, though not formally relieved of his responsibilities, disappeared from the scene. Otunbayeva went to Moscow only to take part in multilateral summits, and even Atambayev, Russia's preferred interlocutor, was not granted an official visit.

In terms of money, Russia limited its investment in Kyrgyzstan to what was deemed necessary to prevent the country from a rapid and potentially irreversible degeneration into a failed state. Moscow's pledges to sponsor the Kambarata-1 HES construction or to purchase 75 % of the *Kyrgyzgaz*, a venture burdened with debt and shattered infrastructure, were put on hold. Kyrgyzstan's applied for a substantial credit from the EurAsEC Anti-Crisis Fund which, however, was not granted. Generally, bilateral cooperation almost came to a standstill, with Russia waiting for the outcome of Kyrgyzstan's presidential election.

The Regional and Geostrategic Dimensions of Kyrgyz Turmoil

The Kyrgyz developments posed at least three sets of challenges for Russia's posture in Central Asia and in the wider world. They were likely to complicate Bishkek's relations with Kazakhstan and heighten Kyrgyz – Uzbek tensions. In a worst case

scenario, Kyrgyz turbulences could spill over into the Uzbek and Tajik parts of the Ferghana valley. Russia's handling of the situation could create another irritant in its relations with the U.S., the EU and China. The Kyrgyz developments could weaken the Russia-led multilateral institutions, the CSTO and the EurAsEC, already suffering from a lack of coherence and failure to demonstrate a substantial practical output.

Moscow handled the challenges cautiously, trying to minimize the damaging effects of the Kyrgyz turmoil and to contain it within Kyrgyzstan. It attempted to make the impression of acting in consonance with other actors. In particular, it tried to rely on the alliance with Kazakhstan, not to antagonize Uzbekistan and to mitigate the differences between Russian and American interests in and perceptions of Kyrgyzstan.

Russia and Kazakhstan demonstrated a relatively high degree of coordination in their responses to events in Kyrgyzstan, though Nazarbayev was critical of the April coup and displayed no enthusiasm in seeing Bakiyev's ouster. Moscow and Astana cooperated in removing Bakiyev from Kyrgyzstan and were unanimous in their negative assessment of the Kyrgyz shift to the parliamentary form of government. In his parliamentary election campaign, Nazarbayev openly supported Kulov's party. Kazakhstan rendered humanitarian assistance to its troubled neighbour and, after oil duties had forced Bishkek to reduce imports from Russia, increased its own oil exports to Kyrgyzstan. Russian – Uzbek consultations on Kyrgyzstan were regular, and Russia praised Tashkent for its non-interference during the Osh crisis.

To the wider world, Russia tried to send a message that it did not seek unilateral gains in Kyrgyzstan and did not perceive the country as an arena of a struggle for influence. Apparently, Moscow and Washington reached an understanding that preventing the total collapse of Kyrgyz statehood should be a higher priority than exploiting the Kyrgyz events for the sake of influencing the country's geostrategic positioning. Russia did not express displeasure when the interim government announced, almost immediately after Bakiyev's overthrow, that Bishkek would stick to the Manas

Transit Center. Moreover, in the propitious atmosphere of U.S. - Russian “reset” Moscow and Washington began to underline the “proximity” of their estimates of Kyrgyz developments and their willingness “to coordinate efforts aimed at the stabilization of the situation in the country”.⁴³ In an unusual symbolic gesture, U.S. and Russian ambassadors in Bishkek issued a joint congratulation to Kyrgyz citizens on the World War II Victory Day.⁴⁴ After the June 2010 events Presidents Obama and Medvedev published a joint statement expressing their interest in the “restoration of democracy and stability” in Kyrgyzstan and support of the “coordinated international response” to the Osh crisis.⁴⁵

In a departure from previous policies, Russia refrained from pedaling the Manas Transit Center issue. Medvedev claimed that he did not oppose the American base in Kyrgyzstan⁴⁶. In late 2010, Bishkek announced that the Transit Center would continue operations till 2014. Atambayev later reiterated this point in Moscow, emphasizing that Kyrgyzstan should honour its international obligations. He was met with an encouraging response: an unidentified high-level Russian source hinted to the *Kommersant* daily that this was acceptable as “it at least looks somehow close to the reality”.⁴⁷

At the same time Moscow worried that other international players could try to turn the Kyrgyz events to their geostrategic advantage or that their involvement could further destabilize the country. China clearly showed that it was not interested in any interference with Kyrgyz developments, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization limited its role to a brief and inconclusive discussion of the Kyrgyz situation at its June 2010 summit in Tashkent. Accordingly, Russian wariness predictably

⁴³ Russian Foreign Ministry Press Release, May 29, 2010, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/B8AF9C49CF220CE5C32577320031B317

⁴⁴ “Sovmestnoe zayavlenie posol’stv SShA i RF v Kirgizskoi Respublike” (Joint Statement of U.S. and Russian Embassies in Kyrgyzstan), May 8, 2010, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1273265700>

⁴⁵ Joint Statement of the Presidents of the United States of America and the Russian Federation in Connection with the Situation in the Kyrgyz Republic, June 24, 2010, http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/24

⁴⁶ Medvedev’s Interview to the Wall Street Journal, June 18, 2010, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/464>

⁴⁷ *Kommersant*, March 22, 2011, p. 8.

concentrated on the West. In early May 2010 the Russian Foreign Minister warned international players, mentioning the EU and NATO in particular, but conspicuously omitting the US, against meddling in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs and attempts at "social engineering".⁴⁸ During and in the aftermath of the Osh events, Russia tried to limit the involvement of the UN and the OSCE in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁹ Otunbayeva's reputation in the eyes of Russian policymakers as a pro-American politician added to Moscow's suspicions about the credibility of the Kyrgyz authorities, especially after the idea of setting up a US-funded counterterrorism training center in southern Kyrgyzstan had surfaced again during Otunbayeva's visit to Washington in September 2010.

Generally, Russia succeeded in avoiding substantial international criticism for its policies in Kyrgyzstan, although this was much due to the fact that no external actor ranked Kyrgyzstan high on a priority list. The Kyrgyz developments had no negative repercussions for Russia's relations with Beijing, Brussels or Ankara; as to the US, the proximity of American and Russian approaches to Kyrgyzstan was hailed by the Department of State as one of the achievements and manifestations of "reset".⁵⁰

One of the "victims" of the violence in southern Kyrgyzstan was the credibility of the CSTO, whose failure to make any meaningful impact called into question the organization's coherence and long-term prospects. The Russian leadership acknowledged that the CSTO had to be revitalized and lessons had to be drawn from the Kyrgyz experience.⁵¹ In December 2010 the CSTO was reformed: its charter was amended to include provisions on "the reaction to crisis situations threatening the

⁴⁸ "Glava MIDa Rossii predosteryog Evrosoyuz i NATO ot vmeshatel'stva vo vnutrnnie dela stran SNG, provodya v primer situatsiyu v Kyrgyzstane" (Russian Foreign Minister Warns the EU and NATO against Meddling with the CIS Countries Internal Affairs, Citing Kyrgyz Situation as Example). "24kg" News Agency, May 19, 2010, <http://www.24kg.org/cis/74422-glava-mida-rossii-predostereg-evrosoyuz-i-nato-ot.html>

⁴⁹ Neil Melvin, Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence, Central Eurasia Project, Occasional Paper Series # 3, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Joshua Kucera, "State Department Touts Russia's Reset's Positive Role in Central Asia", Eurasianet.org, September 23, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62005>

⁵¹ "ODKB vnesyot izmeneniya v Ustav posle sobytii v Kirgizii" (CSTO Will Amend Its Charter after the Kyrgyz Events), August 20, 2010, <http://www.utro.ru/news/2010/08/20/916310.shtml>

security, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty of member states”.⁵² In particular, the CSTO could now deploy Collective Operative Reaction Forces to a member state if it appealed for help in a “crisis situation”, not only in case of an aggression. Along with military forces, the organization could now use units of police, security services, border guards and emergency agencies.

However, the decisions in the CSTO are still to be taken unanimously, and if the violence in Kyrgyzstan were to flare up again, a consensus would be very unlikely. In summer 2011 the Russian political elite began to ponder about the new reform of the CSTO. In particular, a think tank close to the presidential administration suggested that some of the decisions in the CSTO should be taken by majority vote and that Uzbekistan, the most recalcitrant member, should be asked either to comply with the majority or to leave the alliance.⁵³

Another challenge emanating from Kyrgyzstan, though a less urgent one, is its prospective accession to the Russia – Kazakhstan – Belarus Customs Union (CU), formally a part of the EurAsEC but in fact a quite distinct grouping. Although there has been much debate among Kyrgyz experts about the desirability of joining the CU and it is not clear whether the benefits of such a move would outweigh the losses⁵⁴, the Atambayev government decided that Kyrgyzstan would apply for CU membership. In October 2011 the CU, acting on Kazakhstan’s initiative, established a working group to develop an action plan for Kyrgyzstan’s accession.

Politically, Russia cannot but welcome Bishkek’s choice. However, accepting an inherently unstable country into the CU is a risky endeavour, especially as the CU

⁵² The CSTO Press Service, Press Release, December 10, 2010, http://www.dkb.gov.ru/year_ten_month_twelve/e.htm

⁵³ Kommersant, September 6, 2011, p. 6.

⁵⁴ See “ONS pri Minekonomregulirovanii oboznachil plyusy i minusy vhozheniya Kyrgyzstana v Tamozhennyi soyuz” (Public Advisory Board of the Ministry for Economic Regulation Points Out at Pros and Cons of Kyrgyzstan’s Entry into the Customs Union), August 4, 2011, http://tsouz.kz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1705:tamozhennyj-soyuzons-pri-minekonomregulirovaniya-oboznachil-plyusy-i-minusy-vxozhdeniya-kyrgyzstana-v-tamozhennyj-soyuz&catid=1:latest-news&Itemid=65

undergoes a transformation into a “Joint Economic Space” and possibly a “Eurasian Union”. Accordingly, Moscow, while supportive of the idea of Kyrgyzstan’s membership in general, has been only superficially enthusiastic about it.⁵⁵ Fortunately perhaps, Kyrgyzstan is a member of the World Trade Organization, which means that entering the CU would require negotiations between Bishkek and the WTO which would probably take quite a long time.

Russia and the Kyrgyz Presidential Election

Since spring 2011 the Kyrgyz political elite has been in anticipation of the presidential election set for October 30, 2011. Though the new constitution diminished the president’s powers, the position turned out to be a very popular one, with 80 persons initially applying for registration as candidates.⁵⁶ The fact was unsurprising since it was widely expected that the new president would try to initiate constitutional amendments aimed at the expansion of the head of state’s authority. The major contenders to emerge were Atambayev and Kamchibek Tashiev, leader of the “Ata Jurt” party.

The pre-election months were a time of heated political debate and growing nationalist sentiments. The rift between the north and the south of the country widened dangerously, with the candidates clearly associating with either northern or southern bases of support and no politician having a national appeal. It was rumoured that “southerners” pledged not to tolerate a “northerner” becoming a president and that Bakiyev’s clan again became actively involved in southern politics. However, as

⁵⁵ Sergei Glaziev, Secretary of the CU Commission, remarked that Kyrgyzstan could enter the Customs Union when the political situation in the country returned to normalcy. See Alima Tokmergenova, “Perspektivy vstupleniya Kyrgyzstana v Tamozhennyi Soyuz” (Prospects of Kyrgyzstan’s Accession to the Customs Union), August 26, 2010, <http://www.easttime.ru/analitic/1/4/847.html>. Vladimir Putin said cautiously in October 2011 that “for this [Kyrgyzstan’s membership in the CU] to happen, our colleagues need to study thoroughly all the conditions for joining this organization and to be ready to implement these rules both economically and legally”. See CA-News.org, October 20, 2011, <http://www.ca-news.org/news/810271>

⁵⁶ Finally, 19 candidates were registered by the Central Election Commission.

neither “northerners” nor “southerners” are a monolithic force (being in fact coalitions of parochial groupings), a second election round was expected.

Russia tried to keep a distance from Kyrgyzstan’s political battle. No direct interference in favour of any of the candidates took place; characteristically, Kulov, Russia’s former protégé, did not run in the upcoming election. None of the candidates was granted a televised appearance with Putin or Medvedev. Russia worried more about the election’s potential to reignite tensions in Kyrgyzstan, to spur nationalism and to speed up the disintegration of the country, than about who was to become president.

That said, it is widely believed in Kyrgyzstan that Atambayev was Russia’s preferred choice. In any case, overtly nationalist candidates would be, if elected, much more difficult to deal with. It was reported that Moscow declined to give its support to Adakhan Madumarov, another candidate who was formerly a close associate of Bakiyev and had taken a nationalist stance.⁵⁷ *Ferghana.ru*, a popular Russian website focusing on Central Asia, published an interview with an unnamed high-level source in the Russian security services who directly accused Tashiev of being involved in drug trafficking and keeping a private “army” of no less than 1000 men.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Atambayev, while still a prime-minister (he suspended his tenure at the end of September to run for presidency), scored an additional point by signing a memorandum with *Gazprom* whereby the Russian monopolist pledged to invest in oil and gas development projects in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ “Yuzhnye uzbeki podderzhat severnyh kirgizov” (Southern Uzbeks Will Give Support to Northern Kyrgyz), August 21, 2011, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1313873460>

⁵⁸ “Vopros voprosov: kto syadet na kirgizskii narkotrafik?” (The Question of Questions: Who Will Control the Kyrgyz Drug Trafficking?), *Ferghana.ru*, August 30, 2011, <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=7067>

⁵⁹ Almazbek Atambayev, “Soglasheniya s kompaniei “Gazprom” – ser’ yoznyi shag dlya obespecheniya energeticheskoi bezopasnosti strany” (Agreements with “Gazprom” Are a Serious Step to Guarantee the Country’s Energy Security), September 7, 2011, <http://www.gov.kg/?p=2055>

The election brought a decisive victory to Atambayev who gained 63% of votes as compared to 14.8% for Madumarov and 14.1% for Tashiev. The voting was reportedly marred by fraud and irregularities, but otherwise happened to be a surprisingly peaceful event. Predictably, neither Madumarov nor Tashiev conceded their defeat while the protests of their supporters began in Osh and Jalal-Abad. Atambayev signaled his intention to negotiate with Madumarov and Tashiev about their future political roles, opening the space for a compromise and a new redistribution of power within the Kyrgyz political elite.

Conclusion

The basic dilemma of Russian policy in Kyrgyzstan is the choice between active involvement and non-interference. An active involvement in Kyrgyz affairs, especially a military intervention, would be costly and unpopular with the Russian public opinion. It would complicate its relations with Uzbekistan and create a new irritant in Moscow's relations with the US and the EU. The policy of non-interference would be highly problematic since the Kyrgyz turbulence demonstrates a potential of spilling over beyond Kyrgyzstan's borders and being exploited by militant Islamists, terrorists and drug traffickers. The not unlikely implosion of Kyrgyzstan could provoke a regional meltdown, especially if it becomes intertwined with the mounting tensions in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Faced with the post-Bakiyev political turbulence and ethnic tensions in Kyrgyzstan, Russia tried to resolve the dilemma through a series of quite limited, pointed attempts to project its influence, relying primarily on economic and propagandistic leverage. In June 2010, at the gravest moment of crisis, Moscow chose not to intervene, seeing the situation as not critical enough for its own interests and expecting a return to normalcy by itself. Russia tried to mitigate the impact of regional and geostrategic contradictions on Kyrgyzstan, showing a willingness to act in close coordination with Kazakhstan and in consonance with the US.

Russian policy has been helpful in preventing Kyrgyzstan from plunging into chaos and returning the country to a superficial stability, though other factors, in particular the ability of the Kyrgyz elite to arrive at uneasy compromises, have also been significant. With Moscow continuing to grant economic benefits to Kyrgyzstan and other players not paying much attention to the country, Bishkek's foreign policy remained largely pro-Russian. At the same time Russia's refusal to intervene during the Osh crisis left behind greater uncertainty both within Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia in general about Russian intentions, capabilities and the credibility of its commitment to act as security guarantor in the region.

Kyrgyzstan, with its turbulent politics, fragmented and ambitious political elite and a semi-autonomy of southern provinces, has become a difficult country in which to project Russian influence. While Russia has much leverage on the country's political elite, the Kyrgyz politicians seem to be increasingly concentrated on their incessant struggle for power and more and more distant from the population and its grievances. Thus, Russian influence is absorbed in the upper layer of Bishkek's establishment and can hardly be said to reach a large parts of the society.

Kyrgyzstan's chronic instability has meant that the country's position vis-à-vis Russia has evolved from Moscow's geostrategic asset into a strategic and economic liability. The recent presidential election may give the country a respite from political infightings or push it to the brink of implosion and disintegration. In any case, the major challenges that Kyrgyzstan poses for Russian foreign policy have so far been postponed rather than faced, a strategy which clearly cannot be pursued indefinitely.

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