

Testimony to the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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**“The Island of Instability:
Understanding Kyrgyzstan’s Tumultuous Path Since Independence”**

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for inviting me here to testify about the ways to address ethnic tensions in my native country Kyrgyzstan.

In early June 1990, when the initial ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks erupted in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, I was a 13 year-old boy in an Uzbek-speaking town just outside Osh. I saw crowds of furious young men, armed with sticks, stones, and incendiary weapons, attack each other. I also witnessed firsthand how Soviet troops rolled through the Osh streets and brutally suppressed the riots that claimed the lives of more than 200 people. Exactly twenty years later, when the violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks broke out again, I was a scholar conducting research on ethnic relations in Osh. As the conflict unfolded with a lightning speed, I saw the same furious and unruly crowds of young men; but this time they were armed with firearms, automatic machine-guns, grenades, RPGs and even tanks. Unlike the first clash, no Soviet, Russian or any outside troops intervened to stop the rampaging crowds. As a result, more than 400 people died during the conflict that lasted several days.

During those hot June days in 2010, I was among thousands of other desperate ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz who were displaced by the conflict. I and my relatives fled to the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border near Osh. Uzbek border guards allowed about 100 thousand Uzbek refugees, mainly women and children, to cross the border. I was denied entry. Hunted by my own fellow citizens and unwanted by co-ethnics in Uzbekistan, I, like many Kyrgyz citizens, cherished hopes that Russia, Kazakhstan and other countries such as China would intervene to stop the violence. Such hopes were dashed when Kyrgyzstan was told to deal with the conflict on its own. Suddenly, a country where interests of many countries overlap, became no one’s backyard.

Now, when the dust of the conflict is settling down somewhat, we can make sense of what has happened. Some claim that the historical hatred between the two communities precipitated the violence. Others say that economic disparities triggered the conflict. Still others suggest that various extremist groups, local and foreign, had a hand in the violence. In this testimony, I do not deny the relevance of these views. But I would argue that understanding last year’s violence in Kyrgyzstan requires us to have a more nuanced and holistic view of Kyrgyzstan’s past and present. The violent regime change and bloody ethnic clashes in 2010 are symptoms of a set of broader and long-standing challenges, or “chronic ailments,” that have afflicted Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors since independence. If these ailments are not treated adequately, turmoil will continue in Kyrgyzstan.

So what are these ailments? Twenty years ago, when Kyrgyzstan gained independence, its leaders and citizens, like their counterparts in other former Soviet republics, grappled with four key transition challenges that fall under the general rubrics of politics, economy, society and foreign policy. In the political realm, Kyrgyz leaders debated whether they should divide powers more evenly among themselves or preserve Soviet-era institutions of rule. In the economic sphere, leaders were divided into those who promoted liberal market reforms and those who stood for preserving Soviet-era social benefits system. The third challenge was related to the identity of the new state — should Kyrgyz citizens build a multi-ethnic republic or a state ruled by the titular ethnic group (like its neighbors such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan)? The final challenge was related to the country's foreign policy – should Kyrgyzstan pursue an independent multi-vector policy or stick even more closely to Moscow?

After two decades of wavering between these alternatives, two revolutions and two bloody inter-ethnic conflicts – the symptoms of unresolved transition ailments— Kyrgyz citizens are grappling with the same challenges again. It is as if the country has come full circle to start at square one in 2010. In this testimony, I seek to answer two questions. Why did this happen? Why there has been no progress? And second, where might things end?

Before proceeding to these questions, it is important to remind us why we should care about this small mountainous country of five million people, the size of South Dakota, located in the remote part of the world. Kyrgyzstan is important because of several factors. The first factor is its geographic location: the country borders China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (the last two have borders with Afghanistan). Kyrgyzstan is also a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and numerous other regional inter-state structures. Second, the country is important because of geopolitical considerations. It is the only country in the world that hosts an American and Russian military bases. The U.S.-operated Manas Transit Center plays a key role in the so-called Northern Distribution Network. Third, there is an ideological consideration. Kyrgyzstan was briefly the darling of the West, serving as a model of democratic development for other countries in the region. Following the establishment of a parliamentary system, President Barack Obama's administration has given an indication that Kyrgyzstan can serve as a model for some Middle Eastern states as they chart their post-authoritarian courses. For Russia and other Commonwealth republics, especially Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and chronic instability is a model of what not to follow.

Explaining Kyrgyzstan's tumultuous path since independence

So what explains Kyrgyzstan's tumultuous trajectory since independence? Various answers are given. Some observers emphasize the role of history. They claim that the country's nomadic roots and illiberal Soviet past have made the country prone to authoritarianism and political volatility. Other observers cite economic factors, suggesting that a low supply of natural resources has prevented Kyrgyzstan to turn into an economically prosperous and politically stable country. There are also claims that Kyrgyzstan is located in a "bad authoritarian neighborhood" – a condition that is not conducive to developing a democracy.

All of these explanations are relevant and they may not exclude each other. But today, I will emphasize the role of leadership or lack of it as the major source of Kyrgyzstan's troubles. The major flaw of the Kyrgyz leaders was that they failed to find lasting solutions or effective

treatments for the four key challenges, or chronic ailments, outlined above. To be more precise, Kyrgyz leaders have continuously undermined stability by engaging in systematic alteration of political rules whenever such rules did not suit their immediate political preferences. More importantly, Kyrgyz leaders lacked a realization of their historic roles as the founding fathers of the nation and the responsibility that flows from such realization.

Let me describe in detail the way in which Kyrgyz leaders failed to respond to the key transitional challenges. I will start with Kyrgyzstan's first president Askar Akaev who ruled the country from 1990 to 2005. Akaev's initial responses to the challenges of early independence established him as a genuine democratic leader in the West. He liberalized the political space, creating a system in which power was shared more or less evenly between the President, Parliament, and regional authorities through the single-mandate district electoral system. Akaev also liberalized the economy, ushering in massive privatization of state enterprises. In foreign policy, he pursued a balanced and cautious policy toward large powers and neighbors. Eager to quell ethnic tensions, especially after the June 1990 clash in Osh, Akaev promoted a civic idea of Kyrgyzstan as a "common home" for all ethnic groups. This policy, while widely unpopular with the ethnic Kyrgyz majority, sought to give ethnic minority groups a sense of ownership and the Akaev administration much needed votes during elections.

Political and economic liberalization under Akaev had lasting consequences on the country's future trajectory. The economic liberalization policy offered new opportunities for Kyrgyz residents to gain capital outside state institutions and led to the formation of new wealthy class. Seeking to gain seats in Parliament, affluent individuals built ties with the poor in communities across the country by sharing their wealth and by helping community members to solve their day-to-day problems. The political liberalization widened the room for political contestation, allowing Parliament, mass media outlets, and NGOs to assume prominent political roles.

Amidst a rise in opposition activity in the early 2000s, especially after the establishment of the U.S. airbase in Manas, President Akaev began backtracking on his initial liberalizing path, however. His efforts to create a tamed parliament and ensure a managed transition of political power to his hand-picked successor threatened interests of the wealthy class and low-income communities in which the affluent elites invested. As a result, the powerful alliance of the wealthy class and low-income communities resulted in the Tulip Revolution in 2005 and brought to power Kyrgyzstan's second President – Kurmanbek Bakiev – one of the leaders of the opposition movement.

Having seized power in March 2005, Bakiev promised to introduce wide-reaching democratic changes. Nevertheless, by the end of his first term, he undid many of Akaev's initial policies that aimed at fostering harmonious inter-ethnic relations, ensuring balance of power among government branches, and maintaining a cautious foreign policy course. Bakiev relied on the security apparatus and the tamed judiciary which were controlled by his family members to suppress ethnic minorities, religious dissidents and political opponents. In a major change, the October 2007 constitution replaced single district mandate electoral system with party lists, allowing Bakiev's party *Ak-Jol* to win the December 2007 parliamentary election in a landslide with the help of the pliant government bureaucracy and weak judiciary. Having bolstered

domestic control, Bakiev began to pursue a very dangerous foreign policy that pitted Moscow against Washington and other large powers.

Bakiev's policies had some grave consequences for his own regime. First, with the alteration of the Akaev-era constitution and centralization of political power in Bakiev's hands, affluent politicians lost the incentive to share their wealth with and provide surrogate public goods to communities across the country which were already reeling from the gradual decline in the delivery of public goods by the state. Second, Bakiev's neglect of inter-ethnic problems emboldened various chauvinistic groups and deepened inter-ethnic tension. Third, Bishkek's indeterminate foreign policy course, as demonstrated by Bakiev's 2009 turnaround on the Manas airbase, alienated Bakiev's allies in Moscow. In February 2009, days after receiving a large financial package from Moscow, Bishkek decided to close the airbase. But when the U.S. government agreed to increase rent payment in June that year, Bishkek allowed the base to stay albeit under a changed status. And finally, Bakiev's decision to increase utility tariffs, a measure designed to improve cash flows to the state coffers, deepened discontent among Kyrgyz residents, especially in the Northern regions where winter lasts several months.

In March 2005, it was an alliance of the wealthy and the poor that toppled an authoritarian regime. In April 2010, it was a combination of economic sanctions from Russia and protests by poor and unemployed residents in such northern towns as Naryn and Talas which had culminated in a violent ouster of an authoritarian ruler. Bakiev's political demise and the concomitant collapse of the country's security services opened a floodgate of pent-up ethnic tension created by years of biased government policy and prepared the ground for the inter-ethnic clashes in June 2010.

The opposition factions that formed the interim government after Bakiev's demise were not prepared to assume power. Lacking broad legitimacy and being driven by the survival instinct in an almost anarchic environment, the new authorities engaged in a number of chaotic and populist measures such as the demonization of Bakiev and his acolytes and reversal of punitive utility tariffs imposed by the previous regime.

Although the new leaders recognized the strategic need to address the long-standing transitional dilemmas, they lacked resources and a sense of strategic direction. As a result, they got the sequencing of actions wrong. Despite various signals that simmering ethnic conflict was ready to explode in South Kyrgyzstan, the new Kyrgyz leaders preoccupied themselves with the division of political powers in Bishkek. As a result, when the ethnic conflict broke out in Osh in early June 2010, the authorities were utterly unprepared to deal with its consequences. Authorities in Bishkek had little if no control over government security services, let alone rampaging crowds. When their pleas for security assistance from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization were rejected, officials in Bishkek seemed to let the conflict to take its own course.

The bloody conflict ended largely because the blockade of the conflict zones reduced the supply of food; and the rampaging crowds turned into hordes of looters. Rather than deal with the consequences of the conflict in a more effective way, the new leaders' attention again shifted to the distribution of political power. The referendum held days after the violent events, when wounds were still fresh, endorsed the parliamentary system. The December 2010 parliamentary

elections enabled five parties, representing a variety of ideological persuasions, to occupy seats in Parliament.

Where might things end?

Kyrgyzstan's new leaders have made attempts to resolve the long-standing dilemmas, but such efforts have been half-hearted and ineffective. Let's consider the first challenge – the division of powers. The new system contains a number of ambiguities regarding the distribution of political powers; and it is now under pressure from various corners. According to recent polls, a majority of Kyrgyz citizens support a strong presidential system akin to Russia. Decision-makers in Moscow have also been openly critical of Kyrgyzstan's transition to a parliamentary republic. Some influential politicians in Parliament appear eager to change the constitution again.

Kyrgyz authorities' response to the second challenge – forming a new national identity – has been largely ineffective. One widespread assumption among citizens is that the June events firmly established the preeminence of the ethnic Kyrgyz in the political and economic spheres. The new authorities appear to be unwilling to challenge such assumptions in a resolute way, thus allowing chauvinistic and anti-Semitic groups and media outlets to disseminate freely materials containing bigotry. Authorities have done little work in the area of reconciliation. Rather than deal with the legacy of the violence impartially and resolutely, according to one observer, the "provisional government's Soviet-style instinct was to try and sweep the unpleasant events under the rug and put forward a mantra of "friendship of the peoples."" This strategy is flawed and it resembles the one adopted by Kyrgyz authorities after the June 1990 violence.

There are serious flaws in government's responses to the third chronic problem – ailing economy. Kyrgyz officials' are engaging in economic populism as exemplified by the recent raises in public salaries and reversal of utility prices even at a time when the country is facing financial troubles (Kyrgyz debt has reached \$2,5 billion, budget deficit is nearly 10 percent of the GDP) and its donors are hesitant to issue new loans. Leaders in Bishkek are turning a deaf ear to warnings about looming crisis while maintaining an illusion that foreign lenders will save the country.

Finally, the Kyrgyz authorities are again following the footsteps of their predecessors in pursuing an indeterminate foreign policy, which led to the ouster of their predecessor. Relations with neighbors who are concerned about pernicious effects from instability in Kyrgyzstan are still tense. Recent unlawful attacks against Russian businesses in Kyrgyzstan have aggravated Bishkek's relations with Moscow. Some decision-makers in the Kremlin also suspect Bishkek of pursuing an exceedingly pro-Western policy. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan's Western partners are growing concerned about plans by some politicians to change the current system and restore a super-presidential arrangement.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan finds itself at a crossroads again. The violent events in 2010 have taken their toll, but they also provide a new window of opportunity to learn the mistakes of the past and settle on a constructive path. The key lesson is that Kyrgyz leaders and citizens must have a very painful but much needed debate about their fourfold transition challenges before settling down on potential solutions. These solutions must include concerns of all citizens. If Kyrgyz leaders and

citizens will succeed in finding such long-lasting solutions and will make every effort to stick to them, their country can become a model for stability and integration of ethnic groups for Central Asia and CIS. If they will fail, Kyrgyzstanis will set themselves again on the path to a violent revolution and a deadly inter-ethnic conflict.