

Russia's position on the events in Kyrgyzstan (April – June 2010)

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Russia was the first state in the world to de facto recognise the regime change in Kyrgyzstan that took place on 7 April 2010. This recognition, along with a previous campaign by the Russian media against the then President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, has given rise to suspicion that the events of April were provoked by Russia. However, it seems no more than reasonable to say that Russia provided some inspiration and lobbying in that direction. Russia offered support to the new Kyrgyz government almost immediately, albeit conditionally. Russia's relations with Roza Otunbayeva's government have been changing in nature; they are currently much cooler than they had been immediately after the coup. There are many indications that this change was a reaction to the extension of the lease agreement for the American military base in the Manas airport. At the same time, Moscow remains in contact with the political rivals to the current regime, which suggests that the Kremlin is preparing for different developments, and does not regard the current crisis as having been fully resolved.

Despite the interim government's plea for help, Russia refused to undertake military intervention in southern Kyrgyzstan, which plunged into ethnic unrest in June. This shows that Russia is wary of being dragged into a long-standing and bloody conflict in the region, which could entail considerable expenses and jeopardise Russia's authority. It should be expected that after the October parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan, Russia will return to its plans to establish a second military base in this country (in addition to the Kant base) to reinforce its dominant position in the region. This is the first time that Russia has had a real chance to play a stabilising role in the CIS area. How Russia copes with this challenge may decide its position in post-Soviet Central Asia – and in a wider context, its relations with NATO, the USA and China.

Conditions of Russian policy in Kyrgyzstan

Russia's key strategic objective in the Central Asia seems to be to monopolise the region's security system, preferably under the aegis of a regional organisation (the Collective Security Treaty Organisation [CSTO]) and to curb the influence and ambitions of other players, especially the USA and China. The Kremlin would only accept these players' involvement if it had agreed upon this. One such example could be the functioning of the American base in the Manas airport near Bishkek¹, which the US uses for the needs of military operation in Afghanistan; Russia has repeatedly protested against the base's operation, even though it improves the security situation of both the region and Russia itself.

Kyrgyzstan, located in a crucial trouble spot in Central Asia, is favourably disposed towards Russia, and therefore plays the role of a 'foothold' in this part of the CIS, from which Russia can keep or even extend its influence in the region (Armenia plays a similar role in Russian policy in the South Caucasus).

Moscow's policy towards Kyrgyzstan employs three kinds of instruments: military, political, and economic. Russia has an air base in Kant at its disposal; this was opened on 22 September 2003, and about 1,500 soldiers are currently stationed there. Formally, the base is part of the CSTO's Rapid Reaction Force, but in fact it is under control of and fully integrated with the Russian defence system. Russia also controls a communications hub in Chaldovar (near the city of Kara-Balta), and a test base for anti-submarine weapons located in Koisary, Issyk-Kul district.

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(such as the extension of the lease agreement with the United States concerning the Manas base), could hardly have been called 'pro-Western'; his aim was always to manoeuvre between the USA and Russia, and play their contradictions off against each other. In doing so, he pursued not only the objectives of the Kyrgyz state, but also his own material interests. Currently, the most pro-Western politician is Ismail Isakov, the defence minister of the interim government, whose son is studying in a US military academy². The Kyrgyz public is also rather favourably inclined towards Russia, both due to its apparent fondness for the Russian culture and language (Russian enjoys the status of an 'official language'; according to estimates made in 2004, as much as 30% of the population use it in their everyday life³) and to the policy undertaken by the Russian authorities (Kyrgyz nationals who wish to apply for Russian citizenship need not give up Kyrgyz citizenship; they can travel into Russia in search of work, etc.). This state of affairs still prevails, despite some cases of anti-Russian sentiments stirred up by ethnically-motivated violence in Russia, which has been aimed at the Kyrgyz among other nations⁴. Since the 'tulip revolution' of 2005, Moscow has maintained contacts with all the major political and social groups in Kyrgyzstan. It also runs a consulate in Osh, along with the embassy in Bishkek⁵.

Russia has also tried to strengthen its leverage on the Kyrgyz economy⁶, especially in the energy (hydroelectric power plants), gas, oil and military industries. RAO UES Rossii and Gazprom have demonstrated the greatest interest in cooperating with Kyrgyzstan. In 2009, Moscow attempted to take over the majority stake of the Dastan arms factory.

Moscow has considerable leverage on Kyrgyzstan's politicians. None of the major political groups in that country has displayed any anti-Russian orientation. Even the ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, whose decisions Moscow treated as hostile

¹ The base was established in autumn 2001. It is used as a transit air freight hub for transporting soldiers and military equipment to Afghanistan.

² *Eurasia Intelligence Report*, no 2, 7 July 2010, p. 13.

³ Alexandr Arefyev, 'Skolko ludę goryvat i budut gorovit po-russki?' *Demoskop Weekly*, no. 251/252, August 2006.

⁴ Agata Dubas, 'The menace of a 'brown' Russia. Ethnically motivated xenophobia – symptoms, causes and prospects for the future.' *OSW Studies*, no 29, November 2008, p. 19; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2008-11-15/menace-a-brown-russia-ethnically-motivated-xenophobia-symptoms-cau>

⁵ The Russian Consul-General in Osh was Mukhammadzhan Ziganshin, a Tatar born in Uzbekistan, who knew Russian, Uzbek, Tatar, English, and French. He supervised the consulate from December 2007 to the moment of his sudden death of a heart attack on 16 May 2010; http://tt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhamadzhan_Ziganshin, accessed on 9 July 2010 and <http://www.dipkurier.narod.ru/dip97/gen.htm>; accessed on 9 July 2010).

⁶ Wojciech Konończuk, 'Russia uses the crisis to build influence in CIS countries', *Eastweek* no 6 (156), 11 February 2009, www.osw.waw.pl

Russian-Kyrgyz relations under Kurmanbek Bakiyev

After the ‘tulip revolution’ of 2005, Russia hoped that Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s government would take its own expectations into account. During his first visit to Moscow, Bakiyev called Russia ‘a key, strategic ally for Bishkek’. He also indicated that he was not inclined to keep the USA military base in Manas, although no actions to revoke the lease agreement were taken during his time in office.

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In all likelihood, the Kyrgyz government was not prepared to lose the fee for the port’s usage (over US\$17 million annually) or the lucrative contracts for all sorts of supplies to the base, especially fuels (which were provided by companies linked to the Bakiyev clan). On 3 February 2009, Bakiyev announced that his government had decided to close down the base. This decision was doubtless forced upon him by Russia; almost immediately, an announcement was made that Russia would grant Kyrgyzstan US\$2.15 billion of financial support (including a non-refundable grant of US\$150 million and a loan of US\$300 million on very favourable terms). These two sums (totalling US\$450 million) were indeed transferred to Kyrgyzstan. The remaining loan of US\$1.7 billion was designated for the construction of the Kambar Ata 1 hydro power plant. It should be added that back in 2004, the Kyrgyz government had already signed a memorandum with the Russian energy monopoly RAO UES Rossii concerning the completion of two hydroelectric power plants on the Naryn river, Kambar Ata 1 and Kambar Ata 2, in which the Russian company had pledged to invest US\$2 billion. However, it was not clear whether Russia had indeed intended to engage in these projects or was just exerting pressure on Uzbekistan (which was anxious about losing some of its water resources if these two hydro power plants, together with other hydroelectric power projects in Tajikistan, were implemented). In general terms, Moscow was interested in taking control over the whole water management system in the region. In this context, the financial assistance for Kyrgyzstan was commonly interpreted as a ‘fee’ for closing down the Manas base. On 29 May 2009, an agreement was signed extending the Russian lease of the military base in Kant to 49 years⁷. However, despite his earlier announcements, on 7 July 2009 Kurmanbek Bakiyev extended his country’s lease agreement with the USA for the Manas base, using the stratagem of renaming the base as the ‘Transit Centre’. The lease fee was raised to more than US\$60 million⁸. Moscow expressed its ‘disillusionment’, and in response made attempts to establish a second military base in Kyrgyzstan; Russian deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin visited Bishkek to discuss this issue. Russia signalled that Osh was an optimal location for the base⁹. The draft agreement concerning the deployment was signed by Presidents Bakiyev and Medvedev on 1 August 2009, and the final agreement was to have been concluded before 1 November¹⁰. However, the Kyrgyz side dragged the talks out, instead offering a site in the Batken district¹¹ as a possible location. Finally, on the eve of the term’s expiry, Bakiyev announced that Batken would be the site of a Kyrgyz military training centre, built in cooperation with the USA, who pledged to invest \$5.5 million¹².

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⁷ The lease can be extended by a further 25 years (<http://www.altair.com.pl/start-2987>), accessed on 19 July 2010.

⁸ See Konrad Zasztowt, ‘Rywalizacja Rosji i NATO w Azji Środkowej’, in *Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe*, 11/2009, p. 132-134 (publication in Polish). Washington also pledged to grant the Kyrgyz government a \$117 million non-refundable loan.

⁹ ‘Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses’, International Crisis Group, *Asia Briefing* no 102, Bishkek-Brussels, 27 April 2010, p. 12.

¹⁰ <http://www.altair.com.pl/start-3266>, accessed on 19 July 2010.

¹¹ ‘Kyrgyzstan: A Hollow Regime Collapses’, *op.cit.*

¹² KABAR news agency, 23 October 2009. Several months later, it was announced that the centre would specialise in anti-terror training.

¹³ Marek Matusiak, ‘Kyrgyzstan’s president overthrown’, *Eastweek* 14 (207), 14 April 2010, www.osw.waw.pl

¹⁴ The media were accused of being ‘partial’ by President Bakiyev himself (<http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/kirghizia/1266427.html>; accessed on 20 July 2010). On 7 April 2010, Kyrgyz Prime Minister Daniar Usenov asked the Russian ambassador Valentin Vlasov to influence the Russian media ‘which publish information [...] that is not conducive to strengthening the friendly relations between the two countries’. Vlasov replied that these media had been providing ‘balanced and objective’ information concerning the situation in Kyrgyzstan (Interfax, 7 April 2010).

During the weeks that preceded the overthrow of the government, Kyrgyz opposition politicians paid a number of visits to Moscow. The two most ‘frequent flyers’ were Temirbek Sariyev (a businessman, former Member of Parliament, and the deputy prime minister in the subsequent interim government) and Felix Kulov (a police general and prime minister after the ‘tulip revolution’, but who has remained outside the government since the recent coup). On most occasions they met with officials from the Presidential Administration, but on the eve of the April coup, Sariyev was received by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin; upon his return to Bishkek, he announced that the Kyrgyz opposition enjoyed Putin’s support¹⁵.

Russia's reaction to the coup and its attitude towards the new Kyrgyz government

Despite some gestures of goodwill towards the interim government, just a few days after the coup, Moscow hinted that further support would not be unconditional, and would depend on how much Bishkek complied with Russian interests. For Moscow, the Otunbayeva government's attitude towards the American military presence in Manas was treated as a litmus test of her political intentions.

coup, on 8 April, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called Roza Otunbayeva, then acting Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan’s interim government. Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed that Putin spoke to Otunbayeva as a Prime Minister¹⁸. Immediately after the coup, members of the interim government paid several visits to Moscow¹⁹. The Kremlin’s involvement was also visible in how the ousted Kurmanbek Bakiyev was persuaded to formally step down as president and leave the country. Bakiyev left Kyrgyzstan on 15 April, supported by a unit of Russian special forces (spetsnaz); he first headed to Kazakhstan, where he signed a letter of resignation, and then went on to Belarus. President Medvedev confirmed that he had been personally involved in this affair²⁰. Russia also sent humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, on 26 April Russia deported Moldomusa Kongantiyev, the interior minister of Bakiyev’s government, who had been badly wounded during riots in Talas, but had succeeded in leaving Kyrgyzstan. The deportation was quite dramatic: Kongantiyev was taken to the airport straight from his hospital bed in Moscow, where he was being treated for injuries he had suffered during the riots. Despite some gestures of goodwill towards the interim government, just a few days after the coup, Moscow hinted that further support would not be unconditional, and would depend on how much Bishkek complied with Russian interests. For Moscow, the Otunbayeva government’s attitude towards the American military presence in Manas was treated as a litmus test of her political intentions. The absence of explicit declarations concerning Manas was met with disappointment in Moscow. The problem was discussed by the Russian and American presidents during their meeting in Prague as early as 8 April. A ‘high-ranking Russian diplomat’ disclosed that the Manas issue had divided Russia and USA, and added: ‘There can be only one military base in Kyrgyzstan – the Russian one’²¹. However on 11 April, Otunbayeva confirmed in a telephone conversation with the American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

¹⁵ Maja Narbut, ‘Kirgizia przed trzecią rewolucją’. *Rzeczpospolita* daily, 22 May 2010 (publication in Polish).

¹⁶ On 7 April 2010, the deputy minister of foreign affairs Grigory Karasin disclaimed responsibility for the coup (http://www.newsru.com/russia/07apr2010/no_participation.html; accessed on 9 July 2010); Russia’s involvement in the Kyrgyz events was also disclaimed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (<http://www.regnum.ru/news/fd-abroad/kirghizia/1271336.html>); accessed on 20 July 2010).

¹⁷ <http://www.newsru.com/arch/russia/07apr2010/mdvkrgz.html>; accessed on 9 July 2010.

¹⁸ Interfax, 8 April 2010.

¹⁹ Deputy Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev visited Moscow on 8-12 April, Deputy Prime Minister Temirbek Sariyev on 22 April, and Prime Minister Roza Otunbayeva on 9 May.

²⁰ <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/7479>; accessed on 9 July 2010.

²¹ http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2010/04/08_a_3349220.shtml; accessed on 9 July 2010.

that Kyrgyzstan was determined to respect previous agreements, and on 16 April the deputy prime minister of the interim government, Omurbek Tekebayev, announced that the agreement with the USA would be extended by another year, because the parliament – the only state body which is authorised to revoke it – will only be elected in autumn 2010. This was certainly far from satisfactory to Moscow, and proved that the new Kyrgyz government was not at Moscow's complete disposal.

In its attempt to discipline the new government, Russia reached for an argument which it had exploited during the war with Georgia in August 2008: the protection of the Russian minority. On 15 April, the Russian foreign ministry expressed its concern over reports that the Russian population were falling victim to assaults and burglary²². Moscow also maintained

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contacts with representatives of all the major political groups in Kyrgyzstan, including Felix Kulov and Askar Akayev, the latter being the former president of Kyrgyzstan, who was toppled in 2005 and is currently resident in Russia. On 1 July, a Coalition of Democratic Forces of Kyrgyzstan was established in Moscow, including the Kyrgyz National Revolutionary Committee under its leader Shadykan Jakypbekov. Both of these groups are almost unknown, but judging by their press release (in which Roza Otubayeva's authority was deemed 'usurpation'), the activists of this coalition would be ready to form a new government under Russian patronage²³.

On 13 April, President Medvedev appointed General Vladimir Rushailo (a former Russian interior minister, and the Executive Secretary of the CIS) as special presidential envoy for relations with Kyrgyzstan. Rushailo was tasked with representing Moscow in its contacts with Kyrgyzstan's government and opposition, and carrying out consultations concerning the developments and possible stabilisation. Rushailo's nomination proves that the Kremlin is determined to activate its policy towards Bishkek, among other ways by trying to influence the Kyrgyz government's staffing policy, so that it serves Moscow's interests. One such example is the activity undertaken by Nikolai Bordyuzha, the Secretary General of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Bordyuzha suggested that Bishkek appoint Miroslav Niyazov and Adakhan Madumarov, former secretaries of the Kyrgyz Security Council, as Kyrgyz representatives in talks with the CSTO. Meanwhile these two politicians, who have extensive contacts in Russia, are potential rivals to the interim government in its struggle for power²⁴. Another politician regarded as 'Russia's man' is Kubatbek Baibolov, who was a KGB officer of long standing, working for Soviet intelligence. On 12 June, Baibolov was appointed first deputy head of Kyrgyzstan's State Security Service, and on 7 July he was named minister of the interior. Following the constitutional referendum of 27 June, whereby Otunbayeva was authorized as temporary president, Russia (along with other states) formally recognised the new Kyrgyz government. It will acquire full legitimacy after the parliamentary elections scheduled for this autumn.

Russia's position on the riots in southern Kyrgyzstan

On 10 June ethnic clashes broke out between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in Osh, Jalalabad and neighbouring regions in southern Kyrgyzstan, with a toll of several hundred victims. On 12 June, acting president Otunbayeva appealed to Russia for a military intervention, but Moscow refused, stressing its unwillingness to meddle in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs, and restricting itself to strengthening the base in Kant; immediately after the coup, on 8 April, 150 additional soldiers were sent to protect this base. On the same day, the Kyrgyz deputy

²² ITAR-TASS, 19 April 2010.

²³ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1300179.html>; accessed on 9 July 2010.

²⁴ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1293794.html>; accessed on 9 July 2010.

prime minister Omurbek Tekebayev mentioned the possibility of a Russian military intervention in Kyrgyzstan 'should the situation in the country worsen'. Meanwhile, Russian public opinion has opposed intervention from the very start. In a poll conducted by VCIOM and published on 25 April, 60% of respondents opposed Russia's active participation in the Kyrgyz events²⁵. Russia demonstrated a similar reaction to another appeal by Otunbayeva for support in protecting strategic facilities, including dams and barrages. On 14 June, while the riots were still ongoing, Bishkek was promised logistical, military and technical assistance (excluding arms supplies) during a special meeting of the secretaries of the CSTO states' security councils, although direct intervention was ruled out. On 24 June, President Medvedev confirmed that Russia was not planning to send peace forces to Kyrgyzstan, although he mentioned that the CSTO could send a stabilisation contingent there, if need be.

²⁵ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1277514.html>; accessed on 9 July 2010.

Summary and attempted forecast

While reacting to the crisis in Kyrgyzstan, Moscow has also taken three perspectives into consideration: bilateral, regional and global. There is no evidence that Russia was directly involved in the coup, although it could have been said to have inspired it (for example, the accusations against Bakiyev aired on Russian TV – widely watched in Kyrgyzstan – undoubtedly fuelled the protests). Also there could have been some Russian lobbying to have President Bakiyev toppled, as can be proved by the Kyrgyz opposition members' visits to Moscow, and Temirbek Sariyev's statement that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin supported the Kyrgyz opposition. Moscow's current key objective is to stabilise

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the internal political situation in Kyrgyzstan and strengthen the government in Bishkek so that they are able to control the situation in the country, because it is only thus that they can be a credible partner for Moscow. This approach has been reflected in President Medvedev's statements: on the eve of the constitutional referendum and immediately after it, he stressed the weakness and even the atrophy of the

Kyrgyz state, and expressed his concern about the possibility of it splitting into two parts²⁶. These statements were doubtlessly meant to 'discipline' Otunbayeva's government. It should be expected that Russia will continue with its behind-the-scenes promotion of 'suitable' Kyrgyz politicians, especially in the light of approaching parliamentary elections. Due to this, the election campaign may see Kyrgyz politicians curry favour with Moscow. Following the constitutional referendum of 27 June, the leading politicians of Otunbayeva's camp – the deputy prime ministers Azimbek Beknazarov, Almazbek Atambayev, Temirbek Sariyev and Omurbek Tekebayev – stepped down from their posts and announced their intention to run in the parliamentary elections.

From the regional perspective, the prospect of a military intervention in Kyrgyzstan is of great importance. The decision not to send CSTO peace corps to southern Kyrgyzstan in June may have resulted from a lack of willpower on Russia's part, caused by its anxiety of being dragged into a long-standing and bloody ethnic conflict which could entail considerable expenses and jeopardise Russia's authority. Another reason could have been resistance from Russia's partners, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Belarus. Uzbekistan opposed Russia's direct military intervention, though on the other hand it fears that Kyrgyz instability will spill over into the region and Kyrgyzstan itself will turn into a 'black hole', taken

²⁶ President Medvedev's statements during his visit to the USA and Canada on 24 and 28 June 2010 (<http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/8163> and <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/8182>; accessed on 9 July 2010). In the second statement, the president referred to the constitutional referendum in Kyrgyzstan and expressed his anxiety over the decision to strengthen the parliament at the expense of presidential authority; in his opinion, this would not be conducive to the stability and controllability of the Kyrgyz state.

over by Islamic radicals and drug smugglers. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is anxious about Uzbekistan strengthening its position in the region.

In this context, it seems possible that within the next few months a CSTO stabilisation mission will be sent to southern Kyrgyzstan. Such a mission would make it possible for Russia to strengthen its leverage over the region, as Russia would be the dominant partner in that mission. Russia's decision to become involved would be welcomed by its international partners, including the USA and China, who were hoping (in vain) that Moscow would intervene in Kyrgyzstan during the June riots. If the stabilisation mission fails, Russia will find it much harder to conduct a successful policy in the region, but if it is successful, it would be the

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beginning of the construction of a new security architecture, one element of which would be a new Russian military base in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Russia's key strategic objective in the region, namely the monopolisation of the collective security system in post-Soviet Central Asia, requires a global perspective.

Moscow is seeking the strongest possible mandate for its actions. One of the actions meant to strengthen this mandate was the signing on 18 March 2010 of a declaration of cooperation between the CSTO and the United Nations. This agreement signifies that the CSTO is capable of making a contribution to guaranteeing security on the global level. The document also mentions political cooperation and a common fight against terror, drug smuggling and organised crime (such provisions have not usually been included in similar documents signed between the UN and regional organisations). It appears important that President Medvedev chose to announce certain decisions concerning Kyrgyzstan during his meetings with President Barack Obama in Prague and during his visits to the USA and Canada. Presumably, Russia made an offer to the US presenting Russia's terms for cooperation in the region. In a Russian-preferred security system, Moscow would establish itself in a position of hegemony. An American presence (such as further use of the Manas base) would be possible, albeit on Russian terms; the stationing of US forces would have to be consulted with Russia directly. As for China, Moscow expects it to be 'benevolently neutral' and to cooperate within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In return, Russia seems ready to accept some of China's economic interests in the region.