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Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary

Pressures of Being President: Kyrgyzstan Today and Tomorrow

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President of Kyrgyzstan (2010-11)

16 May 2012

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Summary

The Central Asian countries have all partly or entirely successfully completed their transition from former Soviet republics to independent nation states. However, Kyrgyzstan stands out as the first country to abandon authoritarian rule and embark on the path of democracy. It is not for nothing that Vladimir Putin called the Kyrgyz revolution the beginning of the Arab spring. The main challenge as interim president after the revolution was to ensure an organised and peaceful transition.

After the violent ousting of President Bakiyev, decisive steps were to put forward a new constitution and hold parliamentary elections. This was successfully implemented by the interim government in only three months. However, the final outcome of the elections was difficult to accept when it turned out that Bakiyev supporters won the majority of votes (Ata-Zhurt party). However, these elections were the most fair and just in the entire region and no electoral fraud took place. Parliament is a mirror of society and therefore everyone had to accept the surprising results – this is how democracy works. The priorities for Kyrgyzstan are now to learn the ‘rules of the game’ of a parliamentary democracy, a system which has no tradition in Kyrgyzstan or in the wider region. Even literature on parliamentarism is rarely translated into Russian or Central Asian languages. The challenge is immense for Kyrgyzstan.

Important next steps include reform of the court system - the cornerstone of a functioning democracy, but still a Gordian knot in Kyrgyz politics - as well as strengthening the media (in particular installing public TV channels) and investigative journalism. Kyrgyzstan has a vibrant civil society, but an inexperienced media. Radio Liberty is a good model and has a tremendous impact on Kyrgyz society.

The events of June 2010 were a challenge for the interim government. The decision for an international inquiry was difficult but important in order to prove that the events could not be labelled as genocide. It was also the first open international inquiry in the post-Soviet space. These were difficult lessons for Kyrgyzstan’s young democracy, but there is no alternative other than to continue on this path. The window of opportunity is still open and Kyrgyzstan is an important model for other countries in the region.

Questions and Discussion

Asked to what extent Western governments were supportive of the government after the second Kyrgyz revolution in 2010, the speaker criticized a reluctant attitude from Western governments to bringing President Bakiyev to trial in Kyrgyzstan. The main argument was that a fair trial cannot be provided in Kyrgyzstan's courts. British authorities have not been especially helpful although the President's son, Maxim Bakiyev and some former government members have reportedly found refuge in London. On the other hand, Russia strongly supported the overthrow of Bakiyev as it felt betrayed - Bakiyev had promised not to lease the Manas base to the US.

On the question of Uzbek minorities, the speaker emphasized that rebuilding confidence between the ethnic groups is a long-term process which requires time and effort. Although Uzbeks have not been represented in local and parliamentary elections, some Uzbek representatives are members of government and administration. Further measures to support the Uzbek minority include the establishment of Uzbek schools and a military school in Osh to encourage Uzbeks to join the Kyrgyz armed forces. Furthermore, mass media will be further opened up to Uzbeks. But nationalist sentiments are still widespread, especially in southern Kyrgyzstan. A further development is the increasing strength of Islamic fundamentalists, especially Wahhabis and the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement.

Asked about economic policy, the speaker pointed to the strong economic and financial competence of the current government team. The main pillar of Kyrgyzstan's economy is gold mining, but Kyrgyzstan also has a competitive garment industry and a strongly diversified economy not dependent on oil and gas exports. Georgia is a good economic model for Kyrgyzstan and exchange between Georgian and Kyrgyz representatives continues. Surrounded by economically important powers such as Russia, China and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan has to use its strategic position to economic advantage. China, Kyrgyzstan's number one donor, will build a new railway towards Uzbekistan which will strengthen Kyrgyzstan's position as an important transit country. Although the railway is not popular amongst the population, it will be a vital trade route. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan aims to join the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus in the near future. Kyrgyzstan would benefit from the ECU and get better access to the Russian market. Kazakhstan supports Kyrgyzstan's accession but negotiations with Russia and Belarus are still ongoing.

Asked whether Kyrgyzstan is interested in the Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan pipeline, the speaker replied that Kyrgyzstan has no intention of importing gas from Iran, but the Kyrgyz government does aim to diversify its fuel supply. For that purpose, Kazakhstan is building a refinery in Kyrgyzstan and negotiations on gas imports with Azerbaijan are continuing.

Organized crime was a contributing factor to the June 2010 events and is still one of the most difficult problems, especially against the background of drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan is involved in talks with US and Russia as well as the SCO to tackle this threat to the entire region.

The withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan is a further challenge for Kyrgyzstan because of the close proximity between these two countries. From a Kyrgyz point of view, it is of utmost importance to design a convincing roadmap for the next decade with a strong emphasis on Afghanistan's economic recovery.

Kyrgyzstan appreciates the new role of China which has become increasingly active in conflict mediation in Central Asia, for instance between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, relations with Russia and US are also important for Kyrgyzstan and it will stand by its promise to lease Manas to the US until 2014.

The speaker stressed the importance of women in Kyrgyzstan's government. As the first female president in the region after the end of the Soviet Union, she has appointed a female prosecutor general as well as a female chairman of the national bank. The deputy prime minister and other ministers are also women. 80% of the NGOs in Kyrgyzstan are led by women.