

# KYRGYZSTAN'S TRAGEDY IN THE SOUTH: POLITICAL PROVOCATION OR ETHNIC CONFRONTATION?

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Nationalism Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary

2012

*It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honored by the humiliation  
of their fellow beings*

Mahatma Gandhi

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my enormous gratitude to all those who helped me to complete this work. First of all, my deep sense of gratitude goes to my parents, Suinaly Shatmanov and Zamira Muratova, for their endless love and support.

I am also deeply indebted to my supervisor Professor Anton Pelinka whose skillful supervision helped me during the process of writing this thesis.

I also want to thank Maria Kovacs and Andras Kovacs for valuable comments and monitoring the process of writing.

And, finally, my special thanks go to my friends, especially Courtney Kelner, Ruth Candlish, Mariana Mendes, Tiffany Pransky, Karlygach Nurmanbetova, Marija Todorovic, Manushak Kevkhoyan and many many others whose invaluable assistance and support encouraged and helped me to come to this point.

## Abstract

The interrelationship between the socio-political weakening of the state and the rise of politicized ethnicity in post-Soviet Central Asia, particularly in the tensely emerging parliamentary democracy of Kyrgyzstan, provides the context for this analysis of the armed, ethnicized conflict in June 2010 in and around Kyrgyzstan's southern capital, Osh. The initial triggers of the violence remain highly contested and the discourses, academically, journalistically, and politically, are pervaded with divergent interpretations. The interpretations of international organizations, state parties, ethnic Kyrgyz, ethnic Uzbek, and other stakeholders are explored in this analysis of how and why the clashes became suddenly ethnicized.

Fundamentally, this paper argues that ethnic difference was used by ethnic entrepreneurs as a means to mobilize people, thus highlighting the conceptual distinction between ethnic conflict and ethnicized conflict. The concepts are theoretically framed in social cleavages, constructivist approaches to identity, and instrumentalist accounts of violence. By employing these frameworks to explore Soviet nationalities policy, dichotomous identity narratives of the nationalizing state, various regime rhetorics, and omissions and flaws of existing interpretations, the process of ethnicization is explained. Although there are differences between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, the June violence in southern Kyrgyzstan is largely contextual and cannot be causally linked to ethnic difference or assumed to be a primordially predestined occurrence.

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## Introduction

*“I just love my country,” he said gazing down.  
“If only we could learn to love each other.”  
~ Walker, the Guardian*

Kyrgyzstan is a small nation of some five million people that borders Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China. The first parliamentary democratic republic in Central Asia, to the world is known as a host to both United States and Russian military bases; Kyrgyzstan also provides the chance to investigate the interrelationship between the socio-political weakening of the state and the rise of politicized ethnicity. This interrelationship can be said to have resulted in major bloodshed in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. “Before the interethnic violence of last June, Osh was a remarkable meeting point of Uzbek and Kyrgyz cultures. That Osh is no longer, but shared history, provides the best hope for a peaceful future,” writes Nick Megoran, a political geographer of Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 2010 was the day when armed clashes started in Osh, the second largest city of the Kyrgyz Republic, between ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz gangs which later turned into full-fledged interethnic conflict. An explosion of violence, destruction and looting in southern parts of the Kyrgyz Republic on the 10-14th of June, 2010 killed many hundreds of people, mostly Uzbeks, destroyed over 2000 buildings, mostly homes, and deepened the tensions between the country’s ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.<sup>2</sup> According to unofficial statistics, several thousand were killed, while official statistics vary depending on the sources. This confrontation which lasted several days will forever remain as the most tragic and the bloodiest event in the national history

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Megoran, “Osh: one year on,” *Open Democracy*, June 12, 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/nick-megoran/osh-one-year-on>

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan,” September, 2010, 4.

of the Kyrgyz Republic; albeit not the only occasion of political turmoil. Kyrgyzstan stands as the only country in the post-Soviet space since independence that has experienced two mass uprisings which led to regime changes.

As soon as tormented calm gathered in southern Kyrgyzstan, international media outlets were quick to come up with an explanation for the violence: an “interethnic” conflict which was destined to happen. This is a story of Kyrgyz against Uzbek, Uzbek against Kyrgyz: a “violent history”, in the words of an article in the *Independent*, “a tinder box” region where imminent ethnic antagonism had to erupt.<sup>3</sup>

The initial trigger of the armed riots is still unknown. Opposed political narratives presented in the competing media coverage in addition to widespread and divergent rumors resulted in a situation where people did not and still do not know who to believe. Immediately after the end of the violence in June, international media and organizations claimed in their reports that Uzbeks were the primary victims and are endangered by both the Kyrgyz state and people. The interim government of that time with Roza Otunabeva as its leader, opposed this view rejecting the claim that Uzbeks suffered the most. Ordinary people directed their attention towards social networking sites, blogs, and forum discussions where many powerful images of brutal killings and burnt buildings were displayed. According to the political elite of Kyrgyzstan, the recently overthrown President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in the April Revolution of 2010 and the prominent leader of Uzbek minority, Kadyrjan Batyrov, were the main people behind all that happened. Some other politicians blame the interim government for weakness, ignorance, and ineffectiveness in the prevention of the violence. There are also people

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<sup>3</sup> Shaun Walker, “Kyrgyz gangs accused of 'genocide' as death toll rises”, *The Independent*, 14 June 2010 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/kyrgyz-gangs-accused-of-genocide-as-death-toll-rises-1999652.html>

within political structure who believe that Uzbek leaders used the political instability in the country as an opportunity to gain autonomy from the state. There is no one common position within the national government. As for the explanation of the international community, the Kyrgyz government declared Kimmo Kiljunen, the International Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission's Chair, as persona-non-grata, banned from entering Kyrgyzstan, when the Commission's report into the violence was published in May 2011. Furthermore, in the several days following the start of the conflict, many reports and discussions emerged in cyberspace mostly involving two "big" words: "Kyrgyzstan" and "genocide". Generally, deep ethnic polarization could be observed amongst the local population. For example, on the website [www.uzbektragedy.com](http://www.uzbektragedy.com), the narrative of ethnic cleansing in different languages can be observed whereas on [www.osh-reality.info](http://www.osh-reality.info), reports are presented arguing that it was an attempt to disgrace the Kyrgyz majority and that the suffering of Kyrgyz populations is ignored. Nevertheless, exceptions do exist. Moreover, some foreign media outlets called the city of Osh, where most of the violence took place, as "ethnic boiling-pot of Central Asia" arguing that the eruption of violence was not at all surprising, as it was ethno-culturally determined.<sup>4</sup> Also, there are people who believe that the Kyrgyz nation has witnessed a repetition of history referring to the conflict that happened in the same month, in the same city, involving the same ethnic groups, only twenty years earlier (explained below). Thus, there is a substantial need to dissect and research the narratives and interpretations presented in order to understand the roots of the violence of this infamously bloody June.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been an increase in the number and scale of intrastate violent conflicts, most of them being commonly labeled as 'ethnic'. Once the

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<sup>4</sup> "Stalin's Harvest", 17 June 2010, *the Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/16377083>



division between West and East disappeared and violent conflicts could no longer be explained in ideological terms, 'ethnic' seems to have become the preferred label in everyday discourse. The need to provide a ready-made interpretation for violence, together with the incentives that might result from this frame, explain what Brubaker and Laitin have referred to as 'the coding bias in the ethnic direction'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, more than the sudden growth of conflicts fought along ethnic lines, what seemed to be definitely on the rise was the characterization, both by media and academia, of the very discourse on conflicts as 'ethnic'. If, on the one hand, the act of labeling a conflict tends to be strongly influenced by the dominant interpretative frame in the media and academic discourses, on the other, the ethnic label is far from being an innocent one.

Since June of 2010, the lives of citizens of Osh, both Kyrgyz and Uzbek, have become increasingly complicated, mainly because of the intensification of the ethnic polarization in the aftermath of these clashes in which one ethnic group was portrayed as victim and the other as perpetrator. It is critical to find conceptual clarity and seek respite from this polarization by sorting through the various perspectives and meanings attributed to Kyrgyzstan's tragedy.

The aim of this thesis is to problematize the dominant interpretative frame put on the June clashes of 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan based on analytical as well as normative reasons. It is very important to distinguish between an ethnic conflict and an ethnicized conflict. I will argue that that ethnic difference was used by ethnic entrepreneurs as a means to mobilize people, thus the June violence is an ethnicized conflict but it is not an ethnic conflict. However, I do not claim that ethnicity is wholly irrelevant to the June

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<sup>5</sup> Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin, "Ethnic and Nationalist Violence," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 428

2010 tragedy in southern Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, it had become important; simply because people were identified as belonging to one or the other ethnic group, they were killed, their homes were burned down, and they were forced to flee. Those who provoked the violence were certainly familiar with the sensitive nature of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek divide due to the massive violence based on ethnic identification that took place in the same city, some twenty years earlier.<sup>6</sup> I believe that the term “ethnic conflict” in regards to the Osh violence has been largely overemphasized by the media and general public, and it implies an extremely problematic causal claim – in a violent “ethnic conflict” the driving factor of both the conflict and its violent dynamics is ethnicity itself. Without taking ethnic difference as an analytical cause and answering to such question as why and how the process of ethnicization occurred in the case of the June clashes, I will demonstrate that ethnicity was not the driving cleavage of the confrontation but rather a source for mobilization, and that violence was commonly ethnically exercised, but not driven.

In this study, I claim that in order to understand the violence of June 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, one has to explore it in the context of the political changes that have occurred since the year of 2005 and more importantly to situate the conflict in the context of the political crisis of April 2010. The change in the government following the mass uprising in April 2010, and a series of changes occurring in the political sphere of the country as a result of power imbalance in the south, provided a suitable environment for the increased salience of ethnic cleavages as a mobilization tool by opportunistic political entrepreneurs. As Kalyvas argues, because ethnicity is seen as the conflict’s master

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<sup>6</sup> Sean Roberts, “What’s Ethnicity Got to do with it? Healing the Wounds of Uzbek-Kyrgyz Violence in the Fergana Valley,” *PONARS Eurasia* (August 2010): 13

cleavage, all the violent interactions between different ethnic groups tend to be explained through the lenses of the perceived master cleavage, without carefully looking at their dynamics. Such a perspective is flawed because this assumption overlooks the fact that actors are not unitary and have different interests and motivations.<sup>7</sup>

Since the violence of June 10-14, 2010, ethnicity-based narratives have become deeply entrenched among the public and, even worse, embraced by ethnic Kyrgyz security forces in the south, making it very difficult to restore interethnic cooperation or to prevent further violence. Therefore, the study is also important for educators and policymakers in Kyrgyzstan as they consider and implement measures to achieve peaceful coexistence among the two different ethnic groups. Its relevance is especially evident because of how recently the conflict occurred.

As for methodology, content analysis will be the main method employed towards this study's conclusions. Data will be collected from both primary and secondary sources, including academic articles written on the subject, the official reports of the government, international community and other state and non-governmental organizations' research conducted on this particular issue.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter starts by presenting the theoretical framework of the thesis. The second chapter provides the historical background of the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union towards Central Asia, particularly focusing on the republic of Kyrgyzstan. The third chapter analyses the dichotomous identity narrative, civic and ethnic, of Akayev's regime, followed by the

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<sup>7</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence' : Action and Identity in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (3): 475

transformation toward a more ethnonationalist Kyrgyz patriotism under Bakiyev, and later the changes the April revolution brought to Kyrgyz political life. The fourth chapter looks at the existing interpretations and narratives among Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations of southern Kyrgyzstan, pointing to the omissions and flaws of them. And, the final chapter gives the particular background of the conflict and analyzes it within the context of all political transformations since 2005, thus illuminating the process of ethnicization which resulted in this major crisis in the country.

## CHAPTER I. Theoretical Framework

The thesis seeks to explore variation of ethnic identity in conflict intensity as a form of political mobilisation. Theories related to cleavages and mobilisation as well as theories of ethnic violence will be utilised in this analysis. The theoretical framework can contribute to the exploration of why political entrepreneurs chose to mobilize population and why ethnicity as a cleavage became the main source of political mobilization.

First, I present cleavage theory and demonstrate how this theory can be utilised in the context of Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, I will present the constructivist approach to identity and the implication of this approach on conflict. Thirdly, I discuss theories related to unconventional, violent, political mobilisation, focusing on an instrumental approach to violence.

### ***1.1 Social Cleavage Theory***

The role and impact of various cleavages which are embedded within Kyrgyzstan's society such as rural-urban, class, language, regional on the degree or level of Uzbek-Kyrgyz division will be examined through the cleavage theory. One of the main elements of this theory is the assumption that cross-cutting cleavages decrease conflict intensity while overlapping cleavages reinforce each other.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan. *Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives* (New York: The Free Press 1967), 23.

It is the theory of social cleavages developed in 1960s by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan that gives insights for understanding the relationship between existing cleavages in society and political mobilisation.<sup>9</sup> According to the authors, cleavages are: “the criteria which divide the members of a community or subcommunity into groups, and the relevant cleavages are those which divide members into groups with important political differences at specific times and places.” The authors claim that political conflicts are products of the existence and hierarchy of cleavages that vary over time and from one political unit to another. Cleavage theory can offer a good analytical framework to look at how and why communal conflicts polarize society and political life of the state, and the effects of a cleavage’s position in the hierarchy of cleavages on it.

### ***1.2 Constructivist Approach to Identity***

Cleavages or identities will be explored through a constructivist approach, which states that structural and historical changes as well as both intentional and unintentional role of political entrepreneurs do play a role in identity formation.<sup>10</sup> By applying a constructivist approach with a focus on the role of political, social, organizational actors in deconstructing, constructing political or cultural identities, reducing or increasing polarization among society we can understand better why and how the violent mode of political mobilisation took place in Osh in 2010. From the constructivist perspective, identity is seen as a dynamic and constantly changing thing, thus it implies that cleavages can be shaped by agencies and that the degree of polarization and the type of the mode of mass mobilisation are determined by deliberate actions of certain actors: individuals,

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<sup>9</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives* (New York: The Free Press 1967), 24.

<sup>10</sup> James Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity," *International Organization* 54 (2000):855.

organizations, civil society as well as by social, historical or economical events.<sup>11</sup> James Fearon and David Laitin believe that the formation of identity by political actors is related to violent ethnic/religious conflict, and that violence is motivated to emerge and continue because it strengthens and makes group identities more solid. Furthermore, the authors argue that construction of identity, which also implies making individuals feel belonging to a certain group and perceive their ethnicities as essential and major characteristic of their identities, can entail either changing the content of a social category or changing the boundary rules between ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> Having a big desire to assert its uniqueness, self-definition and acceptance as a separate group or entity, some community members can use aggression, violence or certain governmental policies towards the “other” community in order to achieve the aim.<sup>13</sup> The constructivist approach is highly relevant in understanding the motives behind violence and antagonism towards other ethnic/religious groups of other ethnic categories.

### ***1.3 Instrumental Approach to Violence***

The utilization of political mobilisation, in this particular case, unconventional mode of mobilisation by political actors in seeking certain gains will be analyzed through the perspective of instrumental approach.

According to Paul Brass, political elites construct and preserve ethnic/ religious antipathy, and use violence as an instrument to achieve their certain purposes.<sup>14</sup> He notes that there is always a competition between different ethnic groups in multi-ethnic

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<sup>11</sup> James Fearon and David D. Laitin. "Violence and the social construction of ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54 (2000):866.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid,868.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid,868.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: text and context in the representation of collective violence*, Princeton: University Press, 1997.

political entities, and it is usually one group that benefits more in terms of political, economical status and power than others, thus the construction or reinforcement of ethnic communities' identities is connected to this.<sup>15</sup> Holding the view that high officials are responsible for the violence, Paul Brass believes that regions, where violence is widespread and systematic, have institutionalized this way of political mobilisation in an *institutional riot system*. The scholar comes up with a division of riots into three stages and specific responsibilities of political actors in the relation to each stage. These three phases are: the preparation or rehearsal, the enactment of the violence, the explanation or interpretation the attacks.<sup>16</sup> The *preparatory phase* of the violence involves agencies or individuals such as political leaders, propagandists, media who play an important role in translating an event into violent mode of political mobilisation.<sup>17</sup> The second phase of the institutional riot system theory, the *enactment of violence* involves the actions of specialists who know how to translate growing public tensions into a large-scale carnage. These actors usually are groups of trained activists, young hooligans, criminals.<sup>18</sup> The *explanatory phase* takes place when the upheaval is over, and the elites find ways to justify the violence or to control the interpretations and explanations of the causes of the riots.<sup>19</sup> Usually in this stage, actors take a complicity in the violence, seek to give explanations for the events in the favor. The construction of ethnic identity is present in every stage of the institutional riot system, and the success of political organizations or actors depends on how well they can maintain the view that the "others" constitute a big

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 45.



threat, an immoral and barbaric community, that wants to outnumber and destroy their number.<sup>20</sup>

Wilkinson, who argues that the high level of violence is mainly organized by political parties or political individuals who are interested in electoral benefits, also believes that where there is a high degree of competition between rival political formations, bloodshed is often times likely to happen.<sup>21</sup> This is exacerbated, according to Wilkinson, in states with two-party and first-past-the post systems, where the party in power does not need any support or votes from minorities, minorities in most of the cases are not provided security or the rights to realize their minority interests.<sup>22</sup> As for the explanation why ordinary people decide to use violent tactics during conflicts, it can be said that they believe it is the most efficient and right way to reach their own objectives and they also find some other various justifications for such kind of behavior. There is a connection between the probability of the emergence and intensity of conflict and territorial marginalization, residential separation of ethnic/religious groups. As Fearon and Laitin state that ethnic separation leads to the view of an ethnic group as the “other”. Also, according to Varshney the more segregated the groups are the more untroubled beliefs and ideas that put one community in a more superior position over another can acquire successful place.<sup>23</sup> Osh, the most severely affected city during the 2010 violence, is described as “not one city, but two different cities” due to its highly territorial segregation of ethnic communities.

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<sup>20</sup>Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: text and context in the representation of collective violence* (Princeton: University Press, 1997), 67.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence. Electoral Competition and Communal Riots in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, "Postmodernism, Civic Engagement, and Ethnic Conflict: A Passage to India," *Comparative Politics* 30(1997), 57.

By using Paul Brass' theory about the role of political actors it is crucial to explore the role of the government and the police force, and understand how the conflict got intensified.

## CHAPTER II. Historical Background

It is vital to refer to the Soviet historical background of Kyrgyzstan in order to understand the process of institutionalization of the Kyrgyz ethnicity and its outcomes. This chapter focuses on analyzing the Soviet nationalities policies, and particularly the process of border delimitation of Central Asia examining its conceptual framework and logic. Another major issue explored in this chapter is the dynamics of the process of dividing the towns of the Ferghana Valley into different Central Asian republics.

### ***2.1 Drawing borders***

The border-making process of Central Asia by central Soviet authorities provides an excellent basis for a discussion of post-independence formation and character of Kyrgyzstan's ethno-politics. It was during the Soviet nation-building time when ethnicity became highly politicized, and left its dramatically influential marks on the post-soviet national consolidation procedure. In fact, one of the most distinctive yet at the same time ambiguous features of Soviet politics was the role nationality played. However, in order to begin discussing the Soviet nationalities policies, first, it is necessary to see how the ruling socialists understood "the national question".

Soviet ethno-politics was regulated by Marxist and Leninist thinking, the ultimate basis of which was the consolidation of classless society, thus no value and place for ethnic identity had to be given.<sup>24</sup> The revolutionary socialists foresaw an internationalized political community, and the absence of such things as nations, nationalism, or national

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<sup>24</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 10.

statehood.<sup>25</sup> However, the reality happened to be very different and quite unexpected. Defining the establishment of Soviet state as "the greatest nation-building polity ever", Arne Haugen also absolutely termed it "a big paradox"<sup>26</sup> What constituted the Soviet state were national territories, the Soviet republics, formed on the basis of nationality or ethnicity and given names after their dominant ethnic population groups, *titular nations*, being organized into a federalist system with Moscow as the centre.<sup>27</sup> As Ronald Suny has rightly noted, the Soviet Union was the only and first state to create its political entities solely on ethnicity.<sup>28</sup> However, the fact that the originally anti-nationalist revolutionaries, Soviet authorities, decided to make nationality or ethnicity the most important criteria for the formation of its territorial and political units was quite surprising and raised a number of questions. For instance, as Francine Hirsch has pointed out, "the national-territorial delimitation remains the heart of the debate about the nature of the Soviet rule."<sup>29</sup>

Generally, in the scholarly literature on nationalities policy of the Soviet state, two mainstream approaches can be observed. According to the first, the Soviet importance given to nationality is explained as power politics; a pragmatic approach to consolidate and secure the centre's dominance and control over the extraordinary ethnic heterogeneity of the Soviet Union's overall population. The national concessions were intended as a "temporary solution only, as a transitional stage to a completely centralized

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<sup>25</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 23.

<sup>29</sup> Francine Hirsch, "Towards an Empire of Nations: Border Making and the Formation of "Soviet" National Identities," *The Russian Review*, vol.59, no.2 (April 2000), 210.

and a supra-national world-wide Soviet state.”<sup>30</sup> From the second perspective, the advancement of nationality is connected to modernization. According to this interpretation, the promotion of national identity by the Soviet authority was understood as a strategic way to transform the society in the direction of development.

It was the year of 1924, when following with the above explained nationality policy of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region was reorganized into new political administrative units along ethnical/national lines. Before this process took place in the region, most of Central Asia was organized into the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) under the rule of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). It is also important to mention here is that it was during the second half of the nineteenth century when the region of Central Asia with its highly heterogenous population was colonized by the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, during the period of 1924-1936 when national delimitation (*natsional'noe razmezhevanie*) took place, and as a consequence of which Central Asia was politically reorganized into the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), the Uzbek SSR, the Tajik SSR, the Kazak SSR, the Karakalpak ASSR, and the Kyrgyz SSR.<sup>31</sup>

Most scholars agree on that the drawing borders of Central Asia was a significant project, the most profound demonstration of the institutionalization of national identity, because it introduced territorially fixed nationhood to people of this part of the Soviet state, who did not tend to characterize themselves in the national sense. As Arne Haugen maintains the political reorganization of Central Asian territories became an important event from which the era of nationality for Central Asian people can be traced, and also

<sup>30</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union. Communism and Nationalism 1917-1923*, revised edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 296.

<sup>31</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 97.

was left in history as the time when “nationalism as a belief system developed among Central Asian groups”.<sup>32</sup> Before the Soviet arrival, several suborganization identities were dominant among Central Asian groups as closed tribal and clan groups. According to the scholars who believe that national identity does not possess any primordial characteristics, but is an outcome of historical processes, it happens to be that nations and national identity were imposed on Central Asia by an external authority. However, there is also a different approach to this particular issue introduced by Rogers Brubaker, who argues that in most instances the nation can be explained as “an event”, that is a “political phenomenon that emerges under particular political and societal circumstances, rather than as a long development”.<sup>33</sup> In my opinion, the formation of Central Asian political entities can be perfectly explained by Brubaker’s analytical framework.

There is a big variety of proposed implications concerning the logic behind the delimitation project in Central Asia. According to Pipes, the rationale behind the organization of national administrative and political entities in Central Asia was to divide and rule aimed to weaken or destroy a genuine nationalism, pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic longing, and bring to the minds of people the unreal national aspirations.<sup>34</sup> Terry Martin, who holds a similar thinking in regards to this particular issue labeling the Soviet Union the “Affirmative Action Empire”, can also be included to the group. From his point of view, the Bolsheviks so much feared the development of defensive minority nationalism that they promoted national identities to the point of affirmative action in favor of the

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<sup>32</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union. Communism and Nationalism 1917-1923*, revised edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 296.

potential minority nationalists.<sup>35</sup> To add to this, such scholar as Francine Hirsch in his “Empire of Nations” argues that Soviet nationalities policy should be perceived as a strategy for societal development. However, it was national identification to be the most important thing to develop in the shape of a more fundamental loyalty to the Soviet state.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, some scholars suggest that the issue is not that simple, and there is a range of more complex intentions in the process of border-drawing by the Soviets.

Nevertheless, I tend to agree with the more recent assumption of Arne Haugen, who after the Central Party Archives became available having studied them thoroughly, came to conclusion that the Soviet rulers had a primary belief that structuring political boundaries along ethnicity would make the administration in the region a lot easier. The Soviet authorities were aware of the deep fragmentation of identity among the peoples of Central Asia, and they perceived fragmentation prevailing in the region as a big obstacle for the securing total Soviet control over the vast territory of Central Asia. So, in the opinion of Haugen, the achievement of the unity of coethnics among the Central Asian groups was a goal, not a threat.<sup>37</sup>

As for the consequences of the delimitation, Terry Martin has stated that because the Soviet state made nationality the most decisive precondition in the distribution of goods and resources such as jobs, education, administrative positions, and so on, the rhetoric of nationality was adopted surprisingly rapidly by the populations of the newly

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<sup>35</sup> Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire. Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938*, PhD Dissertaion. (University of Chicago, 1996), 68.

<sup>36</sup> Francine Hirsch, “Towards an Empire of Nations: Border Making and the Formation of “Soviet” National Identities,” *The Russian Review*, vol.59, no.2 (April 2000), 234.

<sup>37</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 96.

established Central Asian republics.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Olivier Roy also agrees with Martin by maintaining that:

*Stalin's great victory was that he made the intellectuals in Central Asia defend their own languages and „nations” against their neighbors, and not against Moscow, who instead was called upon mediation and the settlement of conflicts.*<sup>39</sup>

Another key tactic of the Soviet regime in institutionalizing of nationality was the promotion the idea of national cultures, language and local elites. Overall, through the dynamic and elaborate system of Soviet nationalities policy, the new republics came to be known as “in the total possession” of the titular nations, which in turn was used to privilege these groups in “their” autonomous territories.<sup>40</sup>

## **2.2 “Creating” the Soviet Kyrgyz Republic**

One such example of deliberate border demarcation is Kyrgyzstan. If we talk about the sense of national identity among Kyrgyz republic’s population before the creation of ethnoterritorial unity by the Soviet regime, then we learn from the writing of Arne Haugen who stressed that there was no separate Kyrgyz nationalism in the period prior to the delimitation process. Only Kazakhs and Turkmens had demanded to be recognized as nations, no such a thing arose in the name of the Kyrgyz, according to the scholar.<sup>41</sup> Rather, when such claims emerged in 1924, it could have been understood more as a direct outcome of the delimitation itself. Furthermore, as Haugen explains this fact by saying that the political reorganization of Central Asia was perceived as an alarm and created a certain anxiety among some groups, like Kyrgyz, of becoming minorities.

<sup>38</sup> Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire. Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938*, PhD Dissertaion. (University of Chicago, 1996), 89.

<sup>39</sup> Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London: I.B. Tauris),73.

<sup>40</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>41</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 167.



And, another important factor played role in the strengthening of national identification and that has already been mentioned above is that main political and economic resources were greatly connected to national affiliation.<sup>42</sup> After all, the central figures in Moscow agreed that the Kyrgyz also represented a possible unity and therefore had a right to become a nation with its own territory. According to the first delimitation plan in early 1924, on October 14, 1924, the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous Oblast (AO) was established. In May 1925, the name of the oblast was changed to the Kyrgyz AO. In February 1926, the Kyrgyz AO was renamed the Autonomous Republic (ASSR), before it was finally made into a Union republic (SSR) in December 1936.<sup>43</sup>

### ***2.3 Splitting up the Ferghana Valley***

In most cases the major ethnic groups of Central Asia lived in compact communities with other groups being few in such compact settlements. These major groups served as the basis for forming national republics.<sup>44</sup> However, because some territorial communities having complex structures and composition posed difficulty for drawing ethnoterritorial borders, there was a certain degree of incongruence between national territory and nationalities of people inhabiting them.<sup>45</sup> One such case of drawing borders which resulted in the mismatch between territory assigned and predominant ethnicity of people living on was the Ferghana Valley. According to Patnaik the reason for the large Uzbek population's inclusion in Kyrgyz Republic was a consequence of including portion of Ferghana Valley to the republic as a part of "ethnicity principle"

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<sup>42</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>44</sup> Ajay Patnaik, "Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia ", (Kolkata: Anamika Publishers and Distributors Ltd 2003), 28

<sup>45</sup> Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire. Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938*, PhD Dissertaion. University of Chicago. 1996, 34.

combined with economic goals although the inhabitants of Ferghana Valley were of three different ethnicities: Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik.<sup>46</sup> In regard to this particular issue, Andrew Bond and Natalie Koch point out that “regional identities were characterized by so much overlap and ambiguity that even the most meticulous or benign border demarcation effort would have failed to accurately capture the everyday realities of this region”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, most sources say that the drawing the borders of the Ferghana Valley, between the Uzbeks on the one side and the Tajiks and Kyrgyz on the other resulted in a big controversy. Mostly, the towns of the valley, such as Kokand, Ferghana, Andijan, Osh and Namangan happened to be the main themes of a hot debate.

According to Haugen, the discussions had the character of negotiations between the two sides, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, in which both parts made unrealistic demands. The Uzbek representative Committee believed that all of the Ferghana towns have to belong to the Uzbek republic because the majority of their populations were of an Uzbek nationality. As for the Kyrgyz Committee, they strongly argued that several of the towns were highly important for the Kyrgyz people and the republic as well. In particular, the Kyrgyz mostly lobbied to have Andijan as the part of the future republic, certainly much more than on the town Osh, as Arne Haugen stated. In spite of this, when the process of drawing the borders came to its end, Andijan like most other Ferghana towns was placed within the Uzbek republic, while Osh was included in the Kyrgyz oblast.<sup>48</sup>

What is interesting is that when the two parties expressed the needs of their future political structures, socioeconomic differences were obvious. While the Kyrgyz,

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<sup>46</sup> Ajay Patnaik, “Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia”, (Kolkata: Anamika Publishers and Distributors Ltd 2003), 28.

<sup>47</sup> Natalie Koch and Andrew Bond, “Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2010), 534.

<sup>48</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 189.

historically known to be of a nomadic character, largely focused on the need for markets, the Uzbek side, mainly being of a settled agricultural character, were interested in water, a very scarce resource in Central Asia. However, a more principal concern of the valley's Uzbek population was the fear to be included as a socio-economic minority in a republic the majority of which would be a traditionally nomadic population.<sup>49</sup> From this it is quite evident that for the peoples of the Ferghana Valley, identification with ethnic identities such as Uzbek or Kyrgyz was not primarily important, instead what was really important is the identification with historically prevailing socio-economic divisions in the region.

Furthermore, except from the Uzbek minority, the boom of industrialization during the Soviet times resulted in a large flow of other ethnic groups to the country such as Russians, Ukrainians. Apart of them, the other minorities were forcefully sent to Kyrgyzstan by Stalin's resettlement policy after the World War II. These minority groups were Germans, Koreans, Meskhetian Turks, Chechens as Matteo Fumagalli named them as "historically foreign".<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the new republic of Kyrgyzstan, being a home for more than ninety ethnic groups, happened to be known as a new multi-ethnic country in the region of Central Asia.

It is agreed in the scholarly literature on the Soviet nationalities policy that the Soviet Union, being one of the first multinational states of the world at the time, was very successful in consolidating its power and control over its autonomous political units, maintaining political stability and not allowing for the eruption of ethnic nationalism. The most efficient method of achieving the initial aim was the institutionalization of

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<sup>49</sup> Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, 191.

<sup>50</sup> Matteo Fumagalli, "Informal Ethnopolitics and Local Authority Figures in Osh, Kyrgyzstan," *Ethnopolitics*, 6:2, (June 2007), 213.

nationality. Nationality was codified as ethnicity, whereas ethnicity was understood and became institutionalized only as a biological category, a characteristic defined by birth that is in a contrast with the constructive approach to identity according to which ethnic identity/identification is the result of socialization and conscious self-identification. Another outcome of this policy was that there was confusion about such basic categories as ethnicity, nationality and citizenship. Mainly, it was understood and perceived by the people that those of different ethnicity belong to different nations.<sup>51</sup> Francine Hirsch has noted that Central Asian political players made active use of the national identities. The local leaders significantly manipulated the language of nationality to promote and achieve their own interests.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, it is not to say that historically predominant traditional identities disappeared from the lives of the peoples. Even though local elites engaged to advance national identification, the Soviet regime created a considerable room for suborganization identities such as tribe, clan or region based communities, and they remained among the local populations. More important to note is that this factor along with institutionalized nationality became the main organizing principles of categorization within the societies employed by the peoples to find his/her place in the social reality, and the same mechanism is still used in the modern states since the collapse of the Soviet state.

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<sup>51</sup> Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account," 50.

<sup>52</sup> Francine Hirsch, "Towards an Empire of Nations: Border Making and the Formation of "Soviet" National Identities," *The Russian Review*, vol.59, no.2 April 2000, 224.

## CHAPTER III. The Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Conflict and Ethnicity

### 3.1 *The Osh Conflict in June 1990*

In 1990, the first phase of the Soviet empire's dissolution could have been observed. Mostly, the month of May 1990 became the period of unprecedented phenomenon, numerous anti-perestroika mass protests taking place from Moscow to the Baltic states. Even the remote part of the Soviet Union, Central Asia, did not stay unaffected by this political change. In March of the same year, with the emergence of activists with a strongly ethnic-based program among ethnic Uzbek members of the Kyrgyz Communist Party, the Kyrgyz republic, allegedly confronted itself with the calls from the Uzbek minority elites demanding the formation of an Uzbek Autonomous Soviet Republic within the territories of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>53</sup>

The bloody strife in Osh of June 1990 was left in history of the Soviet space as one of the most violent conflicts that took place on the territory of the former Soviet Union. What is known from the limited number of sources concerning this particular issue is that the two sides of the clashes were members of two Central Asian nationalities – Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. The conflict itself erupted in the Osh region of the Kyrgyz republic, and was classified as a “riot-type conflict”.<sup>54</sup>

The city of Osh has always been characterized by its ethnically diverse population. In the early years of the post-Soviet epoch Uzbeks comprised 46%, Kyrgyz 24% and Russians about 20%, the three major ethnical groups residing in the

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<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, “Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan,” 3.

<sup>54</sup> Valery Tiskov, “Don’t Kill Me, I am Kyrgyz! An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 32, no. 2, 137.

administrative point of the Osh *oblast*. Another important town of the Osh *oblast*, Uzgen's regional center population is 34,167, the majority of which are Uzbeks numbering 27,525.<sup>55</sup> Having been industrially well developed during that time, the Osh *oblast* used to account for one-third of all industrial production of the republic. Being historically different in the traditional economic orientations, Uzbeks were primarily engaged in agriculture, whereas the main source of living for the Kyrgyz was cattle, horse and sheep-breeding. Russians used to hold high positions in industry and in intellectual sphere of the *oblast*.

According to Valery Tishkov, the fruitful conditions for the explosion of interethnic tension were the conditions of low living standards, socio-economic crisis and political destabilization. However, in regards to the immediate reasons he has argued that they were the increasing interethnic communities' competition over resources (mainly land), the competition to get control over power structures, the preeminence of urban-rural social cleavages, a high level of unemployment, and lack of housing.<sup>56</sup> Amelin maintains that there were 40,000 people registered in Osh waiting to receive state apartments. Moreover, in the year of 1990 among 25 Communist party leaders in the Osh *oblast*, there was only one person of Uzbek ethnicity. The central apparatus of Osh was, generally, dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz (66.6% Kirgiz, 13.7% Russians, and 5.8% Uzbeks). According to Amelin, the Uzbeks dominated less influential but profitable positions in trade and services, for example in the city of Osh 79% of all taxi drivers and

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<sup>55</sup> Valery Tishkov, "Don't Kill Me, I am Kyrgyz! An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 32, no. 2. 141.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

71.4% of state trade employees were Uzbeks.<sup>57</sup> Uzbekistan's first deputy Minister of Internal Affairs that time V.G.Gusov, commenting on Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations in Osh said: "One often hears hundreds of thousands of Uzbeks live in Kyrgyzstan. They are especially numerous in the districts bordering on Uzbekistan. However, one finds almost no Uzbek among the leadership of provinces, districts and farms. It is quite possible that this led to discontent, tension and eventual confrontation between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents in Osh."<sup>58</sup> A slightly different point is emphasized by some scholars who believe that the activities of nationalist groups of both Kyrgyz and Uzbek sides and the ineffectiveness of the region's administration were crucial factors in provoking ethnic violent attacks.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Valery Tishkov deems that the unrest was directly connected to the activities of criminal groups, economic "mafia", and to the disbalance created after the perestroika in the high-ranking power structures of the republic as well.<sup>60</sup>

The open armed confrontation broke out on 4 June 1990 in the city of Osh and later spread to Uzgen. The consequences of the clashes were catastrophic: during the week of 4- 10 June, 120 Uzbeks, 50 Kirgiz and one Russian were killed. According to the report of the investigating commission, more than 5,000 crimes were committed (murder, rape, assault and pillage).<sup>61</sup> It is also important to note that the violence was stopped only by imposing a state of emergency and Moscow sending military troops, over 2,000

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<sup>57</sup> Amelin, Venalii Y., *Mezhnatsional'nye konflikt v respublikakh Srednei Azij* (Ethnic Conflicts in the Republics of Central Asia). Moscow: Ross., 1 993, 51.

<sup>58</sup> Ajay Patnaik, "Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia ", (Kolkata: Anamika Publishers and Distributors Ltd 2003), 126.

<sup>59</sup> Asankanov, Abilabek. "Ethnic Conflict in the Osh Region in Summer 1990: Reasons and Lessons." In *Ethnicity and power in the contemporary world*, edited by K. Rupesinghe and V. Tishkov, 116-124. Paris, France, United Nations University, 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Valery Tiskov, "Don't Kill Me, I am Kyrgyz! An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 32, no. 2, 137.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

members of the Soviet airborne into the Osh *oblast*.<sup>62</sup> There was not much of research conducted on the roots of the conflict; there was little public discussion of what had happened; almost no efforts to scatter the “myths” that emerged during the violence.<sup>63</sup> The event of 1990 in Osh has affected Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations.

### **3.2 Askar Akayev and his Double Identity Narrative**

The first democratically elected President of the country, a prominent former Soviet intellectual, Askar Akayev was determined to lead the state on a path of democratic reforms and to manage the reconciliation process after the June violence. Kyrgyzstan, in fact, was the most ethno-culturally heterogeneous among all other Central Asian states when the Soviet Union had come to the end of its disintegration.<sup>64</sup> The unification of people of different ethno-cultural backgrounds, who happened to call Kyrgyzstan as their motherland in spite of their wish to be included into Kyrgyzstani nation had become one of the most important aims of the country after it got its independence on 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1991. Indeed, a large plurality of cultures made the objective of nation-building more important for the country especially considering the fact that the titular or major nation constituted not such a big percentage of the overall population. In 1989, 52% of the population was Kyrgyz, 22% Russians, and the Uzbeks represented 13% of the population, 1% Dungans, 2,5 % Ukrainians, 1 % Uigurs, 1,6 % Tatars and others.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Valery Tiskov, “Don’t Kill Me, I am Kyrgyz! An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 32, no. 2, 143.

<sup>63</sup> International Crisis Group. “The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan,” 7.

<sup>64</sup> Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, “The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology,” *Europe-Asia Studies*. Vol. 61, No. 7 (September 2009), 1231.

<sup>65</sup> Emil Juraev, “Ethnicity and Education in Kyrgyzstan.” Project of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. [http://www.osceacademy.org/uploads/files/Ethnicity\\_and\\_Education\\_in\\_Kyrgyzstan.pdf](http://www.osceacademy.org/uploads/files/Ethnicity_and_Education_in_Kyrgyzstan.pdf)



As Carrere d' Encausse has emphasized, the election of Askar Akayev as a President in October 1990 was engraved in a twofold context, that of the sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union and that of the armed clashes of June 1990 in the southern Kyrgyz republic.<sup>66</sup> However, another important figure that played a significant role in the reconciliation process was the republic's world-wide known writer and thinker Chyngyz Aitmatov (1928-2008), who named poor living conditions and unemployment as the main factors that gave push for the Osh and Uzgen violence.<sup>67</sup> As for Akayev, Laurelle rightly argues, it was too ambitious of him to intend to settle two contradictory trends: the interethnic instability in the country by announcing Kyrgyzstan a homeland for all its residents, and special assurances to the titular nationality which believed itself to have been treated not well by the minorities of the state as well as by Moscow.<sup>68</sup>

Askar Akayev developed the slogan "Kyrgyzstan is our common home" (*Kyrgyzstan – nash obshii dom*) as the main concept for the country's new identity, and as Erica Marat has noted, he often used the term "mezhdunaradnoe soglasie" (*international/interethnic accord*) to describe the relationship between different ethnic groups of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>69</sup> By announcing Kyrgyzstan as "a common home", he believed that the best way to construct a nation is by accepting and including all the diverse ethno-cultural groups into social and political lives of the state. So, the official concept of ethnic policy in 1991 was the unification of the entire population in spite of ethnic or cultural

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<sup>66</sup> Helene Carrère d'Encausse. *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of the Nations*. Translated by Franklin Philip (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>67</sup> TASS, 11 June "Moscow Domestic Service." Translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service. FBISOV-90-113, 12 June 1990, 118.

<sup>68</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda," *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Erica Marat, "National Ideology and Statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan." *Silk Road Papers The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, Washington DC (2008), 32.

background into the one Kyrgyzstani nation, embracing multiculturalism.<sup>70</sup> The most important was the civic loyalty to the state; the idea of an ethno-centric nation was rejected under the Akayev regime. As a consequence, most of minority members looked at him as a guarantor of security and equality, and he gained much support from the country's minorities.<sup>71</sup>

The first post-Soviet President created the People's Assembly, which was supposed to administer the national minorities' cultural centers and contribute with their positive activities to the nation-building of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>72</sup> Although it took long years, the Russian language was proclaimed as the official language of the state in 2000. Since there was a dominance of Russified culture, Russian was used as the interethnic communication language.<sup>73</sup> However, due to the large outflow migration of the Russians, the minority lost its position as the largest minority of Kyrgyzstan after quite a short of time since independence. This group has largely been on the defensive, always ready to leave, and not quite accepting Kyrgyzstan as their 'rodina' (*motherland*), says Emil Juraev.<sup>74</sup> The Uzbek ethnic minority took the dominance in number. As for cultural recognition of minorities, the situation was quite stable and promising at first. There were several universities established: American University of Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz-Turkish University, the Kyrgyz Slavonic University in the capital city and the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in the southern capital Osh, which again illustrated Kyrgyzstan's welcoming

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<sup>70</sup> Ainura Elebayeva, Nurbek Omuraliev & Rafis Abazov, "The shifting identities and loyalties in Kyrgyzstan: The evidence from the field", Nationalities Papers, Vol. 28. No. 2. 2000, 67.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew Griggs, "Defending Minority Rights in Ethnic Nation States: Does the prospect of democratic nationalism in Kyrgyzstan pose a threat to the minority Uzbek population?" 32.

<sup>72</sup> Ainura Elebayeva, Nurbek Omuraliev & Rafis Abazov. "The shifting identities and loyalties in Kyrgyzstan: The evidence from the field". Nationalities Papers, Vol. 28. No. 2. 2000, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, "The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology," Europe-Asia Studies. Vol. 61, No. 7. (September 2009), 1245.

<sup>74</sup> Emil Juraev, "Ethnicity and Education in Kyrgyzstan." Project of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

of the other cultures. Apart from this, several secondary schools were established with Uzbek language as the primary language of teaching in Osh, and minority media outlets were allowed to function. The establishment of a central cultural organization uniting all the country's cultural organizations in 1997 was another sign of the existence of tolerance towards other cultures. During that same year, the governing body of Osh created the "House of Friendship" that had to serve as a connecting bridge between cultures in order to strengthen and flourish relationship between them.<sup>75</sup>

Evidently, in the early years of the independence era Kyrgyzstan was committed to promote civic identity and avoid as best as it could ethno-centric feelings. Nevertheless, the overall reality turned out to be different from the official convictions of the first government. The "shocking therapy" or the sudden shift to liberal economic reforms from the Soviet state-planned economy initiated by Akayev led to the serious economic recession. Clan politics or patronage networks among Kyrgyz were still dominating political structure of the state, and hindering the full consolidation of democracy. More importantly, the inability of the government to fill the post-Soviet ideological vacuum of the population by forming a strong national identity was a serious problem of the state. Although national minorities were given cultural rights during the Akayev regime, they did not have any opportunities to become involved in the state's political life, and ethnically based political parties were prohibited.<sup>76</sup> Although Russian language was endowed official status, there was a strong requirement to use Kyrgyz

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<sup>75</sup> Emil Juraev, "Ethnicity and Education in Kyrgyzstan." Project of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

<sup>76</sup> Omuraliev, E.S. Kokareva "Osnovnye mekhanizmy upravleniia mezhetnicheskimi otnosheniami v Kyrgyzstane" Analitika.org (November 2, 2007), 56.

language in almost every aspect of the life, especially political.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, besides the discrimination at the workplace of both minority groups, the Uzbeks particularly were marginalised on the basis of being possible Islamic radicals because they were more religious, whereas Russians were seen as the former “colonizers” who kept the Kyrgyz nation under its control for more than 70 years.<sup>78</sup> Over time, Akayev changed into an authoritarian leader. However, the majority of Kyrgyzstan’s populations still is in the opinion that Akayev personally is clean, but he was pushed by his entourage, his family and his followers to corruption, the problem, actually, very inherent to Central Asia.<sup>79</sup>

The political life of Kyrgyzstan changed its orientation into more and more the historically predominant social cleavage about the division between the elites of the northern and southern parts of the country. As an evidence for this can serve the fact that Akayev organized the 3000-year anniversary of the city of Osh, but his political intention behind this was to hinder the popularity of the former Secretary of the Kyrgyz Communist Party Absamat Masaliyev, who was significantly popular in his native region of southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, in 2003 the President celebrated the “2200 years of Kyrgyz statehood”, but it was more about reviving his rapidly declining popularity and getting more support in the coming 2005 presidential elections.<sup>81</sup>

Subsequently, the identity rhetoric of the central government changed dramatically from putting emphasis on the civic loyalty and multiculturalism to

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<sup>77</sup> John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia’ island of democracy?*(Amsterdam: Hardwood Academic Publisher: 1999), 26.

<sup>78</sup> Matteo Fumagalli, “Informal Ethnopolitics and Local Authority Figures in Osh, Kyrgyzstan,” *Ethnopolitics*, 6:2, (June 2007), 224.

<sup>79</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda,” *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Erica Marat, “National Ideology and Statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.” *Silk Road Papers The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, Washington DC (2008), 35.

<sup>81</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda,” *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012, 4.

strengthening ethnocentrism. Adhering to the intent of this, the Academy of Sciences developed a new history textbook, *History of the Kyrgyz of Kyrgyzstan*, stressing on the centrality of the titular ethnic group.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the state concentrated its attention on the revival of the hero of the Kyrgyz national epic, Manas. He was unusually transformed into someone who first gathered all Kyrgyz clans, which later formed the first Kyrgyz state. Since the late 1990s there have been special courses on “manasology” implemented in the state Kyrgyz universities, and also the Academy of Sciences established a separate department particularly devoted to studying the “Manas” epic.<sup>83</sup> Besides this, in 1995 the government got interested in taking measures for the “return” of the Kyrgyz living abroad. However, it was only in 2006 when a program called “Kairylman” was established, and as the result of this program 22,000 people, mainly from Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan returned.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, I strongly believe that the ethnicization of the state structure is closely related to the deterioration of the socio-economic situation, a failure of the rapid transition to the market economy, harsh social transformations, and the growth and strength of the patronage networks that became the main element in the system’s operation.

Askar Akayev was the President of the republic from 1991 and was forced out from power by the social uprising in March 2005. Kurmanbek Bakiyev, a prominent Kyrgyz political figure from the south of the country emerged as the main political force as a result of the revolution.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda,” *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012, 4.

<sup>83</sup> van der Heide. “Spirited Performance The Manas Epic and Society, Kyrgyzstan,” Amsterdam (2008), 86.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>85</sup> Anna Matveeva, “Kyrgyzstan in Crisis: Permanent Revolution and the Curse of Nationalism,” *Crisis States Working Papers Series* (September, 2010), 3.

### ***3.3 The Collapse of the “Common Home” under the Bakiyev regime***

The successful triumph of the movement that brought end to the Akayev regime marked a significant change in the ethno-politics of Kyrgyzstan. Important marks of the shift were the stronger promotion and spread of Kyrgyz nationalist rhetoric and the north-south divide becoming an increasingly important mechanism of political mobilization.

With the new change of the regime, Bakiyev strenuously focused on the regional divide, as Erica Marat explains, he was playing up the competition between the political elites of the north and south to increase and strengthen his public popularity and approval.<sup>86</sup> Because of the absence of developed political parties with strong ideological bases in Kyrgyzstan, the social differences mainly the north-south political difference served as the most efficient way to mobilize public support. Another common characteristic of the Kyrgyz political elite, tribalism, the advancement of the family and patronage network members, became highly practiced during the Bakiyev era. Koch and Bond have noted that almost all of the central positions in every sphere of the state structure were occupied by ethnic Kyrgyz; and the number one example of tribalism was the family of the President Bakiyev.<sup>87</sup>

“With Akaev gone, the rhetoric of Kyrgyzstan as a “common home” disappeared and the brittle arrangements to manage interethnic relations that the former president had instituted and manipulated collapsed,” writes Nick Melvin.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, since most of the political figures who had forced out Akayev from the power were from the natives of

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<sup>86</sup> Erica Marat, “National Ideology and Statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.” *Silk Road Papers The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, Washington DC (2008), 43.

<sup>87</sup> Natalie Koch and Andrew Bond, “Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2010), 540.

<sup>88</sup> Neil Melvin, “Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence,” *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series* no. Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 8.

southern Kyrgyzstan, in order to oppose the northern elite, they started openly promoting Kyrgyz nationalist aspirations, in order to promote their policies and interests, which in its turn caused anxiety and dissatisfaction amongst national minorities of the country.

The sudden switch of political power to the political elite that had a considerable power and reputation in the southern Kyrgyzstan gave a big push for the Kurmanbek Bakiyev's nationalistic and corruptive political regime and, according to Nick Melvin, marked a new situation for the Uzbeks.<sup>89</sup> Being largely concentrated in the Osh oblast, mainly in the city of Osh, Uzbeks geographically were considered as "southerners", but not by political beliefs. Therefore, Bakiyev did not have much support among ethnic Uzbeks. Actually, most of his entourage was in direct economic rivalry with the representatives of the Uzbek minority across the southern part of the country. In fact, Uzbek businesses were oppressed by criminal groups, the power of which grew with the Bakiyev corruptive regime. In addition to this, the number of ethnic Uzbeks holding important positions in the state's structures drastically decreased. Clearly, hostility between the Uzbek minority and the Bakiyev reign widened. Regarding this change, Nick Melvin has argued that the Tulip revolution and its legacy had greatly affected the Uzbek community in two important ways. Firstly, it provoked some of the minority sections to openly express their demands and break with being silent during the Akayev regime. Secondly, the Tulip revolution incited particularly a more assertive generation of younger Uzbek leaders whose aim was to strengthen and advance their interests.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Neil Melvin, "Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence," *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series* no. Open Society Foundations, March 2011,9.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 13.

Kadyrjan Batyrov, a popular leader of the Uzbek community in the Jalalabad *oblast*, where he is known as a wealthy businessman, was the chief or central figure of this type of group. His significant fortune was gained during the fierce time of capitalism just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From his biography it is known that he used to be a shop manager during the Soviet times, and right after the disintegration of the USSR, he emerged as one of the first post-Soviet financial magnates, the owner of several factories in Russia and elsewhere and also an airline, Batyr Avia. Later, in the late 1990s besides getting actively involved in the politics of the state<sup>91</sup>, he established a university and some other educational institutions in Jalalabad proving job opportunities for his coethnics, and as a result gaining a wide support among Uzbeks despite the fact that most of the community members were curious about the real sources of his gigantic fortune. Hence, in spite of the distrust among educated Uzbeks, he made himself as the most influential leader in the Uzbek community.<sup>92</sup>

During the ruling of Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Batyrov was one of the most active critics of the President's management of the "national question". It was in 2006 when the first serious crack between Batyrov's political group and the Bakiyev regime emerged when the mass protests were organized by the movement of Kadyrjan Batyrov (political party Rodina) against the state government. Later, in May, 2006, during a mass meeting of approximately 700 people in the city of Jalalabad Batyrov stated: "We are always asked (by the Kyrgyz political elite) to have patience because there are lots of other problems in the country. There are lots of problems and that they all will be solved is all

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<sup>91</sup> He was the head of the Jalalabad Uzbek Society as well as serving as an MP

<sup>92</sup> Summary bio-date can be found on Батыров Кадиржан Алимжанович, <http://who.ca-news.org/people/462>.



we are told, but they never do anything to solve them.”<sup>93</sup> The Jalalabad demonstration was, in fact, the first time when a group of ethnic Uzbeks openly expressed their grievances in the streets since the June clashes of 1990 in the southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>94</sup>

It was the events of March of the year 2005 that changed the Kyrgyz politics into more nationalist direction, and consequently had a dramatic impact on its already ambiguous ethno-politics. The Bakiyev regime radicalized “the national question”, and the Kyrgyz politics, clearly, got ethnicized. Nevertheless, I would agree with Nick Melvin who has suggested that the rising Uzbek dissatisfaction was related “to a breakdown of informal channels of communication among Kyrgyz government officials and Uzbek community leaders.”<sup>95</sup> It could be explained by the fact that during the Akayev era, some Uzbek leaders had maintained close relations with Akayev, but after the Tulip revolution none of the Uzbek elite had strong personal ties to Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Moreover, I think Melvin is also right in his further implication that an extremely high level of corruption and the government’s ineffectiveness or unwillingness to suppress it was also an important source of concern. Corruption was strongly “touching” the business sector of the Uzbek economic elite. A striking influence on the upsurge of the Uzbek community’s leadership and on the mobilization of the Uzbeks was also summoned by the intense competition over property and economic resources, according to Nick Melvin. The urban economy and the bazaars traditionally were dominated by the Uzbeks, whereas the rural economy and the local administrative

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<sup>93</sup> Alisher Khamidov, “Ethnic Uzbeks Intensify Civil Rights Advocacy Effort,” [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org), June 6, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav060706a.shtml>.

<sup>94</sup> den Blanken. “Our Uzbek Land in Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek Minority and Claims for Cultural Politics.” Master’s thesis, Radboud University, Nijmegen, 2009, 42.

<sup>95</sup> Neil Melvin, “Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence,” *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series* no. Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 15.

structures were mostly under the control of Kyrgyz people.<sup>96</sup> And, as Anna Matveeva notes that the shadow sectors were shared between both groups, albeit the domination of Kyrgyz circles was seen, due to the support of the Bakiyev family.<sup>97</sup>

### **3.4 April 7, 2010. The Regime Change**

By early 2010, the popular frustration with the Bakiyev regime increasingly heightened as a result of the government's corruption, repression, the dramatic increase of utility prices, and strengthening of patronage and clan networks. International Crisis group named the time of Kurmanbek Bakiyev as "bankrupt state hollowed out by corruption and crime."<sup>98</sup> "Because Bakiyev's hold on power seemed so firm by early 2010, his overthrow on April 7 came as a surprise to many," writes Erica Marat.<sup>99</sup> The protests started in the northern town of Talas on April 6, 2010 provoked by the arrest of several important political opposition members. The next day, 86 people died during the armed confrontation with police, and around 1,000 were injured during the demonstrations in Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz republic. As a result, Bakiyev and some part of his family did not have any other option rather than to escape to the south of the country, where he originally comes from, and the jailed opposition leaders were immediately released. Within a very short period of time, a provisional government composed of three political parties (the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, Ata-Meken and Ak-Shumkar) with Roza Otunbayeva as a head was formed.<sup>100</sup> It is quite

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<sup>96</sup> Neil Melvin, "Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence," *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series* no. Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 15.

<sup>97</sup> Anna Matveeva, Igor Savin, Bahrom Faizullaev. "Kyrgyzstan: Tragedy in the South." *Ethnopolitics Papers*, no. 17 (April 2012), 11.

<sup>98</sup> International Crisis Group, *Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses*, Asia Briefing, April 27, 2010.

<sup>99</sup> Erica Marat, "Kyrgyzstan." *Nations in Transit* (2011): 299

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 299.

interesting that the members of the opposition force that emerged as the winners during the time of political instability were the same persons who had actively participated in the overthrowing Askar Akayev five years before.<sup>101</sup> The provisional government would stay in office for six months before the scheduled for October 2010 presidential elections and also to develop amendments to the constitution.<sup>102</sup>

As well as with the peoples' uprising in March 2005, the April events did not involve ethnic Uzbeks directly. According to the observation, the crowds that constituted the main element of the protests were young uneducated people who came to Bishkek from rural suburbs of the country. It also seemed like many of them intended just to use the opportunity to use the clashes for looting.<sup>103</sup>

Moving further, it should be mentioned that the provisional government showed itself as a weak and disunited. There was no a strong consensus among the leaders, they often times took unilateral decisions. An important figure in the provisional government, Omurbek Tekebayev, initiated the replacement of the presidential system to a parliamentary one. The new constitution was adopted on 27 June 2010. The socio-economic situation of the country did not change much, instead continued getting worse. In addition to this, various rumors and unpromising predictions paved a fruitful way for the widespread anxiety amongst the population, and the central authority failed to build a dialogue and reassure the civil society.

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<sup>101</sup> Neil Melvin, "Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence," *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series* no. Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 16.

<sup>102</sup> International Crisis Group, *Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses*, Asia Briefing, April 27, 2010, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Neil Melvin, "Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence," *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series*, Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 27.

### **3.5 May 2010 in Jalalabad**

With Bakiyev's flee from the capital, all of the political attention switched to the south, specifically to the Jalalabad *oblast*.<sup>104</sup> It was May of 2010 that foreshadowed the June bloodshed in Osh; the month of the unreliable and irresponsible state security structures, of the weak and impotent central government, of a huge imbalance in the political structure, and the time of a deep social paranoia in the country. It is legitimate of the International Crisis Group to claim that if these issues had been paid attention in May and taken active actions in solving them by the state, and had the international community addressed the Kyrgyz central authorities concerning these problems – the rampage in Osh might have been prevented.<sup>105</sup>

On 13 May, the family of Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his supporters, supposedly financed by one of the president's brothers and his loyal ally Usen Sydykov, snatched the regional administrative buildings in Batkem, Osh, Jalalabad, and captured Jalalabad's new governor hostage aiming to swing political power back to the overthrown president, Bakiyev.<sup>106</sup> A so-called "committee in defense of ousted Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev" stated that 25,000 people in the south were ready to march on Bishkek and "deal with the Provisional Government."<sup>107</sup> A critical situation emerged in the southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Jalalabad, complicated by the fact of the police and state security's unwillingness to intervene into the confrontation. Given this fact, the provisional government's two main supportive political parties, "Ata-Meken" headed by

<sup>104</sup> Neil Melvin, "Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence," *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series*, Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 29.

<sup>105</sup> International Crisis Group, "Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan," 18.

<sup>106</sup> Anna Matveeva, "Kyrgyzstan in Crisis: Permanent Revolution and the Curse of Nationalism." *Crisis States Working Papers Series*. (September, 2010), 3.

<sup>107</sup> "Bakiyev Loyalists Seize Kyrgyzstan Regional Offices," [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), May 13, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8679258.stm>.

one of the most instrumental post-Bakiyev era politicians, Omurbek Tekebayev and “Rodina” led by an influential Uzbek businessman Kadyrjan Batyrov, took the responsibility to restore the order in Jalalabad.<sup>108</sup> Due to the fragile situation in the south, the interim government was very concerned to gain power of the region and decided to collaborate with Batyrov and his Uzbek movement in the resistance to the Bakiyev force group. Nevertheless, following the discussions with Batyrov and his loyalists, the provisional government promised that there were representative places for Uzbeks in the government, and the rights of the Uzbek minority concerning language, education and representation were to be implemented into the new constitution.

On May 14 2010, a large group of ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, first ousted the Bakiyev people from the government buildings in Jalalabad and then marched directly to his home village of Teyit where Bakiyev had a family house, but which was destroyed in an arson, committed by this group on that day.<sup>109</sup> And, it is impossible to disagree with Neil Melvin in that it was at exactly this point when the ethnic component of the conflict gained force.<sup>110</sup> Right after Bakiyev’s house was burned, rumours spread among the Kyrgyz population that in the process a Kyrgyz flag was also outraged. Nonwithstanding the fact that both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz took part in forcing Bakiyev’s supporters out from the administrative structures as well as in the burning of the former president’s estate, the rumours attributed the second event solely to Uzbeks. Indeed, as Scott Radnitz argues the Teyit burning produced an extremely big controversy among the

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<sup>108</sup> International Crisis Group, “Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan,” 9.

<sup>109</sup> Alisher Khamidov, “Provisional Government Grappling with Simmering Ethnic Tension in Kyrgyzstan,”

www.eurasianet.com, May 25, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61153>.

<sup>110</sup> Neil Melvin, “Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence,” *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series*, Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 16.

southern Kyrgyzstan's population, inserting "an ethnic card" into already explosively unstable local politics.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Scott Radnitz "Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan." *PONARS Eurasia* (August 2010), 4.

## Chapter IV. June 2010 and Aftermath

### 4.1 The June 2010 Tragedy

In June 2010 a rising political crisis following Kyrgyzstan's second change of regime in April transformed into violent conflict in Osh, the southern capital of the country. Already growing tensions between the Kyrgyz majority and the large Uzbek minority of the south triggered by preceding events, especially the mid-May confrontation explained earlier, were inflamed by rumours of rape and reserved weapons for offensive.<sup>112</sup> The aggressive clashes took place mainly in Osh oblast, and partly in Jalalabad oblast. These regions are home to Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbek communities, which constitute 31% of Osh oblast's total population and 24% of Jalalabad's.<sup>113</sup> For four days, the cities of Osh, Jalalabad, and Bazar-Korgon were submerged in carnage that mobilized and intensified along ethnic lines. With the rapid increase of mobile calls and text-messages during the first days of the conflict, spreading information about violence allegedly planned and engaged in by one community against another, men hurriedly blocked entrances to streets. Young men prepared for a war by equipping themselves with weapons whereas women and children escaped to the closest border with Uzbekistan or concealed themselves in cellars, in trustworthy neighbors' houses, in fields. Due to its scale of bloodshed, pillage, arson and rape, the June inter-communal fight or "the June war", as it is called by ordinary people now, stands as the foremost conflict in the history of the Kyrgyz Republic. More than 470 people reportedly were killed, 2,800 of the state

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<sup>112</sup> Madeleine Reeves, "After Internationalism? The Unmaking of Osh." v.51 n.5 *News of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies*. (October 2011), 2.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

were destroyed, and more than tens of thousands of people were forced to flee from their homes. The roots of the violence are still contested.

#### ***4.2 Competing Interpretations and Narratives Aftermath. Ambiguity and Complexity***

The origin of the violence on June 10 remains disputed despite the fact that significant attention has been given to this matter. The onset of the June conflict is still under investigation. Nevertheless, as with every major political turbulence, the June 2010 unrest has been differently narrated and interpreted by each side of the conflict, external actors, and the international community. There is no single explanation for what really happened during June 10-14 of 2010. For many Kyrgyz citizens, to determine the initiators of the violence means the same thing as who is to blame for the entire bloodshed.

Most of the international media defined the conflict as interethnic clashes that resumed perpetual and imminent social and political resentments. The Western media, resorting to commonly known and easy clichés, presented the Uzbeks as the victims of bloodthirsty Kyrgyz, depicting the latter as Mankurts, a symbolic Central Asian prototype or subjugated inhumane men without rational minds. The Uzbek minority is considered the winner of the battle of images and the hearts.<sup>114</sup> The *Guardian* in June 2010 states:

*“Witnesses said the attacks by the Kyrgyz population on the Uzbek minority were attempted genocide. The violence erupted in Osh last Thursday evening, possibly ignited by a row in a casino. But much of it appeared co-ordinated and planned, Uzbeks said.*

*The attacks took the prosperous outlying Uzbek areas of town unawares.”*  
(The Guardian (16 June 2010) Kyrgyzstan killings are attempted genocide, say ethnic Uzbeks).

<sup>114</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda,” *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012, 2.



A report by *Reuters* from June 2010 notes:

*“The clashes have deepened divisions between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks who have a roughly equal share of the population in the south. Many Uzbeks are blockaded inside their neighbourhoods of Osh, the epicentre of the violence, too afraid to emerge.”*  
(Reuters (24 June 2010) PREVIEW-After the bloodshed, Kyrgyzstan votes on its future)

A report by *BBC News* states in June 2010:

*“Southern Kyrgyzstan is home to a large ethnic Uzbek minority of almost a million people and despite old tensions the two ethnic groups had been living peacefully for many years. But since Kyrgyzstan's popular uprising in April in which former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted, security has deteriorated. The latest violence is the biggest challenge the new government has faced so far.”*  
(BBC News (13 June 2010) Fear and shock as ethnic Uzbeks flee Kyrgyz clashes)

The United Nations Commissioner of Human Rights decided that the unrest was not spontaneous, but was sparked off by a number of organized attacks conducted by separate groups of armed men.<sup>115</sup> Human Rights Watch classified the June fight as an ethnic conflict. Based on the interview findings, Human Rights Watch states that the violence flashed up when ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz gangs collided with each other in a chain of episodes, the culminating point of which was the evening of June 10. Many foreign NGOs and international organizations' analysts concluded that the violence was the outcome of a lack of education, job opportunities, and manipulation by advantage-seeking political organizations or individual figures. As for local NGOs, they have presented another narrative of the conflict according to which the central government's absence of power in the south compelled people to call their coethnics to protect themselves during the time of a big political instability and uncertain future.<sup>116</sup>

Various perspectives on the June riots' chronology, their causes and the circumstances in which the events took place, continue to generate vigorous

<sup>115</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda,” *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012,6.

<sup>116</sup> Erica Marat, “Kyrgyzstan.” *Nations in Transit* (2011), 299.

disagreements among different ethnic groups of the affected areas. In general, both sides, the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, openly accuse each other of starting or even plotting the violence, aggressively defending their own version of “truth”.<sup>117</sup>

#### 4.2.1 Kyrgyz in the South

Survey results of numerous interviews with ethnic Kyrgyz show that the most widespread belief is that Uzbeks suffered because of their own fault, that they pushed too far demanding autonomy and some other illogical privileges. This is based on the prevalent image of Uzbeks as dangerous outsiders, guests in their country, who must obey all the rules dictated by the majority. Moreover, most ethnic Kyrgyz did not want to accept the proven fact that Uzbeks suffered more during this June bloodshed, stressing exclusively Kyrgyz casualties.<sup>118</sup> Most Kyrgyz officials, interviewed by Amnesty International in September 2010, claimed that the riots were provoked by the actions of certain well-organized forces of the Uzbek population whose actions forced certain groups of the Kyrgyz population to react spontaneously and that all these members were civilians. This version of events denies that security forces played any role in the June carnage other than to mitigate the violence.<sup>119</sup> For ordinary Kyrgyz the image of Uzbeks as opportunists who had long been waiting to gain an independent territory for themselves proved to be true. On the other hand, this could be explained by the fact that very few people were exposed to any unbiased analysis of the events.

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<sup>117</sup> Amnesty International. “Частичная Правда и Избирательное Правосудие Последствия Июньских Беспорядков 2010 Года в Кыргызстане (Partial Truth and Consequences of Electoral Justice of the 2010 June riots in Kyrgyzstan),” Amnesty International Publications, 2010,6.

<sup>118</sup> Scott Radnitz “Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan.” *PONARS Eurasia* (August 2010), 6.

<sup>119</sup> Amnesty International. “Частичная Правда и Избирательное Правосудие Последствия Июньских Беспорядков 2010 Года в Кыргызстане (Partial Truth and Consequences of Electoral Justice of the 2010 June riots in Kyrgyzstan),” Amnesty International Publications, 2010,8.

“Few people have any confidence in the future here – neither Kyrgyz nor Uzbek”, shared a Kyrgyz professional, “sooner or later there will be another explosion”.<sup>120</sup> However, there are notable exceptions: ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks who hold different views on the events that do not comply with the dominant narratives. There are the Kyrgyz and Uzbek middle classes in the south with higher education, specialists in peace and conflict, for example who have more compromising, flexible responses to the events and are working to reconcile the two communities. But for now, Akayev’s “common home” has yet to be achieved.

#### **4.2.2 Uzbeks in the South**

In contrast, according to the predominant Uzbek version of the events, armed Kyrgyz committed unreasonable attacks, and Uzbek men resorted to violence to protect their families and property. According to this version, the attacks were planned by representatives of the Kyrgyz population, including local authorities, in particular, the mayor of the city of Osh and organized criminal groups. As the Uzbek minority claims, the main purpose was to take control of the central market and some particular neighborhoods with predominantly Uzbek population in order to expel rivals and to clear the area for the implementation of plans for the improvement of the city. Moreover, ordinary ethnic Uzbeks claimed that the death toll was much higher, more than 2,500 Uzbeks were killed according to this version, and the local officials and security forces were accused of burying many Uzbeks in unmarked graves to hide the true number of victims.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, Osh, 24 November 2011.

<sup>121</sup> Amnesty International. “Частичная Правда и Избирательное Правосудие Последствия Июньских Беспорядков 2010 Года в Кыргызстане (Partial Truth and Consequences of Electoral Justice of the 2010 June riots in Kyrgyzstan),” Amnesty International Publications, 2010,13.

### 4.2.3 The Government's Response

The National Commission of Inquiry was established by presidential decree on July 15. In total thirty members of the commission – of different ethnic backgrounds, competencies and occupations – it seems they were chosen to demonstrate the readiness of the interim government to ensure the impartiality and independence of the investigation. However, upon closer inspection, there are doubts about the political independence of the commission. Several of its members, including the chairman, were nominated as candidates in parliamentary elections of October 10, 2010, and some were of the parties with explicitly nationalist Kyrgyz platforms. In addition to this, some other members serve in such bodies as the General Prosecutor's Office, ministry departments of Interior Health, who lack clearly specified rules that would allow them to operate independently. Furthermore, the commission did not include independent criminologists, and only two of its members were competent in human rights issues. In November 2010 the chairman of the commission stated that the riots were carefully planned in advance, likely by prominent members of the Uzbek community of Osh. Other members of the commission expressed similar views, accusing the Uzbek political and social leaders of multiple calls for autonomy for ethnic Uzbeks in the south, starting in May, thus provoking a group of the Uzbek population in Osh and Jalalabad provinces to prepare for such events. Furthermore, the National Commission said:

*The conflict had its own historical and political roots, due to the legacy of the Soviet era, when all the contradictions and conflicts in international relations were silenced or driven deeper by force*

(From the conclusion of the National Commission for the comprehensive study of the causes, consequences and recommendations for the tragic events that occurred in the south in June 2010)

But, this moderate claim of responsibility was declared only on paper. In reality, the Soviet mentality prevailed, the government attempted to sweep the troublesome events

under the rug and, as Scott Radnitz has pointed out, to put forward a mantra of “friendship of the peoples.” In contrast to the interpretation of international media outlets, the President of the provisional government, Roza Otunbaeva refused to admit that it was an ethnic conflict or that Uzbeks were the victims.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, the interim government was reluctant to conduct a deeper or more comprehensive investigation of the causes of the conflict. For instance, it even argued that announcing the full list of casualties by ethnicity would further aggravate tensions.<sup>123</sup> Human rights activists pointed out this flaw of the government as one of the factors exacerbating national tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. With no official list of names of the dead, the Kyrgyz and Uzbek sides continue to compete with each other over such data, claiming the unidentified bodies as their own and accusing each other of stealing bodies to exaggerate the number of victims.<sup>124</sup>

There is a dismaying disparity between the narration of the government, which asserts itself to be neutral, and what happened in reality in the southern Kyrgyzstan. According to the claims of a number of eyewitnesses, uniformed Kyrgyz soldiers were seen shooting at ethnic Uzbeks, giving their military equipment to Kyrgyz mobs, and removing barricades. This potentially suggests a complicity of the government in the violence.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Scott Radnitz “Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan.” *PONARS Eurasia* (August 2010), 7.

<sup>123</sup> Natalie Koch and Andrew Bond, “Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2010), 536.

<sup>124</sup> Amnesty International. “Частичная Правда и Избирательное Правосудие Последствия Июньских Беспорядков 2010 Года в Кыргызстане (Partial Truth and Consequences of Electoral Justice of the 2010 June riots in Kyrgyzstan),” Amnesty International Publications, 2010,13.

<sup>125</sup> Amnesty International. “Частичная Правда и Избирательное Правосудие Последствия Июньских Беспорядков 2010 Года в Кыргызстане (Partial Truth and Consequences of Electoral Justice of the 2010 June riots in Kyrgyzstan),” Amnesty International Publications, 2010, 6.

### ***4.3 From Interpretation to Reality***

If the memory of the June clashes of 1990 in southern Kyrgyzstan was somewhat appeased by the reconciliatory rhetoric of Chingiz Aitmatov, nowadays Kyrgyzstan lacks any reputable, praised figures to develop a persuasive identity consensus.<sup>126</sup> For now, existing and widely-believed interpretations of the June tragedy have set the stage for ambiguity and complexity. The government's refusal to acknowledge that the post-conflict situation in the country is deplorable, given the fact that the Uzbek minority still stands as the victims of daily violence, land grabs, and unjustified imprisonments proves that the state is not neutral or is unable to take an objective position on ethnic matters.

What the country must be concerned with at this time is that the totally polarized Uzbek and Kyrgyz narratives of victimhood and grievance will require substantial time and effective measures to be undertaken to erase. Otherwise, the narrative will impede any chance of constructing a civil identity and building peace in the country. The rich palette of socio-political changes in the country is reflected in the dynamics of the communication space. The prevalence of informal communication such as rumors and speculations along with the limited resources for broadcasting national information channels broadcasting generates a high level of interpretation of events, at both local and country levels. More importantly, limited level of the broadcasts at home and abroad increases the degree of distortion/interpretations of the events in the country creating an environment of stereotypes. It might seem that such tactics are quite harmless at the household level, but gradually increasing and getting misrepresented such a "box" becomes the reason for the changes in social perceptions, slowly moving from just an

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<sup>126</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda," *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, vol. 45 issue 2, March 2012, 8.

information into social, then political reality. Subsequently, this information becomes the starting point for the formation of dichotomous concepts and interpretations. And, the greatest danger of this kind of phenomenon influences on political decisions, which are becoming hostages intentionally or unintentionally in policy-making in general. Thus, all different myths and stereotypes gain real forms, which carries certain risks, because the reality gets distorted, producing social conflicts.<sup>127</sup>

As earlier reports on ethnic violence in the Ferghana Valley<sup>128</sup> have shown the “true” cause of the violence may be impossible to find, as long as participants and victims continue remembering the events differently. Essentially, change will be very difficult to achieve without reconsidered assertive tactics of the central government to strengthen its legitimacy and control in the south and challenge the dominant nationalist narratives.

Although the frame of “ethnic conflict” is the more widely accepted and easier to apply in the case of the June violence, the following chapter seeks to problematize it and look deeper into what factors led to the eruption of violence that later turned into interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>127</sup> “Report on Monitoring Conflict-situation in Osh, Jalalabad and Batken Provinces of Kyrgyzstan.” International Tolerance Foundation. Bishkek 2011, 23.

<sup>128</sup> Valery Tiskov, “Don’t Kill Me, I am Kyrgyz! An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 32, no. 2, 142.

## Chapter V. The Kyrgyz Tragedy: Political Provocation or Ethnic Confrontation?

The large-scale violence that erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 has been commonly labeled as “ethnic conflict”. It is true that media and public talk of “ethnic conflict” in Kyrgyzstan has been largely overemphasized. I believe that this discourse is misleading, because it implies an extremely problematic causal claim – that in a violent ‘ethnic conflict’ the driving motive of both the conflict and its violent dynamics is ethnicity itself. I find this assumption to be essentially flawed and argue that, contrary to common perceptions, ethnicity is not the driving cleavage of a conflict but rather a source for mobilization, and that violence is more commonly ‘ethnically-exercised’ than ‘ethnically-driven’. Brubaker and Laitin clearly state that violence is not a natural and self-explanatory outgrowth of conflicts, but rather a form of social and political action in itself, with its own sources and particular dynamics.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, Kalyvas emphasizes that the labels religion, class and ethnicity “are not neutral: they typically imply a theory of causation.” Indeed, if these terms were used to simply describe the existence of ethnic markers in a violent conflict, they would be employed in every single case where the warring parties are ethnically distinct, which is clearly not the case.<sup>130</sup> Madeleine Reeves emphasizes that taking ethnicity to be causal in explaining the June events does not describe the complex, messy process that became ethnicized.<sup>131</sup> The task of this chapter is

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<sup>129</sup> Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin, “Ethnic and Nationalist Violence.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (2000), 423.

<sup>130</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, “The Ontology of ‘Political Violence: Action and Identity in Civil Wars.” *Perspectives on Politics* 1(2003), 475.

<sup>131</sup> Madeleine Reeves, “Recent Events in Kyrgyzstan.” Paper presented at Russia and Eurasia Programme Seminar, London, September 13, 2010, 23.



to understand why and how the ethnicization of the long-standing sociopolitical crisis in the country took place.

First, it is necessary to look into the meaning of the term “ethnic conflict” before proceeding to the analysis. To clarify, by the term “ethnicity” I mean a socially constructed category, adhering to the view of Rogers Brubaker who argues: “Ethnicity, race, and nationhood are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world. They are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world”.<sup>132</sup> According to the constructive approach, ethnic sentiment is created through historical differences in culture, myths, conceptions that are formed in the context of intellectual and social construct. Constructivists see ethnic identity as such as the result of purposeful elites who are “professional producers of subjective visions of the social world”.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, both constructivist and instrumentalist approaches view ethnic boundaries as constantly changing and relatively fluid elements.<sup>134</sup> I also adopt Brubaker’s rejection of “groupist” analysis, which he defines as “the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis”.<sup>135</sup>

Since certain social actors have labeled these terms as “ethnic conflict” and “ethnic violence” in a way that it implies that the ethnic quality of the conflict is its most salient feature, their uncritical utilization results in reproducing the same logic in the explanatory phase of the conflict in the heads of the general public. But, this should not

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<sup>132</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>133</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, edited by Carles Boix and Susan Stokes. 274-291. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 12.

<sup>134</sup> Barth, Fredrick. “Ethnic groups and Boundaries,” 56.

<sup>135</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 15.

be in the eyes of a serious analyst who can reflexively employ conceptual terms. It is important to adopt instrumentalist approach that sees ethnicity as a mask that hides a deeper core of political or economic interests. The instrumentalist approach argues that ethnicity is useful for leaders that strategically manipulate it for the sake of gaining political power or drawing resources from the state.<sup>136</sup> Rogers Brubaker stressed the role of “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs,” who “may live ‘off’ as well as ‘for’ ethnicity”, promoting a sense of “groupness”.<sup>137</sup> In the case of Kyrgyzstan, “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” also played an important role in provoking the conflict.

There are two prevalent analytical frameworks in the literature on the nationalities policy of the USSR that assert that the Central Asian ethnic identity is the product of the Soviet engineering. According to the first one, called the “Soviet ethnos theory”, the Soviet Union and Central Asian political elites, seeing the nation as the highest stage or level of the development of ethnicity, emerged as the main actors that promoted the establishment of contemporary Central Asian nations.<sup>138</sup> Here, it can be argued that “the invention” of nationalities of Central Asia, presented as “homogenous, constant, ancient, with a collective memory” was a political project of the Soviet Union with the collaboration of local leaders, influenced by the Soviet ideology, that were aiming to show their loyalty to the state.<sup>139</sup> Alisher Ilkhamov in his article “Archeology of Uzbek Identity” claimed that “the formation of Uzbek identity is a result of deliberate

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<sup>136</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, “Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflict.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, edited by Carles Boix and Susan Stokes. 274-291. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 13.

<sup>137</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>138</sup> Sergei, Abashin, “Post-Soviet Nationalism, Ethnos theory, and Constructivist critique”, *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, (Spring 2006).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid

construction by the elites pursuing their own interests and cultural and political goals.”<sup>140</sup> Although Ilkhamov refers to “the phenomenon of Uzbek identity”, he suggests looking at other Central Asian nations in the same approach as well. Subsequently, it can be argued that the assertion of Brubaker that ethnicities “become real as a result of the efforts of elites or scholars” can be applied in the Kyrgyz case.<sup>141</sup>

Nonetheless, Brubaker notes that the aim is not to refute the reality or importance of ethnicity or nation, but rather he wants to make it clear that the existence of significant ethnic identification in some situations does not mean that ethnic groups do exist as homogenous and bounded entities.<sup>142</sup> Given this presumption, it is wrong to analyze the Osh violence as the conflict between Uzbek and Kyrgyz “groups” because they are not coherent as to have the same aspiration and attitude towards members of other ethnicities, and also they do not have solid boundaries. “The Kyrgyz are not at the war with us,” said one Uzbek man, showing destroyed houses in one of the neighborhoods mainly with Uzbek community living in it, “the local government is.”<sup>143</sup>

To build a research program around such heterogeneous phenomena, just because they fit in the “ethnic frame”, is wrong.<sup>144</sup> On the other hand, these terms overshadow other causal frameworks that can certainly prove to be a lot more relevant. By putting an emphasis on the ethnic aspect of the war, one is implicitly lowering the importance of other factors that may have a superior explanatory leverage. As Andrew Koch and Natalie Bond have argued that although the confrontation was primarily between Kyrgyz

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<sup>140</sup> Sergei, Abashin, “Post-Soviet Nationalism, Ethnos theory, and Constructivist critique”, *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, (Spring 2006).

<sup>141</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid

<sup>143</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan,” 17.

<sup>144</sup> Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin, “Ethnic and Nationalist Violence.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (2000), 423.

and Uzbeks, the basis for much of the tension between the two groups was not ethnicity *per se*, but rather other traditional sub-organization identities that were used as mobilization instruments by “ethnic entrepreneurs” driven by political and economic motives.<sup>145</sup>

Although the Soviet Union put a lot of effort into eliminating the importance of clans in Central Asia, clan politics remains as one of the main and well-known characteristic of Kyrgyzstan. The issue of ethnicity is closely related to this concept.<sup>146</sup> Clan belongings and social attachments to them have always, at least since independence, played a decisive role in political, social and economic structures of the country. As Kathleen Collins explains, clan identities can often times be more important than blood ties and can play a great role in establishing alliances, and also in social mobilization.<sup>147</sup> The Kyrgyz are divided into more than forty tribes, but most of which are organized into three main clan confederations: a “left” wing consisting of seven clans from the north, a “right” wing constituted by the southern Adygine clan, and the Ichkilik group, also in the south, which consists of many clans, including some that are not of “Kyrgyz” origin.<sup>148</sup> The political competition between the left and the right wings has been present since the period of the Kokand Khanate (1709-1883).<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Natalie Koch and Andrew Bond, “Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2010), 554.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 554.

<sup>147</sup> Kathleen, Collins, “The Logic of Clan Politics: Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories,” *World Politics*. 2004, 24.

<sup>148</sup> Saltanat Berdikeeva, “National Identity in Kyrgyzstan: The Case of Clan Politics.” 2006 [http://www.eurasia21.com/document/files/National\\_Identity\\_of\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_-\\_the\\_Case\\_of/](http://www.eurasia21.com/document/files/National_Identity_of_Kyrgyzstan_-_the_Case_of/)

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*

Furthermore, according to the statistical analysis of survey data by Maksim Ryabkov, there are striking north-south differences among the population.<sup>150</sup> As the outcome of the Soviet rule, the north of Kyrgyzstan is left as more modernized and urbanized with a more Russified population, whereas the southern part is more agrarian and inhabited by a large number of ethnic Uzbeks.<sup>151</sup> Lewis largely agrees with Raybkov, claiming that there are real cultural and political differences between the north and south. And, these differences do serve as an important base for political organizations or individuals to mobilize the population.<sup>152</sup> Moreover, I cannot disagree with the proposition of Radnitz who claimed that regionalism or *zemlyachestvo*, support for people originating from the same village or locality, is the most important factor in determining the population's political identification and their potential mobilization.<sup>153</sup> Here, it must be mentioned that I am aware of the fact that this analysis may stand as problematic, because it includes elements of a "groupist" analysis, taking political identity as a *thing*, not as an *event*.

The grounds of the events in June are laid by high dynamics of the political opposition in Kyrgyzstan for the past 10 years. In his analysis of the events dedicated to of June 2010 Neil Melvin notes, "interethnic relations in the south were inextricably linked with the struggle for power in Kyrgyzstan between the south and north, rural and

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<sup>150</sup> Maxim Ryabkov, "The North-South Cleavage and Political Support in Kyrgyzstan." *Central Asian Survey*. 2008.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid

<sup>152</sup> Lewis, David. "The Dynamics of Regime Change: Domestic and International Factors in the 'Tulip Revolution'." *Central Asian Survey*, 27 (2008), 268.

<sup>153</sup> Radnitz, Scott. "What really happened in Kyrgyzstan?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 17, no. 2. (April 2006), 132.

urban populations, the various clans, ethnic groups and political forces.”<sup>154</sup> According to the cleavage theory, cleavages are: “the criteria which divide the members of a community or subcommunity into groups, and the relevant cleavages are those which divide members into groups with important political differences at specific times and places.” Political conflicts are products of the existence and hierarchy of cleavages as they vary over time and from one political unit to another. Moreover, as Lipset and Rokkan believe, cleavages can transform into political parties; “parties represent alliances in a two-dimensional space of functional, economic and cultural, and territorial cleavages, centre and periphery, cleavages,” they say.<sup>155</sup> Most of the major political parties of Kyrgyzstan have been formed on the basis of territorial cleavage, the south-north division, leading to the constant political crisis and deeper polarization of the population in the country.

Stability in the state depends on the number of cleavages, the level of polarization these cleavages cause, whether there are overlapping or crosscutting cleavages, the power of these cleavages, and on the relationship between the cleavages and political parties.<sup>156</sup> From the constructivist perspective, identity is seen as a dynamic and constantly changing thing, thus it implies that cleavages can be shaped by agencies and that the degree of polarization and the type of the mode of mass mobilisation are determined by

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<sup>154</sup> Neil Melvin, “Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence,” *Central Eurasia Project. Occasional Papers Series*, Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 40.

<sup>155</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan. *Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives*, (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 46.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

deliberate actions of certain actors: individuals, organizations, civil society as well as by social, historical or economical events.<sup>157</sup>

The struggle for power is related to the national question. As rightly pointed out in Neil Melvin's study: "At the moment, the relationship between ethnic groups is in the midst of ongoing conflict in the country processes, although the national question is not a key cause of dissension in Kyrgyzstan. The growing political confrontation of the last ten years, primarily representing a fragmentation within the Kyrgyz community, contributed to the gradual erosion of the foundations of state power in the country and exacerbation of conflict in the society, the mass use of violence for political ends."<sup>158</sup> The first two previous chapters discussed the theme of the nation in Kyrgyzstan since independence in 1991, clearly depicting how Kyrgyz ethnic nationalism has become an important tool for elites to seek for political and economic power and promoted as a dominant interpretation of Kyrgyzstan's major problems. Nevertheless, the aim is not to claim that ethnonationalism of both Uzbek and Kyrgyz explains the June clashes.

To accept ethnic differences as the key motivation of either the violence or the conflict is to accept primordialist theories where ethnic antagonism is seen as a self-sufficient condition in generating violent conflicts. Their explanatory power is extremely weak because they view cultural differences as structural constant factors and therefore do not explain why, at a *particular time* and in a *particular place*, these differences were transformed into relevant ones, ignoring that in other times and in other places those ethnic groups have lived peacefully together and even intermingled. By considering

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<sup>157</sup> James Fearon and David D. Laitin. "Violence and the social construction of ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54 (2000), 866.

<sup>158</sup> Neil Melvin, "Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence," *Central Eurasia Project Occasional Papers Series*, Open Society Foundations, March 2011, 40.

ethnic identities as self-explanatory facts that inevitably lead to conflictual situations and by taking identity as a rigid, fixed and self-exclusive given, these theories overlook both the role of human agency and the power of rapid structural change in producing new social facts. Moreover, as Rogers Brubaker indicates that if we admit and think of ethnic groups not as substantial things but as relational and contingent variables, then we can explain ethnic unity as an event with “moments of intensely felt collective solidarity”, as something that “happens” not as something that is always “present”.<sup>159</sup> Particular striking events, “can galvanize group feeling, and ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness”<sup>160</sup>, and that is heightened level can be observed in the case of the Osh tragedy.

The real causes of the June bloodshed are still under investigation, but they are certainly linked to the overthrow of the republic’s second president Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April of that year when the unrest took place.<sup>161</sup> Since Uzbeks throughout southern Kyrgyzstan were unhappy with the discrimination and underrepresentation in important administrative structures during Bakiyev’s regime, they chose to support Roza Otunbaeva’s new provisional government. As I have already mentioned earlier in the previous chapters of the work, many “southern” Kyrgyz, having seen the same treatment under Askar Akayev, because of the north-south clan based politics, decided to stay on the side of Bakiyev, who was also from the south, specifically Jalalabad. When Bakiyev fled the country, the southern elite, fearing that the power over the southern region would fall completely into the hands of the north, highly increased ethnonationalist rhetoric. As

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<sup>159</sup> Rogers, Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 35.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid

<sup>161</sup> Natalie Koch and Andrew Bond, “Interethnic Tensions in Kyrgyzstan: A Political Geographic Perspective,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2010), 535.



Eric McGlinchey has rightly pointed out that neither ethnic Uzbeks nor ethnic Kyrgyz thought of ethnicity as an identification cleavage needed to be pressed during the first uprising in April 2005. With Akayev's ouster, ethnicization of the political conflict could have happened. However, as McGlinchey argues, since Bakiyev had a large support from the southern regional and clan networks, southern Uzbek activists having realized the strength of these networks, decided that spring of that year was not a right time to fight for benefits using ethnic identity claims as their mobilization framework.<sup>162</sup> The fact that ethnic differences are made relevant in one particular context but not in another leads us to our point that the critical driving factors behind a so-called 'ethnic conflict' extend beyond ethnicity.

What is also important is how the April revolution, according to Madeleine Reeves, led to a severe imbalance of power among the country's criminal groups. The collapse of the central authority produced a struggle among criminal gangs in Osh for control over the car industry.<sup>163</sup> Here, I would also add drug industry as another subject over which rival gangs in Osh had to struggle with the collapse of the main power in Bishkek. The rivalry quickly acquired an ethnic aspect. And, as Reeves argues further, the both political and legal vacuum provided a way for populist politicians to play an ethnic card. As for the provisional government's reaction to this, Roza Otunbayeva's government decided to ignore the real nature of the violence, instead maintained the

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<sup>162</sup> Eric McGlinchey, "Exploring Regime Instability and Ethnic Violence in Kyrgyzstan," *Asia Policy*, no. 12 (July 2011), 80.

<sup>163</sup> Madeleine Reeves, "After Internationalism? The Unmaking of Osh." v.51 n.5 *News of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies*. (October 2011)

ethnicization of the violence, by declaring that “this is now a conflict between two ethnicities”.<sup>164</sup>

Spring 2010 was marked by a strong sense of insecurity, and especially when ethnic Uzbek political leaders started to gather other Uzbeks for the street demonstrations (explained earlier), demands of Uzbek leaders such as Kadyrjan Batyrov on behalf of the Uzbek community were perceived with animosity by local Kyrgyz elite. During this time of increased hostility, in an interview broadcast on the Uzbek language channels Mezon TV and Osh TV Batyrov said, “The time when the Uzbeks sat still at home and did not participate in state building has passed. We actively supported the provisional government and must actively participate in all civic processes...If there were no Uzbeks, the Kyrgyz and members of the provisional government would not be able to resist Bakiev in Jalalabad when he tried to conduct his activity against the provisional government.”<sup>165</sup> But still, the Teyit burnings (explained earlier) served as the best incident for local southern elite or criminal groups to begin a narrative of Uzbek revenge and intention to gain autonomy. Kyrgyz politicians, mainly Melis Myrzakmatov, the mayor of the city Osh appointed by Bakiyev in January 2009, who by June 2010 became the unchallenged major political figure in the south, accused Batyrov of demanding autonomy for the southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>166</sup> The charges against Batyrov, actually, presented a fruitful base for political entrepreneurs who were in political or economic rivalry with him and were eager to prevent Uzbek prosperity and local influence. Now, there was a red herring to raise threats associated with the Uzbek minority and to play on

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<sup>164</sup> Madeleine Reeves, “Recent Events in Kyrgyzstan.” Paper presented at Russia and Eurasia Programme Seminar, London, September 13, 2010, 24.

<sup>165</sup> International Crisis group, “Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan,” 10.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

general stereotypes about Uzbeks as dirty, dishonest, and greedy.<sup>167</sup> On the one hand, framing has a real impact on the violence that erupted in the first place, by producing the ethnicization of violence, i.e., by imputing ethnicity to a phenomenon that might not have been initially ethnic, with the consequence of spreading a violent context where violence perpetrated along ethnic lines becomes a more ‘natural’ phenomenon. On the other hand, the ethnicization of violence will contribute to the gathering of popular support for the agenda of the ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ at the political level. So, in the period between the Teyit burning in May and the beginning of the Osh violence, ethnicization of the political confrontation had already been promoted, and a frame of ethnic competition was widely held in southern Kyrgyzstan. Scott Radnitz has suggested that the supposed defenders of both Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic parties – unemployed young men – started preparations for a fight by obtaining military equipment. Probably, both sides assumed that the provisional government would be unable to prevent confrontation and they would not have any obstacles to advance their political and economic interest through street violence.<sup>168</sup> Another reason to avoid these terms is the fact that adopting such labels, either in academia or in the media, is to ignore or downplay the interests of the particular actors that used them in the first place.

Information obtained by Amnesty International from a number of sources indicate that large groups of Kyrgyz youth from the remote areas, for example, from Batken, Alai and Aksy districts, were taken to Osh and Bazar-Korgan. According to the official version, these groups came spontaneously as soon as they found out about the ongoing riots in Osh, volunteering to protect their coethnics. Nevertheless, from unofficial sources

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<sup>167</sup> Scott Radnitz “Competing Narratives and Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan.” *PONARS Eurasia* (August 2010), 6.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid

it became known that recruiters sought often in the Kyrgyz population in these rural areas. Young people were provided transportation, food and shelter. Moreover, it was alleged that they were provided with weapons and, allegedly, financial reward. In interviews with Amnesty International, informal sources referred to the indirect evidence that these men were well supplied with alcoholic drinks, and in some cases-even drugs.<sup>169</sup> This is not to say that people do not kill based on pure ethnic animosity because there are certainly those who do. However, I do believe that this corresponds to a minority.

Even though I recognize that people's motivations are extremely hard to assess, it is possible to infer that the driving motives go way beyond ethnicity. Since the June conflict was accompanied by mass looting, mainly in the city of Osh, I can suppose that one of the driving motives for the exercise of violence was the opportunity to loot, especially given the fact that poor living conditions are prevalent in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Also, the role of rumors during the conflict should not be taken for granted. In the given case, rumors of rape of Kyrgyz girls living in the student dormitory in the centre of the city Osh, allegedly committed by Uzbeks, and that Uzbekistan or Uzbeks are fighting to take over the southern region of Kyrgyzstan stand as another main factor in provoking ordinary people to exercise violence.<sup>170</sup>

Evidently, the ethnic violence in the southern Kyrgyzstan was triggered by the political crisis and dynamics of the year 2010. The political transformation was not ethnic in its nature, but it did have ethnic aspects, but what is more important to understand that it provided fruitful conditions which enabled certain political forces to start violence by

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<sup>169</sup> Amnesty International. "Частичная Правда и Избирательное Правосудие Последствия Июньских Беспорядков 2010 Года в Кыргызстане (Partial Truth and Consequences of Electoral Justice of the 2010 June riots in Kyrgyzstan)," Amnesty International Publications, 2010, 8.

<sup>170</sup> International Crisis Group, "Pogroms in Kyrgyzstan," 11.

mobilising the populations in Osh based on their ethnic identities. Again, I do not claim that ethnic component is not relevant in this case or should not be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, it is critical to explore *how* and *in what ways* the ethnic dimension influences the logic and dynamics of the conflict.

## Conclusion

Although there is a popular belief that Kyrgyzstan's south is a tinderbox for ethnic violence, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz have been living in harmony for centuries in Central Asia's most diverse and rich area, the Ferghana Valley. "During the golden age of the Great Silk Road, the Ferghana Valley people happened to be at the intersection of different cultures and nations from Europe and the Mediterranean area to India and China. Therefore they developed an ability to perceive and adapt to the world outlooks different from their own," notes Kolpakov.<sup>171</sup> It was right after the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1990 when as the result of a poor management of deteriorating economic crisis by local authorities, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz used violence towards each other.

This study has presented the general background of pre-independent Kyrgyzstan's ethno-political situation, and further provided a general analysis of the country's evolving ethno-politics under two different regimes, demonstrating its vigorous dynamics in the face of the radical shift from Akayev's minority accommodating policies to Bakiyev's ethnocentric policies. Following the April revolution of 2010, which led to another regime change, Kyrgyzstan's central government was severely weakened. After several months of political instability, Kyrgyzstan faced a major outbreak of violence that later turned into full-fledged interethnic clashes in the southern towns of Osh, Jalalabad, and Bazarborgon. As the study has shown, much of the public and political discourse on the events stresses the ethnic dimension narrating the conflict as "ethnic conflict" that was

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<sup>171</sup> Aleksei Kolpakov, "Managing the Diversity", Inner Asian Uralic National resource Center, Indiana, 2001, 3.

bound to happen because of Soviet delimitation or ancient ethnic antagonism between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks of the Ferghana Valley.

The objective of the work is not to provide detailed chronological dates of the country's political transformations or to describe the June conflict and its aftermath. The main purpose of the thesis was to prove that the conflict in the south of Kyrgyzstan cannot be seen or interpreted as "ethnic conflict". By avoiding a dominant interpretative frame of the tragedy as "ethnic conflict", the study attempted to demonstrate that the onset of the violence was much more complex. Although there are differences between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south, the June violence is largely contextual and cannot be seen as a "thing" destined to happen. It was proved that the June events are the result of the unconventional political mobilisation, the basis of which happened to be an ethnic identity, exercised by political forces in order to advance their economical and political interests.

By deconstructing the prevalent way of seeing the conflict as "ethnic", we are also "deconstructing" the remembering of the conflict, and contributing to the prevention from the repetition of the violence. Therefore, it is not only an academic point. It is very important to get rid of the limits imposed by others, and to liberate the discourse from these polarizing perspectives and meanings attributed to the Kyrgyzstan's tragedy by politicians, journalists, and perpetrators.

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## Appendix: General Maps



**Fig. 1.** General map of Kyrgyzstan, showing the location of provinces, administrative centers, and other features of interest mentioned in the text



**Fig. 2.** Kyrgyzstan ethnicity map showing the distribution of Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and “other” nationalities (“other” nationalities exceeding 1 percent of the total population of Kyrgyzstan in 2009 include Russians, Dungans, Uyghurs, and Tajiks; National)