

EXTERNAL POWERS' INFLUENCE UPON THE REFORM AND POLITICAL ELITES IN PRESENT KYRGYZSTAN

Irina Morozova*

Abstract

Formerly perceived as an 'island of democracy', Kyrgyzstan is now characterised as a 'failed state'. After the March 2005 revolutionary upheaval, President K. Bakiev has been searching for a way to consolidate the ruling elite. What was the impact of external powers and international policies upon the last four years' socio-political transformation in the country? How were the images of Kyrgyzstan constructed and manipulated from within and outside? Based upon field interviews, open sources and statistics, this research focuses on the influences of Russia, China, the USA and EU, as well as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on Kyrgyz political elites' development after March 2005. Against the background of multi-dimensional and quite open foreign policy, economic integration and social networks in Kyrgyzstan developed in closer co-operation with Russia and Kazakhstan.

Key words: *Kyrgyzstan, political elites, external powers, foreign policy, diplomacy, competition*

Introduction

Since the USSR's disintegration Central Asia has been reconceptualised in the international politics and lexicon, first as a post-Soviet Muslim world, then a part of the Greater Middle East or Greater Central Asia. Developed out of a necessity to find new policy-relevant approaches to the Eurasian Heartland and to construct power projections by framing socio-political knowledge about the region, these concepts of/for Central Asia do not coincide with geographical or historical definitions of the region.

Appearing on the world political map at the beginning of the 1990s, Central Asian states faced all the challenges of the post-Cold War neo-liberal order, such as socio-economic crisis, under- and unemployment, social polarisation and marginalisation, and the inability of national governments and political elites to counter effectively these threats. Beyond all these transnational challenges, the elites and communities of Central Asia had to acquire new knowledge about the changing world order and their own place in it. New geopolitical arrangements and the search for regional identity were reflected in the formation of different regional groupings through the 1990s, the majority of which quickly declined. Neither Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization

□ *Dr. Irina Morozova is currently a Humboldt fellow at the Institute of Middle East Studies, German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg. She has been a research fellow and a lecturer at the International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden University and Institute of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.*

(CSTO) nor Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have become a real motor for regional integration.

The concepts of security in Central Asia have been created and framed by various international actors and external powers involved, and the domestic reforms and policies of nation-building often reflected upon, or found a place within, an external power model. Central Asian elites had to be responsive towards foreign security concepts and policies that had been imposed upon them, such as Russia's "peacemaking" mission at the beginning of the 1990s and the later policies of "fighting against terrorism" at the end of the 1990s and the post-September 11 "global war against terror", as well as foreign energy security policies. Definitions of security threats, introduced from outside, became utilized by the domestic elites and led to the construction of social priorities in the Republics' policies and identification of risk groups¹.

Concurring with those scholars who see nation-states losing power, but not influence of a legitimized entity², I analyze how Central Asian states constitute themselves in response to the challenges of a global world and how foreign states impact upon the ruling elites in Central Asian states. I choose the three most influential external powers, namely Russia, China, and the USA, and regional states directly bordering Kyrgyzstan – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

External powers' involvement into Kyrgyz economy: an overview

After the USSR's disintegration (unforeseen by many people in Central Asian republics), the newly independent states were simultaneously exposed to globalisation by the international markets from above and interference by criminal groups from below, which intensified their activities against the background of socio-political disarray. Kyrgyzstan, one of the weakest Central Asian economies, formerly largely dependent on the centralised Soviet budget redistribution and assistance, had to let international financial institutions and human rights organisations, as well as various NGOs and religious groups, into its domestic market and public domain. Within the first five years of economic reform guided by the IMF, the country accumulated an excessive external debt. The population of Kyrgyzstan went through the shock therapy of price liberalization, hyper-inflation and a drastic fall in living standards.

Foreign direct investments flowed mainly into the Kyrgyz strategic export resource industry – gold mines, which accounted, according to some expert estimations, for about 40% of national budget revenue. In the 1990s the Kyrgyz government, like other Central Asian ruling elites, for instance, in Kazakhstan, sold the bigger part of strategic export production shares to foreign companies. Since January 2004 the Canadian-based Ceterra gold mining and exploration company has owned 100% of the Kumtor gold mine, one of the largest operating gold deposits in Central Asia, located in the Tien Shan Mountains to the south of Issyk-Kul. Various international financial institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the Multilateral

¹ See: Douglas, M., "Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory", (London: Routledge, 1992).

² Castells, Manuel, "The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture", Vol. II., (Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), p. 243.

Investment Guarantee Association (MIGA) and the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), funded the project. However, after 2005, following the Kazakh example of increasing its national shares in strategic exports contracts, Kyrgyz government and parliament revealed certain intentions, supported and exploited in media campaigns, to reconsider and diminish the rights and possibly the share of foreign companies operating in the country.

Table 1. Foreign direct investments into Kyrgyzstan (by country)

Country	millions of US dollars				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Canada	12,7	31,1	46,5	26,1	8,6
USA	20,1	9,9	14,0	11,7	6,4
Russia	17,1	11,1	11,9	8,1	19,8
Turkey	13,4	25,3	23,1	16,1	12,8
Germany	9,0	6,0	8,5	36,5	53,4
China	8,5	14,6	6,8	4,5	7,3
South Korea	7,7	7,2	8,5	0,4	0,7
Kazakhstan	6,3	13,2	15,6	40,3	136,8
Cyprus	1,0	1,8	11,5	10,5	22,9
Great Britain	2,5	2,0	10,5	29,5	38,0

Sources: “Kyrgyzstan v Tsyfra”h (Kyrgyzstan in Numbers), (Bishkek: National’nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic), 2005), pp. 118-119; “Investitsii v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike, 2002-2006” (Investment in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2002-2006), (Bishkek: National’nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic), 2007), pp. 47-48.

If Western countries mainly invest in mines, other states, like Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, China and South Korea choose various processing industries, transportation, construction, trade and for the last four years finance and property³. In 2007-2008 Kyrgyzstan was very active in attracting investors, mainly from Kazakhstan, Russia and China, to its energy sector, using different bargaining tactics.

Right after the overthrow of Akayev’s rule in March 2005 the external powers were awaiting the signals from the new President Bakiev on his future policy towards foreign capital. Kazakhstan was quick to demonstrate to Bishkek the importance of economic ties by stopping the delivery of diesel fuel on the former quotas. The new Kyrgyz government had to suggest certain guarantees on the security of Kazakh investments and joint exploitation of water and energy resources.

Table 2. Foreign trade of the Kyrgyz Republic by countries

Country	export (thousand \$)			import (thousand \$)		
	2002	2003	2004	2002	2003	2004
Russia	80 035,8	97 016,9	137 729,5	116 705,1	176 128,2	293 662,8
EU	31 818,0	31 257,7	27 945,9	86 786,1	93 277,1	118 914,4

³ “Investitsii v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike, 2002-2006” (Investment in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2002-2006), (Bishkek: National’nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic), 2007), p. 44; “Promyshlennost’ Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2002-2006” (Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2002-2006), (Bishkek: National’nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic), 2007), p. 25.

China	41 059,4	23 342,5	3 934,1	59 114,7	77 690,0	80 086,7
USA	36 063,7	6 515,1	3 230,6	47 384,4	47 931,1	44 605,9
Canada	4 905,7	30 977,3	42 743,5	9 048,6	8 302,2	12 603,3
South Korea	1 068,5	383,1	479,2	6 962,6	11 674,9	25 070,3
Turkey	16 402,0	11 002,5	17 046,1	17 006,3	25 988,9	33 242,7
Uzbekistan	27 835,8	16 258,9	14 690,8	60 144,0	39 214,9	51 881,2
Kazakhstan	36 826,2	57 133,4	87 311,0	123 902,5	170 929,2	202 904,5
Tajikistan	10 193,9	18 855,9	22 073,1	3 483,2	3 068,7	2 371,2
Arab Emirates	68 816,8	144 343,7	189 312,2	7 345,3	7 792,6	7 618,5

Source: “*Kyrgyzstan v Tsyfrah*” (*Kyrgyzstan in Numbers*), (Bishkek: *Natsional’nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki* (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic), 2005), pp. 227-229.

Table 2 reflects upon certain tendencies in Kyrgyz foreign trade development, which have not principally changed till the present. Kyrgyzstan’s trade balance remains negative, and the country is still significantly dependent on hydrocarbon resources and the import of industrial products from other former Soviet Republics, especially Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan continues delivering electricity and electrical lamps to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and consumes Uzbek natural gas and oil products, as well as petroleum from Kazakhstan and Russia⁴. Thus, economic integration within the post-Soviet space remains more substantial than co-operation with other regional powers, including China and Turkey, or Western European and Northern American states. The indicators in Table 2 do not count data on export and import from the so-called “shuttle trade”, which would, otherwise, increase the numbers illustrating imports from China and Turkey. At the same time, taking into account migration and significant remittances sent by Kyrgyz migrants from Russia and Kazakhstan⁵, the prevalence of economic integration among the CIS states⁶ over Chinese, Turkish or Western dimensions is evident and is likely to continue, already not as a Soviet legacy, but a result of marketisation and competition.

Foreign Diplomacy and Domestic Political Course

The key difference between the USA and EU policies towards the newly formed Central Asian states was in approaching their elites and groups in power: a more positivist attitude by the US administration reflected in its temporary co-operation with the regimes on the basis of their support to the US and NATO operations in the Middle East, while the European countries, as well as such organisations as the OSCE, did not boost wide-scale collaboration, instead criticising the undemocratic nature of the regimes. Tactically, Western countries preferred not to deal with the political regimes as they were, but to endorse certain personalities within the regional elites. Those personalities were expected to be capable of working for the Western interests’ promotion in the republics, and often were either from the opposition or encouraged to form one. Consequently, Western policies did not always receive a warm welcoming by the ruling governments. The “personalized” policy of political

⁴ “Vneshnyaya torgovlya Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2002-2006” (Foreign trade of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2002-2006), (Bishkek: *Natsional’nyi Statisticheskii Komitet Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki* (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic), 2007), pp. 8-10, 55-72.

⁵ Sadovskaya, E., “Labour Migration and its Impact on Social Stability in Central Asia”, in: I. Morozova (ed) “Towards Social Stability and Democratic Governance in Central Eurasia: challenges to regional security” (Amsterdam: IOS Press, NATO Science Series), pp. 206-228.

⁶ This fact does not exclude the general lack of success in the CIS’ meeting its original integration goal.

promotion imposed from outside was destroying consolidation tendencies within the domestic elites, which were seeking external support in a tense internal competition. Kyrgyzstan has become an exemplary case of such a controversial external impact on the domestic elites.

China, to the contrary, accepted the regimes and worked with the ruling elites. Re-emerging as a key regional player in Central Asia at the beginning of the 1990s and demonstrating the ambitions of a future major power on the Eurasian continent, it strongly intended to cooperate with the new states next to its borders. Proclaiming its foreign policy as “China’s peaceful rise to power” and “establishing harmonic relations with the neighbouring states”, it pursued a strategy of support to its state and business interests in bilateral relations with all Central Asian republics. Since the start of the 1990s China has been increasing its impact upon Kyrgyz political elites. In 1996 and 1999 about 125,000 hectares of the so-called disputed territories belonging to Kyrgyzstan were given to China.

The political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, which resulted in President A. Akayev’s removal, was viewed by Beijing as a means to confront Western and particularly US influences in Central Asia by identifying “dangerous coloured revolutions syndrome”, which at the same time forced China to differentiate between various groups in Kyrgyz politics. “Velvet revolutions studies” became a new trend among Chinese policy analysts and sociologists, for which research centres were being opened. The border issue once again became Beijing’s concern, particularly after some Kyrgyz politicians’ statements on possible borders’ revision. However, the new Bakiev government reassured the Chinese side in its intention to leave the border agreement as it had been under Akayev.

Above the official rhetoric from Washington about the victory of democracy in Kyrgyzstan, the immediate issue in Kyrgyz-US relations after the revolution was connected with the location and possible withdrawal of the American military base in Manas airport. However Akayev’s agreement remained unchanged at that moment, as well as the one on the Russian base in Kant. A few Kyrgyz analysts suggested locating on the country’s territory even more foreign bases as an “asymmetric reaction to the new global threats”⁷. Such an approach to the country’s hard security seems to have lost its meaning at present, as the progress has been made at the start of 2009 in Kyrgyz-Russian negotiations on Moscow’s \$2 billion credit to Bishkek in exchange of dismantling US base in Manas.

A common Soviet educational and political background gave Russia exceptional positions of influence upon the Central Asian groups in power in some republics in particular. Different degrees of interdependency vis-à-vis Moscow in Soviet times determined the variation in the republics’ attitudes towards Russia after obtaining independence. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan did not develop such a vivid anti-Soviet rhetoric as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Originally established as the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic within the Russian Federal Socialist Republic in 1924, Kyrgyzstan had been more dependent on Moscow, as well as on its neighbours. Although the integrity of late Soviet *nomenklatura* elites has been gradually eroding for the last eighteen years, the Central Asian population developed new identities and motivations in relation to Russia; business elites established new networks and, consequently, new levels of interdependencies were formed. In approaching the ruling

⁷ Suyunbaev, M.N., “Geopoliticheskie osnovy razvitiya i bezopasnosti Kyrgyzstana (global’nyi, regional’nyi i natsional’nyi aspekty)” (Geopolitical basis for the Kyrgyzstan’s development and security (global, regional and national aspects)), (Bishkek: KNU, 2005), pp. 69-70, 94.

political elites of Central Asia, Russia demonstrated greater solidarity with China rather than the West: many of Russia's policy-makers clearly expressed preference for an autocratic, but "stable" rule in Central Asia. In supporting Central Asian ruling elites, Russia revealed the 15-16th centuries' Horde model of relations with the polities next to its southern borders: allying with the dominant ruling strata for joint exploitation of the population and blocking outside threats to the regimes.

The new neo-liberal exploitation of some sections of the population, legally and half-legally employed, and depriving other groups from social welfare, became a characteristic feature of post-Soviet Eurasian transformation. Managing natural resources and running privatization campaigns became a key means of survival by the post-Soviet Central Asian political elite. The tendency of maintaining control over the strategic assets and the mechanisms of resource redistribution by President Akayev became more visible with time. Analysts divide Akayev's time in power into two periods. The first years of his presidency were highly praised by Western policy-makers and journalists, as he not only opened the country to international financial institutions and accepted the IMF's reforms on a transition to market economy, but also seemed to perform as an intellectual democrat who granted his citizens more liberties than any other President in post-Soviet Central Asia. Akayev's scientific background⁸, probably not very important in the eyes of his international partners, gave additional legitimacy to his presidency in perspective of his country fellowmen, who perceived a scientific career, especially one made in central research institutions of Leningrad and Moscow, as a highly rewarding social status. The attitude towards his presidency changed by 2000, as the Western and some Kyrgyz media launched campaigns to accuse him of increased authoritarianism and corruption. The question that one can be puzzled by is whether the principles of Akayev's rule really changed or the transformation happened solely in the eyes of foreign politicians and media?

The first Akayev period was marked by consolidation of his group's rule, leading in the second period to fragmentation of the group itself. Further development was based around the accumulation of more wealth within the family and a narrow circle of friends and allies. The "privileged circle" was getting even narrower, provoking negative aspirations and dissatisfaction even among "northern clan members" that were believed to be more loyal to the Akayevs⁹, but still deprived from accessing the strategic resources. The rule of Akayev's "clan" was washed away by the riots organised by oppositional leaders in March 2005.

The so-called Tulip revolution brought a number of surprises to the international community and public that had been ill-prepared to interpret the Kyrgyz upheaval as a regular case of a "velvet revolution" in post-socialist space. Despite a number of publications that appeared to prove the prevalence of outside guidance in the revolution's development¹⁰, the trends followed afterwards did not prove such a vision. The new governmental course showed no signs of becoming more pro-Western or democratic. In addition, not only further rapprochement with Russia or Kazakhstan, but a more vivid shift towards economic

⁸ Akayev graduated from the Leningrad Institute of Precision Mechanics and Optics in 1967 and obtained a doctorate from the Moscow Institute of Engineering and Physics in 1981.

⁹ Askar Akayev and his wife Mayram Akaeva were born in the northern provinces of Kyrgyzstan (Chui and Talas respectively).

¹⁰ See: Knyazev, A., "Gosudarstvennyi perevorot 24 marta 2005 g. v Kirgizii" (*Coup d'état* of 24 March 2005 in Kyrgyzstan), (Bishkek: Obshestvennyi Fond Aleksandra Knyazeva, 2007).

integration with them, as well as probating their model of state-corporation economics, became evident in Kyrgyzstan as soon as 2006.

Bakiev's policy in relations towards international financial institutions was changing in parallel to his gradual rapprochement with Russian and Kazakh corporate elites. After declaring in the fall of 2006 the intention to join the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative that promised to eliminate about half of Kyrgyzstan's \$2 billion debt to international lenders, Bakiev radically changed his mind and declined the HIPC programme in February 2007. The majority of observers concluded that the government was put in the position to react upon the wave of public protests against HIPC in Kyrgyzstan. Some analysts even argued that the abandonment of HIPC demonstrated the formation of civil society in the country. However, if to analyze the President's rhetoric on the negative outcomes of the former IMF initiatives for Kyrgyz state and economy, one can clearly note the critics towards Akayev, whose former "mistakes" the new ruler was deemed to "correct". By deciding against HIPC Bakiev also acted against his key competitor F. Kulov, who was about to support the debt-relief programme. Nevertheless, the final decision on HIPC was rather unexpected than foreseen, since the bargaining element in Kyrgyz foreign policy caused and is still likely to cause unpredictability in allegiances and pacts.

That sort of unpredictability was seen as a threat by the Kazakh elites as well. Kazakhstan was frequently named among the next candidates to launch a velvet revolution in Kyrgyzstan. On 25 March 2005, the Kazakh democratic block "For the Fair Kazakhstan" sent its welcoming greetings to the leaders of the Tulip revolution in Bishkek, while the official reaction by the Kazakh President N. Nazarbaev was sharply negative. In less than a year before the presidential elections in his country, Nazarbaev condemned the Kyrgyz revolution as a "split of elites at the end of the election cycle just before the legal power transition". During the revolution in Kyrgyzstan the southern Kazakh border was closed for any Kyrgyz citizen intending to cross it. Nazarbaev's regime was mobilising political officialdom and the public to confront any possible political turbulence. Not only changes in legislation and electoral laws followed, but the state-sponsored civil society, in its turn, reacted accordingly: for instance, two parties – Agrarian Party and Civil Party – proclaimed an establishment of the People's-Democratic Front that aimed to prevent any attempt of organising a revolution according to the Kyrgyz scenario in Kazakhstan. The Kyrgyz revolution is still being revised and commented upon by Kazakh politicians and publicists, who endeavour to work out an idea of Kazakh national development¹¹ (which often happens in contrasting the Kyrgyz case).

As argued by some Kyrgyz scholars¹², the negative image of Kyrgyzstan as a "failing state" and a source of instability for the whole of Central Asia is constructively overemphasised by other "more successful" regional states, as well as by the international communities, including academia. Kyrgyzstan's economic weakness, escalated social conflict and political instability became a means to shape regional policies and concepts of security by foreign countries and international organisations.

Official Tashkent set up its own bargaining tactics with the new power in Bishkek. After the immediate short period of an optimistic renewal of bilateral relations, the Uzbek ruling groups

¹¹ Toiganbaev, Adil. "Technologiya mechty" (How to realize one's dream). <http://territoria.kz>

¹² Nogoibaeva, Elmira, "Images and Symbols of Kyrgyzstan under Construction", paper was presented at the Eurasian Political Science Research Network Fifth International Conference, Moscow, 2 February 2008.

returned to an already-practised pattern of confrontation after Bishkek did not provide the expected support on the questions of Andijan “refugees” and the UN resolution on the human rights situation in Uzbekistan of November 2005. The Uzbek opposition showed a greater variety of reactions, including criticism towards the leaders of Kyrgyzstan’s revolution. The link between the Tulip revolution in March and the Andijan revolt in May 2005 has not been proven so far, but is claimed to exist by a number of analysts, particularly those who see the predominance of Western organisations’ support in mobilising Central Asian oppositional movements.

As in case with Kazakhstan, energy supplies remained the key factor in the Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations after the revolution. Disputes on water redistribution between the two Republics, in which Russia also plays an important mediating role, remain acute and capable of influencing the directions of foreign policy in relations with Russia, the USA and China.¹³ The current decision to remove the US military base from Manas has not proved some Kyrgyz analysts’ expectations that further rapprochement between Russia and Uzbekistan, resulting in Russia’s playing into Uzbek gate, would lead to Bishkek’s orientation towards more substantial US presence in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴

Tajik ruling elites, sharing the common depressive memories of the civil war with all other sections of society, could not fail to feel a certain danger after the revolutionary upheaval in Bishkek. The Tajik President E. Rahmonov swiftly proceeded with security arrangements and other measures inside the country. Thus, the Tajik Foreign Office addressed all the diplomatic missions in the country on the information security of the Republic of Tajikistan in the sphere of domestic and foreign policies. In October 2005 Freedom House and National Endowment for Democracy were refused registration.

Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik ruling groups condemned the “external factor” in the organisation of the Tulip revolution. Western human rights organisations were found guilty of escalating social conflict. Representatives of these institutions, as well as the Kyrgyz revolutionary leaders, in their turn, publicly accused Russia of being an outside stage-director of the Kyrgyz political upheaval.

Russia was learning how to react to power transfers in the former Soviet republics. Some Central Asian analysts noted a shift in Russia’s general tactics: “from one-side support to the regime in power towards a more diversified policy”¹⁵. Indeed, the Kremlin swiftly established dialogue with the new Kyrgyz government, whilst at the same time providing shelter to the former President in Moscow. No crisis or stagnation in the bilateral Russian-Kyrgyz relationships followed. Moreover, humanitarian assistance was being delivered to Kyrgyzstan during the first month after the revolution. The Russian officials were stressing the need to support Russian business in the Kyrgyz market, and new commercial projects were launched and huge advertisements of Russian big business projects appeared in Bishkek.

Allying and bargaining with Russian and Kazakh business elites, whilst at the same time trying to find correlations with other foreign powers’ presence, including the USA, Bakiev

¹³ Bogatyriov, V., “The Factor of Uzbekistan in the Strategies of Foreign Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic”, IPP, <http://www.ipp.kg/ru/analysis/746/>

¹⁴ Authors’ interview, *Europe*, January 2009.

¹⁵ Muhiddin Kaberi, one of the leaders of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, *Rosbalt News Agency*, Author’s interviews. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, February 2008.

was in search for a model to consolidate his rule. Despite the criticism about the quick and unsystematic rotation of cadres by the President, his tendency to establish a “monopoly over economic and political patronage”¹⁶ became soon evident. Bakiev consolidated power gradually by removing his former ally, Prime Minister and influential politician F. Kulov and forming the new Parliament. A tendency to provide for more centralization and reduce the role of the regions became clearer. The new Constitution drafts, as well as the legal code and elections, became a tool of delegating more authority to the central power organs. The President also tried to reduce the judiciary’s powers. The new presidential party Ak Zhol (Bright Path) was formed and became the favourite at the parliamentary elections campaign in November-December 2007. Although it was (and still is) too early to judge on the long-term success of the party, which fully depends on the degree of elites’ consolidation around Bakiev, various politicians, even the prominent opposition figures, have already demonstrated an instant desire to appear in the Ak Zhol’s election list.

In attempts to correlate relations with foreign states at the start of 2009 Bakiev has tended to bring the existing cooperation with the USA on hard security issues to a halt. The decision by the Kyrgyz President declared on 4 February 2009 in Moscow not to prolong the agreement with the US on location of their military base in Manas and the parallel agreement on the establishment of the Russian-Kyrgyz joint stock society on construction of Kambarata-1 hydro-electro station may signal further trans-regionalisation of the two states’ corporate elites in search of joint exploitation and trade of energy resources.

Education, Media, Political Sponsorship and Patronage

Taking into account the close connections between the Kyrgyz political official circles and academia that can be traced back to the late Soviet times, the views by the leading Kyrgyz political analysts often reveal motives for certain political decisions. The division line between different academic and public groups lies not just along institutional affiliations (in Bishkek, among the most famous universities established in the last eighteen years are American University of Central Asia, Russian-Kyrgyz Slavic University, as well as Kyrgyz-Turkish University Manas), but also drawn by individual loyalties. While the US educational and scientific grant programmes have been more structural and total in targeting the country’s young generation as a whole, Russia’s projects were narrowed to supporting a few individual researchers, who tried to penetrate the public domain from scientific chairs. However, the diplomas of the Slavic University, which are recognised in the Russian Federation, are viewed by students as a means for a prospective position in a commercial or state representation operating in Russia or for emigration to Russia. Prevalence of personal motivations like finding a job in Russia, reuniting with the relatives, living in Russia, for studying over collective identities impedes the development of any significant support group in favour of Russia’s (or another country’s) policy in Kyrgyzstan. Networks developed by the Russian and Kyrgyz corporate companies go beyond state-orientated interests. The usage of the Russian language as a *lingua franca* is explained by businessmen in Kyrgyzstan and other regional states, such as Kazakhstan, as a pure pragmatic decision. The Kyrgyz state policy of granting Russian the status of the second state language has not changed, although for a number of

¹⁶ Such a definition is given in the recent ICG report on Kyrgyzstan. Asia Briefing # 79, Bishkek/Brussels, 14 August 2008.

politicians, including Western-oriented ones (such as Roza Otunbaeva, for instance¹⁷), the language issue remained a political instrument.

In the 1990s Kyrgyzstan was famous for the most liberal climate and freedom of speech in the whole of post-Soviet Central Asia. Special assistance and grants from international organisations were directed to developing media resources and running computerisation campaigns that intended to provide the population with easy access to the Internet. Internet cafes in Bishkek were booming and some Kyrgyz Internet media portals were regularly publishing news on Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian states. Those portals were also used as a platform for criticism towards the political regimes in the neighbouring states. Internet public forums became popular, especially among young people and students, who were the most active in acquiring new PC skills. Western research organisations lectured Central Asian scholars on how to build networks and exchange information via e-mail lists. Particularly due to all these achievements in making the access to information easy for different sections of the population, Kyrgyzstan was praised for being an “island of democracy” in the region. With time, after 2000, the side effects of computerisation were discovered: children addicted to computer games hanging around in Internet cafes instead of going to school (a usual picture in present Bishkek); some computer technologies, including role-playing games, became utilised by organisations that were officially unrecognised and identified as a threat, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir¹⁸. The questions of rights and property of media companies become acute practically every time a new government is formed. If at the beginning of the 1990s some press, publishers and other media were developing due to foreign donations, however, at the end of the 1990s and especially after 2000 privatisation and commercialisation of those resources resulted in the formation of media holdings.

Journalists, publicists, academicians and politicians were often very close to those financial sources spent on media and public campaigns and did not hesitate to play on that market. Various associations and NGOs were rapidly established and dissolved. Prominent figures were continuously changing their affiliations, bargaining in between different sponsors. It is believed that opposition figures can be particularly active in using media resources. However, a specific feature of the Kyrgyz opposition was its on-going fluctuations: many opposition leaders in the very recent past used to hold high posts in the government and stayed ready to ally with it again. The most active government officials’ move to the opposition happened in 2001, and later, particularly after 2004, they started transforming their NGOs into political parties. Currently, the former oppositional leaders have begun allying with Bakiev and receiving appointments in the governmental apparatus.

Between 2001 and 2005 the oppositionists were constantly criticising Akayev’s rule, often receiving support from such US organisations operating in Kyrgyzstan as USAID, the International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, Freedom House, Soros Foundation, Eurasia Foundation, and other European and international organisations such as OSCE branches, International Crisis Group, Cimera-Kyrgyzstan (Switzerland) and others. Proclaiming their mission as democracy promotion, they have been extremely active in civil society-building: some of their leaders became very popular in the country and became truly capable of influencing domestic public life¹⁹. They organised supervision and sponsorship of election campaigns and sometimes even mediated between some local groups and individuals.

¹⁷ Author’s interview with R. Otunbaeva, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, July 2006

¹⁸ Author’s interview, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, February 2008

The US organisations were particularly active in working at the grassroots level and mobilising large sections of society, mainly the youth, and accumulated data on Kyrgyz political personalities, religious leaders and regional alliances.

A few years before the March 2005 revolution, Informational Centres of Democracy have been established throughout Kyrgyzstan: 3 centres in Osh, 2 in Batken, 3 in Jalalabad, 3 in Naryn, 4 in Issyk-Kul, 2 in Talas, and 1 in Chui. The Independent Publishing House “Centre for Supporting Mass Media” – Freedom House was opened. A particular level of activity was noted in the south of the country. Among the externally financed youth organizations there were: “The Young Jurists of the South”, “Oigon, Kyrgyzstan zhashtary!” [“Wake up, the youth of Kyrgyzstan!”], and “The southern centre of young electorate”. Students’ organizations in Bishkek included “Prodvizhenie” [Progress], “Friends”, “Bashat” [“Spring”], “Via honesty – to knowledge”, “Students in Action”, “Together forever”²⁰.

The ruling elites’ attitude towards externally funded civil society establishments in any Central Asian state has been constantly distrustful. In Kyrgyzstan, nevertheless, the state officials let them function more tolerantly. Russian NGOs were practically missing during the 1990s and after 2000, still not much initiative and effort was put into establishing such organisations. At the same time, a newly constructed civil society brand appeared in the Russian and Kazakh public markets - state-funded NGOs. Given the availability of power and financial resources, such structures might develop in Kyrgyzstan as well.

Conclusion

Despite the anticipated westernisation of Kyrgyz political officialdom, the country is becoming more dependent on its closest neighbours’ policy and more widely engaged in joint project with other CIS states, particularly Russia and Kazakhstan. The impact of these states’ policies upon the Kyrgyz society and elites can be considered as extremely substantial. While increasing their investments and trade into/with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia have not enabled Kyrgyzstan to overcome its resource dependency. By constructing and exploiting a certain image of Kyrgyzstan as a poorly developed, unstable regime, other regional ruling elites aim mainly at consolidating and strengthening their domestic powers. Western, and primarily US, policies in the field of education, media and public campaigns have had a more focused and total approach towards generational change in Kyrgyzstan.

Whether the recent decision by Bakiev to remove the US military base from Manas airport near Bishkek would be persistent and does not change shortly is an open question, largely dependent on the Kyrgyz politics’ bargaining game in allying with the Russian (and Kazakh) corporate elites and internal competition for power. Would the growing public discontent with such a decision²¹ influence the bargaining process and whether or not the tactical situation with HIPC (which was first accepted and afterwards rejected by the government) repeats, only time can tell.

¹⁹ Foreign diplomats were also regarded as prominent political figures in Kyrgyzstan: for instance, the US Ambassador in Bishkek Steven Yang was even rated among the 100 leading politicians in the country

²⁰ Knyazev, Gosudarstvennyi perevorot, 20-48

²¹ See, for instance, M. Imanaliev, “Kyrgyzstan – the USA: do we need each other?”, IPP, <http://www.ipp.kg/ru/analysis/743/>

