

Political Turbulence in Kyrgyzstan and Russian Foreign Policy

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Russia and Political Turbulence in Kyrgyzstan

In April 2010, five years after the ouster of Kyrgyzstan's first president Askar Akayev, the country saw another unconstitutional change of power. The violent overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was followed by a rise in ethnic and social tensions. In June, Kyrgyzstan was shattered by wide-scale pogroms in Osh and Jalal-Abad, the first outbreak of violence of such magnitude and ferocity since 1990. The country underwent a hasty transition to a parliamentary republic and, as the presidential election set for October 30, 2011 approaches, faces another decisive point in its post-independence history.

The political turbulence in Kyrgyzstan has become a challenge for Russia, the country seeing itself and generally seen by others as Central Asia's security guarantor and the most influential external actor in the region. It is on Moscow's response to this challenge that this brief focuses.

Bakiyev's Ouster

In July 2009, Kurmanbek Bakiyev was triumphantly reelected for a second presidential term, gaining 76% of votes with a turnout of 79%. The president's reelection was followed by a rampant campaign to concentrate political power and the country's most valuable economic assets in the hands of Bakiyev's extended family and close associates. These steps were taken in an increasingly unfavorable internal context, at a time of exacerbating economic hardship and shrinking remittances from labour migrants.

It was at this very time that the ruling regime lost the support of Russia, Kyrgyzstan's crucial foreign partner. Bakiyev's foreign policy had become so mercurial and overtly mercantile that Kyrgyzstan could no longer be seen as a loyal and reliable ally. For example, the Russian leadership was deeply vexed at Bakiyev's reversal on his pledge to close the Manas air base. In August 2009, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed a memorandum on the opening of the second Russian military base in the country, but no agreement was reached as Bishkek and Moscow differed on the location of the base and the conditions of its functioning. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan did not comply with an agreement to pass 48% of the stocks of the *Dastan* defense industry to Moscow in exchange for resolving Kyrgyz indebtedness.

In the first months of 2010, relations between Moscow and Bishkek rapidly deteriorated, reaching their lowest point in the post-Soviet history. Russian officials began to accuse openly the Kyrgyz authorities of mispending Russian credit and made it clear that the promised loan for the construction of Kambarata-1 hydroelectric station would be withheld. In response, Bishkek hinted that it would ask Russia to pay rent for the Kant air base or even consider closing the facility, threatening to

undermine the whole strategic and political pattern of the Russian presence in Central Asia.

In March, as popular protests in Northern Kyrgyzstan unfolded and the anti-Bakiyev opposition united, Russian media, including the First TV Channel and the leading daily *Izvestiya*, both closely linked to the government, launched a campaign of heavy criticism against Bakiyev and his family. The Russian Customs Service imposed a duty on oil and oil products exported to the country, citing Kyrgyzstan's non-membership in the Russia – Kazakhstan – Belarus Customs Union as a reason.

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

Russia's reaction to the uprising in Bishkek was remarkably swift. On April 8, the day after Bakiyev left Bishkek, Putin had a telephone conversation with Rosa Otunbayeva, the head of the interim government established by the leaders of several opposition parties, and offered material assistance to the new authorities. As Putin's press secretary explained, Moscow saw Otunbayeva as a "de facto head of the executive power in Kyrgyzstan". A few days later the Russian government decided to disburse \$ 50 million to Kyrgyzstan and promised to cancel the duty on oil exports to the country.

As Bakiyev fled to the south of the country and tried to mobilize his supporters in resistance to the interim government, Moscow intervened in the situation. Putin and Nazarbayev pressed Bakiyev to agree to submit his resignation and persuaded the interim government to allow him to leave the country, with Kazakhstan providing an airplane for the deposed president.

The Russian leadership was clearly satisfied to see Bakiyev's ouster and did not hesitate to shower caustic remarks on the former president. Moscow's early expression of support to the interim government and its insistence on Bakiyev's removal from Kyrgyzstan were critically important to infuse at least some legitimacy in the new authorities and to soothe the heat of the moment.

The Interim Government

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

The interim government became a venue for a bitter power struggle, with its key members pursuing different, if not contradictory, agendas. An uneasy compromise on the configuration of power was reached in May: Otunbayeva was appointed president for 1.5 years, but was barred from running in the next presidential election. A draft of the new constitution envisaged that Kyrgyzstan would be transformed into a parliamentary republic.

Moscow did not remain indifferent to these attempts at recasting the country's government. The Russian leadership saw the parliamentary form of government as inappropriate, even dangerous, for Kyrgyzstan, as an amplifier of instability and an undesirable example for other countries of the region. However, the key figures of the Kyrgyz political elite, each of them lacking the resources that could guarantee an ascendancy to the presidential position, needed the flexibility provided by the institutional arrangements of a parliamentary republic. Despite admonitions from Russia, the interim government persisted in rejecting a presidential form of government. Thus, Moscow and Bishkek openly disagreed on a highly important issue, and the limits of Russian influence on Kyrgyzstan were clearly exposed.

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

On June 27, 2010, 91% of Kyrgyz voters approved the new constitution. The official Russian reaction was outspokenly skeptical. President Medvedev remarked that he did not quite understand "how the parliamentary republic model would work in Kyrgyzstan" and warned against the danger of the country's disintegration.

The Parliamentary Republic

The interim government was dissolved after the referendum, and the parliamentary election was set for October 10, 2010. The Russian factor figured prominently in the election campaign. The major parties competed in emphasizing their “connections” with the Russian political elite and promising good prospects for Kyrgyz-Russian relations. At first, the Russian leadership acted cautiously, trying to spread the risks and encourage several contenders simultaneously. Almazbek Atambayev, Omurbek Babanov and Temir Sariyev, leaders of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the “Respublika” and the “Ak-Shumkar”, visited Moscow in September and had meetings with high-ranking Russian officials; in particular, Atambayev was received by Putin and Babanov – by Sergei Naryshkin, the head of presidential administration.

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

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

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

It took two months for the winners to come to terms with the configuration of the governing coalition. In mid-December, SDP, “Ata Jurt” and “Respublika” reached an uneasy compromise and distributed ministerial portfolios and the positions of regional governors among themselves. Atambayev was appointed prime-minister, Babanov

became his first deputy and co-chairman of the Kyrgyzstan–Russia Intergovernmental Cooperation, and a representative of “Ata Jurt” was elected speaker of parliament. An intensive cooperation with Russia was declared one of the centerpieces of the coalition’s programme.

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

At the end of December, Atambayev visited Russia and promised a prompt resolution of all the major bilateral issues. To encourage a new government, Moscow agreed to cancel duties on oil exports to Kyrgyzstan since the beginning of 2011. However, Russia made it clear that it looked forward to practical steps and concessions on the part of Bishkek.

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

Meanwhile the governmental coalition faced its first crisis, provoked by allegations that Babanov was involved in a raid attack on *MegaCom*, a Russian mobile and telecommunications company. Claiming to be indignant at Babanov’s misconduct, “Ata Jurt” threatened to leave the coalition and demanded Atambayev’s and Babnov’s dismissal. The idea to impeach Otunbayeva and to call an early presidential election began to be discussed.

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

Russia's Reactions to Ethnic Violence in Kyrgyzstan

The immediate consequence of the regime change in Kyrgyzstan was the heightening of inter-ethnic tensions. The interim government faced a particularly complicated challenge in the south of the country. The local Kyrgyz elites of Osh and Jalal-Abad were closely linked with Bakiyev's regime and unwilling to subordinate themselves to the interim government where "northerners" were in a clear majority. The leaders of the Uzbek minority saw the situation as an opportunity to enhance their status and supported the new administration. Thus, political divisions were reinforcing territorial, clan and ethnic contradictions.

On June 10, 2010, tensions between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek communities in Osh burst into wide-scale clashes. The perspective seemed imminent that violence would engulf the whole of the country and spillover into the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley, provoking the implosion of Kyrgyzstan and regional meltdown. On June 12, as violence spread to Jalal-Abad, the interim government asked Russia to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan.

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

Moscow decided in favor of non-interference, hoping that the situation would return to normalcy by itself or at least would be contained within Kyrgyzstan's borders. Russia stated that the violence in the southern provinces was Kyrgyzstan's internal affair and the Kyrgyz authorities should "cope by themselves". The matter was referred to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, but the option of military intervention was clearly excluded, since Moscow did not call for an emergency summit, preferring to convene a consultative body (a meeting of the secretaries of national security councils). The secretaries went no further than promising to help Bishkek with military equipment and material. The interim government called back its appeal for peacekeepers, but asked Russia to provide troops for the defense of "strategic objects", such as dams and factories. Russia refused to accommodate this request as well.

The tide of violence in Osh and Jalal-Abad was soon reversed, due to internal self-regulatory mechanisms (in particular, the role of the communities' elders), the firm but belated steps taken by the interim government and the unexpectedly reticent reaction of Uzbekistan. The fragile and superficial stability was restored, and Russia's

refusal to interfere turned out to be justified. However, the Russian reputation as regional stabilizer and guarantor of stability was severely damaged. For future contingencies, Russia's involvement was to be taken as less likely and more limited than many of the regional and outside actors had expected. As if to convey this message more unambiguously, Russia signaled at the end of June that it was no longer seeking a military base in southern Kyrgyzstan.

The events of June 2010 catalyzed nationalist sentiments among the Kyrgyz public. Nationalism was mainstreamed in Kyrgyzstan's political debate, and a growing part of the country's political elite turned to nationalist rhetoric. Another consequence was the reinforcement of autonomist and even overtly separatist tendencies in the south of the country. In fact, the authorities of the Osh province emerged out of the situation with greater autonomy and distance vis-à-vis Bishkek.

Russia and the Kyrgyz Presidential Election

Since the spring of 2011, the Kyrgyz political elite had been anticipating the presidential election set for October 30, 2011. Though the new constitution diminished the president's powers, the position turned out to be a very popular one, with 80 persons initially applying for registration as candidates and 19 finally registered. That fact was unsurprising, since it is widely expected that the new president would try to initiate constitutional amendments aimed at the expansion of the head of state's authority. The major contenders to emerge were Atambayev and Kamchibek Tashiev, leader of the "Ata Jurt" party.

The pre-election months were a time of heated political debate and growing nationalist sentiments. The rift between the north and the south of the country widened dangerously, with the candidates clearly associating with either northern or southern bases of support and no politician having a national appeal. It was rumored that "southerners" pledged not to tolerate a "northerner" becoming a president and that Bakiyev's clan again became actively involved in southern politics. However, as neither "northerners" nor "southerners" are a monolithic force (being in fact coalitions of parochial groupings), a second election round was expected.

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

That being said, it is widely believed in Kyrgyzstan that Atambayev was Russia's preferred choice. In any case, overtly nationalist candidates would be, if elected,

much more difficult to deal with. It was reported that Moscow declined to give its support to Adakhan Madumarov, another candidate who was formerly a close associate of Bakiyev and has taken a nationalist stance. *Ferghana.ru*, a popular Russian web site focusing on Central Asia, published an interview with an unnamed high-level source in the Russian security services who directly accused Tashiev of being involved in drug trafficking and keeping a private “army”. Meanwhile, Atambayev, while still a prime-minister (he suspended his tenure at the end of September to run for presidency), scored an additional point by signing a memorandum with *Gazprom* whereby the Russian monopoly pledged to invest in oil and gas development projects in Kyrgyzstan.

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

Conclusion

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

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

About the author

Dr. Evgeny Troitskiy was a visiting researcher at the Russia Research Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) during May and September-October 2011, on a grant from the Sverker Åström Foundation for the Furtherance of Swedish-Russian Relations. He is Associate Professor at Tomsk State University, Russian Federation. He holds a PhD in Modern History from Tomsk State University (2004). His publications include two chapters in *Mezhdunrodnye otnosheniya v Tsentral'noi Azii: sobytiya i dokumenty* (International Relations in Central Asia: Events and Documents, Moscow, 2011) and the monograph titled *Politika SShA v Tsentral'noi Azii, 1992 – 2004* (U.S. Policy in Central Asia, 1992 – 2004, Tomsk, 2005).

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