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# Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding and Responding to Nationalism

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper considers ways of averting further violence in southern Kyrgyzstan following the inter-ethnic clashes of June 2010. Distrust between Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities remains high, with many segments of Kyrgyz society fearful of the intentions of the Uzbeks, and suspicious of the role of foreign organizations and agencies. A corrupt legal system has meant that perpetrators have largely gone unpunished and the vulnerable Uzbek minority has routinely been mistreated. The paper contends that in order to avert future violence it is necessary to get to grips with the trajectory of nationalism within the country.

Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan has been misunderstood by foreign analysts. It should not be understood as an inherently negative force, but rather an ambiguous ideology that divides and excludes while also being inseparable from the rise of modern democracy and welfare states. Nationalist politics can be inclusive or exclusionary of minorities. As the doctrine that posits that a nation should have its own territory, and that this territorial nation-state should in some way reflect the character of the nation, it is the ideology of the world divided into nation-states into which independent Kyrgyzstan was 'born' in 1991. This ideology informs the state-led nation-building projects that all Central Asian governments embarked on in 1991. Nationalism is thus, for the time being, an inescapable context to politics in the republic. The paper's key analytical question is thus 'how can Kyrgyz nationalism/nation building become more inclusive?'

The paper suggests that the historical trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism is marked by a profound insecurity about the very survival of the country, and the fear that Kyrgyzstan is primarily endangered by the weak state of the Kyrgyz language, internal disunity, and geopolitical threats. A historical imagination that sees classical Kyrgyz political forms derived from a nomadic past posits the solution to these challenges as 'unity' and 'concordance.' According to this vision, Uzbeks (or at least their elites) are seen to represent a fundamental existential threat to the state, because they are perceived to be aligned to external powers and not investing in the national project of unity.

The paper examines how comprehending nationalism in this way makes the policy responses of central and municipal authorities understandable and rational in their own terms. These responses – including the building of statues of Kyrgyz national heroes around Osh, a drive to 'Kyrgyzify' social life, and the fostering of 'tolerance' between grass-root communities – are grounded in the idea that inter-ethnic peace in Osh is to be guaranteed through unity by creating loyalty to a strong state with a clear Kyrgyz character and ideology.

Next the paper examines the responses of international actors, who have generally failed to understand both the trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism and its role in conditioning responses to the Osh violence, and the role of patronage networks in influencing career pathways and political change. As a result two problematic assumptions have shaped policy-making. The first is that nationalism is a pathology that can be isolated to a few extreme individuals and then be eradicated by a central government that is willing and able to do so. The second is that it is feasible at the moment to promote and foster the civic reintegration of Uzbeks as actively participating citizens of an inclusive state. By misdiagnosing the problem, the international community has proposed solutions that are either unrealistic or, by fuelling a backlash against the Uzbeks, dangerously counter-productive.

The paper concludes by arguing that a just peace in southern Kyrgyzstan will not be possible until the insecurities at the heart of contemporary Kyrgyz nationalism are addressed. To be sure, this will not occur without massive reform of the police and judicial system, so that justice is seen to be done, and increasing economic opportunities for all. However even if these occur, the Uzbek minority will not be safe until the Kyrgyz themselves feel that Kyrgyzstan is safe. The key recommendations therefore are:

- In policies and rhetoric, Kyrgyz politicians and civil society should promote the development of inclusive, civic forms of nation-building.
- Kyrgyz society should energetically pursue the goal of making Kyrgyz the primary language of public life and inter-ethnic communication. At the same time, the secondary roles of Russian and Uzbek should be protected within given spheres.

- Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek communities should aim at full Kyrgyz fluency, and should redesign the Uzbek schooling system to equip young people for life in Kyrgyzstan.
- The central government in Bishkek and the municipal authorities in Osh and other parts of southern Kyrgyzstan should involve Uzbeks and other minorities in the project of nation-building to address concerns about national unity.
- The Kyrgyz government should prioritize the resolution of territorial disputes and border management issues with neighbours in order to allay fears that the country's territorial integrity is threatened.
- Recognizing the importance of the cross-border dimension, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan should work together to ensure the flourishing and protection of Uzbek and Kyrgyz minorities in their respective sections of the Ferghana Valley.
- Kyrgyzstan should continue to articulate the commitment to a future vision of Osh and the country as shared space. Although participation as equal citizens is impossible for Uzbeks at the moment, it is a constitutional ideal that needs upholding until conditions change so that its attainment is possible. The protection of ethnic minority citizens from the extremes of nationalism is a crucial responsibility.
- The international community should adopt conflict-sensitive practices and support Kyrgyzstan in the above goals.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In June 2010 the Kyrgyzstani city of Osh was engulfed in four days of horrendous violence between its two main ethnic groups, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Before the security forces re-established order, the city witnessed savage killings, torture and sexual assault, widespread destruction of residential, commercial and state property, mass lootings, and significant population displacements. Both parties suffered and committed grotesque crimes, with Kyrgyz government figures reporting that 295 Uzbeks and 123 Kyrgyz were killed.<sup>1</sup> The violence occurred in a power vacuum following the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010. However in spite of more than a dozen reports and investigations, there is no broad agreement on the causes of what happened.

Although the immediate triggers of the violence are contested, the subsequent aftermath is clearer. The Kyrgyz state, municipal authorities and international actors have worked hard to reconstruct the urban fabric of the city and to foster a particular version of inter-ethnic tolerance and harmony. At the same time, the Uzbek population, deprived of influential leaders, has been routinely subject to forms of violence including kidnapping, extortion, robbery, torture, questionable trials, and intimidation by state forces and criminal gangs – with near impunity. The systematic denial of justice to Uzbeks undermines the ability of Kyrgyz leaders to secure the ‘unity’ (*birimdik*) and ‘harmony’ (*yntymak*) that they have identified as being imperative to avert further violence. Similarly, many Kyrgyz residents of Osh live in fear of further violence.

The failure to agree on the causes of the June 2010 violence, the ongoing injustices experienced by Osh Uzbeks and the ability of most of those responsible for crimes to escape consequences and in many cases to benefit financially from their actions, mean that further violence is distinctly possible and that, should it occur, it could potentially be more destructive than before.

This paper is not another attempt to explain what happened. It is worth noting that the 2010 violence in Osh was displaced from the front pages of the British press by the publication of the Saville inquiry’s report on the 1969 ‘Bloody Sunday’ killings in Belfast. It took Lord Saville 12 years, eight volumes, and £195 million to report authoritatively on the killing of 14 people four decades earlier in a country where the legal system works comparatively well. The truth about Osh will emerge, but it may take as long or longer. Due to proximity to the events, ongoing tension and abuse, and nationalist feeling in Kyrgyzstan, the domestic political climate is no more amenable to such a process now than British society was in 1969.

Rather, this paper focuses on the importance of understanding and responding to Kyrgyz nationalism for the aversion of future violence. Many observers regard Kyrgyz nationalism as an aggressive, inauthentic and atavistic force responsible for the maladies of Osh. In such accounts, Kyrgyz fears of Uzbek threats to the integrity of the state are depicted as irrational and illogical impediments to the creation of a progressive state that affords minorities full civic rights. Likewise, this perspective views Kyrgyz nationalism as a mechanism that allows Kyrgyz society to dismiss foreign criticism of its treatment of Uzbeks and to avoid taking seriously the conclusions and suggestions of foreign organizations. Such an approach is understandable but unhelpful. This paper rather regards nationalism as an inescapable and ambiguous element of a world order divided into *nation-states*. It is the ideology that a nation (usually defined by such features as shared language, culture and history) should have a territorial state that expresses its character and defends its interests. It is thus the ideology of the world system of nation-states into which independent Kyrgyzstan was ‘born,’ and the ideology that informs state-led nation-building in the country. As elsewhere in the world, it has the potential either to help Kyrgyzstan develop as a democratic, inclusive and just society, or to become exclusive and hostile to minorities. Nationalism is thus, for the time being, an inescapable context to politics in the country: it needs to be worked with and around, not dismissed or ignored. The paper’s key analytical question is thus ‘how can Kyrgyz nationalism/nation-building become more inclusive?’

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<sup>1</sup> Out of 442 total deaths. The report continued that of 545 prosecutions, 400 were ethnic Uzbeks and 133 Kyrgyz. Asker Sultanov, ‘Kyrgyz ethnic clashes prompted by Bakiyevs, drug criminals’, Central Asia Online, 8 June 2012. [http://centralasiaonline.com/en\\_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2012/06/08/newsbrief-03](http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2012/06/08/newsbrief-03).

It is therefore crucial to delineate some of the primary features of contemporary Kyrgyz nationalism and to show their relevance to the Osh context. Central to this is the uneasy transplant of ideas about the nation as a tribal unity into the context of a modern, territorial, multi-ethnic state. Important too is the Soviet experience in mediating this transition. The paper argues that, unlike state nationalist projects in neighbouring Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, this historical trajectory has produced a modern Kyrgyz nationalism that is fundamentally insecure and deeply fearful about the ability of the country to survive as a viable entity.

This enables us to understand responses to the violence both inside and outside Kyrgyzstan. International donors and actors have generally failed to grasp the concerns and significance of Kyrgyz nationalism. As a result, elements of the international effort at reconstruction have played into the hands of populist politicians. Likewise, many of the activities and recommendations of international organizations for political reform have been badly judged, and created a backlash against the Uzbek minority. By not properly getting to grips with Kyrgyz nationalism, international responses to the Osh violence have exacerbated its more aggressive tendencies and caused a further deterioration in conditions for the city's Uzbeks.

In view of these issues, the paper recommends a series of steps that the Kyrgyz government and municipal authorities, Kyrgyz civil society, the Uzbek minority, the government of Uzbekistan, and international donors and actors, can take to help avert future violence by working to limit the negative effects of exclusionary Kyrgyz nationalism, promote inclusive nationalism, and thus further its potential to enhance the common good. Although a just peace will not be possible until there has been wholesale reform of the police and judiciary, and greater provision of economic opportunity, those alone will not guarantee a secure future for Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan.

This paper is based upon research carried over five weeks in Osh (and to a lesser extent Bishkek) in October-December 2011. This consisted of interviews with senior and lower ranking Kyrgyz and Uzbek politicians, activists and NGO staff, educationalists, local and national state officials, journalists, artists, as well as representatives of international organizations working in the republic. It also comprised ethnographic study of social relations within the city, and an analysis of media coverage.<sup>2</sup> It builds upon ongoing research into inter-ethnic relations in Osh conducted since 1995. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 summarizes the violence of June 2010 and its aftermath. Section 3 outlines the trajectory and concerns of Kyrgyz nationalism as a project that is profoundly insecure about the country's survival. Section 4 explains how this accounts for Kyrgyz responses to the June violence, and section 5 details how it frames Kyrgyz national and municipal policy responses. Section 6 argues that international responses have failed to grasp Kyrgyz nationalism and, misdiagnosing the problem, have proposed solutions that are unrealistic, irrelevant, and even counter-productive. Finally, section 7 presents a series of policy recommendations for preserving a viable and ultimately thriving Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan by getting to grips with the questions raised by Kyrgyz nationalism.

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<sup>2</sup> There are, inevitably, limitations with this methodology. My understanding of 'Kyrgyz' opinions about the Osh issue is drawn from ethnography in southern Kyrgyzstan and textual analysis of northern Kyrgyzstani political actors and journalists, but lacks a northern Kyrgyz ethnographic dimension. Likewise my lack of Russian language skills reduces my ability to move more widely in Kyrgyz circles.

## 2. VIOLENCE IN OSH: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

The Kyrgyzstani city of Osh, lying alongside the border with Uzbekistan at the eastern end of the Ferghana Valley, has been home to a large and mixed population of predominantly Uzbek and Kyrgyz residents for many decades.<sup>3</sup> Being able to draw upon a rich repertoire of shared culture and history, the city's and country's leaders have generally ensured that longstanding tensions between the two groups over the sharing of urban space have been managed well.

On two occasions in particular has this not been the case: June 1990<sup>4</sup> and June 2010. In each case an unstable national context precipitated the eruption of massive inter-communal violence that left hundreds dead and injured. To be sure, factors such as Kyrgyz fears about Uzbeks seeking autonomy, recent Uzbek experiences of injustice and prejudice, economic hardship, and inept government action played a role. However it is important to remember that these are ongoing structural factors that do not inevitably or usually lead to riots in themselves: national crisis productive of a power vacuum is the common factor.

Many commentators predicted that after the 1990 violence the region in general and Kyrgyzstan in particular was likely to be marked by widespread ethno-nationalist violence. These predictions were based not on empirical research but rather on uncritical invocation of 'ethnicity' as an independent and supremely powerful social force. Such musings left little room for politics, in particular the politics of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, tried to dampen ethnic nationalism and foster a sense of inclusive, civic nationalism that scripted the state as 'the common home' of all groups. He placed inter-ethnic harmony at the centre of his exposition of the 'Seven principles of Manas.' One of Akaev's favourite slogans was 'Kyrgyzstan is our common home', illustrated on a thousand roadside billboards with a smiling president amidst a group of Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and others in national dress. He founded the Assembly of the Peoples as a talking shop for minority issues. These were not empty gestures. Akaev promoted the founding of Osh's Kyrgyz-Uzbek University, and the creation of Osh State University's Uzbek Humanities-Pedagogical Faculty by the merger of the Uzbek philology and pedagogy departments.<sup>6</sup> These demonstrated a concrete commitment by the state to reproduce an educated Uzbek class within Kyrgyzstan, in particular to staff the numerous Uzbek-language schools in the south of the country and ensure the viability of Uzbek intellectual life in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>7</sup> These new institutions also produced Uzbek-language textbooks for Kyrgyzstani Uzbek schools, a vital move as those from Uzbekistan were unsuitable because of their Latin script and their thick veneer of state patriotism.<sup>8</sup> Akaev forged alliances with Uzbek politicians in Osh,<sup>9</sup> such as Mamasaidov, the influential Osh MP who was also rector of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University. Numerous Uzbeks I spoke to in the 1990s and early 2000s praised Akaev and said their life in Kyrgyzstan was preferable to life in Uzbekistan. Politically, Akaev's main rivals were a loose alliance of populist Kyrgyz opposition parliamentarians and their sympathetic press that had strong roots in the south and was openly suspicious of the Uzbek minority.<sup>10</sup> Akaev's suppression of these populists (sometimes by undemocratic means), and his ties with Osh Uzbeks, were important reasons why violence did not recur during his watch. These populist nationalists swept to power in the anti-Akaev coup of 2005, putting a new politics of nationalism in place that eroded the position of Uzbeks (who now lacked close ties to Bishkek) and set the scene for the violence of 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of this paper, by 'Osh' is meant populations both bounded within the formal administrative extent of the city, and contiguous settlements functionally part of it yet formally within the boundaries of the neighbouring district of Kora-Suu.

<sup>4</sup> See Asankanov, Abilbek (1996), 'Ethnic conflict in the Osh region in summer 1990: Reasons and lessons', in Rupesinghe, Kumar and Tishkov, Valery (eds), *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World*. (Paris, United Nations University), pp. 116-24.

<sup>5</sup> Heathershaw, John and Megoran, Nick (2011), 'Contesting danger: a new agenda for policy and scholarship on Central Asia', *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No 3.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, anonymous Uzbek academic, Osh 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Yodgor Jalilov, interviewed in *O'sh Sadosi*, 28 June 2001

<sup>8</sup> 'Ona darsliklar xususida' [Regarding textbooks in the mother tongue], *O'sh Sadosi*, 25 September 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Fumagalli, Matteo (2007), 'Informal ethnopolitics and local authority figures in Osh, Kyrgyzstan', *Ethnopolitics*, 6/2, pp. 211-33.

<sup>10</sup> Megoran, Nick (2004), 'The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999-2000', *Political Geography*, Vol. 23, No 6.



Although not by any means the sole explanatory variable, nationalism is an important factor in understanding why violence did or did not occur in the past, and whether it will again. Kyrgyz nationalism should not be seen as either an inherently negative or positive force; it is an inescapable background to understanding Kyrgyzstan, and is a force that politicians can use for good or ill. This paper finds current trends in Kyrgyz nationalism alarming, and argues that they increase the potential for further outbreaks of violence that are potentially more destructive than that in 2010.

## Aftermath of June 2010 violence

In the aftermath of the June 2010 violence, many Kyrgyz reacted angrily to both the Uzbek populations of southern Kyrgyzstan, and outside reporting on the events. The veteran queen of Uzbek pop, Uzbekistani singer Yulduz Usmonova, released a provocative song, 'To the Kyrgyz', asking them, 'Have you no conscience? Ah, you've sold yourselves cheaply!'<sup>11</sup> A series of Kyrgyz artists quickly wrote and released responses, including Talant Anarbaev's 'Yulduz' and Altynbek Boroshov's acerbic 'To the Uzbeks of Osh.' Siymik Beshikaev's 'Tor Talashpa', more commonly known as 'A reply to Yulduz', angrily rejected her accusations, in turn accusing the Osh Uzbeks that 'Coming from outside, growing wealthy, becoming greedy, they shed the first blood.'<sup>12</sup>

Kyrgyz reactions reflected a double sense of grievance – at the behaviour of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, and at the way the outside world represented Kyrgyz responses to this behaviour. Some Kyrgyz media, politicians and activists were angered by foreign news portrayals of Kyrgyz as savage perpetrators of atrocities against Uzbeks, leading eventually to the blocking of internet access to the pro-Uzbek media web-site Ferghana.ru.<sup>13</sup> In December 2010 the newspaper *Jangy Agym* carried an article about the arrest of terrorist suspects and a bomb explosion in Bishkek, allegedly carried out by a 'national separatist group' on the orders of the exiled 'leaders of the Uzbek separatist movement.' The headline spoke volumes about how the newspaper understood the plight of the country: 'There are lots of "interested parties", but Kyrgyzstan is alone.'<sup>14</sup> A Kyrgyz government agreement with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in July 2010 to send an international 'police advisory group' to help better train the police with crowd control techniques was met with demonstrations by Kyrgyz nationalists in the south of the country. They interpreted it as a Western attempt to ally with a separatist minority in order to break up the state, just as the West had supposedly done in Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>15</sup>

The perceived external threat was linked to internal ones. An article in the newspaper *Alibi* in late June 2010 moved seamlessly from invective against Uzbekistan for allegedly attempting to seize Kyrgyz border territory, to invective against the Uzbek minority within Kyrgyzstan for neither learning Kyrgyz nor loyally identifying with the state.<sup>16</sup> Osh Uzbeks, the article said, have 'bakeries, canteens, cafes, restaurants, kindergartens, schools, universities, a theatre, television stations, newspapers [...] countless mosques and madrassas' plus adequate elected representation in the village, regional and national councils/parliaments. 'What else do they need?' asked the author. In contrast, the article claimed, 'in Uzbekistan there isn't a single Kyrgyz-language kindergarten, school or university, nor is there even one Kyrgyz person in the Uzbek parliament or government.' Thus whereas Uzbekistan is attempting to 'completely eliminate' the idea of a Kyrgyz ethnic group there, concluded the article, the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan have a strong desire for autonomy and are

<sup>11</sup> Yulduz Osmonova, 'Hechmi yo'qki ichingda vijdong?/ Ah, Qirg'izim sotilding arzon', *Qirg'izlarga*, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> 'Syrktan kochyp keliship/baylik menen mal jiydy/Achs kozdygy ashynyp/Algach bashtap kan kiydy.' The song's title literally means 'don't contend for the tor', the seat of honour given to the most important person present at a meal. It thereby implies that the Uzbeks have come as guests to Kyrgyzstan, yet are abusing hospitality by trying to be top-dog.

<sup>13</sup> For example Zulpukar Sapanov 'Kyrgyzdar – tozokto kiyg'lo' [Burn in hell, Kyrgyz], *Alibi*, Vol. 39, No 104, 6 July 2010, p. 2. This article claimed that the Uzbek media was portraying the Kyrgyz in a bad light, making lots of unsubstantiated claims about atrocities they committed, etc. In particular the website Ferghana.ru came in for sharp criticism. The Kyrgyz government later blocked access to this site, claiming it was inciting inter-ethnic hatred.

<sup>14</sup> "'Kyzykkandat" kop, Kyrgyzdar jalgyz', *Jangy Agym*, No 22, 3 December 2010, pp. 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Timur Toktonaliev, 'Kyrgyzstan divided over foreign police presence', Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia*, No 627, 31 August 2010. See discussion in section 5.

<sup>16</sup> Mashakbay Rakhmankulov, 'Otkondu tapancha menen atsan... Ozubek ketip oz kaldyk' [If you could shoot the past with a gun... Uzbeks left, we stayed by ourselves], *Alibi*, Vol 35, No 100, 22 June 2010, p. 2.

trying to make Uzbek equal to Russian as a state language. Only Kyrgyz speakers should be allowed to work in state jobs, suggested the author.

This sentiment, that Uzbeks had had it too good for too long and that Kyrgyz generosity allowed them to become disloyal, received widespread expression. In the immediate months following the violence, Uzbeks routinely reported verbal and physical abuse on the streets. There have been numerous reports of arbitrary arrest, kidnapping, extortion, and theft of property by police and groups of ‘heavies’ (*sportsmen*).<sup>17</sup> Other forms of exclusion have been commonplace, for example forcing Uzbeks to quit their positions in state employment, and the seizure or closure of Uzbek-language television stations. Official government figures shows that while Uzbeks 67 per cent of those killed were Uzbeks, 73 per cent of those prosecuted in relation to the events were Uzbek.<sup>18</sup> Far from being a recourse to justice, many Uzbeks see the legal system as a chief tool of their abuse. This has been acknowledged by Ombudsman Tursubek Akun, who is reported to have said that in southern Kyrgyzstan residential and commercial property belonging to ethnic minorities is taken by force, and that the ‘Uzbek population undergoes tortures and biased attitude from judicial authorities. Cases’ consideration is being protracted; judges and law enforcement officers commit lawlessness.<sup>19</sup> As a result, many Uzbek men fled or were sent abroad by families for their own protection.<sup>20</sup>

Education has been severely affected. The Kyrgyz-Uzbek University, created in the 1990s to allow higher education in the Uzbek language, changed its name to the Osh State Social University. (However, as a state university’s name change can only be sanctioned by the Ministry of Education in Bishkek, this was a *de facto* rather than *de jure* change). In some departments most Uzbek staff have quit or been forced out, and many Uzbek students have stopped studying. Likewise Osh State University’s Uzbek Pedagogical-Humanities Faculty has been downgraded to a department of the university’s philology faculty, with many staff leaving and a significant proportion of students abandoning their studies. In 2011 the of Osh, Melis Myrzakmatov, reportedly announced his desire to see an end to most Uzbek-language schooling in the city; and neighbouring Kara-Suu’s regional educational administration instructed all Uzbek schools to convert one incoming September class from Uzbek- to Kyrgyz-language instruction.<sup>21</sup>

One must be cautious not to misrepresent this as one-sided. Life for many Kyrgyz in Osh too has deteriorated since the June 2010 violence, with the economy fractured and a fear of Uzbek reprisals affecting their use of public space. Endemic corruption means that relatively poorer Kyrgyz, too, are frequently subject to police and judicial abuse.<sup>22</sup> In June 2012, President Almazbek Atambaev acknowledged that systematic failures in the court system mean that they ‘do not protect the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of citizen.’<sup>23</sup> National and local politicians, although fuelling anti-Uzbek sentiment by their explanations of what happened, have publicly at least striven to promote values of ‘tolerance’ and have stressed that the ‘ordinary people’ are not responsible and that Uzbeks have a future in Kyrgyzstan as near kinsfolk from the same cultural roots. The situation gradually improved into 2011, with Uzbeks becoming more visible again in public space, and finding strategies to tentatively begin re-establishing economic activities. Nonetheless while Kyrgyz

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<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Still Waiting for Justice: One Year on From the Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan’. (London: Amnesty International, 2011). This is corroborated by the author’s observations in Osh, and by numerous informal conversations with non-elites in the city.

<sup>18</sup> Asker Sultanov, ‘Kyrgyz ethnic clashes prompted by Bakiyevs, drug criminals’, Central Asia Online, 8 June 2012, [http://centralasiaonline.com/en\\_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2012/06/08/newsbrief-03](http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2012/06/08/newsbrief-03).

<sup>19</sup> Makhinur Niyazova, ‘Ombudsman: Uzbek population suffers from lawlessness in S. Kyrgyzstan,’ 24.kg, 8 June 2012. <http://eng.24.kg/community/2012/06/08/24655.html>.

<sup>20</sup> It appears to be true that a year afterwards, some of these were returning.

<sup>21</sup> The material in this paragraph is derived from personal observation and interviews with three senior anonymous Uzbek educationalists in Osh in October and November 2011, and some details have been verified by discussion with representatives of branches of the Kyrgyz government.

<sup>22</sup> In November 2010 I asked an activist in the influential Kyrgyz hardline nationalist Ata-Jurt party: ‘Uzbeks say that the police here will arrest them, torture them, demand money, etc. Do you know about this, is it true?’ She replied: ‘After the war, the police probably took revenge on the Uzbeks for what they did to us, for trying to take our country from us. But they do those sorts of things to the Kyrgyz, too, they find an excuse to extort money – they are thugs [*mykaachy*].’

<sup>23</sup> ‘The President of Kyrgyzstan acknowledges that today’s courts as before do not protect the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of citizens,’ 24.kg, 19 2012 <http://eng.24kg.org/community/2012/06/19/24812.html>.



politicians claim that 'peace' has returned to Osh, its Uzbek residents generally feel themselves to be a relatively powerless group that has been denied justice in the wake of a fierce backlash.

### The potential for further violence

For the reasons described above, the sense of bitterness and injustice among Uzbeks is very great, and many Kyrgyz likewise fear that Uzbeks remain disloyal to the state. This situation of mistrust and resentment, combined with a range of other factors, means that the danger of further violence is not inconsiderable.

Following the 1990 violence, the police worked hard to bring perpetrators to justice,<sup>24</sup> and the government moved to reassure the Uzbek population of their place in Kyrgyzstan through, for example, the opening of higher education institutes in the Uzbek language. Following 2010 the opposite happened: in spite of the rhetoric, justice has been routinely denied and opportunities reduced. There is a burning sense of anger that, Amnesty International argues, has been compounded by 'repeated official endorsement of an ethnically biased version of events'.<sup>25</sup> In turn many Kyrgyz feel that the world's media and the 'international community' are against them. Uzbeks also fear further violence because the flight of large numbers of males abroad for safety, and stringent searches for weapons, have reduced the potential ability of Uzbek neighbourhoods to defend themselves.

At the same time, there is a sense that perpetrators have impunity. Many of those who looted shops and homes in June 2010, and who have subsequently forced Uzbeks to sell businesses, homes and property at token prices, or simply taken them by threatening violence, have appeared to benefit from their crimes. There has been a lack of accountability among police and local and national politicians for failing to respond better to the violence and its aftermath. Given this combination of bitterness among victims and impunity among perpetrators, it is possible that future violence would be more intense.

The role of Uzbekistan needs considering in this regard. In June 2010 it did not intervene militarily, but rather sealed its borders – apart from accepting a temporary refugee movement. Subsequently, it did little to pressure the Kyrgyz government for better treatment of Osh's Uzbeks. Although this has been praised in Kyrgyzstan for preventing an inter-state escalation, many Osh Uzbeks hoped that Uzbekistan would intervene on their behalf. Many Kyrgyz feared this would happen, especially given the perceived geopolitical threat of Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan (see below). Indeed, it appears that rumours of an Uzbek military incursion helped stop attacks on Uzbek neighbourhoods. That this did not occur could embolden more sustained attacks in any subsequent violence, particularly if there is no visible change of policy by Uzbekistan towards its co-ethnics in neighbouring states.<sup>26</sup>

But it is not simply that Uzbeks were victims and Kyrgyz perpetrators. Large numbers of Kyrgyz were killed or injured, or lost property, in the June fighting. Many Kyrgyz remain angry at Uzbek atrocities against them in what they believe was an Uzbek plot to separate Osh from Kyrgyzstan, and regard international aid in reconstructing burnt-out Uzbek homes as tantamount to rewarding their disloyalty. Media and politicians have led them to believe that this threat continues. Thus further violence would occur in a context of bitterness on both sides.

Another pertinent factor is experience. Despite rumours and claims to the contrary by both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, there is little concrete evidence of preparation or coordination by either 'side' before the violence began. When it did, strategies of defence (for example, blockading neighbourhoods and armour-plating trucks) and attack (coordinated methods of breaking into neighbourhoods, looting, and the ferrying of males from outside Osh to participate in the fighting) became increasingly organized during the course of the violence. The young Kyrgyz men who came in from

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<sup>24</sup> Tishkov, Valery (1995), "'Don't Kill Me, I'm a Kyrgyz!': An Anthropological Analysis of Violence in the Osh Ethnic Conflict", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 32, No 2.

<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International, 'Still Waiting for Justice', p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Unlike the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, that of Uzbekistan has not actively supported its co-ethnics abroad. See Fumagalli, Matteo (2007), 'Ethnicity, state formation and foreign policy: Uzbekistan and 'Uzbeks abroad'', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No 1.

the villages to participate in the fighting once rumours and news started being transmitted by mobile phones are celebrated by many as saviours of Kyrgyzstan from the Uzbek threat. Given these experiences, such organization may happen more quickly and on a greater scale on a subsequent occasion.

The changing composition of the city's Kyrgyz population might also have a role, albeit a minor one. Since the violence of 2010, many educated, professional, middle-aged Kyrgyz who were raised in the city have migrated to Bishkek or elsewhere. These '*shaardyk kyrgyz*' (urban Kyrgyz), who grew up in a Soviet milieu characterized by close inter-ethnic friendships, feel less comfortable and less safe in a city increasingly populated by recent migrants from mono-ethnic rural areas who have little sense of the city's earlier cosmopolitanism. There are thus fewer Kyrgyz in the city who could play a role in calming tensions.

An important unknown here would be the role of the Kyrgyz security forces. As Paul Brass argues in the context of Indian Muslim-Hindu violence, communal riots (like that in Osh) are produced by precipitating events such as the killing of a prominent public person or an attack on a place of worship: 'One reaction then leads to another, generating a chain, which if not immediately contained will lead to a major conflagration.'<sup>27</sup> Could the security forces stop such a development? On the one hand, Kyrgyzstan has conducted at least three internal investigations, one of which was for the use of the security and police forces. It would be hoped that lessons have been learnt and that the security forces and police would move more quickly to contain violence and block the entrances to the city to turn back young men from rural areas, be better trained in crowd control techniques and be less likely to surrender weapons to groups of young men. However, it is also possible that, under the influence of propaganda in the media and from local politicians, rather than seeing themselves a neutral force between two groups of citizenry, they might understand their primary role as aligning with co-ethnics in defence of the territorial integrity of the state against separatists.

It would be foolish to attempt to predict the course of events in Osh with any certainty. However, on the balance of evidence it is reasonable to conclude that a further incidence of massive Uzbek-Kyrgyz violence in the city in the coming years is a possibility, especially if another power vacuum or national crisis like that of April 2010 should recur. Further violence could be more destructive with greater loss of life and property, and lead to greater refugee flows, than in either 1990 or 2010. Therefore averting such a development should be high on the agendas of the Bishkek and Osh authorities, Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek communities, Uzbekistan, and foreign governments and agencies.

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<sup>27</sup> Brass, Paul (1997), *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 257. See also Brass, Paul (2003), *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (London: University of Washington Press).

### 3. UNDERSTANDING NATIONALISM IN KYRGYZSTAN.

In Kyrgyzstan's 2011 presidential election, a soundbite used by the eventual victor, Almazbek Atambaev was 'don't divide among yourselves!' (*bolynbygylo!*), and the headline slogan of one of his rivals, Kamchybek Tashiev, was 'The nation won't be divided, and the land won't be sold' (*el bolynboit, jer satylbait*). For a competitive election in a country at peace with its neighbours, such prevalence of the fear of disunity might appear odd. However, being deeply resonant of post-nomadic sensibilities, it is the key to understanding contemporary Kyrgyz nationalism and to explaining attitudes to and treatment of the Uzbek minority before and after June 2010. It is also therefore crucial to averting future violence.

The study of nationalism has been one of the staple topics of academic Central Asian studies in the past two decades. Most Western studies have critically engaged with the nation-building projects of the governments of the newly independent republics, faulting them for the inauthenticity of their use of history and their ethnic exclusivity in post-Soviet contexts where many ethnic minorities live.<sup>28</sup> In popular commentary on Kyrgyzstan, 'nationalism' is used as a pejorative term to mean an intolerant, chauvinistic prejudice that Kyrgyzstan belongs primarily to the Kyrgyz, a feeling that has blinded Kyrgyz society to its abuse of Uzbeks and is an impediment to the creation of a progressive state that affords minorities full civic rights.

Drawing on inter-disciplinary scholarship this paper considers nationalism differently, as a political ideology holding that the territorial and national units should be congruent.<sup>29</sup> The *raison d'être* of a nation-state is therefore, in the first place, to express the character and defend the interests of the nation, usually associated with a dominant ethnic group. In Central Asia, this has meant the 'titular' nation: thus state legislation in the Kyrgyz republic has, for example, promoted the use of the Kyrgyz language, given preferential access to citizenship for ethnic Kyrgyz migrating from abroad, required that the president be fluent in Kyrgyz, adopted a flag with explicitly Kyrgyz ethnic symbols on it, and so on. These processes of 'nation-building' are manifestations of the broader ideology of nationalism.

It is mistaken to view such an ideology as essentially chauvinistic. Kyrgyzstan was 'born' into a world of nation-states and, despite the advocacy by a few luminaries, such as author Chyngyz Aytmatov, of a broader Turkestan confederation, it would have been difficult to buck the trend of worldwide decolonization and create a non-national state. Indeed, although nationalism is readily associated with war and strife, it has also been the vehicle for progressive social change. In Europe, the idea that the state was not the monarch's plaything but represented a nation of equal citizens was inextricable from the emergence of democracy and the impetus for social justice through wealth redistribution by taxation and 'public' funding of social goods such as health and education systems. As Leah Greenfield argues, 'nationalism, in short, is the modern culture,' a humanistic worldview based on the principles of popular sovereignty and egalitarianism. By allowing individuals to invest their dignity in their nationality, it creates the idea that tasks such as farming, industry, teaching, art or sport are ennobled by being done 'for the nation.' Likewise, she argues, its principle of equality of national membership means there is nothing strange in the daughter of provincial greengrocer becoming the prime minister of Britain (Margaret Thatcher), or the son of a single mother unhappily remarried to an Arkansas garage mechanic becoming US

<sup>28</sup> See for example Schoeberlein-Engel, John (1994), 'Identity in Central Asia: Construction and Contention in the Conceptions of 'Ozbek', 'Tajik', 'Muslim', 'Samarqandi' and other groups.' PhD. thesis, Harvard University; Akbarzadeh, Shahram (1996), 'Nation-building in Uzbekistan', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No 1; March, Andrew (2002), 'The use and abuse of history: "national ideology" as transcendental object in Islam Karimov's "ideology of national independence"', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No 4.

<sup>29</sup> Stephan Nikolov defines nationalism as a doctrine emerging in the 18th and 19th centuries along with the rise of the nation-state, which 'refers both to doctrines and political movements that maintain that a nation (usually defined in terms of ethnicity or culture) is entitled to a sovereign or at least autonomous political community, rooted in shared history, culture, religion, custom, and common destiny.' Nikolov, Stephan (2008). 'Nationalism and warfare', in Lester Kurtz (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace & Democracy*. 2nd edn (London, Academic Press), p. 1315.

president (Bill Clinton) – neither of which would have been thinkable before nationalism, where aristocratic succession was the norm.<sup>30</sup>

In the parts of the world that Europe colonized, nationalism was a key ideological mobilization for decolonization. A recent academic study claims that among Kyrgyzstani intellectual elites and the general public, national ideology ‘is considered to be a fundamental element of statehood – a means for achieving regime legitimacy and effective state building.’ They regard national ideology as not something to be dismissed, but rather as ‘the idiom in which concepts of freedom, responsibility, and a just social order [...] are formulated and contested.’<sup>31</sup>

Nationalism is thus an inescapable aspect of life in Kyrgyzstan as elsewhere. But it is crucial to acknowledge that there are multiple forms of nationalism, multiple ideologies and strategies of nation-building. Almost all forms place the language and culture of one group – or occasionally two or three – as central to the state-building project: but they vary greatly according to how inclusive or exclusionary they are in their attitude to minorities. Some forms of nationalism enable ethnic minorities to maintain their own cultural, religious and linguistic practices while facilitating their economic, social and political participation in the state as equals. Other forms are less accommodating of difference, less willing to accept the effective participation of minorities, and less likely to safeguard their rights. These forms of nationalism are sometimes called ‘civic’ versus ‘ethnic,’ with the implication that the former is inclusive and good but the latter exclusive and thus bad, but in practice these categories fail to work analytically and normatively.<sup>32</sup>

Nationalism is thus an ambiguous phenomenon that will continue to be the main mechanism for ordering political life in Kyrgyzstan for the foreseeable future. All serious Kyrgyz politicians are nationalists, to some degree or another. The key analytical question is ‘why does Kyrgyz nationalism take certain forms?’ and the overarching normative policy question is ‘how can it be reworked to limit its negative effects on minorities and to enhance the common good in the republic?’ Or put more simply – ‘how can Kyrgyz nationalism/nation-building become more inclusive?’

## Kyrgyz historical political imagination

In discussing the ideology of nation-building – as Kyrgyz politicians and commentators are wont to do at every opportunity – two recurrent words are *birimdik*, meaning unity, and *yntymak*, meaning cooperation, harmony and concordance. Their negative counterpart is *bolynoo*, meaning division. It is common for politicians the world over to call for ‘unity’ after elections, disasters etc., but these words have specific meaning and distinct resonances in Kyrgyz nationalism, figuring a conception of pre-Tsarist tribal history.

Group formation among the Turkic tribes (*uruular*) of Inner Asia was a dynamic pattern of fission, fusion, shifting alliances, genealogical manipulation, realignment, redefinition and renaming. Strong ‘tribal confederations’ (*uruu soyuzdar*)<sup>33</sup> would survive and expand, weak ones would buckle, and the essential quality of a good leader was skill at uniting disparate entities and maintaining that unity.<sup>34</sup> In such a state, the people would enjoy prosperity – hence a saying oft-cited by Kyrgyz

<sup>30</sup> Greenfield, Liah (2005). ‘Nationalism and the mind’, *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 11, No 3. See also Agnew, John (2003). ‘Nationalism’, in Duncan, James, Johnson, Nuala and Schein, Richard (eds), *A Companion to Cultural Geography*. (Oxford: Blackwell).

<sup>31</sup> Murzakulova, Asel & Schoeberlein, John, (2010). ‘The invention of legitimacy: struggles in Kyrgyzstan to craft an effective nation-state ideology’, in Sally Cummings (ed.), *Symbolism and Power in Central Asia: Politics of the Spectacular* (London: Routledge).

<sup>32</sup> Brubaker, Rogers (1999). ‘The Manichean myth: Rethinking the distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalism’, in Kriesi, H., Armingeon, K., Slegist, H. and Wimmer, A.(eds) *Nation and National Identity: The European Experience in Perspective*. (Zürich, Rüeger), pp. 55-71.

<sup>33</sup> See Osmonov, Oskon and Asankanov, Abylabek (2001). *Kyrgyzstan Tarykhy: Eng Bayyrky Doordon Azyrky Mezgilge Cheyin*. [History of Kyrgyzstan: From Early Times to the Present] (Bishkek, Erkin-Too), p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> The literature here is vast, but two good statements of this argument are Bastug, Sharon, (1999), ‘Tribe, confederation and state among Altaic nomads of the Asian Steppes’, in Korkut Ertürk, (ed.) *Rethinking Central Asia: Non-Eurocentric Studies in History, Social Structure and Identity*. (Reading: Ithaca), 77-109; Sneath, David, (2006), ‘Imperial statecraft: arts

leaders, *'yrys aldy – yntymak'*, meaning 'prosperity follows concordance.' Thus Manas, the warrior leader celebrated in the eponymous poem that is the crowning glory of Kyrgyz oral culture, is the quintessential leader because he united disparate Kyrgyz tribes against a common enemy, the Kalmak. On the basis of his pioneering research on the Manas epic, the 19th-century Russian scholar Vasily Radlov wrote that 'the Kyrgyz are especially remarkable for their strong and lasting feeling of the people's unity, which is so clearly manifested in their epic poetry.'<sup>35</sup> According to this reading of the past, in contrast to the time of Manas, for example, the Kyrgyz's succumbing to imperial Russia is blamed upon rival tribal factions trying to play the Russians off against each other.

The disunity that precipitated this 'betrayal of national honour' is viewed by academics such as Amanbek Mambetov as the greatest threat to modern Kyrgyzstan, making the formation of a state ideology to unite the Kyrgyz of the utmost contemporary importance.<sup>36</sup> This historical imagination explains why Kyrgyz politicians and thinkers place so high a premium on *birimdik* and *yntymak*. The role of Manas as a successful unifier of the disparate Kyrgyz tribes has made him a compelling icon for intellectuals and politicians of independence. President Akaev derived 'seven principles' from the epic, even claiming that that 'just as the Muslims hold their five duties sacred, so we too ought to observe [the seven principles].'<sup>37</sup> Unsurprisingly, the first of the seven principles is preserving the unity of the nation; the second is *yntymak* between the ethnic groups of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>38</sup>

## The insecurity of Kyrgyz nationalism

Modern senses of Kyrgyz national identity, therefore, use a vocabulary that needs to be understood with reference to political concepts that predate the territorial nation-state system in Central Asia. Their frequent contemporary invocation as remedies for the trials of independent statehood reveals a sense that Kyrgyzstan is in crisis. In 2011 musician Jolboldu Alybaev, one of the greatest cultural figures in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, said to me in an interview:

We don't have a good identity, we are not developing, we need one. Manas united the people, he fought against the Kalmaks. The Kyrgyz had been dispersed, but he united them and brought them here. They were almost extinguished, but he rescued them. Today, we need him to unite us. We have enough of the resources that we need – land, people, etc; but we have poor leaders, no ideology, and we need it, to unite the people. The challenges of disunity are many: North and South, *uruuchuluk* (tribalism), other ethnic groups. Our leaders are only pursuing their own interests, making us capitalist; they are not thinking about the people, so it is vital that we unite.<sup>39</sup>

This quote reveals a Kyrgyz nationalism that, far from being a confident exultation in post-colonial liberty, is essentially insecure. This insecurity is particularly evident within three national debates: about 'tribalism', geopolitics and language.

Indicated in Alybaev's statement, the first major element of insecurity in modern Kyrgyz nationalism is the internal division of *uruuchuluk*, commonly translated as 'tribalism.' The voluminous academic literature is divided on what term to use, different scholars advocating terms including clans, tribes,

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of power on the steppe', in David Sneath (ed.), *Imperial Statecraft: Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries*. (Bellingham: Centre for East Asian Studies, Western Washington University).

<sup>35</sup> Radlov, Vasily (1995 [1885]). 'Preface', in Irina Kondratyeva (ed.), *Encyclopaedical Phenomenon of Epos 'Manas': Articles Collection*. (Bishkek: Kyrgyz Encyclopaedia), p. 258.

<sup>36</sup> Mambetov, Amanbek 'Satylgan uluttuk ar-namystyn jana adashkan ideologiyany maseleleri' [The issues of betrayed national honour and deviant ideology], *Res Publica*, 7-13 September 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Sovetbek Baygaziev, "'Traybalizm" - kolomtogo komylgon mina' [Tribalism – the landmine concealed in the hearth], *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 13-15 April 1999, pp. 57-58.

<sup>38</sup> This is by no means to claim that clan structures have remained unchanged over time or that their role can be disentangled from numerous other social forces; rather, it is to recognize that the idea of a polity whose survival is predicated upon the ability of a leader to unite clans provides a historical political imagination and vocabulary that remain powerful today.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, Osh, 29 October 2011.



strategic groups, factions and regionally-based kinship networks.<sup>40</sup> But it is agreed that informal loyalties based on a range of ties are crucial for understanding how society works in Kyrgyzstan. These ties may be bonds based on genealogies, native locality (from village to region), neighbourhood of residence and peer relationships developed at different stages of career in youth organizations, universities, military service, workplaces, the Haj pilgrimage, etc.

These networks are not static and unchanging, but are flexible and dynamic. They are not the only basis of social organization – money, talent, ideals and ideology are also significant. But they are nonetheless highly important as a basis of patronage networks, very useful in everyday life for helping gain access to a range of goods such as university entrance, jobs and promotion, work contracts, the signing off of forms and certificates, release without charge from police custody, tax avoidance, favourable court rulings, etc. In the realm of politics, they are considered vital for acquiring office, mitigating conflict, mobilizing protests, and effecting change.<sup>41</sup> Because these practices are regarded as deeply embroiled in corruption and bad governance, they are considered by commentators as inimical to proper Kyrgyz ideals of good politics, and emblematic that the Kyrgyz nation is divided and thus in crisis.

The second source of profound insecurity in Kyrgyz nationalism is geopolitical.<sup>42</sup> Cartoonists in the Kyrgyz nationalistic press often depict helpless little Kyrgyzstan squeezed between its powerful Chinese, Kazakh and Uzbek neighbours (Figure 1), or tucked into the back pockets of powers further afield such as Russia and the United States (Figure 2). Kyrgyz intellectuals fret over whether the country, with little wealth and a divided, Russified elite out of touch with Kyrgyz traditions, is even viable as a state, and whether it should not rather seek to merge itself with Russia or Kazakhstan.<sup>43</sup> Among educated Kyrgyz, the lament that Kyrgyzstan lacks an ideology is a recurrent theme. Many Kyrgyz fear that their state might be dismembered by the ‘creeping migration’ of Tajiks drifting into depopulated land along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.<sup>44</sup> Thus the issue of ceding territory to China as part of a bilateral boundary delimitation agreement in 2002 caused so much popular anger that it precipitated the fall of the government.<sup>45</sup>

But it is Uzbekistan that has evoked most alarm about the insecurity of the country. Relative to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan is a militarily strong and politically assertive neighbour. It has frequently been alleged by Kyrgyz politicians and journalists that Uzbekistan has consistently violated the country’s sovereignty by snatching criminal suspects from Kyrgyz soil, abusing and killing villagers at illegally erected border checkpoints, holding the country to ransom by withholding gas supplies, disrupting transport networks by closing roads, and even laying unmarked mine-fields along the boundary.<sup>46</sup> By unilaterally erecting boundary fences and checkpoints, Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov was depicted by one cartoonist as freely snipping away at the undefended territory of Kyrgyzstan (Figure 3). But it is not only the Uzbek *state* that many Kyrgyz fear. In 1999, Kyrgyzstan’s weak army struggled to repel the so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as it invaded Kyrgyzstan from its Tajikistani mountain hideouts. Geopolitically, there is a thick vein of thought in Kyrgyz society that thinks of the country as existentially threatened.

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<sup>40</sup> For a good overview of these debates, see Gullette, David, (2007). ‘Theories on Central Asian factionalism: the debate in political science and its wider implications’. *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No 3.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Jones Luong, Pauline, (2002), *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Collins, Kathleen (2002), ‘Clans, pacts and politics in Central Asia’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No 3; Radnitz, Scott (2005), ‘Networks, localism and mobilization in Aksy, Kyrgyzstan’. *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No 4; Radnitz, Scott (2010), *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*. (London: Cornell University Press).

<sup>42</sup> Marlène Laruelle identifies the same phenomenon as ‘feelings of imperilled sovereignty.’ Laruelle, Marlène (2012), ‘The paradigm of nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving narrative, the sovereignty issue, and political agenda’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 45, No 1, p. 39.

<sup>43</sup> Megoran, Nick (2000), ‘Chinggis Aitmatov and the geopolitics of Kyrgyzstan,’ *Eurasia Insight*, 14 February 2000 (New York: OSI).

<sup>44</sup> Reeves, Madeleine (2009). ‘Materialising State Space: “Creeping Migration” and Territorial Integrity in Southern Kyrgyzstan’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 61, No 7.

<sup>45</sup> Megoran, Nick (2012), ‘Rethinking the study of international boundaries: a biography of the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan boundary’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 102, No 2.

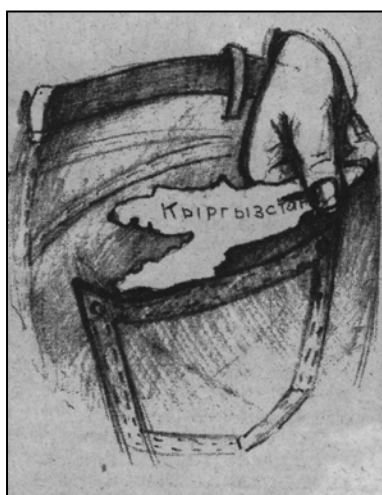
<sup>46</sup> Megoran, ‘The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999-2000’.



**Figure 1. Kyrgyzstan - here today, gone tomorrow?<sup>47</sup>**



**Figure 2. Pocket politics<sup>48</sup>**



**Figure 3. Uzbekistan's President Karimov snips away at the Kyrgyzstan border<sup>49</sup>**



The third most significant source of insecurity is that of language. Language is often a pivotal factor in nation-building, and this is particularly the case in Kyrgyzstan. Most Kyrgyz were not literate at the time of the Soviet formation of the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Region, the forerunner of present-day Kyrgyzstan. Soviet rule resulted in the first systematic written codification, development and promotion of the Kyrgyz language, establishing universal literacy and the emergence of a nationwide stream of Kyrgyz schooling. However, even after many decades the Kyrgyz language played second-fiddle to Russian in education, politics and the professions. Kyrgyz cultural forms of music and oral poetry were denigrated. Kyrgyz elites were generally more fluent in Russian, and simply speaking Kyrgyz in public in the capital city (then called Frunze) could earn a verbal rebuke from passers-by.

<sup>47</sup> 'Bugun Kyrgyzstan Bar: Erteng jok bolup ketishi mymkyn?' [Kyrgyzstan – here today gone tomorrow?], *Aalam* Vol. 7, 34/02/1999-02/03/1999.

<sup>48</sup> 'Chontok sayasat' [Pocket politics], *Aalam* Vol. 11, 31 February 1999.

<sup>49</sup> 'Chakira-chokor... chek ara' [Ho hum, the border], *Asaba* Vol. 15, 29 March 2000.

Therefore the drive to right this historical wrong was at the forefront of the late Soviet sovereignty movement within the republic. In 1989 this succeeded in having Kyrgyz declared the formal language of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, a great achievement. With independence, measures were taken to widen the terminology, reform spelling and punctuation, set a timescale for the switch over from Russian to Kyrgyz, and enhance the status of Kyrgyz through awards, prizes and campaigns.<sup>50</sup> Periodic appraisals of the laws by commentators and academics led to lots of hand-wringing about their apparent failure: in spite of all the laws, commissions, and other work, 'everything continues as it was' with Kyrgyz barely used at all in the workplace', bemoaned the newspaper *Kyrgyz Tuusu* in 2004.<sup>51</sup> Kyrgyz nationalists sardonically draw a distinction between people who are *Kyrgyz* (pronounced with a Kyrgyz hard 'y') and *Kirgiz* (pronounced with a Russian soft 'i') – the latter being elites who spoke better Russian than Kyrgyz and are thus linguistically and culturally alienated from authentic Kyrgyzness.

In October 2004, the southern Kyrgyz newspaper *Ferghana* published an article asking 'Why is Kyrgyz still failing to become the state language?'<sup>52</sup> Various reasons were adduced, including the poor teaching of Kyrgyz in Russian and Uzbek schools, the influence of Russian and Uzbek television, the absence of laws obliging people to know Kyrgyz to take citizenship or enter state employment, and the preference of the public sector to conduct its written business primarily in Russian. All these, the paper concluded, amount to saying that there is no real need to learn Kyrgyz. The article also argued that the decision in 2000 to make Russian an 'official' language<sup>53</sup> has exacerbated the situation by ensuring that there are even fewer inducements to switch.

Bhavna Dave argues that because the state in Kyrgyzstan lacks the resources of its neighbours in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, 'the symbol of language' became a focal point of nationalist angst.<sup>54</sup> For Kyrgyz nationalists, it is the quintessential indication of the insecurity of the Kyrgyz nation, which is unable even to learn its own language or get its powerful ethnic minorities to do the same.

### Implications of insecurity

Nationalism, as a political ideology holding that the territorial and national units should be congruent, is an inescapable context for political life in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz national imaginations are framed by concepts of 'unity' and 'concordance', which refer to particular political concepts derived from an understanding of Inner Asian tribal organization and leadership models. As a framework for understanding the multiple social crises and challenges that the country faces, this has produced a Kyrgyz nationalism that is profoundly insecure about issues of internal unity, geopolitics and language.

It is absolutely crucial to grasp this for, as will be seen in the following sections, it explains to a significant degree the difficulties that the sizeable Uzbek minority presents to the Kyrgyz nationalist project; and it also points to ways to avert further violence.

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<sup>50</sup> Landau, Jacob & Kellner-Heinkele, Barbara, (2012), *Language Politics in Contemporary Central Asia: National and Ethnic Identity and the Soviet Legacy*. (London: I.B. Tauris), Chapter 5.

<sup>51</sup> 'Mamlekettik tilge – mamlekettik mamile' [A state approach for a state language], *Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 23-26 July 2004, p.5

<sup>52</sup> "Kyrgyz tili emne uchun mamlekettik til bol albay jatat?" [Why is the Kyrgyz language failing to become the state language?] *Ferghana*, 11-17 October 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Kyrgyzstan is the only state in Central Asia that grants any official status to Russian. Landau, & Kellner-Heinkele, *Language Politics in Contemporary Central Asia*, p.150.

<sup>54</sup> Dave, Bhavna. (2002), 'A shrinking reach of the state? Language policy and implementation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan', in Pauline Jones Luong, (ed.), *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, p. 147.

#### 4. KYRGYZ NATIONALISM AND THE ISSUE OF OSH

In his book account of the June 2010 inter-ethnic violence in Osh, the city's populist mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, claims that Uzbekistan's armed forces massed at the border in preparation for an invasion of Kyrgyzstan in support of the 'Uzbek separatists.'<sup>55</sup> According to this understanding, the harm done to Uzbeks in the June fighting was not 'crimes against humanity,' but legitimate self-defence against a well-armed and well-funded plot to destroy the state. This plot was hatched not by ordinary Uzbeks, who want to live in peace, but by politicians such as Kadyrjon Batyrov and Davron Sabirov.

Because little, if any, credible, objective evidence has been presented to support this claim, it is routinely dismissed by foreign observers. External research on the issue found no evidence of demands for autonomy among Uzbek elites in Osh.<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, from the late 1990s until the Bakiev period, many Uzbeks in Osh considered that the relative economic and religious freedom of Kyrgyzstan made it a more conducive place to be than Uzbekistan's secular(ist) authoritarianism. However, the belief that Osh's Uzbeks want to break up the Kyrgyz state, although not universally subscribed to, is widely held among all strata of Kyrgyz society. Why? It is not sufficient to simply dismiss this view as a cynical move by some populist politicians to bolster their own positions, a defence mechanism that evades responsibility by blaming the victims, or simple prejudice. These may or may not be factors. Rather, as the previous section argued, it reflects a Kyrgyz nationalism that is profoundly insecure about issues of internal unity, geopolitics and language. As this section shows, it is this insecurity that explains longstanding fears about the Uzbek minority in Osh, and provides the context for the 2010 violence and the subsequent mistreatment of Uzbeks.

##### Before 2010

The urban history of Osh and the relations between its Uzbek and Kyrgyz inhabitants can be scripted in different ways, as stories of coexistence or conflict. Much of Osh's recent history can be retold as one of cooperation. It was in the markets of Osh that the historically sedentary Uzbeks and nomadic Kyrgyz met to trade. Stories of co-existence draw on ideas of the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks as sharing religion, language and culture. In a 2006 state visit to Uzbekistan, former Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev delighted his hosts by declaring, in Uzbek, during a press conference that 'Our air is one, our water is one, our God is one, our language is one. Therefore, the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz will never be separated.'<sup>57</sup>

But this relationship can also be narrated in terms of competition for urban space. Uzbek narratives relate a story of how they traditionally lived in the city and worked as artisans, cooks, traders and technicians, but the Kyrgyz gradually displaced them, taking land, jobs and wealth.<sup>58</sup> Kyrgyz narratives invert these accounts and have Osh's land traditionally controlled by Kyrgyz tribes. The growth of the newly minted Uzbek ethnicity in the late Russian and early Soviet periods threatened rightful Kyrgyz control, and in the 1924-27 process of national delimitation the leadership of the nascent Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic even made a move to conjoin Osh to its territory or seek autonomy within the Kyrgyz state.<sup>59</sup>

For many Kyrgyz, the subsequent story of Osh can be narrated as the attempts of privileged Osh Uzbeks to hinder Kyrgyz from taking their rightful place in the city. Kyrgyz increasingly moved to

<sup>55</sup> Myrzakmatov, Melisbek (2011), *Men Izdegen Chyndyk* [The Truth That I Sought]. (Bishkek), pp.66-72.

<sup>56</sup> Fumagalli, Matteo. (2007), 'Informal ethnopolitics and local authority figures in Osh, Kyrgyzstan', *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 6, No 2, p.220.

<sup>57</sup> Uzbek Television First Channel (2006), 'Uzbek leader urges fighting Islamic group (translation from Uzbek)' BBC Monitoring CAU 041006 nu/atd.

<sup>58</sup> The focus of this paper is Kyrgyz sensibilities. For more on Uzbek narratives, see Megoran, Nick (2011), 'The background to Osh: stories of conflict and coexistence', *Open Democracy: Russia*. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/nick-megoran/background-to-osh-stories-of-conflict-and-coexistence> Some of the material in this section about Kyrgyz narratives is drawn from that same article.

<sup>59</sup> On delimitation, see Koichiev, Arslan (2003), 'Ethno-territorial claims in the Ferghana Valley during the process of national delimitation, 1924-7', in Everett-Heath, Tom (ed.), *Central Asia: Aspects of Transition*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon); Haughen, Arne (2003), *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Osh to take up roles in the modern urban life of their country, but the Soviets failed to develop quality Kyrgyz educational provision. For example, there was only one Kyrgyz-language school (Gagarin) in Osh at independence, and Kyrgyz children were thus usually obliged to study in Uzbek- or Russian-language schools. This left Kyrgyz disadvantaged, and they often felt looked down on by urban Uzbeks and Russians. All but the most privileged of new rural migrants were squeezed into often cramped apartment blocks vacated by Russians, or rented rooms from Uzbeks. To incoming Kyrgyz it seemed as if the often better-educated and privileged Uzbeks, who dominated the mosques and skilled sectors of the economy, had the best land, the wealthiest businesses and the best houses in the best locations – that the Kyrgyz were second-class citizens in their own state. Upon achieving independence in 1991, Kyrgyz effectively formed a minority in the two main urban centres of their country, Bishkek and Osh. The psychological significance of this is immense: Osh Uzbeks appeared a hindrance to the realization of authentic Kyrgyz statehood.

In Kyrgyz narratives of Osh as a contested space, Uzbeks played the role not only of impeding the development of Kyrgyz statehood, but also of fundamentally threatening the very territorial integrity of the state. Some of these concerns were grounded on explicit challenges to the state. For example, the inter-communal violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Osh in June 1990 had many causes but one exacerbating factor was a formal appeal in March 1990 to the Supreme Soviet's Council of Nationalities by a minority of Osh Uzbeks for the creation of an 'Osh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic' within the framework of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>60</sup> In 1999 the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan invaded Kyrgyzstan, and in 2006 Kyrgyz police killed five suspected IMU militants who they alleged were planning an attack on the security forces in Jalalabad. They claimed that although three of the dead men were Uzbekistani citizens, two were Kyrgyzstanis: treacherous citizens of Kyrgyzstan willing to join co-ethnics from Uzbekistan in murderous attacks on Kyrgyzstan.<sup>61</sup>

However, most of the evidence that Kyrgyz adduce for the claim that their Uzbek compatriots threaten the territorial integrity of the state is inference based on interpretations of everyday cultural practices being essentially nefarious refusals to accept the state's Kyrgyzness. For example, in 2004 Osh oblast's governor, Naken Kasiev, signed a resolution mandating that companies, administrations and educational institutions conduct their affairs in Kyrgyz, and that all signs and advertisements be written in Kyrgyz.<sup>62</sup> However, five years later, an article in a nationalist-leaning Osh newspaper marking the 20th anniversary of the passing of the 1989 language law lamented the failure of language laws in the republic, claiming that even some local government administrations in Osh oblast still regularly used Uzbek for official business.<sup>63</sup> More dramatically, one Kyrgyz news agency interpreted the issue of girls wearing hijabs in three Uzbek-language schools in Southern Kyrgyzstan as suggesting that 'these three Uzbek schools want to establish a caliphate in Kyrgyzstan.'<sup>64</sup> In April 2010, *Alibi* newspaper published an open letter from the 'March People's Revolution Public Foundation' to the interim government warning that young people in the south were turning to Uzbek for film, music and culture as Uzbek-language media was dominant in the south.<sup>65</sup> As seen in the previous section, the belief that Uzbekistan presented a particular threat to Kyrgyzstan was widespread in the public domain. Therefore tuning in to culture from Tashkent, in the minds of many Kyrgyz, demonstrated fealty towards Uzbekistan. It was interpreted as evidence that a weak state was threatened by an alliance between a strong neighbour and a powerful yet disloyal 'fifth column' minority.

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<sup>60</sup> Shozimov, Pulat, Beshimov, Bakytbek and Yunusova, Khurshida (2011), 'The Ferghana Valley during Perestroika, 1985-1991', in Starr, S. Frederick, Shozimov, Pulat, Beshimov, Bakytbek, and Yunusova, Khurshida (eds), *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia* (London: M.E. Sharpe), pp. 194-96.

<sup>61</sup> 'Kyrgyz Police Kill Five Suspected Militants In Jalalabad', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Newsline Vol. 10, No 128, Part I, 17 July 2006.

<sup>62</sup> 'Osh Governor Issues Language Resolution', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Newsline Vol. 8, No 88, Part I, 11 May 2004.

<sup>63</sup> 'Kyrgyz tiline kyr korsotkon torolor' [The bigwigs who threaten the Kyrgyz language], *Osh Shamy*, Vol. 30, No. 946, 5 September 2009, p. 2

<sup>64</sup> 'Kyrgyz region debates hijab-wearing in schools.' Excerpt from report by Kyrgyz news agency Belyy Parokhod website, Bishkek, in Russian. BBC Monitoring CAU, 5 July 2006.

<sup>65</sup> *Alibi*, 30 April 2010 (no title).



But it was periodic debates about the status of the Uzbek language in Kyrgyzstan that raised most heckles. In 2004 a Kyrgyz NGO official – who enjoyed an international reputation as a champion of human rights, and was considered a liberal internationalist by foreign donors and had received substantial amounts of funding from them – privately told me that he thought Osh Member of Parliament Davron Sabirov’s aim was to make Uzbek a state language and then join Osh to Uzbekistan. Sobirov was accused in 1999 of inciting inter-ethnic hatred in an election video, but later acquitted by a court. A 2006 demonstration by supporters of Jalalbad MP Kadyrjon Batyrov in support of better treatment of Uzbeks and official status for the Uzbek language likewise raised Kyrgyz fears of an attack on the unity of the state. At a meeting in 2006 with the OSCE High Commissioner for Ethnic Minorities, Rolf Ekeus, Kyrgyzstani State Secretary Adakhan Madumarov said Uzbek could not be granted official status because ‘we are a unitary state’ and other minorities might demand similar rights.<sup>66</sup>

The idea that using Uzbek in the workplace, wearing a headscarf, listening to Uzbek music or raising the idea that Uzbek language could be granted some official recognition could be interpreted as sinister plots to dismember Kyrgyzstan by seeking autonomy for an ethnically-Uzbek Osh can only be understood in terms of the profound insecurity of Kyrgyz nationalism explained in the previous section.<sup>67</sup> Osh, with its complicated history of urban coexistence and conflict, became the focus for all these concerns.

## The Uzbekistan comparison

In Kyrgyz narratives, as seen in section 2, it is striking how often the perceived wealth and privilege of Osh Uzbeks are sharply contrasted to the supposedly parlous state of Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan. In 2006 the Kyrgyz newspaper *Agym* blasted the head of the OSCE office in Kyrgyzstan, Marcus Müller, for a statement that was seemingly sympathetic to Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks demonstrating for language rights. Whereas ‘the Uzbeks are occupying a large financial and economic niche in the southern region’, the paper wrote caustically, ‘it is known that ethnic Kyrgyz people in Uzbekistan have ten times more problems with their culture and language than the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan.’<sup>68</sup> *Agym* concluded that the only reason the likes of the OSCE could support ‘separatist and extremist’ elements of the Kyrgyzstani Uzbek population is because the Kyrgyz government is too weak to silence them and they would not get away with that in Uzbekistan.

A senior Osh Kyrgyz policeman put it to me in 2009 that ‘here Uzbeks are free, they have every opportunity – universities, schools, television channels, and supermarkets; but Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan have nothing.’ Kyrgyz felt that whereas they had once dominated the Ferghana Valley, they had been treated unfairly in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. They thus needed ever to be vigilant against Uzbek intentions and designs on their state, and be suspicious of their foreign supporters in Western governments and organizations like the OSCE who might use the excuse of human rights as pretext to attack and dismember a state by supporting a separatist minority, as they did in Kosovo in 1999.

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<sup>66</sup> Kyrgyzstan: How Real Are Uzbek Minority Concerns?’ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia*, No 451, 7 June 2006.

<sup>67</sup> It is worth considering why the idea of ‘autonomy’ was so alarming: after all, in many contexts autonomy is a way to preserve the unity of the state as an alternative to separatism. Kyrgyz fears that autonomy would be a step towards the fracture of the state are informed by post-Soviet comparisons. Many of the secessionist or irredentist wars on (post-) Soviet space were for a change in the political status of territories that already enjoyed some degree of formal autonomy – Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia etc. Julie George argues that these autonomous regions provided mobilizing infrastructures for separatism, and the lack of such structures in the Ferghana Valley meant that ‘Long-term separatist goals and extensive nationalist mobilization have been conspicuously absent.’ George, Julie. (2009), ‘Expecting ethnic conflict: The Soviet legacy and ethnic politics in the Caucasus and Central Asia’, in Wooden, Amanda and Stefes, Christoph, *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (London: Routledge); p.88ff

<sup>68</sup> ‘Kyrgyz paper blasts OSCE for meddling in internal affairs’, *Agym*, 23 June 2006. BBC Monitoring CAU 11 July 2006.

## After 2010

The policy responses of the Kyrgyz government and local authorities to the Osh events will be considered in the next section, but at this point it is worth noting that much popular reaction and comment followed the lines established before the violence, albeit with unprecedented (and often unchecked) vitriol.

An extended essay by Kalen Subanov, provocatively entitled 'Southern Kyrgyzstan: Caliphate or Uzbek state?' identified a three-fold Uzbek threat to Kyrgyzstan. The first was the Islamist group Hezb-ut-Tahrir, proscribed in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and whose supporters in Osh are in the popular imagination (and probably in reality) identified primarily as being Uzbek. The second is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has attacked Kyrgyzstan at various times since 1999 but was largely neutralized by the US military in Afghanistan. Subanov dwelt on the third, which he claimed was the operations of Uzbekistan's security services to monitor and control drugs routes and thus consolidate their position in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, an article in the newspaper *Alibi* in late June 2010 moved seamlessly from invective against Uzbekistan for allegedly attempting to seize Kyrgyz border territory to invective against the Uzbek minority for not learning Kyrgyz and loyally identifying with the state.<sup>70</sup> The same paper claimed that the most essential factor for the unity of the nation was language, and that the only ethnic group one would fight for was that with which one shared a language. Therefore, 'the only guarantee that we can preserve the Kyrgyz state' is to employ in state service only people who know and can speak pure Kyrgyz.<sup>71</sup>

These are familiar themes. The profound threats to the survival of Kyrgyzstan arising from disunity, geopolitics and language are brought together in Osh's Uzbeks (or at least their leaders), who are disloyal, a vector for the actions of hostile Uzbekistan, and who refuse to learn the language or identify with proper Kyrgyz culture. The violence of June 2010 is thus read as simply the latest Uzbek attempt to dismember Kyrgyzstan; but this time, one that needs to be met with a tougher and more concerted response. It is this understanding that frames policy responses in Kyrgyzstan, as the next section explores.

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<sup>69</sup> Subanov, Kalen, 'Tushtuk Kyrgyzstan: Khalifatpy je Ozbek mamleketibi?' [Southern Kyrgyzstan: Caliphate or Uzbek state?], *Alibi*, 11 June 2010 (part I) and 15 June 2010 (part II).

<sup>70</sup> Rakhmankulov, Mashakbay, 'Otkondu tapancha menen atsan... Ozubek ketip oz kaldyk' [If you could shoot the past with a gun... Uzbeks left, we stayed by ourselves].

<sup>71</sup> 'Ichki integratsia kuchotulmoiuncho, mamlekettegi birimdik bekemdelbeit' [State unity cannot be consolidated unless internal integration is strengthened], *Alibi*, 21 June 2011.



## 5. UNDERSTANDING LOCAL RESPONSES

Kyrgyz nationalism framed the violence of June 2010 not as an isolated incident but as the latest manifestation of a long-term Uzbek plot to break up the country. Such narratives were repeated not simply by populist sections of the media, but also by elected politicians. For example, Nathan Hamm reports on the unsubstantiated accusations by populist MP Jyldyz Joldosheva about the supposed activities of a sinister Moscow-based ‘Congress of Uzbeks’ dedicated to furthering the plot. He claims that President Atambaev has echoed some of these claims, ‘playing the game of reckless, racist speculation.’<sup>72</sup>

Alongside such comments, as seen in section 2, Kyrgyz state agencies and politicians have closed down Uzbek-language media outlets and curtailed and threatened Uzbek-language education. Furthermore elected Uzbek politicians have fled abroad, as the courts and police have targeted Uzbeks accused of participating in the violence. It would thus be easy to conclude that the main response of Kyrgyz society since the June 2010 violence has been to victimize and persecute Uzbeks, and effectively to exclude them from participation in society as citizens enjoying equal civic rights by virtue of their supposed disloyalty. It is as if the message is that Uzbeks have no authentic claim to be part of Kyrgyzstani society, cannot expect equal treatment and do not belong there.

However, that is not the complete picture. Both the national government in Bishkek and the municipal authorities in Osh city have devised and (to an extent) implemented comprehensive policies to promote good ethnic relations and emphasize the place that Uzbeks have in Kyrgyzstan. Against trenchant foreign criticism of the treatment of Uzbeks since 2010 by ‘nationalist’ politicians, Kyrgyz elites point to these policies as evidence of their commitment to an inclusive, multi-ethnic future. This section considers these local policy responses and argues that it is a mistake to dismiss them – but that their apparent failure to change the situation is due to their underlying nationalist assumptions about the tribal organization and insecurity of Kyrgyzstan.

### Kyrgyz government policy responses

Kyrgyz central government policy responses to June 2010 events are difficult to gauge at this moment owing to the change of president in 2011. During the interim presidency of Roza Otunbaeva in 2010-2011, a Department of Ethnic, Religious Policies and Interaction with Civil Society was established in the President’s Office, headed by Mira Karybaeva. It has analysed and compiled the findings and recommendations of the various national and international reports on the Osh violence, and has produced a ‘concept of ethnic policy and consolidation’ entitled ‘Kyrgyzstan is my homeland’, plus an action plan on their implementation, which is comprehensive in coverage but vaguer in terms of responsibility and funding sources.<sup>73</sup> It spotlights a commitment to Kyrgyzstan as a ‘multilingual’ and ‘multicultural’ society, with a ‘guarantee to the representatives of all ethnicities that form the people of Kyrgyzstan that they can maintain their native languages, create conditions for its study and development, and does not allow discrimination by failure to know state and official languages.’

In 2011, Mira Karybaeva told me that the government therefore regarded the threat by the Mayor of Osh to close down Uzbek schooling as ‘very serious,’ and considered it, along with the renaming of the ‘Kyrgyz-Uzbek University’ and Kara-Suu region’s instruction to Uzbek schools to open Kyrgyz classes as ‘unacceptable’ and exceeding local authority.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, calls by populist protestors and leaders such as Jyldyz Joldosheva in May 2012 for the scrapping of Uzbek-language university

<sup>72</sup> Hamm, Nathan (2012) ‘Kyrgyz MP Claims to Unearth New Uzbek Plot’, *Registan.net*, 5 April 2012 <http://registan.net/2012/04/05/kyrgyz-mp-claims-to-unearth-new-uzbek-plot/> However Hamm provides little evidence to support his claims about Atambaev.

<sup>73</sup> Department of Ethnic, Religious Policies and Interaction with Civil Society of the President’s Office of the Kyrgyz Republic, ‘Mekenim Kyrgyzstan: Conception of ethnic policy and consolidation of the society in the Kyrgyz Republic and Action Plan through 2015’ and ‘Action Plan on Implementation of Ethnic Policy and Society Consolidation of the Kyrgyz Republic Through 2015’, 10 June 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Interview, Bishkek, 27 October 2011.

entrance exams have been vigorously rebuffed by the Atambaev administration.<sup>75</sup> This is encouraging, but at this stage it is too early to identify the approach that the Atambaev administration will take towards ethnic matters, or the extent to which it is able to enforce its writ in Osh.

### Osh government policy response 1: promoting ‘tolerance’

A recurring theme in international analysis of inter-ethnic relations in Osh since June 2010 has been the role of the city’s mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov. According to the reports of organizations such as the International Crisis Group, his role has been inflammatory and caused great consternation among Osh’s Uzbeks.<sup>76</sup> As seen in section 4, Myrzakmatov interpreted the violence as an attempt by Uzbek separatist leaders, backed by powerful interests in Uzbekistan, to dismember the state in a violent uprising. Versions of this theory are widely believed within Kyrgyzstan: by presenting himself as the saviour of the state who crushed the uprising and deterred an Uzbekistani invasion, Myrzakmatov rode a wave of populist nationalism he helped create. Because of this he has emerged as a champion of the countrywide populist nationalistic opposition; harder-line nationalist candidates defeated in the autumn 2011 presidential elections subsequently allied themselves with him. In March 2012 he further bolstered his position when his party, *Uluttar Birimdigi* (literally: the unity of the ethnic groups), won the greatest number of seats in Osh city council elections.<sup>77</sup>

Myrzakmatov has energetically pursued two sets of policies in particular that have a bearing on ethnic relations in Osh: promoting tolerance and developing a symbolic Kyrgyz ideology for the city. Overall, he is critical of the Soviet model of schooling in national-minority languages, and states that the model he prefers was that of the United States, where, he claims, numerous ethnic groups coexist with a sense of their unique history but primarily consider themselves ‘American’.<sup>78</sup>

The first plank of Myrzakmatov’s policy response to the 2010 violence has been to promote *tolerance*. As an article in the mayorality-controlled newspaper *Osh Shamy* put it, ‘Tolerance is the way to peaceful existence.’<sup>79</sup> In the aftermath of the June violence, Myrzakmatov announced his desire to rebuild not mono-ethnic Uzbek *mahalla* neighbourhoods, but mixed neighbourhoods of apartment blocks, as he claimed that ‘ethnically mixed housing would prevent future violence’ by reducing distance between communities.<sup>80</sup> This was subsequently shelved under international pressure.

The core of Myrzakmatov’s promotion of ‘tolerance’, however, was built around his declaration of 2011 as ‘The year of strengthening the relations, concordance and friendship between ethnic groups in the city of Osh.’ In a decree on 31 January 2011, he set out a comprehensive plan for the year’s events.<sup>81</sup> The extensive programme was a medley of schemes including those dedicated to improving public healthcare provision, raising consciousness of citizens’ rights and promoting sport.

<sup>75</sup> Shoshina, Ekaterina, ‘Row Over Uzbek Language In Kyrgyzstan,’ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia*, 18 May 2012.

<sup>76</sup> International Crisis Group (2012), ‘Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South’, *Asia Report*, No 222, 29 March 2012. See detailed analysis of this paper in section 6.

<sup>77</sup> Toktonaliev, Timur. ‘Southern Kyrgyz Mayor Strengthened by Local Polls’, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Reporting Central Asia*, 7 March 2012.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Osh Shaarynyn meri M. Myrzakmatov: “El aralyk beytarap komissiya uluttar aralyk mamilesi kyrchutuuga bagyttalghan butum chygardy” [The independent international commission has issued its conclusions about the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations] *Osh Shamy*, 7 May 2011, p.2 (headline with portrait of mayor on page 1).

<sup>79</sup> *Osh Shamy*, 11 June 2011, p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Myrzakmatov is reported as saying that ‘Mixed neighborhoods didn’t suffer during the violence [...] So we want to create integrated neighborhoods where children [of various ethnicities] play together and people live side by side and make friends.’ Feifer, Gregory (2011), ‘In Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks Criticize Osh Reconstruction Plan’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 August 2012.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Osh shaaryna uluttar aralyk mamileni, yntymaktuuluktu, dostuktu chingdoo jyldyn otkoruu boyuncha ish-charchlar plany’ [A plan of activities for implementing the year of strengthening the relations, concordance and friendship of the ethnic groups of Osh city], *Osh Shamy*, 5 February 2011.

These generally had an inter-ethnic flavour, encouraging Uzbeks and Kyrgyz to engage in them together. Kyrgyz and Uzbek schools came together to stage festivals celebrating the good relations between the two groups, with children dressing up in national dress and dancing to Uzbek and Kyrgyz music.<sup>82</sup> *Osh Shamy* carried Kyrgyz-language articles about Uzbek culture, for example culinary, funeral and wedding traditions, and Uzbek-language articles about their Kyrgyz counterparts.<sup>83</sup> Numerous articles printed warm affirmations from Osh residents insisting that ordinary Uzbeks and Kyrgyz enjoyed strong fraternal bonds that could not be ruptured by the machinations of unscrupulous politicians.<sup>84</sup> As if to underline this, *Osh Shamy* printed photographs of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz together apparently enthusiastically burning copies of books and DVDs that document purported anti-Uzbek violence in Osh in June 2010 and allegedly attributed to Kodirjon Batyrov.<sup>85</sup> More positively, the mayor announced cash bonuses for inter-ethnic marriages formed after June 2010, and photographs of happy couples whose union embodied the message of tolerance and unity were splashed across the local press.<sup>86</sup>

What is the ideological dimension of these projects? The mayor's decree of January 2011, in which 55 programmes and events were outlined in a table, along with their aims, source of funding, and the names of individuals and partner organizations responsible for carrying them out, gives an insight. They included programmes to encourage and reward the singing of Kyrgyz songs and thereby develop 'an interest in and respect for national culture and traditions' (number 12), Kyrgyz lessons for minorities who do not know the language (number 17), 'teaching the young patriotism' (number 20), 'drawing the representatives of other ethnic groups into participation in Kyrgyz national sports' (number 21), enabling businesses and municipal workplaces to use Kyrgyz in their formal written documents (number 34), and the like. Six programmes under the heading of 'Defence and protection of rights' had intended outcomes such as 'instilling a patriotic spirit in the youth' (number 54), 'teaching schoolchildren to love the Fatherland' (number 55), and 'cultivating in the youth the feeling that serving their country is a sacred duty' (number 52).

Some of these were doubtless directed at Kyrgyz as well as Uzbeks: many Kyrgyz businesses and state agencies effectively use Russian rather than the state language, for example. Glaringly absent, especially in the law and order section, was any explicit recognition that improving ethnic relations demanded holding Kyrgyz politicians, the media and police to account for the mistreatment of minorities. For Uzbeks in Osh, this is a key prerequisite to establishing the conditions for peace. Taken together, the message of this programme is that peace is not a justice issue and is not about allowing minorities to get on with their own lives, but is to be achieved by 'tolerance' – meaning that all members of society, and especially the Uzbeks, come together by loyally identifying with the Kyrgyz nature of the state, speaking and using the Kyrgyz language, learning Kyrgyz cultural values and traditions, and increasing their love for the Kyrgyz republic.

## Osh government policy response 2: symbolic

The second identifiable plank of Myrzakmatov's policy response to the June 2010 violence has been the use of symbols to assert and create civic allegiance among all ethnic groups to the idea of the city of Osh as a Kyrgyz city that is firmly and securely part of the Kyrgyz republic.

This was facilitated by replicating trappings that are more commonly associated with statehood. In October 2011 the mayor announced the creation of a new flag for Osh (Figure 4). This flag superimposed a *tyndyk*, the central point of the structure of a Kyrgyz yurt, which is imbued with spiritual and cultural meaning, on an outline of Osh's Solomon's Mount/Throne, the iconic mountain

<sup>82</sup> For an example of a report on such a festival, see 'Toktobosyn yntymaktyn kerbeni' [May the caravan of concordance not stop], *Osh Shamy*, 7 May 2011.

<sup>83</sup> 'Ozbek elindin uylonuu toyina bayanyshkan ishenim, kaada-salttar' [Wedding beliefs and traditions of the Uzbek nation], *Osh Shamy*, 28 May 2011; *Osh Shamy*, 29 September 2011. (Articles in Uzbek and Kyrgyz on each others' funeral practices.)

<sup>84</sup> 'Biri-biribizge tilegibiz ak bolsun' [May our wishes for each other be pure], *Osh Shamy*, 28 May 2011.

<sup>85</sup> 'Osh tun eli chagymchylardyn araketine tatyktuu joop berdi' [The people of Osh have given the malicious gossipers an appropriate response], *Osh Shamy*, 21 May 2011.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example *Osh Shamy*, 11 June 2011.

around which the city sprawls. The inhabitants of neighbourhoods around the base of the mountain are largely Uzbek (neighbourhoods that saw some of the worst violence), so the symbolism here is unmistakable. Likewise, the mayor introduced a new anthem for the city, which declared that Osh was Kyrgyz land. He instructed that the hymn be played at all political activities and celebrations, after the national anthem, and that the city's flag must be displayed alongside the national flag in all municipal state organizations and bodies.

**Figure 4. The new flag of Osh city**



More tangibly, the mayor initiated the construction of a number of monuments around the city. To mark the 'year of strengthening the relations, concordance and friendship between ethnic groups in the city of Osh', the so-called 'Bell of Peace', made in the Russian city Novosibirsk, was installed.<sup>87</sup> On the first anniversary of the 2010 violence, Myrzakmatov unveiled a monument called 'The mothers' tears'. In a speech, he said that the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan is my homeland' (*Kyrgyzstan – menin mekenim*) is sacred, symbolizing the unity of the citizenry and the apex of the common national idea.<sup>88</sup>

More striking, because of their scale and location, were statues of three men considered in modern narratives of Kyrgyz national history as towering figures in the pantheon of military/political leaders: Barsbek, Alymbek and Manas. Barsbek was a leader of the Kyrgyz in the late seventh and early eighth centuries,<sup>89</sup> Alymbek an important leader controlling the Alai region for the pre-Tsarist Kokand Khanate of the mid- to late nineteenth century,<sup>90</sup> and Manas, the central character of the eponymous epic narrative poem, the leader who united and liberated the Kyrgyz tribes suffering under Kalmak rule. Each statue was erected on a major approach road to the city. That of Alymbek was installed on the road to Uzgen, in the largely Uzbek-inhabited Furkat area, scene of some of the worst violence against Uzbeks in 2010. It is accompanied by a giant arch and new murals depicting Kyrgyz pastoral scenes – superimposed, somewhat incongruously, against a long stretch of burnt-down Uzbek homes. The area was to be renamed 'Kyrgyz Street' so that, according to a journalist, people entering or leaving the city could be reminded of the semi-nomadic Kyrgyz past.<sup>91</sup> The statue of Manas was officially unveiled on 11 June 2012, the second anniversary of the violence.

<sup>87</sup> 'Kalaaga yntymakty jar salgan "Tynchtyk konguroosu"' [The 'bell of peace' announcing concordance to the city], *Osh Shamy*, 14 May 2011. The monument's inscriptions are in Kyrgyz, Russian and English but – pointedly – not in Uzbek.

<sup>88</sup> 'Osh shaarynyn meri M. Myrzakmatov iyun koogalanyn bir jyldygyna karata elge kayryl jassady' [Osh city mayor M. Myrzakmatov has made an appeal to the people of Osh on the first anniversary of the June riots], *Osh Shamy*, 11 June 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Asankanov, Abylabek and Junushaliev, Janybek (2000). *Kyrgyz Respublikasynyn Taryxy* [History of the Kyrgyz Republic]. (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), p.85-87.

<sup>90</sup> Osmonov, Oskon and Asankanov, Abylabek (2001). *Kyrgyzstan Tarykhy: Eng Bayyrky Doordon Azyrky Mezgilge Cheyin*. p.168.

<sup>91</sup> 'Toraga A. Keldibekov Osh tun oyun ukt,' [Chairman A. Keldibekov heard the thoughts of Osh], *Osh Shamy*, 26 June 2011.



Needless to say, these projects were not cheap. The construction of the towering bronze statue of Manas, near mainly Uzbek areas of the Kora-Suv region on the approach road to the city from the airport, was voted support of 31 million som (about two-thirds of a million dollars) by Osh city council. Justifying this vast expenditure while many neighbourhoods still lay in ruins, Myrzakmatov 'explained how the construction of the statue of our father Manas played an important role in the creation of an ideology and was extremely important for the next generation.'<sup>92</sup>

Myrzakmatov underlined this in his speech at the opening of the Barsbek statue. He recounted that Barsbek was a great hero at a time when Kyrgyz statehood flourished, but most of his speech was about the defence of Kyrgyz statehood today. 'Osh city can be considered the linchpin [*tyrkyk*] of Kyrgyz statehood,' he insisted. 'Last year,' he continued, it was not ordinary Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, but separatists who threatened 'the integrity of the state, our national language, our sacred culture and our inviolable boundary.'<sup>93</sup> Here, we see again the deep-seated insecurity about Kyrgyz national statehood, how the state, culture and even language are imperilled. Therefore, he concluded, 'The Osh tragedy is evidence of how extremely important it is to raise in the young generation a patriotic spirit and to strengthen in the general public a love for the fatherland.' Invoking the defence of 'the divine spirits of our father Aykol Manas and Kagan Barsbek,' he concluded by calling the population of Osh to 'unity' and 'concordance' and by declaring his wish that Kyrgyz statehood would prove 'everlasting.'

A recurring theme of Myrzakmatov's is that outside forces, backing the Uzbek separatists, also represent a grave threat to Kyrgyz statehood. In a major article published in June 2011 in the *Osh Shamy* newspaper, he offered a trenchant critique of aspects of the findings and recommendations of the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Committee (KIC).<sup>94</sup> Writing in the same newspaper, journalist Abdiraim Mamytov railed at foreign newspapers like the *Financial Times* and *New York Times* that, he said, had accused the Kyrgyz of 'crimes against humanity' and 'genocide.' He argued that the KIC's report was driven by the same geopolitical interests that were behind NATO's attacks on Serbia.<sup>95</sup> Myrzakmatov's book carries colour plates of his supporters staging demonstrations in Osh against the perceived threat of foreign intervention, carrying banners with slogans like 'We will not allow Kyrgyzstan to be broken apart' and, in English, 'No OSCE police' and 'Say "NO" to Kyrgyz Kosovo!'.

It might appear that there is a contradiction between organizing a 'year of strengthening the relations, concordance and friendship between ethnic groups in the city of Osh', and imposing unambiguously Kyrgyz statues upon the landscape of Osh. I put this directly to Myrzakmatov in an interview in 2011.<sup>96</sup> He replied, 'By building statues of Barsbek, of Manas, we are strengthening the Kyrgyz state and thereby are guarding the peace between the peoples.' In this view, the reason for ethnic tensions is the weakness of the Kyrgyz state project and the lack of a strong national ideology: inter-ethnic peace in Osh is thus to be guaranteed through unity (*birimdik*) by creating loyalty to a strong state with a clear Kyrgyz character and ideology. That is to be achieved through the use of Kyrgyz language and the symbolic reinforcement of the Kyrgyzness of Osh as an integral part of the Kyrgyz state. Although interpreted as dangerous nationalism by foreign analysts, this has a rationale in its own terms and needs to be seen as the main 'policy response' of the mayor of Osh to the violence of 2010. As the next section shows, it is radically different from that of the international community.

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<sup>92</sup> Orozmatova, Barchinai, 'Deputattar Osh shaardyk Kengeksinin XXX sessiyasy' [The 30th session of the deputies of Osh municipal council], *Osh Shamy*, 13 October 2011.

<sup>93</sup> 'Osh shaarynyn meri M. Myrzakmatovdun Barsbek kagandyn aykelin achuu azeminde sozy' [The words of Osh mayor M. Myrzakmatov at the opening of the statue of Barsbek khaghan], *Osh Shamy*, 20 October 2011.

<sup>94</sup> 'Osh shaarynyn meri M. Myrzakmatov: "El aralyk beytarap komissira uluttar aralyk mamilesi kurchtuuga bagyttalghan butum chygardy'" [The independent international commission has issued its conclusions about the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations], *Osh Shamy*, 7 May 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Mamytov, Abdiraim, 'Koogalandan kiyinki kooptuu oyundar' [Dangerous games after the riot], *Osh Shamy*, 28 May 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Interview, 28 November 2011, Osh.

## 6. UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

In the aftermath of the June 2010 violence, there have been numerous international policy responses. These entail the actions and statements of neighbouring and more distant states, major intergovernmental and international agencies, and smaller international non-governmental agencies of all stripes. Their activities have included the provision of humanitarian and longer-term development aid, the production of investigative reports, a large-scale inquiry, bilateral cooperation with the Kyrgyz government and Osh municipal authorities, and cooperation with local NGOs on a plethora of programmes including promoting reconciliation and the protection of human rights.

This section is not an attempt to exhaustively summarize and evaluate them. Rather, it explores how well some of these interventions have understood and grappled with the challenges related to Kyrgyz nationalism. It is based on an analysis of published reports, and also interviews with representatives of international actors in Kyrgyzstan, local agencies who worked with them and individuals who participated in their programmes.<sup>97</sup>

By and large, international actors have failed to understand the trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism and its role in conditioning responses to the Osh violence.<sup>98</sup> This leads to two problematic assumptions shaping policy, each of which will be discussed below. The first is that nationalism is a pathology that can be isolated to a few extreme individuals in politics and the media, and be eradicated by a central government that is willing and able to do so. The second is that it is therefore feasible to promote and foster the full civic reintegration of Uzbeks as citizens of an inclusive state. These assumptions do not take proper account of Kyrgyz nationalism, and, as a result, many policies proposed or pursued are unrealistic. Some are even dangerously counter-productive, playing into the hands of nationalists and fuelling a backlash against the Uzbek minority community whose interests they seek to protect.

### Misdiagnosing nationalism

The first erroneous assumption proceeding from the international community's misunderstanding of Kyrgyz nationalism is the misdiagnosis of it as an isolated streak of extremism in Osh that could be contained by concerted action from Bishkek.<sup>99</sup> The International Crisis Group's 2012 report, 'Kyrgyzstan: Widening Ethnic Divisions in the South', is typical of this. It largely blames the plight of Uzbeks in Osh on the 'anti-Uzbek policies' of the city's mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, 'an ardent Kyrgyz nationalist' by whom the city is 'dominated.'<sup>100</sup> The report is very superficial. For example, at one point it focuses on his 'program of monumental architecture' aimed at 'reconfiguring the city's identity to emphasise Kyrgyz roots.' This is a correct observation of a disturbing process. However, it then says that he has erected monuments to 'Manas, Kurmanjan Datka, and other Kyrgyz leaders,' although Myrzakmatov has not erected a statue of Kurmanjan Datka – that statue in Osh dates to the Akaev period. Likewise, it goes on to say that 'another commemorates Kyrgyz nomadic traditions', an observation followed by some brief notes on the ethnic history of the Fergana Valley, and an implication that a better statue to erect would be one of Babur.<sup>101</sup> It does not apparently bother to discover the subject of this other statue – presumably Alymbek, who is recognized by both Uzbek and Kyrgyz historians as an important leader at a time when the Fergana Valley lacked ethno-territorial division.

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<sup>97</sup> As these interviews were largely conducted under guarantees of anonymity, it has obviously not been possible to attribute them.

<sup>98</sup> It is recognized that a major challenge facing international organizations is that of ensuring the impartiality of local staff who play important roles in receiving, transmitting and reporting understandings to foreign managers, directors and policy-makers.

<sup>99</sup> This is also commonly true of academic analysis. Thus, for example, Marlène Laruelle correctly recognizes that nationalism is 'an increasingly dominant psychological frame for interpreting Kyrgyzstan's problems', but goes on to isolate this 'wave of nationalism' to southern leaders who represent 'ethno-nationalist radicalism.' See Laruelle, 'The paradigm of nationalism in Kyrgyzstan'.

<sup>100</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Kyrgyzstan', p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



The report writes with bewilderment that Myrzakmatov ‘enjoys considerable approval among broad segments of southern Kyrgyz society – including among the younger, better educated and urbanised social groups that might have been expected to take a more liberal and conciliatory position.’ This is indicative of its failure to grasp the importance of Kyrgyz nationalism as a force in the country. As a result, the thrust of the report’s recommendations is, first, positive discrimination towards Uzbeks and, secondly, the removal or marginalization of Myrzakmatov. It recommends that international organizations and foreign governments should make clear to Myrzakmatov that discriminatory policies will damage Kyrgyzstan’s ‘access to international funding,’ and should make ‘judicious use of its financial leverage’ to ‘encourage’ Bishkek to ‘take action in the south.’<sup>102</sup>

A similar failure to grasp Kyrgyz nationalism pervades other international actors. The Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission’s second headline recommendation was that the country’s name should be changed from ‘Kyrgyz Republic’ to ‘Republic of Kyrgyzstan’ as this name is supposedly ‘more responsive to the civic basis of nation building.’<sup>103</sup> This was not only condescending and arrogant – as if outsiders can tell a country what it should call itself – but betrayed a belief that Kyrgyz nationalism was a limited problem that could be dealt with by superficial gestures. It was seized on by the Kyrgyz media as evidence that outsiders were hostile to Kyrgyz statehood, stoking the nationalist sentiment it purported to challenge.<sup>104</sup>

A representative of the international community engaged in political development activities in Kyrgyzstan voiced disdain that Uzbek leaders in Osh exhibited ‘lethargy’ in not challenging Myrzakmatov, as his organization was seeking to do.<sup>105</sup> He went on to express shock that his organization, and international organizations in general, ‘have totally lost our credibility’ in the eyes of the Kyrgyz press and populace, and blamed Myrzakmatov for this to a substantial degree. Another representative of a foreign organization engaged in high-level political activities told me of disappointment that president Atambaev was ‘quite nationalistic’ by opining that the Uzbeks ought to ‘learn Kyrgyz, so that they can get government jobs.’<sup>106</sup>

This reaction to Atambaev’s remarks is revealing. It is noteworthy that most of the reports written by international organizations contain recommendations directed exclusively at the Kyrgyz government and the international community; hardly any give suggestions to either Osh’s municipal authorities or to Uzbeks. This is bizarre as these will be two constituencies crucial in stabilizing ethnic relations in the long run. An exception is Neil Melvin’s insightful report. He recognizes that ‘nationalism’ is not a problem that can be isolated as a pathology of a few individuals, but that ‘all of the parties in the parliament reflect the new nationalist mood to some degree.’<sup>107</sup> This has meant that the Soviet concept of the ‘titular nation’s’ leading role ‘has been reinforced as the basis of nation building far above that of citizenship and rule of law.’ Therefore, he goes on, issues such as the role of the Kyrgyz language and the place of specifically Kyrgyz history and culture ‘are likely to be key in the years ahead.’

## The advocacy of civic reintegration

The second problem arising from the international community’s failure to grasp Kyrgyz nationalism is the assumption that it is feasible to promote and foster the civic reintegration of Uzbeks as citizens of an inclusive state. This assumption permeates the work of many international organizations. The Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Committee’s first recommendation was that ‘The State should take a strong public stand against extreme nationalism and ethnic exclusivity by declaring that Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic society and facilitating the integration of its minorities into all

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, pp. 15-16.

<sup>103</sup> Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (2011), ‘Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry into the Events in Southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010’, p 83.

<sup>104</sup> For example, ‘Osh Shaarynyn meri M. Myrzakmatov: El Aralyk Beytarap komissiya uluttar aralyk mamilesi kurchtuuga bagyttalghan butum chygardy’ [The independent international commission has issued its conclusions about the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations], *Osh Shamy*, 7 May 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Anonymous interview, 26 September 2011, by telephone.

<sup>106</sup> Anonymous interview, Bishkek, 24 November 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Melvin, Neil (2011) *Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence*. (Washington DC: Central Eurasia Project), p. 44.

spheres of public life.’<sup>108</sup> The *Joint Economic Assessment* published by Kyrgyzstan’s major international donors following the June violence stated that ‘the government of the Kyrgyz republic is encouraged to commit to building a government and civil service representative of the nation’s ethnic diversity.’<sup>109</sup>

In response to its disturbing findings of systematic and widespread injustice towards Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, Amnesty International recommended that the Kyrgyz government create ‘specialist units of investigators, prosecutors and judges’ to investigate allegations of injustice, and that ‘Appointments to these units should be ethnically and gender balanced.’ Likewise, the international community ‘should provide funding, training and technical assistance to the June 2010 specialist units in order to ensure that they can function independently and effectively and deliver justice without prejudice.’<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the International Crisis Group, after carefully detailing a shocking catalogue of abuses of Uzbeks, recommends ‘The appointment, or reappointment, of qualified Uzbeks to positions in local government, from civil administration through the police to education’, and encouraged UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to be ‘calling for a truly inclusive political process.’

These goals are laudable and modelled on positive discrimination and ethnic minority inclusion policies in other countries. But they are ill-suited to contemporary Kyrgyzstan. In the first place, they do not take account of how the clan/network model of politics works – it is important not only for recruitment, but also for advancement and promotion. Even if a headline government policy succeeded in placing numerous Uzbeks in state employment, what of their future? Promotion and advancement is, like recruitment, dependent to a substantial degree on networks and connections. This, combined with prejudice and antipathy given rampant aggressive nationalism, would work against Uzbeks. As a prominent Uzbek human rights activist in Osh put it to me, ‘it isn’t simply a matter of recruiting. When people are mistreated, when their career paths are closed off and they are forced to do all sorts of menial tasks and not given the responsibility they should be, then they will just leave. It is a real problem.’<sup>111</sup>

As well as networks, promotion and success also depend on the ability to pay bribes, as Johan Engvall’s research demonstrates.<sup>112</sup> With substantial Osh Uzbek wealth dissipated since June 2010 through theft and destruction of property, loss of livelihoods and payments of extortion money to gangs and security forces, Uzbeks would find it relatively harder to progress along this pathway. Furthermore, properly incorporating Uzbeks into the security forces through military service – which most manage to avoid – could be highly dangerous to them, owing to problems of ‘hazing’ (violent/humiliating initiation ceremonies).<sup>113</sup> For example, in December 2011, 15 ethnic Kyrgyz conscripts deserted *en masse* from the same unit after complaining about violent assaults by officers, reflecting a military culture that has allegedly led to many deaths in the Kyrgyz army.<sup>114</sup> It is easy to imagine that, compounded by racism, Uzbek conscripts would fare even worse in such a culture.<sup>115</sup>

Even if the issue is reduced to political participation, that is also dangerous. The violence in 2010 was precipitated in part by the attempts of Jalalabad MP Kadyrjon Batyrov to participate more fully in Kyrgyzstan’s political life.<sup>116</sup> Not only was the Kyrgyz backlash against him intense, but many

<sup>108</sup> Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, ‘Report’, p. 83.

<sup>109</sup> Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund & The World Bank (2010), ‘Joint Economic Assessment: Kyrgyz Republic – Reconciliation, Recovery and Reconstruction’, p. 39.

<sup>110</sup> Amnesty International (2011), ‘Still Waiting for Justice: One Year on From the Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan’. (London: Amnesty International).

<sup>111</sup> Interview, Osh, 25 November 2011.

<sup>112</sup> Engvall, Johan (2011), ‘In Kyrgyzstan, corruption is not a problem for the state, it IS the state’, *Turkish Weekly Journal*, 31 December.

<sup>113</sup> The alleged racist abuse of Uzbeks in the Soviet military was a major grievance in the Uzbek SSR’s late-Soviet sovereignty movement. See Critchlow, James (1991), *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: a Soviet republic’s road to sovereignty* (Boulder, Westview), chapter 9.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Kyrgyz Army “Deserters” Turn Themselves In To Military’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 9 December 2011.

<sup>115</sup> This makes the suggestion of employing more Uzbeks in the police force even less realistic for military service is generally a prerequisite for police recruitment. See Matveeva, Anna, Sarin, Igor and Faizullaev, Bahrom (2012), ‘Kyrgyzstan: Tragedy in the South’, *Ethnopolitics Papers*, No 17, p.5.

<sup>116</sup> This is chronicled succinctly in Melvin, *Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan*, pp. 16-18.

Uzbeks were alarmed that his activist stance would backfire.<sup>117</sup> Given this history, government and international efforts to encourage the equal participation of Uzbek minorities in the political life of the country could be equally counter-productive at this point in the republic's history. As one Uzbek politician put it to me, Batyrov 'chose the wrong time' to raise the issue of Uzbek civil rights: 'Kyrgyzstan was poor, it had had two revolutions, it was unstable [...] when the country is developed, richer, only then.'<sup>118</sup>

## Summary

There has been intense international interest in the 2010 violence and its aftermath, with numerous different forms of policy intervention. Their common aim is the promotion of peaceful ethnic relations to enable the long-term maintenance of a thriving Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan. This is laudable. However, by failing to properly understand the trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism, these policies misdiagnose the problem and propose solutions that are either unrealistic or potentially dangerously counter-productive.

Laurent Goetschel and Tobias Hagmann outline how, with the end of the Cold War, a 'peacebuilding' agenda became integrated into the policies and programmes of bilateral donors, multilateral institutions and NGOs. They argue that these agencies have rarely defined what they mean by peace, seldom involved local communities in defining what peace is, and 'deliberately excluded local actors that do not share its geopolitical worldviews.'<sup>119</sup> Donor-led interventions, they continue, often ignore or elbow out local concepts of peace and how it is produced, and thus become ineffective or irrelevant. This is clearly observable in Kyrgyzstan: foreign organizations have failed to understand Kyrgyz (and to an extent Uzbek) concepts of peace, and thus failed to grasp social dynamics and the feasibility and implications of proposing models for political development devised elsewhere.

Considering the condition of Bedouin minorities in Israel, Oren Yiftachel argues that Israel is an 'ethnocratic' regime, which presents itself as a democracy yet whose main project is the 'ethnicization' of the social, economic and political life of the country in favour of the titular nation.<sup>120</sup> Under such conditions, minorities focus not upon the struggle for full participation in the state as equal citizens, but on creating conditions for the survival of their group in the state until such a time as they can seek full civil rights.<sup>121</sup> In comparative work in Sri Lanka, Nihal Perera argues that most subordinated classes in history have not been afforded the luxury of open, organized political activity, yet often manage to create their own conditions for survival.<sup>122</sup> The condition of Uzbeks in Osh is analogous. The current trajectory of exclusive Kyrgyz nationalism and the patronage structures of Kyrgyz society mean that equal participation in a multi-ethnic state is not possible for the time being. That goal of inclusive nationalism needs to be kept alive, and the critique of injustices that prevent it needs to be maintained. But in the meantime, international organizations need to find other ways of supporting Uzbeks and of promoting good relations between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Some measures along these lines are proposed in the final section.

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<sup>117</sup> As one Uzbek put it to me: 'People here can't forgive Batyrov. If he comes to Cheremushka [an Osh Uzbek neighbourhood that saw some of the worst anti-Uzbek violence in June 2010] we'll kill him before the Kyrgyz do. He was seeking his own interests, hoping to be governor of Jalalabad by siding with the temporary government, and see what happened to us. He should never have got involved with the Kyrgyz politics.' Conversation, Uzbek farmer, Osh, 11 October 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Interview, local Uzbek elected politician, Kora-Suu region, 15 October 2011. Although this person is a rival of Batyrov's, I do not have records of his position before the violence.

<sup>119</sup> Goetschel, Laurent and Hagmann, Tobias (2009), 'Civilian peacebuilding: peace by bureaucratic means?' *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 9, No 1, p. 58.

<sup>120</sup> Yiftachel, Oren, and As'ad Ghanem. (2004). 'Understanding "ethnocratic" regimes: the politics of seizing contested territories', *Political Geography*, Vol. 23.

<sup>121</sup> Yiftachel, Oren (2009), 'Critical theory and "gray space": mobilization of the colonized', *City*, Vol. 13, No 2.

<sup>122</sup> Perera, Nihal (2009), 'People's spaces: familiarization, subject formation and emergent spaces in Colombo', *Planning Theory*, Vol. 8, No 1.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has considered the aftermath of violence between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, and the conditions required to stabilize inter-communal relations. Because of the sense of injustice among Uzbeks and the apparent impunity of many perpetrators, further violence is possible (given further political instability) and on a scale potentially greater than before. There are multiple reasons for the June violence, including economic hardship, the burgeoning of organized crime, political turmoil following the April 2010 overthrow of President Bakiev, and the poor preparedness and discipline of the security forces. Without discounting these, this paper has examined one factor, the importance of Kyrgyz nationalism, for understanding responses to what occurred.

Analysis has shown that among all echelons of Kyrgyz society some version of the belief is widespread that the leadership of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks, with shadowy external support, were, under the guise of advancing civil and linguistic rights, secretly plotting to dismember the Kyrgyz state by seeking autonomy or secession. I am aware of no convincing evidence for this, and it is only explicable by understanding the trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism. Nationalism is here not understood as an irrational and aggressive force, but as the political ideology holding that the world should be divided into territorial states each representing a nation.

With independence thrust upon them, Kyrgyz elites found themselves having to make a place for their new country within this framework. However the Soviet system had ill-prepared them for it as they were systematically disadvantaged through the structures of education that denigrated Kyrgyz language in favour of Russian. Demographically and economically, the Kyrgyz occupied marginal positions in the country's two urban centres, Bishkek and Osh. At the same time, the Soviet policy of favouring 'titular majorities' in political administrations created an expectation that Kyrgyz should be in leading positions in the country, when they were palpably not. Against a backdrop of poverty and deep social malaise in a country sandwiched between stronger and richer neighbours, these factors produced a Kyrgyz nationalism that is profoundly insecure about its survival, an insecurity focused on issues of internal unity, geopolitics and language.

This insecurity presents particular problems for the Uzbek minority. Kyrgyz national imaginations are framed by concepts of 'unity' and 'concordance' that refer to particular political concepts derived from a specific narration of Kyrgyz history and a particular understanding of Inner Asian tribal organization and leadership models. According to this, the prosperity of the nation depends upon its constituent elements being loyally united behind a leader. Projected forward, this translates into the idea that for Kyrgyzstan to survive the present crisis and prosper, its class, regional and ethnic groupings must loyally unite behind the idea of a state that is marked by ethnic Kyrgyz language, culture and symbols. Through this lens, the Uzbek minority was seen as an existential threat to Kyrgyz statehood – and one supported by the schemes of foreign governments and powers for their own geopolitical interests. This accounts to some degree for the context of the June 2010 violence, and to a significant degree for the subsequent mistreatment of Uzbeks and antipathy to foreign interventions such as the Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission.

In order to stabilize ethnic relations and secure a decent future for Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, it will be crucial to address these concerns about Kyrgyz statehood. This means addressing the three main issues underlying insecurity about Kyrgyzstan's future – internal unity, geopolitics and language. It can be argued that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union a Central Asian federation might have been more desirable than five independent republics, and it may well be that a future union along the lines of the European model would work better for the region's inhabitants. But for the time being at least, the ideology of nation-building based on the pre-eminent role of the titular ethnic group is the inescapable context that frames Kyrgyzstani politics. The challenge is not to identify errant nationalists within Kyrgyzstan and oppose them: it is to help Kyrgyz nationalism develop an ideology and practice that is more inclusive than exclusive of minorities.

This argument requires qualification and caveats. The causes of the violence in and since 2010 are multiple, and solutions must also be multiple. These will include creating economic opportunities, and massive overhaul of the police and justice organs to create a properly functioning legal system that prosecutes both physical harm and incitement to racial violence and discrimination. Reconciliation will require truth-telling, apology, a thorough and open inquiry, and equal

opportunities for ethnic minorities to advance in political and professional careers. It is important to hold on to the ultimate goal of a society that enables all citizens to fully participate on an equal basis. But this will not happen until insecurities about Kyrgyz statehood are addressed. The Uzbek minority will not be safe in Kyrgyzstan until the Kyrgyz themselves feel that Kyrgyzstan is safe. The suggestions below are not alternatives to securing justice and economic opportunities for all, but rather are complementary. They are not alone sufficient to improve inter-ethnic relations, but they are necessary.

### Suggestions for Kyrgyz society

Kyrgyz society should pursue the goal of **making Kyrgyz the primary language of public life and inter-ethnic communication** in Kyrgyzstan. This has been long since formally stated, but not pursued with sufficient vigour. The Soviet legacy of splitting educational streams according to language, with higher status attached to Russian, both hampers social cohesion and is no longer fit for purpose in independent Kyrgyzstan. Making Russian an official language in 2000-01 was a political move<sup>123</sup> that was ultimately counterproductive because it derailed efforts to develop the use of Kyrgyz, and excited false hopes and fears about the possible status of Uzbek. It is unreasonable to expect minorities to attain everyday fluency in Kyrgyz until the Kyrgyz have done that first, and it is unreasonable to expect most Kyrgyz to do that quickly. It is a goal to be pursued over generations, through dedicated research into the production of materials to enable this to occur based on comparative international experience. At the same time, the secondary role of some other languages should be protected within given spheres: for example, Uzbek and Russian for the upbringing at home and limited schooling of some minorities, as well as confessional use in places of worship; Russian for regional trade, politics and scholarship; English for international trade and scholarship, etc.

The central government in Bishkek and the municipal authorities in Osh and other parts of southern Kyrgyzstan should involve **Uzbeks and other minorities in the project of creating a national identity to address concerns about national unity**. This would involve, for example, routinely inviting Uzbek (and other minority) community leaders to participate visibly at public ceremonies of national and local significance. It would also include ensuring that Uzbek intellectuals have a presence in the humanities sectors of higher-education establishments in Osh, and that they are regularly invited to participate in public events and discussions in the media. This could be furthered if the office of the President or the Academy of Sciences considered establishing a multilingual and multi-disciplinary research institute to investigate, document and promote public knowledge about the contribution of Uzbek and other minority groups to Kyrgyzstan and the lives of those groups in the country.

The Kyrgyz government should prioritize the **resolution of territorial disputes with neighbours** and promote the development of good border-management schemes that facilitate legitimate trans-boundary activity in order to allay fears that territorial integrity is threatened.

The above measures are aimed at addressing the three primary reasons for insecurity of the Kyrgyz national project. At the same time the central government should **develop closer communication channels with Uzbek communities** in southern Kyrgyzstan. This is both to listen to concerns and to promote awareness of initiatives that the central government is taking to assist Uzbeks. The breakdown of Akaev-era patronage networks created a gulf between Bishkek and Osh Uzbeks. The opening of Osh and Jalalabad branches of the Department of Ethnic, Religious Policies and Interaction with Civil Society of the President's Office would help in this regard.

The central government should acknowledge that issues in southern Kyrgyzstan have a **Ferghana Valley-wide dimension**, and it should seek to develop its ongoing support of Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan

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<sup>123</sup> Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian state that grants official language status to Russian. See Landau and Kellner-Heinkele, *Language Politics in Contemporary Central Asia*, p. 150. In his struggle against nationalistic opposition, a beleaguered President Akaev hoped that this move would shore up his support amongst national minorities. See Megoran, 'The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999-2000'.



(i.e. through the scholarships it offers) into a bilateral arrangement where the Uzbekistan government offers similar support to Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan.

It should also continue to articulate a **commitment to a future vision of Osh and Kyrgyzstan as shared space**. As well as narratives of conflict and competition, the ethnic history of Osh can be narrated as one of coexistence of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz with similar religious and linguistic roots and symbiotic economic relationships.<sup>124</sup> Part of the reason for relatively good ethnic relations in the first 15 years of Kyrgyzstan's independence was that President Akaev invested in this narrative. Part of the reason for their deterioration since 2005 was the sidelining of this approach by his successor. The Kyrgyz central and municipal administrations should maintain this particular narrative of Kyrgyz nationalism. They should discourage, challenge (and if necessary prevent and punish) forces inciting racial discrimination and hatred; and encourage the efforts of NGOs, neighbourhood committees, schools, mosques, churches and other bodies to promote understanding and mutual support.

The central government can also stress an ongoing **commitment to inclusive, civic nationalism and effective citizenship** for all. Equal participation in the Kyrgyz state and equal access to justice are impossible for Uzbeks at the moment, owing to the operation of patronage networks and the current exclusionary trajectory of Kyrgyz nationalism. Nonetheless it is a constitutional ideal that needs upholding until conditions change so that its attainment is possible. This entails not only policy, but also rhetoric and slogans, symbolic politics (such as building statues and including minority representatives at national events), and the regulation of hate speech in the media. The protection of ethnic minority citizens from the extremes of nationalism is a crucial responsibility of national as well as local government.

### Suggestions for Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks

In the Soviet period, many Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks attained distinction in the scientific, political, and cultural life of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. With independence, that is no longer an option, and the old schooling system that prepared children for life in an Uzbek-language milieu rather than a Kyrgyz-language one no longer serves them well. It also fuels Kyrgyz fears about Uzbek loyalties, and exacerbates insecurities about Kyrgyz statehood. The upbringing and schooling of young Uzbeks should primarily aim at equipping them to pursue a future in Kyrgyzstan. Eventually the goal is to pursue the goal of realizing their full and equal constitutional rights. In the meantime, the imperative is to maintain community life and presence.

Therefore Uzbek communities should set themselves the goal of **attaining complete fluency in the state language** as a matter of the utmost importance. In doing so, Uzbeks should be proactive in exploring with the Ministry of Education ways to **redesign the Uzbek schooling system** to facilitate this. This will probably involve the increasing replacement of Uzbek with Kyrgyz as the language of instruction for most subjects, but the maintenance of its special place for humanities subjects such as Uzbek literature. This should not be done quickly or in response to hostile populist pressure, for example by sacking ethnic Uzbek teachers and drafting in Kyrgyz staff who are unqualified to teach children in their second language. Rather, it should be done slowly and carefully by drawing on comparative international pedagogical expertise and in close cooperation with national and local educational administrations.<sup>125</sup> At present there do not exist the materials, expertise or resources to make this move comprehensively.

Eventually, it will be necessary to **adapt the system of higher education** in the institutes that have served Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks accordingly. However the preservation of an Uzbek milieu at this level will be important in humanities subjects. It will be crucial to **maintain a viable community of Kyrgyzstani Uzbek intellectuals** able to elaborate what Neil Melvin calls 'a distinct history of

<sup>124</sup> See for example Megoran, 'The background to Osh'.

<sup>125</sup> My opinions here have been informed by interviews with two leading professional Uzbek educationalists in Osh, 16 October 2011 and 29 November 2010. It is important to note that there is a divergence of opinion amongst Osh Uzbeks. Some feel the Soviet-era system of Uzbek language education in all subjects should be preserved; others that it should be radically recast. I am persuaded by this second school of thought.

Uzbeks as part of Kyrgyzstan's society.<sup>126</sup> This may best be done through the existence of bilingual departments of history in Osh's higher education institutes, and/or by the establishment of a dedicated research institute under the sponsorship of the President or Academy of Sciences, as proposed above. Obviously this measure, and the previous one, can only be done in partnership with state funders of higher education.

There has been no evidence of separatism in recent years among Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek leaders should continue to **quash and rebut any hint of separatism**, whether aimed at autonomy or secession, within their own communities. They should also be wary of pursuing constitutionally legitimate forms of political participation that nonetheless might, at this sensitive moment in Kyrgyzstan's history, be misinterpreted as disloyalty to the state. This is not to accept second-class citizenship. Uzbeks should continue to seek justice for themselves and their families when faced with abuse or mistreatment (including by state officials), just as other citizens of Kyrgyzstan should. Like all citizens, they should fight for their rights within the current constitutional provisions and hold Kyrgyzstan to the high ideals that it formally ascribes to. Rather, it is a tactical move to keep a low profile politically for the time being as they work out the strategy for a long-term future in Kyrgyzstan.

### Suggestions for foreign actors

Foreign actors can possibly assist the situation by promoting structural reform of the judiciary, enabling job creation and urban renewal, and encouraging processes of reconciliation and truth-telling by drawing on experiences elsewhere. They can also go to considerable lengths to address the insecurities in Kyrgyz national ideology and thus ease pressure on Uzbeks. In its recommendations for conflict prevention in the Ferghana Valley, Saferworld argue that 'conflict-sensitive economic development' will help reduce tensions.<sup>127</sup> It can be further argued that 'conflict sensitivity' is not simply trying to avoid the impression that the distribution of material aid is seen to disproportionately benefit one group over another. It is endeavouring to make sure that the policies and practices of all foreign actors are designed not to exacerbate ethnic tensions needlessly, by being sensitive to the concerns and trajectories of Kyrgyz nationalism.

Therefore the 'international community' should aim to **make Kyrgyz their primary local language of operations** rather than Russian. For example, documents should be produced primarily in Kyrgyz. New staff, particularly those based in Osh, should be trained in Kyrgyz before Russian, even if it is recognized that this shift can only practically occur following a lead from Kyrgyz society. NGO workers and academics who either moved from working in Uzbekistan when that became politically difficult, or who work primarily among Uzbeks in Osh, should learn Kyrgyz as well as Uzbek. In some cases, some of these people adopted Uzbek names and personas in Uzbekistan that they continue to use in inappropriate ways in Kyrgyzstan.

Foreign actors must also be careful to **consider how aid is perceived**. For example, in the post-June 2010 reconstruction, rebuilt Uzbek homes were visibly flagged under the names and symbols of foreign organizations. In contrast, the extensive road-building and other infrastructural work funded by donors to benefit the entire city was not so visibly marked as being the product of foreign aid, enabling the populist mayor to take credit for this work.<sup>128</sup> As a result, many Kyrgyz in Osh have interpreted the aftermath of the violence as foreigners supporting Uzbeks with the mayor alone helping Kyrgyz, fuelling the anti-Uzbek backlash. Foreign actors should also **avoid inflammatory symbolic gestures** that exacerbate nationalist sentiment, such as suggesting the name of the country be changed or ignorantly criticizing the construction of certain monuments without understanding what they are or represent.

<sup>126</sup> Melvin, *Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan*, p.50.

<sup>127</sup> Saferworld (2011), 'Looking Back to Look Forward: Learning the Lessons of Conflict Prevention in the Ferghana Valley', (London: Saferworld), p.32.

<sup>128</sup> For example, 'Oshtogy ayaldamalar ondogluuda' [Osh's bus-stops are being renovated], *Osh Shamy*, 30 June 2011. In this report, the restoration of some 90 bus-stops around Osh is credited to the mayor, whereas the funding provided by international donors is not mentioned.

Rather than defending the outdated Soviet system of minority-language education in its present form, foreign actors should work with progressive elements in Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek community and with the Kyrgyz educational authorities to **support the redesign of the Uzbek schooling system** by assisting a partial transition to Kyrgyz instruction (see above). Foreign governments and organizations can assist by facilitating the involvement of international pedagogical experts on this theme.

**Foreign actors should focus on working with institutions rather than individuals.** Demonizing certain individuals as embodiments of irrational nationalism backfires to the detriment of the ability of foreign organizations to promote good ethnic relations. They should recognize that Kyrgyz nationalism is an inescapable element of the political landscape that must be worked with to curtail its exclusionary trends and promote an inclusive model of nation-building.

Finally, foreign actors should recognize the trans-boundary framing of the issues within Kyrgyzstan, and work with the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to **support the higher education of Kyrgyz and Uzbek minorities** respectively.

### Suggestions for Uzbekistan

The government of Uzbekistan was widely praised in Kyrgyzstan for its perceived role in calming the violence by assisting refugees without intervening directly in support of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks. (There have even been unconfirmed reports that Uzbekistan's security forces took swift precautionary measures to protect its ethnic Kyrgyz population from retaliatory attacks.) Uzbeks in Osh, however, felt betrayed that more support was not forthcoming, as they believed Uzbekistan's long-standing unwillingness to identify with them emboldened those who attacked them. In a region where most governments (including that of Kyrgyzstan) provide some measure of cultural assistance to co-ethnics abroad, this distance could potentially backfire by creating anger in Uzbekistan that a future populist leader there could exploit, to the detriment of good relations between the two republics. Uzbekistan must thus strike a difficult balance between not exacerbating existing Kyrgyz suspicions and also demonstrating some moral identification with co-ethnics in Kyrgyzstan.

Uzbekistan should therefore continue to assure Kyrgyzstan that it **respects its territorial integrity** and would strongly oppose any irredentist movement within it. The successful completion of a mutually satisfying boundary delimitation treaty would assist here, alongside a border-management system that facilitates trade and the ability of Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan to maintain trans-boundary social links.

Uzbekistan's authorities should also aim to develop a role in supporting **a redesigned Uzbek educational system in Kyrgyzstan**. This would not be the provision of resources (which are often inappropriate due to incidental material related specifically to Uzbekistan's state-building project), but of exchange programmes for school and university-level students of Uzbek literature and language. This should be unexceptional: Iran supports an Iranian studies centre in Osh State University, Turkey the teaching of Turkish in schools and Bishkek's Manas university, and Russia some Russian-language higher educational establishments.<sup>129</sup> To avoid inflaming Kyrgyz fears, this would be part of a bilateral agreement that sees Kyrgyzstan supporting the education of Uzbekistan's Kyrgyz citizens (see next recommendation).

Finally, Uzbekistan should do more to **assure Kyrgyzstan's population that its co-ethnics in the country are treated well**. As outlined in section 4, the perception that Uzbekistani Kyrgyz are relatively disadvantaged in comparison with Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks is a source of great anger in Kyrgyzstan. Measures such as bilateral educational (at school and higher levels) and professional (for example agricultural) exchange programmes, and invitations to Kyrgyzstani journalists to meet Uzbekistan's Kyrgyz community, are needed to demonstrate material and institutional support for the Kyrgyz community. Ideally this measure and the previous one would occur simultaneously, as part of a programme of bilateral exchange that is seen to treat Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan the same as Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan.

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<sup>129</sup> This is the outline of an argument put to me in an interview with a leading figure in Uzbek education in Kyrgyzstan, 25 October 2011.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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