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## **A Silk Road to Democracy?**

FAST Country Risk Profile

Kyrgyzstan

**Reto Weyermann**

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[www.swisspeace.org](http://www.swisspeace.org)

[info@swisspeace.ch](mailto:info@swisspeace.ch)

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Kyrgyzstan

Reto Weyermann

## About the Author

**Reto Weyermann** holds an M.A. in Political Science, Slavic Languages and Literatures, and International Law from the University of Bern. He joined swisspeace in 2003 as a FAST research analyst (FAST: Early Recognition of Tension and Fact Finding), specializing in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) as well as the North Caucasus. During his studies, he was a visiting student at Moscow State Institute for International Relations under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MGIMO), and he worked for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in its Central Asian Conflict Prevention Program.

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## Abstract/Zusammenfassung/Résumé

The year 2005 is decisive for Kyrgyzstan's political future. Parliamentary elections at the end of February and, even more so, presidential elections in October provide an opportunity for the first democratic change of power in Central Asia, because the incumbent President, Askar Akaev, has repeatedly stated that he will abide by the constitution and step down. If he were to stay, thereby breaking his promises, and in case of electoral fraud, there is a possibility for political turmoil in the country, which could spill over into other dimensions than the political. The country's ethnic diversity and its history of interethnic conflict pose a certain risk for ethnically motivated violence, if ethnicity were to be exploited irresponsibly by political actors for their needs. However, as the successful privatization of agricultural land proves, potential dangers can be eliminated if there is enough political will and, if necessary, pressure from the outside.

Das Jahr 2005 ist entscheidend für Kirgistans politische Zukunft. Die Wahlen für das Parlament Ende Februar und mehr noch die Präsidentschaftswahl im Oktober bieten dem Land die Gelegenheit, den ersten demokratischen Machtwechsel in Zentralasien zu vollziehen: Der amtierende Präsident, Askar Akaev, hat mehrmals verkündet, er werde sich an die Verfassung halten und zurücktreten. Falls er in Missachtung seiner eigenen Versprechen doch im Amt bleiben und es zu groben Wahlfälschungen kommen sollte, besteht die Gefahr von politischen Unruhen, welche sich auf andere Themenbereiche ausdehnen könnten. Das Völkergemisch und Erfahrungen mit interethnischen Konflikten stellen eine gewisse Gefahr dar für ethnisch motivierte Gewalt. Dies würde aber eine verantwortungslose Instrumentalisierung von Ethnizität durch politische Akteure für ihre eigenen Zwecke bedingen. Die erfolgreiche Privatisierung von Landwirtschaftsland zeigt aber, dass mögliche Gefahren mit genügend politischem Willen und nötigenfalls Druck von aussen auch beseitigt werden können.

Pour l'avenir politique du Kirghizistan, l'année 2005 est décisive. Les élections parlementaires à la fin de février ainsi que les élections présidentielles en octobre offrent la possibilité du premier changement démocratique de gouvernement en Asie Centrale: le Président actuel, Askar Akaev, a promis plusieurs fois qu'il ne se représenterait pas pour un nouveau mandat, comme l'exige la constitution du pays. S'il se représentait quand-même, malgré ses promesses, et en cas de massives manipulations électorales, des troubles politiques ne peuvent pas être exclus. Il y a même un certain risque que des dimensions autres que politiques puissent être touchées. La diversité ethnique et les conflits inter-ethniques du passé représentent un risque d'éruption d'actes de violence à caractère ethnique, si le facteur ethnique devait être exploité par des agents politiques irresponsables, dans l'intérêt de leurs visées personnelles. Cependant, comme l'a prouvé la privatisation réussie de la terre agricole, il est possible d'éliminer les dangers potentiels avec de la volonté politique et, si nécessaire, par la pression extérieure.

# 1 Preface

The present report is part of a series of working papers published by FAST International, the Early Warning Program of swisspeace. In this context we would like to point out briefly the focus and main aim of this paper.

FAST's core task is the early warning of violent conflict with the aim of linking it to early action or response in order to prevent crises situations from deteriorating. Linked to that, FAST also looks at identifying "windows of opportunity" for the purpose of peace-building. Several tools are applied in the combined methodology used by FAST, in order to analyze developments in the countries of concern. The core issues that influence the development of the country are analyzed by looking at root and proximate causes, as well as intervening factors. This Country Risk Profile is, thus, the continuation of this task, providing an in-depth study of Kyrgyzstan by looking closely at several selected core issues that shape the degree of conflictivity.

The underlying tool for this analysis is the Analytical Framework,<sup>1</sup> which points out the single factors building up to the outbreak of a conflict and/or influencing a conflictive situation. By applying this tool, the analysts of FAST are continuously updating the status of developments in the countries monitored. The Analytical Framework, hence, provides an up-to-date set of the key issues critical for the further development of the country.

Since FAST strives to link early warning with early action, the last chapter of this paper will place strong emphasis on discussing strategic options. These options are directed at end-users of FAST products and shall hopefully be incorporated into their ongoing decision making process.

We hope that this paper will provide the reader with food for thought on the further developments and the necessary steps to take in order to resolve current problems and crises in Kyrgyzstan by peaceful means.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the Analytical Framework and the definition of root causes, proximate causes and intervening factors please see <http://www.swisspeace.org/fast/analytical.htm>, see document "Background information on FAST's Analytical Framework."



## 2 Introduction

The FAST Country Risk Profile Kyrgyzstan will discuss in detail the following issues: the cleavage between the government and the opposition, privatization of agricultural land, and the complex of topics comprising ethnicity, regionalism, borders, and the interactions thereof. The author is well aware that the conflict potential for Kyrgyzstan cannot be entirely covered by these three issues only – there are arguably many other issues that one has to consider for an overall assessment. Topics such as corruption, religious extremism, or economic inequality are not covered in-depth in this paper but may or may not be touched upon within the scope of the three issues. For an overview of other relevant topics please see the FAST Analytical Framework in the Appendix.

The reasons for having chosen the three above mentioned issues are the following:

On the political scene, 2005 is a key year for Kyrgyzstan's history. Despite many shortcomings and a negative trend since the second half of the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan still has the most liberal political system in Central Asia, and there is a real chance for the first peaceful "change of guards" in the region: President Akaev is the first president in a highly autocratic environment who has publicly stated that he will leave his post in 2005. This is all the more significant if one considers the concentration of political power with the presidency and the neighboring countries "leaders'" artificial extension of their term of office and, consequently, their hold on power. However, certain activist groups in Kyrgyzstan do not believe in the President keeping his word and deeply distrust the authorities. International observation missions for the parliamentary and presidential elections should therefore guard against election fraud. In case of electoral fraud political turmoil cannot be ruled out. Recent events in Ukraine with its so called "Orange Revolution" have shifted the focus of international attention towards Kyrgyzstan, and many an analyst points to the possibility of a so-called domino-theory, arguing that after Georgia and Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan will be the next candidate for democratization by a whatever colored revolution. This paper does not want to nourish such speculations but aims at providing the reader with a concise analysis of the political system and the possible scenarios and their impact on the conflict situation in the country.

The second issue, the privatization of agricultural land, has been chosen in order to set some kind of counterpoint to the ever-present pessimistic scenarios on Central Asia in general and Kyrgyzstan in particular: Despite an enormous potential for conflict (which will be discussed later on), the privatization of agricultural land has been a success story, without any of the fears voiced on the eve of privatization having materialized. This chapter will show that the huge problems the country is facing notwithstanding, change towards the better is possible.

Deeply intertwined with the political processes and land privatization are ethnic, regional, and border issues: The only cases of political violence Kyrgyzstan has seen so far are either on political-regional or resource-ethnic grounds.<sup>2</sup> Therefore a thorough assessment of both of these factors is vital. Ethnic diversity, scarcity of agricultural land, and unclear borders pose, if exploited, a remarkable threat to both Kyrgyzstan's stability and its sovereignty. Nevertheless, as will be shown later on, talk of any "Balkanization" of Central Asia is highly risky and could easily turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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<sup>2</sup> Noteworthy are the bloody Özgön and Osh riots in 1990 over the allocation of land, housing, and rumors on ethnic criteria, as well as the clashes between protesters and police in the southern district of Aksy in 2002 on political grounds. These events will be discussed later on.

## 3 The Cleavage Between Government and Opposition

### 3.1 Introduction

The last fifteen years have seen the emergence of more than twenty newly independent states in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, along with regime changes in several other countries in the region. Despite the huge differences between these countries, all faced similar challenges with regard to establishing a democratic, law-based political system. After the ouster of the old regimes and/or the obtaining of independence, many countries have seen a first period of turmoil, followed by the establishment of a certain set of political rules. In most of these countries, the first change of power after these new rules were imposed proved to be crucial for the further development, in as much as the political direction is determined. Several countries, however, have not yet seen any change of power, be such democratic or undemocratic in nature.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, several questions remain unanswered in these countries: Do the different players abide by the rules set by the institutional framework that has been put in place? Is there a fair chance for "everyone" to obtain his or her share of power? Will those who lose the battle accept that they have not lost the war, that there is a fair chance to win next time?

If Kyrgyzstan succeeded in a peaceful and "democratic" change of power at the highest level, it would be the first country in Central Asia to achieve this, a fact that should not be underestimated by different international actors active in the region. Thanks to such a development, Kyrgyzstan could regain its reputation as an "Island of Democracy." However, failing to provide for a peaceful and "democratic" change of power would deeply impact the country's stability, mainly from an economic point of view: The USA, the main bilateral donor and a major contributor to international organizations' aid programs, stated publicly (AFP, 17 July 2004; Kyrgyzinfo, 13 October 2004) that they expect a new regime. Therefore, it is highly probable that a prolonged government of the incumbent President, Askar Akaev, would not only face an image problem but also economic troubles. This, in turn, could lead to social unrest in the country, caused by the widened gap between the thin but extremely rich elite and the common people.

As Kyrgyzstan will be holding parliamentary elections in the spring of 2005 and presidential elections in fall 2005, it is possible that the confrontations between the government and the opposition will increase. Not only the scandal on bugging-devices found in the offices of opposition members of parliament in January 2004, but also the re-grouping of several opposition parties during 2004 are among the possible tensions the country might face in the election run-ups, especially in the light of the bloody Aksy shootings of April 2002 (see chapter 3.3.). The cleavage between the government and the opposition demands special attention from the viewpoint of early warning. This section therefore aims at answering questions such as the following: Who will be challenging whom? By what means? On the basis of which arguments? What are the perspectives of success for the different parties?

<sup>3</sup> These countries are: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In these four countries, it is still the old nomenklatura that has been ruling the country since Soviet times.

And, last but not least, which are the options to be chosen by the country as well as by the international community in order to keep the political disputes and conflicts on a peaceful, non-violent level?

In order to discuss and analyze the above mentioned topic, this paper will be divided into the following chapters:

1. Definitions
2. Historical Review (beginning with the country's independence)
3. Description of the political system and the different players
4. Outlook

## 3.2 Definitions

In order to ensure a clear discussion in the following chapter, certain definitions must be made. Although the title suggests that there are two blocks – the government and the opposition – neither of them can be described as being homogeneous: The government in the proper sense of the word, actually only includes the Prime Minister and his “staff,” the different ministers. However, when the government is referred to in this paper, the author also includes the presidency, i.e. the President who holds the most significant political power. Within the governmental block, the President’s “family” is also a very important element – all family members hold stakes with regard to economic or political power, which makes them influential in different ways. Their interests may well differ from those of government members who do not belong to the “family.” According to many ordinary Kyrgyz, it is the “family” that holds most of the power in the country.<sup>4</sup> In order to be clear in the analysis below, the author will distinguish and specify the actors accordingly. The general term “government” will be used if the entire governmental camp is concerned; when further differentiation is appropriate, such will be made.

Matters are at least as complicated with regard to the term “the opposition.” From a Western perspective, “opposition” is understood as being those parties not currently in power and having an alternative political agenda. For Kyrgyzstan, this definition does not all that appropriate, because many of the most outspoken critics of the current government are not exponents of political parties, but rather NGO activists working for human and civil rights. All these organizations – be it NGOs or political parties – are mainly person-centered, expressing the needs and viewpoints of their leaders rather than those of a certain segment of the population.<sup>5</sup> Since many of the NGOs are either completely or at least partially Western-funded, a large part of the population perceives them as not being very positive; statements such as “They are only working for their own interests” or

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews in Bishkek, Talas, Naryn and Osh, April 2004.

<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group 2004: Political Transition in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects. Osh/Brussels (11 August). This view has been confirmed by interviews with international and local experts as well as the author’s personal observation.

“They’d better start working like ordinary people do instead of sitting in their offices and receiving foreign money” are common.<sup>6</sup> There can be no doubt that many NGOs do make a difference: However, such NGOs are mainly organizations working on a grassroots level, addressing needs that are of immediate concern to the target group.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.3 Historical Overview

Kyrgyzstan gained its independence in 1991 with the break up of the Soviet Union. As Kyrgyzstan is a mixed presidential-parliamentarian political system,<sup>8</sup> the main focus of interest lies on the presidency, albeit in its interaction with the people, the parliament, and the constitution.

The country’s first President, Askar Akaev, was elected back in 1990 by the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet. After the failed coup d’état against Gorbachev in Moscow, the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet voted for Kyrgyzstan’s independence on 31 August 1991. In October 1991, the Kyrgyz people elected Akaev as their President. The country adopted its first constitution in 1993 and the ruling principles of statehood were outlined as follows:

The Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) shall be a sovereign, unitary, democratic Republic, and it shall be founded as a rule-of-law and secular state.<sup>9</sup>

According to his supporters, in December 1995, Akaev was “re-elected” President for the first term, as it was his first election under the constitution of independent Kyrgyzstan. This distinction became all the more important in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2000: While his opponents insisted on him having served the constitutionally allowed two terms, Akaev himself, together with his supporters, referred to the adoption of the constitution of 1993 (with constitutional referenda in 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003), which meant that the 2000 election would be the second election under the country’s constitution. Akaev won this election fairly unopposed, although the OSCE observer mission stated that:

[...] the 29 October 2000 presidential election in the Kyrgyz Republic, despite some positive features, failed to comply with OSCE commitments for democratic elections [...]<sup>10</sup>

However, the main failures were not to be found on the election day but in the run-up to the elections, with candidates being harassed (leading from intimidation, barring from

<sup>6</sup> Interviews in Bishkek, Yssyk Köl and Jalalabad, April 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Merkel, Wolfgang 1999: Systemtransformation. Opladen: Leske+Budrich. 446.

<sup>9</sup> Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic May 1993, in its latest version of February 2003. Unofficial translation.

<sup>10</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) 2001: Kyrgyz Republic. Presidential Elections October 29, 2000. OSCE/ODIHR Final Report. Warsaw: ODIHR (15 January). 1.

running, to lengthy jail sentences for the possibly most threatening opponent, Feliks Kulov), biased (state) media coverage and irregularities during the tabulation process.<sup>11</sup>

Possibly, the most significant challenge that the young republic has faced with regard to the cleavage between the opposition and the government to date is what is referred to as the Aksy Events of 2002, when police opened fire on a crowd of more than 1,000 demonstrators peacefully protesting oppositional parliamentarian Azimbek Beknazarov's arrest for alleged abuse of power. Six people were killed, and Beknazarov was released. This event shocked the Kyrgyz population, because it was the first time since the bloody clashes in Osh in 1990, that political disputes led to bloodshed. In the aftermath, there were several protest demonstrations in different parts of the country, including the capital Bishkek, where people demanded that these events be investigated and that the responsible persons be punished. President Akaev thereupon introduced certain conciliatory steps, e.g. reshuffling his government (Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev was dismissed) and appointing a joint Constitutional Council by the government and the civil society (political parties and NGOs) that was to work out recommendations for a constitutional reform to be approved of by the voters in a nationwide referendum. However, parallel to the Constitutional Council, the President appointed a working group of legal advisers selected by himself. Within a month's time (January 2003) the new constitution had been worked out and approved of by the people (with an approval rate of over 75 percent). The two questions that were asked at the referendum were as follows:

1. Should the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On a New Version of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic" be adopted?
2. Should Askar Akaev remain President of the Kyrgyz Republic until December 2005 (until the end of his constitutional term) in order to implement the approved constitutional amendments?<sup>12</sup>

The international community mainly criticized the short notice given rather than the referendum's actual content – the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) declined the invitation to observe the referendum due to the short notice. Whether the amendments as such will have a positive or negative impact on political and social life in Kyrgyzstan remains open to discussion: Some points of the constitution aim at strengthening democratic principles and human and civil rights, others (especially the extended competences of the President) leave room for interpretation on the limitations of government activity.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) 2003: Kyrgyz Republic. Constitutional Referendum, February 2, 2003. Political Assessment Report. Warsaw: ODIHR (20 March).

### 3.4 The Political System

German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel (1999: 446) described the political system of the Kyrgyz Republic as a mixed system, situated between parliamentary and presidential systems. However, there is reason to argue that since then, there has been a steady move towards a more accentuated presidential system, especially if the political system is analyzed according to the distinguishing features established by Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart (1999). According to Lijphart, three main features determine whether a political system can be referred to as presidential or parliamentarian:

	<b>Presidential</b>	<b>Parliamentarian</b>
<b>Position of the executive power</b>	Head of government: President, elected for a certain period defined by the constitution	Head of government: Elected Prime Minister or Minister President, dependant on support by the parliament during the period in office; can be overthrown by vote of no confidence
<b>Election of the executive power</b>	Directly or indirectly by the electorate	By the legislative body
<b>Character of the executive power</b>	Advisory body to the President	Collegial or collective, with a head of government more or less powerful

The political system of the Kyrgyz Republic is characterized by a very strong position of the President and can therefore be described as presidential, according to Lijphart. Regarding the first feature, the President of the Kyrgyz Republic cannot be overthrown by a vote of no confidence. Therefore, he does not require the support of the parliament with regard to his term in office.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the President is elected by the people clearly points to a presidential system, as do the methods of appointment and work of the Kyrgyz government.

#### 3.4.1 Presidency

The President of the Kyrgyz Republic is not only the Head of State (art. 42, paragraph 1 of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, May 1993, in its latest version of February 2003; unofficial translation), he also has far-reaching legislative powers. The President can propose bills to the parliament and oppose bills adopted by the parliament. However, after two consecutive votes with a majority of two thirds in the first vote and three quarters in

<sup>13</sup> There is a provision for impeachment of the President in the constitution (art. 51), but the rules are very strict and apply only to "treason or other serious offense" (art. 51, paragraph 1).

the second vote, the parliament can insist on a bill being adopted. With regard to his government, the President has even more far-reaching competences: If the parliament rejects his proposed Prime Minister candidate three times but the President still insists, the President has the freedom to appoint the Prime Minister and dissolve the parliament (art 71, paragraph 4 of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, May 1993, in its latest version of February 2003; unofficial translation). The President's power in the judiciary branch is just as extensive, since he has the right to nominate candidates for the position of judges for the Constitutional Court and Procurator-General (for selection by the parliament). In a centralized state such as Kyrgyzstan, it is not surprising that the President is also responsible for nominating the governors and judges of the provinces.

Given the above mentioned presidential powers, it is obvious that in Kyrgyz politics, the presidency is the "big prize," all the more so if you also take into account the informal power of the President and his family.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the main focus of contention is the presidency, with the parliamentary elections (to be held in February 2005) being of lesser significance. The parliamentary elections are seen as a preparatory act to the presidential elections with regard to transparency and support for the opposition and governmental camps.

### 3.4.2 Parliament

After a period of fierce battles between the legislative and executive branches in the early nineties, the power struggle was eventually decided in favor of the executive branch. The last parliamentary elections in 2000 marked the beginning of a period of deteriorating democratic standards. For the first time, the government had a strong opponent with the potential to threaten the President's grip on power: Feliks Kulov, the leader of the oppositional *Ar-Namys* party, former mayor of Bishkek and former security chief of Kyrgyzstan. Of the six parties commonly referred to as oppositional, three were either denied registration or de-registered on legally disputable grounds; these three are: *Ar-Namys*, the *Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan*, and the *People's Party*.<sup>15</sup> The same happened to certain individual candidates. The OSCE observer mission stated that

The overwhelming conclusion is that there was a high level of political interference affecting actions and decisions of candidates, election commissions and courts, up to and including the CEC and Supreme Court. These actions aimed at excluding particular political forces from competing in the election.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This informal power is probably one of the main "temptations" for the incumbent President to stay in power, not least because of the economic advantages for his family (in a wider sense). Without entering into greater detail, it is most obvious that in a country with a country rank of 122 for Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2004, defining corruption "as the abuse of public office for private gain." ([http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2004/cpi2004\\_faqs.html#two](http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2004/cpi2004_faqs.html#two)), the highest official and his entourage cannot be free from corruption.

<sup>15</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) 2000: Kyrgyz Republic. Parliamentary Elections. February 20 & March 12, 2000. Final Report. Warsaw: ODIHR (10 April). 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 9.



Tension was especially high during the time of Feliks Kulov's alleged defeat in the second round and his subsequent arrest on charges dating back to when he was Head of National Security and Governor of Chui Oblast.

However, despite several blatant irregularities in the 2000 elections, there are some outspoken opposition politicians in the Kyrgyz parliament. With the change from a bicameral to a unicameral parliament coming into effect for the 2005 elections, the competition between candidates will become increasingly stronger, especially in the South. Since people there are more likely to elect politicians whom they trust to ensure direct benefits for their region, it is likely that many of the legislators will originate from influential families with considerable means.<sup>17</sup>

In an environment with fluctuating party and coalition affiliations, the listing of all the different parties is neither an easy nor a fruitful task. Some parties and coalitions in both the governmental and the oppositional camp, however, deserve a closer look due to their specific significance for the political process.

The most recent and interesting phenomenon on the pro-governmental side is the party *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!*. While traveling around the country in April 2004, the author noticed many banners praising the party, the name of which means *Go ahead, Kyrgyzstan!* Although not officially, and unlike *Asar* in Kazakhstan, the informal leader of *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!* is President Akaev's daughter Bermet. The image *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!* is that of a young, dynamic, liberal party that is attractive for students and wealthy businessmen alike.<sup>18</sup> The similarities with Russia's ruling *Edinaya Rossiya (United Russia)* party are obvious, i.e. a strong party, established with the aid of administrative resources and a party that should be able to win in the parliamentary elections, thus fully supporting the current regime and providing its actions with a superficially legal basis. Party members do not shy away from populist measures, i.e. the call for the introduction of dual citizenship with the Russian Federation in January 2005 in order to win the votes of the Russian-speaking population. A victory of *Alga, Kyrgyzstan!* at the parliamentary elections would allow the government to modify the constitution and continue its rule (see chapter 3.6).

<sup>17</sup> Interview in Bishkek, April 2004. The validity of this argument for the whole country, though, has been verified by the results of the October 2004 local elections, where more than 70 percent of the seats went to individual businessmen. (Hamid Toursunof 2004: *Kyrgyzstan: The Rumbles from Ukraine*. Prague: Transition Online (13 December).

<sup>18</sup> The promotion of Bermet Akaeva's candidacy for parliament by a student group at the Kyrgyz State National University in the beginning of January 2005 gives evidence for this tactics.

## 3.5 The Oppositional Camp – Fragmentation, Volatility and Irreconcilability

### 3.5.1 NGOs – “barking dogs” or a real political force?

As stated above, political opposition in Kyrgyzstan does not manifest itself in a clear political alternative to the agenda of the incumbent government. Many of the oppositional movements are organized around prominent figures and act as a platform to their personal interests, be they political or economic in nature. There are no real strategies for the development of the country, since the main goal is to do away with the current regime. A very important main distinction of the different movements opposing the incumbent government is the distinction between political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The phenomenon of politicized NGOs is closely linked to the weakness of the political parties: while certain NGOs receive foreign funding, political parties are usually neglected by international donors. This, together with a general lack of “oppositional culture,”<sup>19</sup> keeps oppositional parties weak, while NGOs try to assume the parties’ role. Thus, many representatives of “civil society” leave the original field of a neutral approach to the analysis of their respective field of research (e.g. corruption, human rights, press freedom, etc.) and become advocacy groups for a regime change. This leads to a misperception of “civil society,” since the difference in the roles of political parties and NGOs becomes blurred and weakens both. Moreover, this ambiguity of roles in society can be exploited by the authorities, for instance by pointing to the foreign financial sources of certain NGOs.

There can be no doubt, however, that NGOs do play a very important role in the socio-political concert of Kyrgyzstan – the role of a clear and neutral analysis of the state in their respective research field: When human rights are abused, the role of an independent NGO specialized in the area cannot be overestimated; it is such organizations that can ring the alarm bell and provide victims with assistance. The step from this task to the call for political consequences, such as a resignation of the responsible persons, is a small but delicate one, and should therefore be left to the oppositional parties.

### 3.5.2 Parliament

At the last parliamentary elections in 2000, together, all parties with opposition orientation won 11 seats out of 105; whereas parties with presidential orientation won 21 seats. Taking into consideration the fact that “independent candidates” won 73 out of 105 seats at the last parliamentary elections, the role of political parties becomes even clearer.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview in Bishkek, April 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

For the upcoming parliamentary elections, the spectrum of parties and election blocks is very wide and volatile, especially on the opposition side. Within the scope of this report, it is only possible to cover a small range of the oppositional forces, thereby attempting to focus on the most important ones.

### The Communist Party

Historically, there was one single party, i.e. the Communist Party. After seventy years of exclusive ruling, the Communists lost their power in the wake of Kyrgyzstan's independence. When Akaev, the only Central Asian leader who was not previously head of the local Communist Party, was installed as a compromise President by the last Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet in 1990, the Communist Party lost its predominant position in Kyrgyz politics. Unlike the situation in other former Soviet republics, however, the Communist Party was not completely banned. It has remained the strongest and most well organized opposition party in the country, a status it owes mainly to its organizational structures inherited from Soviet times as well as a certain "nostalgia" for the Soviet past among large parts of the population. In the 2000 parliamentary elections, the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan won six seats (out of a total of 105 seats). With regard to its parliamentary representation, the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan must be considered the most important opposition party in the country. With the demise of its leader, Absamat Masaliev in August 2004, the Communists lost a leader figure. However, since the political landscape is not organized according to Western standards of democracy, the strongest representation in parliament does not necessarily reflect a party's true strength in the population.

### Ar Namys

When screening the international press on Kyrgyzstan's political scene, the seemingly most important opposition force is the Ar Namys Party headed by the jailed party leader and former mayor of Bishkek, Feliks Kulov. However, in parliament, Ar Namys does not hold one of the seats distributed according to the party lists.<sup>21</sup>

### Electoral Blocks

In addition to the two main opposition parties, there are (for the time being) four opposition blocks, i.e. *For Fair Elections*, the *People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan*, *Jangy Bagyt*, and *Atajurt*. The interesting common characteristic of these four movements is that they are all headed by persons formerly employed by the authorities: The *People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan* is led by former Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev, *Atajurt* by Roza Otunbaeva, a former Foreign Minister and Ambassador, *Jangy Bagyt* by former Foreign Minister Muratbek Imanaliev, and *For Fair Elections* by the former Chairman of the Security Council and close friend of Akaev, Misir Ashirkulov. The only official candidate for

<sup>21</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) 2000: Kyrgyz Republic. Parliamentary Elections. February 20, & March 12, 2000. Final Report. Warsaw: ODIHR (10 April). 21.

presidency to date is Kurmanbek Bakiev.<sup>22</sup> However, the volatility of these oppositional electoral blocks is best illustrated by the following example: In May 2004, the *Union for Fair Elections* included prominent opposition figures Omurbek Tekebaev, the leader of the *Ata-Meken* Socialist Party and presidential candidate in 2000, as well as Adakhan Madumarov, an opposition parliamentarian and outspoken critic of the President.<sup>23</sup> In December 2004, they both changed their affiliation and joined *Atajurt*.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is very difficult to provide an accurate picture of the state of the Kyrgyz opposition.

The fact that the main opposition figures were once part of the administration could hamper their chances at the elections to a certain degree – the perception of the opposition as being part of and fed by the regime is widespread.<sup>25</sup> The high number of formal and informal deals between opposition figures and the government also points in this direction.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, criticism of the current regime does not necessarily correlate with broad support for oppositional NGOs or parties.

### 3.5.3 Presidency

For many observers, Feliks Kulov is still the candidate with the best chances of winning the presidency in free and fair elections: the only obstacle are the criminal charges against him (see chapter 3.4.2.). However, since Kulov is still one of the most influential political figures in Kyrgyzstan, he has the ability to unite the opposition, even from jail.<sup>27</sup> The question is whether he actually wishes to do so. Two perspectives seem possible at the moment: First, Kulov will not attempt to unite the opposition, since the victory of another oppositional candidate could seriously hamper Kulov's own chances of becoming President after his release. With the successor to the incumbent President being a member of the apparatus, Kulov could maintain his image as that of a political martyr. Second, Kulov will try to unite the opposition. If the opposition candidate wins the election, the chances are high that Kulov's case will be reviewed again and he will be released. Then the new President could reward him for his support by appointing him Prime Minister.

As mentioned above, the only official candidate for presidency is former Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev. His ouster from government was caused (at least officially) by the bloody Aksy events in 2002 (see chapter 3.3.), and the question as to which point his role in this could hamper his chances to be elected must remain open. For the opposition, however, it is important to unite behind one single candidate, since fragmentation would only help the candidate favored by the incumbent government.

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<sup>22</sup> Hamid Toursunof 2004: Kyrgyzstan: The Rumbles from Ukraine. Prague: Transition Online (13 December).

<sup>23</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 28 May 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14 December 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews in Bishkek, Talas, Jalalabad, Osh, Batken, Naryn and Yssyk K l provinces, April 2004.

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group 2004: Political Transition in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects. Osh/Brussels (11 August).

<sup>27</sup> RFE-RL, 12 January 2005.

### 3.6 Outlook

The most crucial question is whether or not incumbent President Akaev will really step down in 2005 and allow for a democratic change of power. His statements on this subject point univocally to an end of the Akaev era. However, many opposition groups fear the President might not keep his word and may resort to various mechanisms in order to at least indirectly retain his grip on power. This chapter shows possible future development scenarios, as described by interlocutors in April 2004 as well as possible consequences of such scenarios.

#### Scenario 1: Akaev remains in power as President

In breach of all the promises he made to the international community and to his people, Askar Akaev will seek a third, that is to say fourth (re. above), term in office. In order to ensure at least a cosmetic legitimacy, the President will need to convince the parliament to modify the constitution. The prerequisite for this would be positive results in the parliamentary elections for the pro-presidential powers. Another possibility would be a referendum on constitutional changes. The incumbent President would surely win such a referendum, since he has all the administrative resources to achieve the result desired. The worst case scenario leading to Akaev serving another term in office would be the provocation of internal or external instability by the authorities in order to call for a state of emergency and the subsequent usurpation of power by the ruling elite.<sup>28</sup> To date, however, there are no signs for such a move, although the President did make hints regarding a certain degree of radicalization of the authorities.<sup>29</sup>

#### Scenario 2: Akaev steps down but changes the political system in his favor

After a victory of pro-Akaev powers in parliament, the President will ask legislature to adopt changes to the political system, i.e. the switch from a presidential to a parliamentary system in which the President would have mere representative functions and a Prime Minister appointed by the parliament would hold the effective power. Thanks to his supporters in parliament, Akaev would be elected Prime Minister after his resignation from the presidency. A twist on this scenario would involve the President stepping down but "recommending" a Prime Minister from among his closest entourage, possibly even a family member.

#### Scenario 3: Akaev steps down and appoints a successor

This is the "Russian scenario," referring to the transition of power from the first Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, to his successor, Vladimir Putin. In this scenario, Akaev will look for a reliable person to propose as his successor. The deal will then involve the incumbent President providing his successor with all the means necessary in order to win the pro

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group 2004: Political Transition in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects. Osh/Brussels (12 August).

<sup>29</sup> Beshimov, Erdin 2004: Kyrgyzstan's Akaev: The Revolution Stops Here. Eurasianet (22 December).

forma democratic elections while the latter will guarantee Akaev and his family exemption from punishment for crimes committed during Akaev's time in office. A variation of this scenario would involve the appointment of a family member as his successor, a step that would significantly decrease the danger of being persecuted.

#### **Scenario 4: Akaev steps down and allows a democratic transition**

The President will keep his word and step down without any major interference in the succession process. This could allow for a free and fair competition for votes on the grounds of the different political programs of different candidates.

#### **Possible consequences**

If President Akaev stays in power at whatever cost (constitutional changes, electoral fraud, state of emergency) the mid- and long-term consequences for the country's future would be bleak both internationally and domestically: Domestically, it is possible that people will become fed up with election fraud and attempt to oust the illegitimately elected President or Prime-Minister, i.e. Akaev. This could be brought about by peaceful means, depending on the loyalty of the security forces that is difficult to predict in the case of massive turmoil. However, it is also possible that the people would accept a new term for Akaev without any major opposition. Oppositional forces would be sure to cry foul, but the cry would remain unheard in the country. The country has no significant natural resources and depends greatly on foreign aid. Its external debt amounts to 115 percent of its GDP and discussions with the Paris Club regarding restructuring in view of debt payment have been postponed until after the February 2005 parliamentary elections.<sup>30</sup> Most of the foreign aid to Kyrgyzstan was provided on the basis of its reputation as an "Island of Democracy." This goodwill will most probably deteriorate, should Akaev, contrary to his promises, stay in power. Without international goodwill (and aid), economic hardship would very likely increase. This, in turn, could lead to widespread public discontent and to a destabilization of the country as a whole.

Most probably, the international community would react with goodwill to a "Russian variant" involving the appointment and election of a successor - provided the election process does not fall short of international standards. This statement is based on the experience of the Russian Federation, where the 2000 presidential elections did not give rise to any special concern among the members of the international community. The only restriction necessary is the different geopolitical weight of Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation: Whether acquiescence with the "Russian variant" in the Russian Federation was due to general satisfaction or to geopolitical reasoning and how the latter could influence the reaction to the same pattern in Kyrgyzstan is an issue that remains open. Domestically, there is no reason to assume any major disturbances.

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<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group 2004: Political Transition in Kyrgyzstan: Problems and Prospects. Osh/Brussels (11 August).

To date, the underlying assumption has been that the best solution for the country would be if President Akaev left office, since this, once more, would distinguish Kyrgyzstan from its more authoritarian neighbors. However, the question has to be asked whether a change of power would be the best solution for the country. Is there a viable alternative to the incumbent President? Or will a change of guards in the White House in Bishkek bear the risk of destabilization, despite correct procedures? When asking these questions, analysts have to be careful to avoid playing into the authorities' hands, since many of the Central Asian rulers are keen on portraying themselves as the only guarantors of stability. Nevertheless, questions regarding alternatives must be asked, because a transfer of power for the sake of the process as such cannot be the ultimate aim.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the current President enjoys quite high a degree of support among ethnic minorities, either for his stance on language issues or for his bilateral relations with (more powerful) neighbors.<sup>31</sup> With numerous opposition leaders more nationalistic in their rhetoric than Akaev, the absence of any ethnically motivated opposition is not surprising.<sup>32</sup> The recent move of the Kyrgyz parliament to endorse a resolution for the government to raise the question on the return of the Uzbek Shakhimardan exclave to Kyrgyzstan in bilateral negotiations has to be seen in the light of the incumbent government fearing the image of a "soft" negotiator, rather than being of any concrete significance. However, playing the nationalistic card in the Central Asian context involves great risk for everyone. Any international actor dealing with governments in this region of the world should be knowledgeable of this fact.

### **The Ukrainian or the Tajik Scenario for Kyrgyzstan?**

The revolutionary events in Ukraine at the end of 2004 gave rise to the question of a possible repetition of this form of power change in other CIS countries. Presidents throughout Central Asia have criticized the manner in which the Ukrainian opposition came to power, warning their own opponents that there will not be any revolution of any "color" in their country (alluding to the "Orange Revolution"). Kyrgyzstan's President Akaev was one of the harshest critics of both the 2004 Ukrainian and the 2003 Georgian change of power, at one point even questioning Georgia's sovereignty by hinting that President Saakashvili receives his salary from US financier George Soros.<sup>33</sup> Paralleling the President's statements on developments in other CIS countries, Foreign Minister A. Aitmatov warned of a "Tajik Scenario" that could arise out of the wish to realize a "velvet" revolution<sup>34</sup> and newspapers published in-depth analysis of the Tajik civil war.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Khamidov, Alisher 2004: Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks: A Safe Vote for the Government. Eurasianet (9 September); Toralieva, Gulnura 2005: Kyrgyz Minorities to Back Akaev Parties. Bishkek/London: Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Reporting Central Asia no. 349 (16 February).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.; Interview with Kyrgyz opposition leader, October 2000.

<sup>33</sup> Radio Azattyk, 8 January 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Slovo Kyrgyzstana, 6 January 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Delo Nr., 12 January 2005.

The combination of these facts illustrates the degree of nervousness in the current government. However, for the time being, there seems to be no real danger of either a "Ukrainian" or a "Tajik" scenario:

1. The opposition is not as united as it was in Ukraine.
2. The opposition lacks a charismatic leader figure.
3. The opposition is not able to mobilize the masses.
4. The tragedy of the Tajik civil war is too present among the members of the government, the opposition, and the broader population.



## 4 Privatization of Agricultural Land

### 4.1 Introduction

The issue of land in the Kyrgyz Republic consists of at least four sub-issues, i.e. agricultural land, undeveloped land, urban land, and pasture land. Although every sub-issue provides a complex of problems, the focus of this chapter lies on agricultural land for the following reasons:

1. The population living in rural areas makes up two thirds of the population;
2. Between one and two thirds of Kyrgyzstan's population depends on agriculture;
3. Agriculture is the only sector that showed a positive average annual growth between 1992 and 2002 and accounts for almost forty percent of the GDP.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, the importance of agricultural land cannot be denied and the consequences of a major conflict over land would be disastrous for the country, as the Özgön riots in 1990 have shown (see chapter 5.3.). In this second part of the FAST Country Risk Profile on Kyrgyzstan, the author will provide a short historical background, discuss some of the fears and hopes connected with land privatization, describe the privatization process and assess the current situation. The last part of the paper will provide an outlook.

Kyrgyzstan with its seventy year old tradition of state-ownership over land has made comparatively strong progress in privatizing agricultural land. Despite widespread fears of inter-ethnic clashes at the beginning of the privatization process, the implementation has been smooth, with only minor allocation problems.<sup>37</sup> However, there are sources of discontent, though unrelated to the privatization as such – in certain areas, the plots allocated do not provide families with enough income in order to survive. The government seems to have recognized this problem and encourages farmers to collaborate on the basis of cooperatives, i.e. to unite their efforts in all stages of production – from acquiring seeds, to running common vehicle parks, to coordinated marketing strategies. The important factor of this model (and the factor that distinguishes it from the former Soviet model of collective farms, what were referred to as "*Kolkhoz*") is that farmers unite their efforts on a voluntary basis and divide profits while keeping their own property.

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/kgz\\_aag.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/kgz_aag.pdf);  
[http://www.rdiland.org/OURWORK/OurWork\\_Kyrgyzstan.html](http://www.rdiland.org/OURWORK/OurWork_Kyrgyzstan.html);  
<http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=labor&cty=KGZ,Kyrgyz%20Republic&hm=home2>; Bloch, Peter C. and Rasmussen, Kathryn: Land Reform in Kyrgyzstan. In: Wegren, Stephen K. (ed.): Land Reform in the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. London 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Interview in Suzak, April 2004. The main problem was the failure to raise an inventory at the *Kolkhozes* and *Sovkhozes*, which lead to some disputes over equipment. In the Suzak Raion of Jalalabat province, there have been problems with registration, because people had been living in the cities during the privatization process and then returned when the land had already been distributed.

## 4.2 The Concept of Land in the Soviet Era

During the Soviet era, according to Marxist-Leninist ideology, land was a common good which belonged to and should be “owned” by the people. Therefore, owning land as private property was prohibited, except for very small gardens where farmers were allowed to practice subsistence farming. The main agricultural production was concentrated in *Kolkhozes* and *Sovkhozes*, practicing collective production methods. This collective system, introduced by Stalin in the 1930s and implemented by means of forced collectivization, showed some positive results (e.g. higher agricultural output) for a certain period of time. However, because of the lack of long-term incentives for agricultural workers, the system proved to be highly inefficient. This is best demonstrated by the fact that, under Brezhnev, four percent of the USSR’s arable land were privately owned plots that produced approx. twenty-five percent of the country’s agricultural output.<sup>38</sup> Despite the shortcomings on microeconomic level, the system of collective farming has remained very popular among agricultural workers. The main arguments in favor of the collective system were job security, regularity of wages, non-monetary benefits (e.g. collective holiday trips), and the “feeling of belonging.”<sup>39</sup> Although caution is called for (because of the general tendency to “sugarcoat” the past), the difficulties today’s farmers face (e.g. a lack of entrepreneurship, dependence on the state to solve problems caused by “the market,” the deplorable state of existing equipment, etc.) can be seen as a confirmation of the popularity of collective farming. Nonetheless, many – mainly young – private farmers greatly appreciate the possibility to work independently, to own land (to be granted land titles) and to have the freedom to select the range of products they cultivate.<sup>40</sup>

## 4.3 Fears on the Eve of Privatization

The arguments stated above point out the importance of agricultural land as a means of existence. Therefore, it is obvious that fears existed in the period preceding the privatization process. The main fears by the rural population included:

- Unjust distribution of land;
- land being bought up by wealthy city dwellers;
- discrimination on ethnic grounds;
- sell-out of the homeland to foreigners.<sup>41</sup>

The fear of unjust distribution was closely related to the high level of corruption: People in the right position (e.g. former *Kolkhoz* or *Sovkhoz* chairmen) exercising a direct influence

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.fsmitha.com/h2/ch33.htm>, 7.1.04.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews in Talas, Yssyk Köl, Naryn and Jalalabat provinces, April 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), internal documents. Bishkek 1999/2000.

on the distribution process were suspected of steering the land distribution process to their own benefit; whereas poor land workers would be left without their due share.

Mistrust of city dwellers (as a form of the deep-rooted rural-urban cleavage) was the driving force behind the second fear: It was assumed that people who had made their (relative) fortune in the cities would buy farm land for investment reasons, thereby ousting local rural residents with limited financial resources.

The ethnic component was probably the main fear preceding the privatization process, which even led to a moratorium of the process in 1999.<sup>42</sup> It must be stated that this fear was not unjustified – the only but nonetheless very bloody violent event that Kyrgyzstan had experienced up until then were ethnic clashes in the Southern cities of Özgön and Osh, where disputes over land between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were the triggering factor.<sup>43</sup> The reason why disputes over scarce resources – be it land or water – in Central Asia can quite easily turn into ethnic conflict lies in the contradiction between sedentary and nomadic peoples in the region, that is to say Uzbeks and Tajiks on the one hand and Kazakhs and Kyrgyz on the other.<sup>44</sup> Whereas Kyrgyz were traditionally involved in cattle-breeding, Uzbeks have a much longer tradition of cultivating land. Therefore, Uzbeks are usually more successful farmers than Kyrgyz.<sup>45</sup> The chapter on Interethnic Relations will deal with this issue in greater detail.

The fear of a sell-out of the homeland to foreigners is persistent in many countries. In several countries, there are restrictions regarding the selling of land to foreigners. Kyrgyzstan is no exception – article 5 of the Land Code of the Kyrgyz Republic, February 2003, states that

[...] the allocation and alienation of agricultural land to foreign citizens is not allowed.<sup>46</sup>

Even if the land is correctly inherited by a foreigner, the foreigner must sell the land to a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic within a year's time.<sup>47</sup> The fear of a sell-out in Kyrgyzstan is therefore totally unfounded and can only be explained by the high level of corruption that also exists in the judiciary, a situation that might be exploited by wealthy foreign investors.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> For details refer to:  
[http://www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=5&issue\\_id=269&article\\_id=3044](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=5&issue_id=269&article_id=3044)

<sup>44</sup> Although there is some dispute between Tajiks and Uzbeks on the former being sedentary and the latter being nomadic, it is widely recognized that both groups have a more sedentary tradition, as compared to Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

<sup>45</sup> This might be contested by Kyrgyz, but the underlying feeling of the Uzbeks being more successful can be found with almost any of the many prejudices against the Uzbeks, such as "The *Bazaars* are dominated by Uzbek traders," "The Uzbeks are slier," "The Uzbeks are also hospitable, but their hospitality is always profit-oriented" (statements by Kyrgyz made in different talks and interviews, September 1999-April 2004). Whether these prejudices are true or not cannot be the question will not be discussed in this paper – their simple existence is enough to cultivate resentments.

<sup>46</sup> Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic May 1993, in its latest version of February 2003. Unofficial translation.

<sup>47</sup> Article 37, paragraph 2 of the Land Code of the Kyrgyz Republic in its February 2003 version.

This, however, has not occurred to date and is unlikely to occur in the future, because the land has already been distributed.

#### 4.4 The Privatization Process

The process of land privatization in Kyrgyzstan has undergone three stages:

- 1992: merely land of insufficient quality was given to farmers and without a corresponding legal basis
- 1996: the first laws and presidential decrees were issued
- 1999: the privatization process is completed, most of the agricultural land allocated.<sup>48</sup>

Together with the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, the legal basis for the privatization of agricultural land is – the Land Code of the Kyrgyz Republic in its latest version of 17 February 2003.<sup>49</sup> Article 4, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic states that:

Land, minerals, air space, water, forest, flora and fauna, and all other natural resources shall be the property of the Kyrgyz Republic, and they shall be used as a basis for life and functioning of the People of Kyrgyzstan, and shall be under the special protection of the state.<sup>50</sup>

Apart from the ownership rights on the part of the state, paragraph 3 also states that the

[...] land may also be owned privately, municipally and otherwise. Limits to and procedures for the execution of their rights by landowners and guarantees of the protection of such rights shall be ascertained by law.

This division between the general principle that land is the property of the Kyrgyz Republic and the possibility of private ownership illustrates the sensitiveness of the issue: Not only the roughly seventy years of Soviet rule but also the nomadic traditions created this special relationship between the people and the land. Land – pasture or agricultural – forms the very basis of existence, which explains why the issue of land privatization was highly contested.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview in Talas, April 2004; Bloch, Peter C. 2002: Kyrgyzstan. Almost Done, What Next? In: Problems of Post-Communism, vol. 49, no. 1, January/February. 53-62.

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.cis-legal-reform.org/document.asp?id=6951>

<sup>50</sup> Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic May 1993, in its latest version of February 2003. Unofficial translation.

Since 1996, the process of land privatization has been moving forward rapidly.<sup>51</sup> Agricultural land has been distributed to the local residents, with equal shares for each person, the size of the plot depending on the total amount of agricultural land available in the respective "Raion" or district.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the size of allocated land varies between different districts, from 0.0015 hectares in Batken Oblast (province) to 2.5 hectares in Chui Oblast.<sup>53</sup> Although there is reason to believe that justice has prevailed on a local level, the country-wide perspective leaves a totally different impression: People living in the densely populated Southern areas of Kyrgyzstan received much less land than people living in the North. It comes as no surprise that as a result of the distribution pattern, today, a significant South-North migration prevails.<sup>54</sup>

## 4.5 Current Situation

Most agricultural land has been privatized by today and the share of publicly owned land varies between different *Ayil Ökmötü* (village governments).<sup>55</sup> By lending the publicly owned land to farmers, the village administration receives some income to spend on social needs. The amount, however, depends on the size of the agricultural land available for lending.<sup>56</sup> Since none of the fears mentioned above proved to come true, the overall impression of the land privatization process is one of success. This holds true with regard to different aspects: On one hand, Kyrgyzstan is the most advanced country in land privatization within the CIS and therefore enjoys a pioneer position. On the other hand, the consequence with which land privatization is carried out is advantageous for the (overall) economy. This can be demonstrated by the two following examples:

With regard to agricultural output and productivity, Kyrgyzstan is the only country of the former Soviet Union that has increased its crop production in the period from 1998 to 2000, as compared to the period between 1989 and 1991. With regard to food production, Kyrgyzstan ranks third behind Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; with regard to livestock production, Kyrgyzstan ranks fourth behind Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia; regarding cereal yield in kilograms per hectare, Kyrgyzstan comes in second behind Uzbekistan.<sup>57</sup> The leading group of countries in agricultural production within the CIS could not be more different: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan with a tightly controlled state agriculture on the one and Kyrgyzstan with the most advanced land privatization on the

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.rdiland.org/OURWORK/OurWork\\_Kyrgyzstan.html](http://www.rdiland.org/OURWORK/OurWork_Kyrgyzstan.html)

<sup>52</sup> Interviews in Talas, Karakol, Naryn, Batken, Suzak, and Isfana, April 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews in Bishkek and Batken, April 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Interviews in Talas and Bishkek, April 2004.

<sup>55</sup> In Batken *raion*, 98 percent of the agricultural land are private property (Interview in Batken, April 2004), phone interview to Talas, February 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Alymkulov, Emil and Kulatov, Marat: Local Government in the Kyrgyz Republic. In: Munteanu, Igor, and Popa, Victor (eds.) 2001: Developing New Rules in the Old Environment. Local Governments in Eastern Europe, in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. Budapest: Open Society Institute. 552.

<sup>57</sup> World Bank, World Development Indicators 2004.

other hand. There are different interpretations of this phenomenon, but the most important is that agricultural output is highest under a) complete state control over land, and b) the most radical privatization of land. Countries that have stopped halfway in-between face the most significant problems.<sup>58</sup>

## 4.6 Conclusion

Thanks to a farsighted policy defined in the second half of the nineties, based on the principle of justice and equality, the major fears that preceded the privatization process have not come true: The agricultural land was neither purchased by a few rich city dwellers or otherwise privileged persons (e.g. former chairmen of *Kolkhozes* and *Sovkhozes*), nor has there been any significant discrimination of buyers on ethnic grounds. This is not to say that agricultural land could not be a trigger for violent conflict in the near future. The contested issue, however, would certainly not be the privatization of land but rather its scarcity in the Southern provinces, which exerts pressure on farmers with regard to the generation of income.

In addition to the indisputable achievements of the privatization policy as conducted by the Kyrgyz government, one factor that facilitated the process, as compared to other Central and Eastern European countries, is the lack of a tradition of land ownership: Whereas in countries such as Romania<sup>59</sup> or Poland, private land property existed before forced collectivization, Kyrgyzstan did not (or at least to a lesser extent) face such a legacy. Therefore, there were fewer disputes over land ownership (and subsequent restitution) than in Central and Eastern Europe.

Another issue of concern is the farmers' lack of experience with the free market: Despite highly effective advisory programs, most of the farmers have yet to adopt a sense of *entrepreneurship*. This means that when the price for one product, e.g. potatoes, is high one year, most farmers will grow potatoes the next year, which will lead to a drastic increase in production of that product and subsequently, the disintegration of prices. This lack of entrepreneurship and the farmers' disappointment with "the market" leads to widespread discontent. This frustration is currently not directed against any specific target, but could, if exploited by a politician, bare substantial danger for escalation. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial that advisory projects continue to assist farmers in questions related to market issues.

The farmer as an *entrepreneur* is one part of the system. In order to seize the full scope of the problem, the counter-part – the customer – must also be taken into consideration: The Kyrgyz agriculture is in desperate need of reliable selling markets outside its own small

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<sup>58</sup> This is of course a speculative assumption, but it seems to be the most reasonable explanation for the rankings of the three countries.

<sup>59</sup> For the land privatization process in Romania, see Verdery, Katherine 2001: Inequality as temporal process. Property and time in Transylvania's land restitution. *Anthropological Theory* Vol 1(3) London.

territory.<sup>60</sup> With Kazakhstan also being a major producer of agricultural goods, Uzbekistan having a very restrictive tariff policy, and Tajikistan being a rather small market, the Kyrgyz agricultural sector faces huge difficulties in selling its products. One possible solution that was mentioned quite often by interlocutors during the research carried out in April 2004 was the establishment of food processing factories. However, the question of where to sell processed foods is not all that different from the question of where to sell unprocessed food. Diversification, combined with a niche strategy, might be a reasonable alternative to mass production of a few chosen products.<sup>61</sup> Whether the question of demand can be solved in this manner remains to be seen, since the major obstacle for mutually benefiting trade in Central Asia is the restrictive tariff policy adopted by most of the countries in the region.

## 4.7 Risks

Despite the overall positive image of the land privatization issue, certain risks connected to the land question remain. The first is the scarcity of agricultural land in the densely populated Southern provinces – with an average population density of 24.1 persons per km<sup>2</sup> for the whole country, the three Southern provinces of Batken, Jalalabat and Osh all range high above the average. The Osh province is the most densely populated with 40.3 persons per km<sup>2</sup>, with Suzak district housing 91, Kara-Suu district 106.5, and Aravan district even 147.5 persons per km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>62</sup> To date, pressure on land has been eased by internal and external migration – either to Bishkek and the Northern Chui province or to Russia.<sup>63</sup> However, if the population will grow as predicted by UN Habitat or the World Bank,<sup>64</sup> the pressure on land will increase and consequently, given a lack of economic perspectives for the young, so will the potential for social unrest.<sup>65</sup> This can only be counteracted by economic development beyond the agricultural sector.

A second concern is the global climate change that affects Central Asia as well as the rest of the world. With so many people depending on agriculture, and water being a scarce resource, global warming may have a devastating impact on regional stability. The first region that comes to mind with regard to water issues is the Ferghana Valley, i.e. the three Southern provinces of Kyrgyzstan. However, the climate change is felt in the other regions as well – farmers on the Northern shore of Lake Yssyk Köl complained about a lack of

<sup>60</sup> Interview in Bishkek, April 2004.

<sup>61</sup> Interview in Karakol and Naryn, April 2004.

<sup>62</sup> [http://www.investment.kg/matrix\\_IV\\_02\\_project\\_02](http://www.investment.kg/matrix_IV_02_project_02); <http://stat-gvc.bishkek.su/English/index.html> (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic) both October 2004.

<sup>63</sup> The UN System in the Kyrgyz Republic. Common Country Assessment 2003: 39; 65.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.unhabitat.org/habrdd/conditions/socentasia/kyrgys.htm>  
<http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/modules/social/pgr/dataeuro.html>; both October 2004

<sup>65</sup> Lubin, Nancy and Rubin, Barnett R. 1999: Calming the Ferghana Valley. New York: The Century Foundation Press. 60.

rainfall, while in Talas province, they reportedly have to dig deeper and deeper in order to reach ground water.<sup>66</sup> Still, thanks to its glaciers and high mountain spring rivers, Kyrgyzstan is much better off than neighboring Uzbekistan. However, the dependency of the Kyrgyz economy on agriculture leaves the country vulnerable to climatic changes.

## 4.8 Recommendations

The pressure on land, especially in the South of Kyrgyzstan, could be met best by the economic development of the region: If agriculture loses its predominance for economic survival, the attractiveness of land possession will decline and with it, the pressure on agricultural land. Economic development of the Ferghana Valley, however, faces at least two structural obstacles – the remoteness of the region and the lack of interstate cooperation. While the problem of remoteness has been addressed by improving the road connections to the respective capitals (esp. the roads Tashkent-Quqon and Bishkek-Osh) and plans for a new railroad from Jalalabat to China exist, there are other measures that could be introduced, such as improving the flight connections to the region (e.g. re-establishment of flights from Moscow to Osh or ensuring better connection flights at Bishkek airport).<sup>67</sup>

Linked with the question of infrastructure is the issue of regional cooperation. Despite the common past, all the Central Asian countries have adopted a foreign policy that focuses on the relations with countries lying farther away rather than on a consistent policy of good neighborhood. Furthermore, most of the documents on “Eternal Friendship” or free trade are not worth the paper they were written on. The foreign policies relying on *Realpolitik* rather than on mutual benefits of cooperation can – to a certain extent – be explained by the relatively new phenomenon of statehood in the region. The main obstacle to regional cooperation, the border issue, will be discussed later on in this document.

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<sup>66</sup> Interviews with farmers in Talas and Yssyk Köl regions, April 2004.

<sup>67</sup> By October 2004, there were flights from the Kyrgyz Ferghana Valley to the country’s capital, to the UAE and to Dushanbe. The Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley has much more connections, including flights to different domestic destinations and Russian cities. The same holds true for the Tajik part. The Kyrgyz and Tajik capitals are both connected with the other country’s part of the Ferghana Valley, whereas it is noteworthy that there are no flights from Uzbekistan to neither the Tajik nor the Kyrgyz part of the Ferghana Valley, and no flights from the Uzbek part of the Valley to the Kyrgyz and Tajik capitals. This is one more indication for Uzbekistan’s often cited isolationist tendencies.



## 5 Ethnicity, Regionalism, Borders, and their Interaction

Throughout Central Asia, ethnic diversity is a major issue of discussion. Parallels drawn between Central Asia and the Balkans, even talk about a “balkanization” of Central Asia, point to the (apparent) danger of ethnic violence.<sup>68</sup> This chapter aims at analyzing interethnic relations in Kyrgyzstan by attempting to find answers to questions such as: Which of the interethnic relations are relevant? What potential for violence do they possess? What are the restraining and the encouraging factors for possible interethnic violence? In what relationship does interethnic coexistence stand to interstate relations? Is interethnic violence inevitable, and, if no, what are the measures to be taken to avoid interethnic violence?

This chapter, however, will not deal with theoretical frameworks and abstract concepts of ethnicity but will acknowledge that there are different ethnicities with distinct identities.

On another level, this chapter will also deal with regionalism *within* the ethnic group of the Kyrgyz. It will provide some degree of analysis of the often cited divide between the North and the South of the country and try to show interactions of this division with the ethnic question.

### 5.1 Ethnicities in Kyrgyzstan

As the term “Kyrgyzstan” suggests, the country is “the Land of the Kyrgyz.”<sup>69</sup> This term is obviously exclusive, since the meaning of “Land of the Kyrgyz” stands in juxtaposition to the “lands” of all others. However, unlike its neighbors, for official purposes, Kyrgyzstan mainly uses the term “Kyrgyz Respublikasy” or Kyrgyz Republic, which is slightly more inclusive than, for instance, “O‘zbekiston Respublikasi” or “Republic of the Land of the Uzbeks.” Whether this official term is deliberately used because of ethnic sensitivities remains open.

The “Land of the Kyrgyz,” however, is not inhabited by the titular nation alone: according to different sources, there are more than ninety different ethnicities in Kyrgyzstan. The table below shows the ethnic diversity of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Krummenacher, Heinz: Conflict Prevention and Power Politics: Central Asia as a Show Case. Berne 2001, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> “Istan” is the Persian word for “land.” In this sense, it is a frequently used term in different languages to point to “the land of a nation.” In addition to the known examples from Central Asia, the Turkish terms “Bulgaristan,” “Hindistan,” “Macaristan” (=Land of the Magyars, the Hungarians), “Ermenistan” for Armenia (= Land of the Armenians) or the Armenian “Hajastan” for the same country, provide further evidence.

<sup>70</sup> National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic: Results of the First National Population Census of the Kyrgyz Republic of 1999.

	Total population			In % of total population		
	1979	1989	1999	1979	1989	1999
<b>Total population</b>	<u>3,522,832</u>	<u>4,257,755</u>	<u>4,822,938</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>
Kyrgyz	1,687,382	2,229,663	3,128,147	47,9	52,4	64,9
Uzbeks	426,194	550,096	664,950	12,1	12,9	13,8
Russians	911,703	916,558	603,201	25,9	21,5	12,5
Dungans	26,661	36,928	51,766	0,8	0,9	1,1
Ukrainians	109,324	108,027	50,442	3,1	2,5	1,0
Uigurs	29,817	36,779	46,944	0,8	0,9	1,0
Tatars	71,744	70,068	45,438	2,0	1,6	0,9
Kazakhs	27,442	37,318	42,657	0,8	0,9	0,9
Tajiks	23,209	33,518	42,636	0,7	0,8	0,9
Turks	5,160	21,294	33,327	0,1	0,5	0,7
Germans	101,057	101,309	21,471	2,9	2,4	0,4
Koreans	14,481	18,355	19,784	0,4	0,4	0,4
Others	88,658	97,842	72,175	2,5	2,3	1,5

Despite the high degree of fragmentation, the ethnic question is only posed between a few ethnicities. One first differentiation can be made between "European" and "Central Asian" peoples, i.e. Russians, Ukrainians, and Germans as one group, and all the other peoples as the other group. Whereas there is a certain degree of homogeneity in the "European" group, the cleavages within the "Central Asian" group are at least as deep as between the two major groups. These cleavages will be discussed further on.

When talking to representatives of different ethnic groups throughout the country, and especially Kyrgyz, about questions of nationhood, state, and ethnicity, the general impression is that many fear that their country and subsequently, their people, might be assimilated by larger neighboring nations. In addition to the fear of China throughout Central Asia, practically all other neighbors, depending on the region, are also feared. The fear of the Chinese is most persistent in Naryn and Yssyk Köl provinces, while in Jalalabat and Osh, the fear of the Uzbeks is dominant. Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks seem to be interested in participating in political life but Kyrgyz try to exclude them, because they suspect them of forming some kind of a "Fifth Column" aiming at unification with Uzbekistan. In the Batken province, especially in the border villages in Batken and Leilek Raions, the main fear is of a "creeping migration" from Tajikistan. Although the weakest among the fears, there

is a perception of a possible “Kazakhization” in the North of the country (Talas, Chui) should the capital be transferred to the Southern city of Osh in order to foster internal stability.<sup>71</sup>

This climate of fear is certainly not contributing to overcome ethnic divisions in Kyrgyzstan. It is, however, a factor that has to be included in an analysis focusing on interethnic relations, since it is only by addressing these deep-rooted fears that the majority segment can be convinced of the merits of a more inclusive political system.

## 5.2 “Central Asian-European Relations”

With regard to the “inter-racial”<sup>72</sup> relations, it has to be stated that since 1991, the formerly dominant influence of the “Europeans” has receded: While during Soviet times, directors of *Kolkhoz* or production plants used to be of European nationality with a Central Asian deputy, this relationship has since been inversed. Although there is no direct discrimination of Europeans, the fact that for many (official) posts, Kyrgyz is the official language, can be seen as an indirect discrimination of the non-Kyrgyz-speaking group. Since most Europeans (and several Central Asians, too) do not have a professional command of Kyrgyz, this requirement effectively equals direct discrimination.<sup>73</sup> This language policy, albeit more liberal than in its neighbor republics,<sup>74</sup> is one of the main reasons for the huge number of Europeans who have left the country since its independence. For many Russians, it is also difficult to accept that they are no longer the leading elite of the country. The attitude of many Russians towards the Kyrgyz is not hostile but characterized by a high degree of arrogance. Statements such as “The Kyrgyz are not able to work and to manage their country” are frequent when talking to Russians living in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>75</sup> This attitude, combined with the *de facto* exclusion from the political decision-making process and exaggeratedly negative perceptions of the security situation, leads to a pessimistic view of the future and is probably the most convincing explanation

<sup>71</sup> Interviews in different provinces, April 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Inter-racial in this context means “all Central Asians vs. Europeans.” The differences within the Central Asian group will be discussed later on.

<sup>73</sup> The language question is hotly debated in Kyrgyzstan. According to the Constitution, “The Kyrgyz language shall be a state language of the Kyrgyz Republic. The Russian language shall be used in the Kyrgyz Republic as an official language.” (Article 5, paragraphs 1 and 2). Although paragraph 4 states that “[...]rights and the freedom of citizens shall not be abridged on account of ignorance of the state or official languages,” there is an effective discrimination, since the new law on state language of 2004 aims at introducing Kyrgyz as the only official language by 2015. The most discriminating point with regard to the language is the need for command of the state language for presidential candidates.

<sup>74</sup> Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian country where the language of the titular nation and Russian have almost the same position. While in Kazakhstan, Russian is still very much present, the situation is completely different in Tajikistan (where there are practically no Russians left) and Uzbekistan, which had even changed from a Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews in Bishkek and Yssyk Köl, 1999-2004.

for the massive emigration of Europeans to their “motherlands” and beyond.<sup>76</sup> However, Russians from Russia do not perceive Russians who migrated from Central Asia to Russia or Central and Western Europe as Russians. The former group themselves feel the “impact of Asia.”<sup>77</sup>

Kyrgyz usually do not have all too negative feelings towards Russians. They are viewed, on one hand, as colonizers who have settled on foreign land and are merely tolerated but do not have any influence. On the other hand, many Kyrgyz attribute the relative economic and social progress the country has enjoyed under Russian influence to their role as “civilizers,” where women’s rights, infrastructure, and education are the main achievements of Russian domination.<sup>78</sup>

Overall, the relationship between “Central Asians” and “Europeans” is not too bad, and there can definitely be no talk of an “inter-racial” hostile climate. Nevertheless, the emigration of “Europeans” can be regarded as some kind of “Vote with your Feet,” although there is also a non-negligible number of ethnic Kyrgyz who leave the country, which reflects the general economic situation.<sup>79</sup> The only way to stop emigration is by providing an economic perspective for every citizen, an aim which Kyrgyzstan must still go a long way to achieve.

### 5.3 Relations Between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks – a “Frozen Conflict”?

The relationship with the highest potential for violent conflict is the relationship between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. The outbreak of violence in 1990 in the Southern cities of Özgön and Osh, where, according to different sources, between three hundred and one thousand people were killed, goes to prove this. Without entering into any details, it must be stated that the Osh ethnic conflict was the bloodiest ethnically motivated conflict Central Asia has seen for decades.<sup>80</sup> International observers in the region paint a rather contradictory picture of the current situation: While some point to the resumption of interethnic weddings in Osh, others have the impression that they can “hear the walls rising” between the two groups.<sup>81</sup> With positions differing to such an extent, any analysis is encumbered and vulnerable to critique from every side.

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<sup>76</sup> In this context, the emigration of Russians to Russia, Germans to Germany, and Jews to Israel has the highest significance.

<sup>77</sup> Interview in with a Russian emigrant from Kyrgyzstan in a major Central European city, February 2003.

<sup>78</sup> Interview in Bishkek, September 1999.

<sup>79</sup> The UN System in the Kyrgyz Republic. Common Country Assessment 2003: 40.

<sup>80</sup> For more information on the Osh ethnic conflict c.f.: 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 (May). 133-149.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews in Jalalabat and Osh, April 2004.

### 5.3.1 Problems

The occurrence of interethnic violence in Osh and Özgön is not accidental: The problems surrounding the relations between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks are concentrated in the South of the country where most of the Uzbek minority lives. While the Kyrgyz have nomadic traditions of cattle breeding, Uzbeks have a history of sedentariness and agricultural life. This explains why Uzbeks have settled in the fertile plains of the Ferghana Valley while Kyrgyz have stayed at the foothills (e.g. Tishkov: 134). Since Uzbeks have a much longer tradition of agricultural work and, consequently, trade, they are considered to be more successful and slier (see chapter 4.3.). The sedentariness of the Uzbeks also helps to explain their generally higher degree of religiosity compared to the Kyrgyz. They were able to build mosques and *Medressahs* in the towns and villages where the Uzbeks lived. The lack of institutionalized Islam, is considered as the main factor for the higher degree of secularity among Kyrgyz than Uzbeks.

What are the problems the Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations suffer from? In addition to the above-mentioned fear of an "Uzbekization" of the South and the formation of a "Fifth Column" by the Uzbeks, Kyrgyz often view the Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks as being economically more successful. Whether this holds true or not does not matter – the fact that this prejudice exists, is enough to pose a danger for interethnic stability. With labor migration of Uzbeks from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan, where they allegedly can earn almost twice the salary of Uzbekistan and still earn less than locals, there is a possibility of Kyrgyz economic jealousy.<sup>82</sup> Another problem is that "Islamist activity" in Kyrgyzstan is often attributed to ethnic Uzbeks, which used to hold true for a certain time (re. below). From the other, the Uzbek perspective, there is a widespread feeling of exclusion from power and general discrimination on ethnic grounds.

However, the main problems occur on a very local level, be it disputes over land, water, or border posts. These difficulties vary tremendously from community to community: While there can be tensions over the allocation of land in one village, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz coexist peacefully in the neighboring village.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, micro-projects that identify target communities without exacerbating the tensions (or even evoking them) and try to remove the reason for the specific conflict in the specific area are absolutely necessary. There is, however, the risk of "self-fulfilling prophecy," i.e. if a community is targeted by an international or local organization only because it is ethnically mixed, without an analysis of the conflict potential as such. An in-depth knowledge of the local circumstances is indispensable.

<sup>82</sup> Interviews in Jalalabat and Osh, April 2004, IRINNews 11 September 2003.

<sup>83</sup> A further danger according to the interview partners in Jalalabat is the increase in rice production: with rice production being extremely irrigation-intensive, disputes over water between neighboring communities bear a certain potential for aggravation. Interview in Jalalabat, April 2004.

### 5.3.2 Restraining factors

The first and foremost restraining factor for interethnic violence is the very occurrence of it in 1990. The term "Oshskie Sobytiya," "Osh events," has been burned into the memories of the ordinary people as well as the political elite, and there is a high degree of mystification and "tabooization" of these events.<sup>84</sup> Avoiding a reoccurrence of this national tragedy is most probably the main goal behind the President's campaign of "Kyrgyzstan, our common home" which aims at national unity regardless of the ethnic background and translates into the backing of the current government by ethnic minorities (see 3.6).<sup>85</sup>

A second restraining factor can be seen in the fact that both Uzbeks and Kyrgyz share the same religion (Sunni Islam) and speak a similar language. With regard to religion and traditions, the cleavage between the North and the South of the country is at least as large as the one between Southerners and Uzbeks: The more secularized and the more "russianized" North of Kyrgyzstan dominates the country not only economically but also politically. The perception of the Southerners as not being "real Kyrgyz" but "half Kyrgyz half Uzbek,"<sup>86</sup> of course, is not acceptable to Southern Kyrgyz. This notion, however, can be explained by the general impression of the South being more conservative in different ways. Therefore, the crossing of two societal fault lines has a positive impact on interethnic relations – it is not only the Uzbeks who feel discriminated but also the Southern Kyrgyz, and there is even the possibility of unification of Uzbeks and Southern Kyrgyz with regard to action taken in Bishkek.

A third restraining factor is the addressing of ethnicity-specific needs by the central government. With the establishment of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh and the introduction of Uzbek textbooks written in the Uzbekistani-Latin script, much of the overall tension has been eased.<sup>87</sup>

Last but not least, there is a wide range of mutual cooperation between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks on a local level, e.g. Uzbeks from the lowlands entrusting Kyrgyz shepherds with their cattle during summer; or interethnic marriages that had come to a virtual halt after the Osh riots but are currently increasing once more.<sup>88</sup> It is these local ties that can help people to build up confidence and mutual understanding.

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<sup>84</sup> Rumors go as far as pointing to the KGB as the initiator of the riots. Whether this is true or not is obviously difficult to assess and a task to be left to historians.

<sup>85</sup> In the Kyrgyz public, the notion of the "common home" is transmogrified into "dormitory," since the sound of "Obshiy Dom" (common house) and "Obshezhitie" (dormitory) are quite similar.

<sup>86</sup> Interview in Talas, April 2004.

<sup>87</sup> Interviews in Bishkek and Jalalabat, April 2004.

<sup>88</sup> Interview in Osh, April 2004.

### 5.3.3 External Factors – Uzbekistan

#### Dangers

As mentioned above, there is a certain fear among the Kyrgyz that larger neighboring countries might threaten Kyrgyz statehood. The main source for this fear is Uzbekistan, and this for several reasons:

1. Significant Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan
2. Significantly larger population in Uzbekistan (more than five times the population of Kyrgyzstan)
3. Perception of a foreign policy by Uzbekistan aiming at regional hegemony, combined with the strongest army in the region
4. Possible political instability in Uzbekistan
5. Uzbekistan's border policy
6. Higher degree of religiosity among Uzbeks

Ad 1:

The fear of the Uzbek minority posing a "Fifth column" has already been mentioned. On a local level, this latent mistrust carries a certain potential for violent conflict, especially when combined with the other factors (re. below).

Ad 2 et 3:

With a population of more than 26 million, Uzbekistan outnumbers Kyrgyzstan more than five times. Although a certain feeling of inferiority is nothing to worry about, in the Central Asian context, it is combined with uncertainty. Is the larger neighbor really to be trusted? What are the country's intentions? Despite different pathetic notions of "Eternal Friendship"<sup>89</sup> the yet unconsolidated statehoods in Central Asia and the generally realistic foreign policy (i.e. the lack of perception for mutual win-win bargains among nations) leads the governments to prefer relying on partners farther away than on mutual cooperation with neighbors. From the Uzbek point of view, Kyrgyzstan is not to be trusted either, albeit not due to its size: With the incursion of fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000 into Southern Kyrgyzstan and to some extent into Uzbekistan, the Uzbek government accused Kyrgyzstan of not being able to control its territory and borders. While there is some truth in the argument, a deeper reasoning behind this accusation is obvious: If the relatively democratic neighbor were successful, then the regime of Uzbek President Karimov would have difficulties justifying its tough stance towards political dissent.

<sup>89</sup> A "Treaty on Eternal Friendship" between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was signed in 1996.

Ad 4:

In April 2004, just a few days after the shoot-outs in and around Tashkent, Bukhara and other cities of Uzbekistan, several interlocutors in Kyrgyzstan were very anxious about the events in the neighboring country. The answers with regard to the impact of domestic Uzbek policies on Kyrgyzstan ranged from general statements on regional security to the notion of Uzbekistan falling apart into five to six *Khanates*.<sup>90</sup> The impact of such a development on Kyrgyzstan would be mainly economic, since the country would have to deal with many refugees from Uzbekistan. According to the interlocutors, the massive police check-points at the borders of the different *Viloyati* (provinces) illustrate the danger of Uzbekistan falling apart. Regardless of the probability of such a scenario, the question remains as to which extent such a development would affect Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks. If a new, independent state were indeed to emerge out of the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley, the consequences for all of Central Asia would be unforeseeable. Major territorial shifts affecting Kyrgyzstan as well as Tajikistan would be inevitable and the IMU's notion of a united "*Khanate* of Ferghana," a revival of the ancient "*Khanate* of Quqon," would materialize. However, for the time being, such a development seems very unlikely, although not entirely impossible. Another danger with regard to Uzbekistan's (and, for that matter, Kyrgyzstan's) political stability is the possible raise of nationalistic rhetoric by political leaders in order to cover internal grievances. The canalization of dissatisfaction and lack of perspective towards an external threat, with the aim of uniting the people behind a certain political leader, is a common political pattern.

Ad 5:

With the jigsaw – borders between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan virtually sealed off, which imposes difficulties for both Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, there is a certain danger that Kyrgyz will project the policy of Uzbekistan's government downwards, to the group of Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks. In other words, Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks would be held responsible for the border policy of the Uzbek government.<sup>91</sup> However, whether this projection is really made by a major part of the Southern Kyrgyz population remains open, since it would require further sociological research.

Ad 6:

Whereas there is a higher degree of religiosity in Southern than in Northern Kyrgyzstan, there is a differentiation in the South between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz: Women wearing a *Burqa* are immediately identified by Kyrgyz as Uzbeks, "our women don't wear that kind of thing."<sup>92</sup> This statement perfectly describes the pattern of ethnicity and religiosity, according to which Islamic fundamentalism in Kyrgyzstan is a Kyrgyzstani Uzbek problem.<sup>93</sup> However, in recent months, although there is some truth to this pattern held so dear by certain Kyrgyz representatives, the theory has experienced some scratches. The appearance

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<sup>90</sup> Interviews in Bishkek, Jalalabat and Osh, April 2004. The main distinctions were made between Ferghanis, Tashkentis, Samarqandis, and Bukharis.

<sup>91</sup> Interviews in Jalalabat, April 2004.

<sup>92</sup> Interview and personal observation in Özgön, April 2004.

<sup>93</sup> International Crisis Group 2003: Radical Islam in Central Asia. Responding to Hizb ut-Tahrir. Osh/Brussels, (30 June). 18.



of leaflets of the banned radical party, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, in the Northern Chui, Talas, and Yssyk Köl provinces in light of an almost complete absence of ethnic Uzbeks in these areas, point to the engagement of ethnic Kyrgyz in radical agitation.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, radical Islam remains tightly associated with ethnic Uzbeks. The problem lies in the fact that members of organizations such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* are mainly Uzbeks, whereas most policemen are Kyrgyz: Therefore, if an alleged member of a radical organization is arrested, it is most likely that a Kyrgyz will arrest an Uzbek. This fact, however, is hardly exploited, since the combination of ethnic and religious radicalism has no broad support and it would be political suicide for Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks.

Islamic radicalism in Kyrgyzstan can also have an impact on the relations with Uzbekistan. This has been shown by the latter's reaction to the incursion of fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan from Kyrgyz territory into Uzbekistan. The mining of the common border by Uzbekistan as a "measure of self-defense" is a direct consequence of the perception of Kyrgyzstan not being able to protect its borders and fight Islamic radicalism on its own territory. This perception of the neighbor by the political elite in Uzbekistan can, if exploited, lead to an increase of negative sentiments among the broader population (re. Tajikistan).

### Opportunities

Although it might sound somewhat cynical, Uzbekistan's authoritarian regime and especially its economic decline, could have a stabilizing effect for Kyrgyzstan in the short- and mid-term. Calls for a unification with the motherland, a policy of "Anschluss" or "Heim ins Reich," lose their attractiveness if they are not backed by a perspective.<sup>95</sup> With peons from Uzbekistan crossing the officially closed border to Kyrgyzstan almost daily in search of work, Kyrgyzstan's Uzbeks remain very well informed on the situation in Uzbekistan, and the country's bleak economic situation, combined with its authoritarian political system are rather uninviting.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks are not necessarily perceived as Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, although many of them hold both passports.<sup>97</sup>

Another positive aspect is the time factor. In the first years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the call for a redrawing of the borders might have been more appealing than today. The more time passes, the more people get used to their new states – for Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks, being a citizen of Kyrgyzstan is natural, because they know no alternative. With regard to border issues, there have been some slightly positive signs: The work of the joint commission for border demarcation is progressing, although not at a very high speed, and Uzbekistan started de-mining parts of the common border in August 2004.<sup>98</sup> The clearance of mines, combined with a less restrictive border crossing regime, would certainly ease

<sup>94</sup> This statement is confirmed by an interview in Karakol, April 2004.

<sup>95</sup> International Crisis Group 2002: Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential. Osh/Brussels, (4 April). 13.

<sup>96</sup> Interview in Jalalabat, April 2004.

<sup>97</sup> Interview in Osh, April 2004.

<sup>98</sup> FAST Database, 17 August 2004.

tension on the local as well as on interstate level. However, taking into account Uzbekistan's need for security, Kyrgyzstan must ensure a certain degree of control over elements Uzbekistan regards as threats - provided control remains within the framework of Kyrgyzstan's and international standards on human rights.

## 5.4 Kyrgyz-Tajik Relations – an Underestimated Conflict Potential?

The table in chapter 5.1. shows that the percentage of ethnic Tajiks among the population of the country is a *quantité négligeable*, so why dedicate an entire chapter to them? The Tajiks account for less than one percent of the overall population and are indeed one of the smallest ethnic minorities in Kyrgyzstan. However, their local concentration and their distinction of origin from both the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks places them in a special position. With regard to language, Uzbeks are the minority best suited to adopt the state language: Both Uzbek and Kyrgyz are Turkic languages with quite high a degree of similarity. With Tajik, the situation is completely different: Being a Persian language, Tajik is not understandable for either Uzbeks or Kyrgyz.<sup>99</sup>

On a local level, especially in certain areas of the Batken and Leilek Raions of the Batken Oblast, conflicts over land and water do not arise between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks but between Kyrgyz and Tajiks. One of the main problems is the yet uncompleted demarcation of the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>100</sup> Out of this lack of clarity, disputes over land and water arise with a different degree of intensity in several places. Furthermore, the respective countries do not seem to be keen on resolving this problem any time soon, since for both of them, the region concerned is very peripheral. Some Kyrgyz consider this delay in the demarcation process to be a Tajik tactic, because Tajiks are said to have a higher birth rate, thereby attempting to produce facts by means of what is referred to as "creeping migration."<sup>101</sup> The peripheral location of the region, however, seems to be a more probable explanation.

On an interstate level, the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is probably one of the best in the region, mainly because of their common fear of dominant Uzbekistan. The common construction of the Batken-Kanibodom 220-kV transmission line is just one example of bilateral cooperation. Both countries lack natural resources except for water. Therefore, there is a common interest in negotiating deals with downstream countries (mainly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, to a lesser extent Turkmenistan). The notion made by an interlocutor in Osh in April 2004 that the relations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are more dangerous than those between the former and Uzbekistan because of the cultural / linguistic distance does not seem to hold true, if one considers the common interests of both countries.

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<sup>99</sup> For Uzbekistan with its high percentage of ethnic Tajiks, the situation is somewhat different – there are many Tajik expressions that were adopted by the Uzbek language. Interviews in Buxoro (Uzbekistan) and Khujend (Tajikistan), August and September 2003.

<sup>100</sup> The same holds true for several border regions between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>101</sup> Interviews in Chorku (Tajikistan), September 2003, and Batken province, April 2004.

## 6 Conclusions

As the analysis has shown, Kyrgyzstan faces problems in different fields, especially in the political and social ones. On a political level, the main question is whether the tendency towards an ever increasing authoritarianism will continue or whether Kyrgyzstan will manage to become a model for a peaceful democratic change of power which could impact on the whole Central Asian region. For the time being, there are developments pointing into both directions: On the one hand, Kyrgyzstan's political space is comparatively lively, with possibilities of freedom of expression unheard of in neighboring countries. President Akaev's promise to leave office in accordance with the constitution and his readiness to hand over the political future of the country to the younger generation can be considered a very positive signal. On the other hand, harassment of prominent opposition figures ahead of the parliamentary elections on 27 February 2005, can be interpreted as the regime's determination not to let go of any power. This assumption is fuelled by the sometimes even hysteric rhetoric from the government's side in the wake of the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine. However, the Kyrgyz government seems to be seriously committed to abide by international standards for the parliamentary elections, assured by the provisions taken not to let any opposition candidate become too serious a threat.

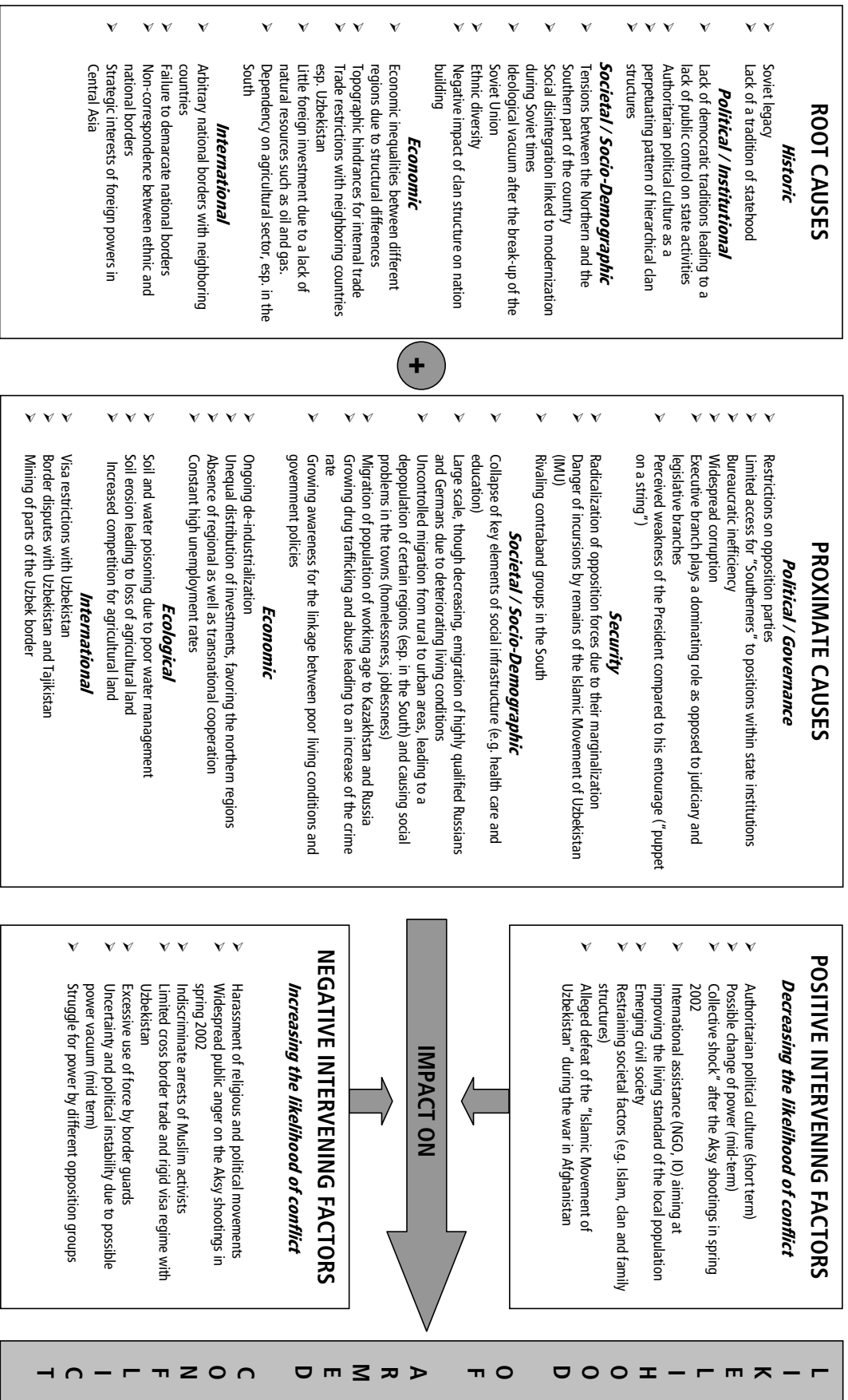
For the government it is important to show the image of free and fair elections to the international community in order to remain credible. While a certain emphasis on the process (transparent and fair elections) is necessary beyond any doubt, the reasoning must go on *beyond* 30 October 2005 and focus on the issue of the kind of future that would be desirable for Kyrgyzstan. Depending on the point of view of the observer, this analysis will differ: While some might focus on the fight against radical Islamism or on maintaining the interethnic balance, others might emphasize economic prosperity and regional cooperation. The international community, especially Western donor countries with a certain financial leverage, can attempt to influence processes as well as future political actors. In light of the recent events in Ukraine and the accusations made by the Russian and Central Asian sides regarding Western "meddling in internal affairs," this form of exerting influence must be carried out very carefully in order to avoid provoking nationalistic reflexes that could be exploited by the ruling elite in their favor. The avoidance of provoking nationalistic reflexes is crucial for a Kyrgyzstan's inter-ethnic stability. While the question on whether ethnic diversity poses a danger to peaceful coexistence *per se* is highly disputable, its exploitation for political ends has to be prevented at any cost. Ethnicity is frequently used as a tool for social mobilization on other, mainly economic and/or power issues. Furthermore, there must be a "political entrepreneur" who consciously exploits ethnic differences for his or her aims. For the time being, this is not the case in Kyrgyzstan or in Uzbekistan. However, the international community has to monitor developments closely in order to be able to steadfastly react should there arise any signs of an increase in ethnicity-based propaganda.

As the above analysis has shown, at present, there are no signs for an immediate danger of massive ethnic violence. On the contrary, the situation can be described as stable, although resentments and prejudices persist. Still, there is room for projects aiming at easing interethnic tensions on a local level. Such projects usually either try to foster interethnic understanding by bringing both communities together (sports, cultural events, etc.) or aim at eliminating the potential source of tension (e.g. by reestablishing irrigation infrastructure) that might lead to interethnic conflict. Nevertheless, actors working in the area of conflict prevention must constantly be aware of the danger of a "self-fulfilling prophecy" and avoid ethnicization of problems that are not necessarily ethnic in nature. This requires a constant monitoring of actors' activities with regard to this. As the example

of the land privatization process has shown, there is room for real reforms and progress, and the Kyrgyz government is arguably the most receptive government in Central Asia for foreign support for its reforms. As the OSCE's police training program demonstrates, foreign actors can even provide assistance in highly delicate spheres. Caution, however, must be exercised and all stakeholders involved. Furthermore – and quite obviously so – cooperation programs must be checked with regard to their impact and the ruling elites must be convinced of the necessity of various reforms. In times of large numbers of reports from Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan painting a rather pessimistic picture of the region, land privatization can be considered a success and proof of the fact that things *are* changing in Kyrgyzstan. Or, to say it with Galilei: "Eppur si muove!"

# Appendix

## FAST Analytical Framework Kyrgyzstan



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