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Kyrgyzstan: Internal and External Course of Development

ABSTRACT

After collapse of the Soviet Union Central Asia (CA) was not in the focus of academic society and big geopolitical players, Kyrgyzstan not being an exception. But today Russia is back to CA through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Kyrgyzstan is a member of CSTO and is going to join the EEU. Therefore it is worth of broader analysis. This study tried to understand specifics of Kyrgyz internal and external course of development. It found that internal political process in Kyrgyzstan used to be very problematic. The country suffered a lot from two revolutions, caused by the authoritarian “family rule” of Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev. After that Kyrgyzstan decided to change its system of government from presidential to parliamentary (or semi-presidential) model. But this experiment did not bring peace and stability, additionally complicated by ethnic tension between Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens. Possible recipe of success – bigger socio-economic responsibility of the government, but it is still not in place. After two people revolts Kyrgyzstan was near to become a “failed state”, but orientation towards strategic partnership with Russia and membership in the EEU can help it to survive politically and economically at the expense of Russian geopolitical ambitions, compensate internal political turbulence by external factor of stability. Moreover, close (also institutional) cooperation with Moscow strengthens systemic power of Kyrgyzstan in its relations with the closest neighbors, such as Uzbekistan (not satisfied with the water policy of Bishkek) and Afghanistan (poses real security threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism to Kyrgyzstan). To sum up, for the moment Kyrgyz internal politics is hardly predictable, also because of the parliamentary experiment, but definite external orientation towards Russia and the EEU creates some basis for stable long term development of the country.

Key words: *Central Asia; Kyrgyzstan; family rule; Tulip Revolution; political instability; authoritarianism; parliamentary experiment; geopolitics; Russia; the Eurasian Economic Union.*

Introduction. Central Asia (CA) as a region still requires more academic attention. After collapse of the Soviet Union Russia lost its interest to it, America was busy in other places of the world and China only started preparation for further expansion to CA.

Actually all Central Asian republics were left on their own, being not prepared for independence. Story of Kyrgyzstan is one of the worst ones. This country tried to become “island of democracy” in CA, but finished with two revolutions, which put Kyrgyzstan to the boarder of “failed state”. But today it is back to big politics, choosing Russia as its main strategic partner and going to become member of the Eurasian Economic Union (the EEU).

Therefore it is worth of deeper analysis, and this study tried to observe, summarize and predict internal and external course of Kyrgyz development. Many experts did that, but mystery of Kyrgyzstan stability is not puzzled out until now, also because CA countries are very specific, little known and hardly understandable for the outside world.

This article wanted to say that the main source of Kyrgyz problems is related to the nature of its political elite, which looks for short term benefit in a zero sum game without taking care of people. But external factor (especially that of Russia) is also important, because it can strengthen stability of Kyrgyzstan and help its leaders to put the country on the path of mobilization development. Still it is unclear if today’s Kyrgyz government uses its chances to success.

Internal Politics of Kyrgyzstan: From Revolution to Mobilization?

After gaining independence Kyrgyzstan tried to follow international advise in its development, has been notable for its struggle to develop a pluralist polity and free market. Therefore it was even called “island of democracy” in Central Asia (Anderson, 1999). But soon members of Askar Akaev family understood that open and transparent political system is not useful for them, because it is an obstacle for self enrichment. In the end of the last decade of the XXth century personalistic authoritarian tendency started to dominate in Kyrgyzstan, and shortly tradition of “family rule” was established. But as the practice showed, it was not strong enough to keep the power, and the time of revolutions came. Their consequences are still a challenge for the country to overcome.

From Revolution to More Revolution

Political and economic system of Kyrgyzstan is characterized by the clear South-North clan division. To stay stable it must be balanced. Akaev was representative of the North, but as it was mentioned above he was more interested in strengthening the rule of his family, not of his clan. Therefore, when regime faced serious social challenges trying to stay in power, not only southern, but also northern clan groups did not support Akaev, and he had to leave. As Konstantin Syroezhkin summarized: “Finally, it must be noted that presidential family’s power monopoly and her control of the economy became a serious cause of the protest both in the South and the North. Akaev’s relatives controlled almost all profitable business in Kyrgyzstan” (Pavlovskii, 2005).

At the same time “Tulip Revolution” was not classics of “color revolution”. For example, the role of criminal gangs was evident in it. They had been plundering Bishkek for several days, they stayed powerful after revolution and are still very influential.

Besides, people revolt in Kyrgyzstan created a crucial precedent – it destroyed the cult of power not only in the country but in Central Asia as a whole (that is why Islam Karimov reacted so hard in Andijan). In other words, before “Tulip Revolution” people in the region believed that their

rulers were untouchable, but after it they saw they can overthrow the government they did not like rather easily (Akaev left his position without big blood, what possibly was the only positive moment in that story).

When Kurmanbek Bakiev from the South came to power, social expectations were very high. But he made the same mistake Akaev did. Bakiev created his own “family rule”. There even was a joke in Kyrgyzstan that only son of the president Maksim had been working day and night because he controlled almost all profitable business in the country. Kyrgyz people (also criminal gangs) recalled that the power of government is not granted and changed it once again. As president of Russia Vladimir Putin summed up: “When President Bakiev was going to power, he had been criticizing deposed President Askar Akaev for nepotism. It seems to me now that Mr. Bakiev stepped on the same rake” (V. Putin: K. Bakiev steps on the same rake A. Akaev did, 2010). Bakiev did not want to leave without fight, but violence only played against him and made people angry even more.

Finally, events in Osh demonstrated that ethnic Kyrgyz-Uzbek tension is a real threat to the statehood of Kyrgyzstan and can put the country to the border of civil war and state disintegration. Of course, it should be noted that acceleration of this problem depends strongly on the wish of different interest groups to escalate situation in order to get some political dividends. The saddest thing is that these groups do not fully realize possible consequences of their ethnic power games, and the same conclusion relates to Kyrgyz elite politics in general.

Parliamentary Experiment

After long period of political instability Kyrgyz political elite decided that it is high time to change something in the governmental system of the country, and new Constitution was adopted. Very accurate valuation of the document was presented by Charles Recknagel: “But if the constitution’s intention to limit presidential power seems clear and welcome, the new charter does not create a fully parliamentary system as the alternative. Rather, it tries to balance presidential and legislative power in a way that even the constitution’s authors have trouble naming” (Recknagel, 2010).

New Kyrgyz Constitution has many disputable moments, but it anyway created new legal framework of the political process in Kyrgyzstan. Still this new order did not bring peace and stability to the country because of several reasons. First, like any other post-soviet country Kyrgyzstan never had tradition of true parliamentarism or semi-presidentialism. Therefore, negative aspects of this governmental system became evident in the state at once. Parliamentary democracy with multiparty system requires politics of compromise Kyrgyz parties are not ready for. They imagine politics like a zero-sum game for influence and resources (besides, it is difficult to expect other view from old generation of politicians, produced by the degraded soviet system). In time of strict (authoritarian) presidential rule this game was controlled by Akaev and Bakiev. Parliamentary experiment weakened this control and created conditions for even bigger chaos. Accordingly, it is no surprise that after constitutional reform 2010 parliamentary coalition in Kyrgyzstan have already collapsed several times.

Secondly, *de jure* and *de facto* situation is not the same. President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambaev tries to consolidate his power despite legal requirements, and instability in the parliament only helps him to do that. As Baktybek Beshimov and Ryskeldi Satke note: “Certainly the new leader of the republic—first as prime minister and then as fourth president – Almazbek Atambayev has spared no effort to convey his commitment to democracy. Yet, like his predecessors, Atambayev has sought to extend his political power, strengthening control over lucrative businesses and persecuting his opponents. Overcoming the old authoritarian traditions has proven challenging. Today, factional infighting for power among the provincial clans and political regionalism continue to set the agenda for this small nation” (Beshimov, 2014). In other words, historical tradition of individualistic rule still determines Kyrgyz political process.

Mission Possible

Situation can be changed, and institutional framework is not the main problem (for instance presidential rule in Russia or Kazakhstan proves to be able to guarantee more or less stable and prosperous development of the country). It can be stated that the problem of (in)stability of CA countries – also of Kyrgyzstan – is mainly dependent on the dynamics of the relationship between their governments and the most powerful interest groups (clans). To be precise – on the willingness of both sides to cooperate and be more socio-economically responsible to the people.

For now thinking of Kyrgyz elite is still dominated by two principles – greediness (plunder as much as you can) and fear (plunder as fast as you can, because you may lose your power anytime), not to speak about its reluctance to take care of the people. Kazakhstan as a CA country shows different example.

“Social contract” correlates there with economic progress and relative political liberalization, and therefore can be regarded as a clear instance of the balance of interests between the government (“family”), the clans and the society. A huge role in this case belongs to the president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev. He understood the advantages of the “social pact” and, using a strategy of compromises and repression (when needed), was able to convince all the major interest groups (despite the fact that not all of them support him in principle) that, seeking to maximize their benefits (what President’s “family” also does), they must also keep in mind the needs of ordinary people of the state. Thus, a relatively strong base (especially, in comparison to Kazakhstan’s neighbors in CA region) for stable and successful development of the country was created.

At the same time it is worth to note, that such a model correlates well with mobilization way of development (Fonotov, 1993), which is especially actual in the context of hard economic situation of Kyrgyzstan. Correlation points are the following: dominant role of the state, elite and society consolidation, rapid reaction of the system to the existential challenges etc. Of course, mobilization way of development is not the best choice, but in case of nearly “failed states” as a first stage of a transition towards evolutionary and innovative course it seems to be appropriate.

Is Atambaev (Kyrgyzstan in general) ready, powerful and smart enough to create “social contract” and start mobilization development of his country? The main word in this question is “readiness”. Choosing Russia and the EEU as strategic partners gives him two options – option of Kazakhstan (see above) and option of Tajikistan. In other words, Russia’s help can make Atambaev powerful enough to put Kyrgyzstan on the path of long term stability and prosperity, whereas Rahmon uses Moscow support only for consolidation of personal power without active looking for balance in relations with different interest groups (clans) and socio-economic dialogue with society. In other words, solutions of the main Kyrgyz political and economic problems must be found primarily inside the country, but external factor in this case is also important.

Foreign Policy of Kyrgyzstan: From Uncertainty Towards Determination

After collapse of the Soviet Union vacuum of power happened in Central Asia. New independent CA states actually were left on their own in a new world order definitely being not ready for that. Kyrgyzstan was not an exception and went through severe internal challenges, at the same

time trying to balance interests of “big players” (Russia, America, China) in its politics. But it was more an infant, elite benefit oriented game than an effective multipolar foreign course until finally Kyrgyzstan decided to join Russian geoeconomic project – the Eurasian Economic Union. It means that from now Bishkek is in a geopolitical trend of the Eurasian integration.

Forgotten Central Asia

When the Soviet Union stopped existing, the Russian Federation did not have much time and wish to take care of independent CA states. As Galina Maikova writes: “It is well known that at the beginning of independent statehood of the Central Asian republics voluntaristic decisions of the former Russia’s government did everything to alienate them” (Maikova, 2007).

At the same time, America was satisfied with its new role of single world’s superpower. Besides, they faced crisis in Balkans. Therefore, U.S. did not pay much attention to the post-soviet area, and CA was especially hardly comprehensible for Americans because of the specifics of the region. Something the same could be said about the EU politics in Central Asia, which is even more complicated because of lack of the geopolitical subjectivity of the European Union. Perhaps the only tangible interest America and Europe showed in CA (except of strengthening of its new independent states against Russia) were its energy resources. But they managed just Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, i.e. any Trans-Caspian project was implemented (and still is not). And again it was not a problem for the West because of the peripheral importance of CA for it.

China after the end of Soviet Empire started from observing economic and political situation in Central Asia. Also before entering region seriously it had to change its image there, because historically CA people had been extremely suspicious of Chinese in comparison to Russians. Finally, always being chary of getting involved in any conflict of interests China from the very beginning of its Central Asian “journey” did not want to provoke Russia’s dissatisfaction with the rush for influence in its “backcourt”. As Vitalii Borovoi resumes: “First half of the 1990s became a preparation period during which Beijing did not have clear strategy and limited itself to the establishment of basic diplomatic contacts, regional trade development and gathering of information” (Borovoi, 2007).

At that time Kyrgyzstan as all its neighbors had been trying to consolidate shaky statehood and waiting for someone big to come and take care of its strategic future once again. It did not have much of gas and oil like Kazakhstan what could make it attractive for foreign investment and it did not experience civil war like Tajikistan what made Russia to interfere and become its guarantor of stability. But 9/11 and Putin’s appearance in Kremlin changed situation of forgotten Kyrgyzstan dramatically.

Russia Against U.S. in Manas

Soon after September 11th America started its operation in Afghanistan and established its military base in *Manas* airport. Putin had been trying to make Russia closer to the West at that time and was ready for some strategic compromises. Therefore, Russia supported American military appearance in Kyrgyzstan (and Uzbekistan) in the framework of the global fight against terrorism.

But then “Tulip Revolution” happened. It is popular to say (especially in Russia) that all “color revolutions” are planned in Washington and implemented by American agents. Despite the fact that causes of 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan were primarily internal and U.S. role in them – episodic, Moscow decided it was American operation once again.

Russia was shocked by “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, lost that game and actually did not know how to respond properly in Bishkek. As Martha Brill Olcott writes, increased cooperation between Russia and Kyrgyzstan on questions of internal security was designed to help shape the country into a “guided” democracy, to teach its elite how to make more skillful use of threatened force and political intimidation and how to shape political reforms to create illusion of participation, but “Akayev received bad political advice from his Russian advisers, and even with extra training, Kyrgyzstan’s security forces proved unreliable in crowd control” (Olcott, 2005).

Finally, Kyrgyz President decided to leave the country and Moscow had to deal with his successor Bakiev. Imagining that this is visibly U.S. fault, Kremlin (which at that time had already decided to reconsolidate post-soviet area as its sphere of influence) tried to kick out Americans from *Manas*. But new regime in Bishkek was too greedy to lose money from base rent and shadow schemes around it. To regain the initiative Russia promised Kyrgyzstan big credit, but Bakiev, seeking to sit on two chairs, just changed the name of the American base to “transit center”. As a result, when another revolution happened in April 2010 he did not get Moscow support.

New Kyrgyzstan President Atambaev decided to finish sham multipolar foreign policy, actually based on short-sheet benefit for ruling elite, and chose Russia (the EEU) as the main strategic partner for future development. Americans had to leave.

Self-Preservation Instinct and Geopolitical Spirit

Several reasons why Kyrgyzstan refused tear strategy could be mentioned. First, Tashkent still tries to play balance game, but differently from Bishkek it has economic and political strength reserve to do this. After two devastating revolutions Kyrgyzstan is politically weak with economy in very poor condition. In fact “center” hardly controls periphery, and state urgently needs at least foreign guarantor of stability, also in face of Afghanistan threat (like in Tajikistan).

Of course, Russia is not an altruistic partner. Therefore, it required to close American base in *Manas* and prolong Russian military base in Kant rent, Kyrgyzstan membership in the EEU, “Gazprom” dominant position in Kyrgyz energy sector etc. But new state leadership understood that Moscow is ready to pay for loyalty.¹ In other words, Bishkek expects to solve its economic problems with the help of Russia and protect itself from another revolution in the long run, because Moscow will be just forced to safe loyal regime in the framework of the EEU in order to keep stable the whole Union (for this task it has Collective Security Treaty Organization).

There could be a question: “Kazakhstan entered the EEU and now faces economic problems. Is there a guarantee that Kyrgyzstan will be more successful?” Answer is very simple – situation in Kyrgyzstan is so bad that it can not become worse because of state’s membership in the EEU.

Second, Timur Toktonaliev wrote for IWPR: “Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambaev has made clear he believes that joining Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia in the Customs Union will reduce his country’s dependence on its neighbours. But analysts say that however frustrated the Kyrgyz government might be with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, it would be short-sighted to try to use Customs Union to turn away from them” (Toktonaliev, 2014).

¹ In August 2014 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia is going to invest 500 mln. USD to Kyrgyz economy (huge sum for Kyrgyzstan) in order to harmonize it with the economy of the Customs Union (Miliukova, Netroba, Zabavina, 2014).

In this context it could be said that Kyrgyzstan membership in the EEU tangibly strengthens institutional power of Kyrgyzstan and effectively used can smooth, not complicate its relations with the closest neighbors. Russia as a mediator is a good option, and soviet times, when Moscow was able to manage regional competition, prove this truth. To say more, the EEU membership will facilitate Kyrgyz economic and political dialogue with China (also in Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Kyrgyzstan is interested in Chinese investment, re-export of its goods and becoming an important link in a “New Silk Road”, but it is well known that economic policy of China is very tough, and Russia’s back can help Bishkek better ensure national interests.

To sum up: “Republic has slightly stabilized its position, getting perspective of infrastructure development at the expense of China and new loans / grants from the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, also because of the progress in integration to the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (...). In the context of the deficit of resources there is still a high level of internal and external risks” (Minchenko E., Petrov K., Kazantsev A., & Murashkin N., 2015).

Finally, Kyrgyzstan example shows that Eurasian geopolitical spirit in Central Asia dominates anyway. Kazakhstan became member of the EEU because of geopolitical orientation of Nazarbaev, which correlates with geopolitical gravitation of the country. In case of Kyrgyzstan geopolitical gravitation correlates with simple self-preservation instinct of the ruling elite, but the result is the same. If Tajikistan, where self-preservation factor also dominates, also becomes member of the EEU, it could be said that geopolitical gravitation and broader – Eurasian geopolitical spirit – is core element, which presupposes Eurasian integration.

Conclusion. Today Kyrgyzstan is still a country with high level of internal political risks and weak economy, what is the result of the authoritarian “family rule” of Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev, which produced two people revolts. At the same time, country has latent ethnic Kyrgyz-Uzbek tension, and events in Osh put Kyrgyzstan to the border of civil war and state disintegration. Finally, for a long time Bishkek had been trying to play the game of two chairs with Russia and America, and none of them supported Bakiev in April 2010. Now Kyrgyzstan decided to choose Moscow and the EEU as the main strategic partners, hoping to survive politically and economically at the expense of Russian geopolitical ambitions, compensate internal political turbulence by external factor of stability. Still it can be stated that the problem of (in)stability of CA countries (also of Kyrgyzstan) is primarily of internal nature and is mainly dependent on the dynamics of the relationship between their governments and the most powerful interest groups (clans). To be precise – on their willingness to cooperate and be more socio-economically responsible to the people, which only can put the unbalanced country on the mobilization path of development.

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