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Regime Change in Kyrgyzstan and the Specter of Coups in the CIS

Uwe Halbach / Franz Eder

The developments in Kyrgyzstan differ markedly from the regime changes in Georgia and Ukraine. Yet the overthrow of Askar Akayev's regime again raises the question of how "contagious" changes of government are in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The forms of political power that have become established in this region range from "managed democracies" to authoritarian presidential regimes and neo-totalitarian systems. Sovereignty is centered largely in the person of the president, not in the will of the electorate. Since rigged elections were the catalyst for peaceful regime change in Georgia and Ukraine, speculation about the likely next candidate for a "democratic coup" shifted to countries where elections were scheduled and there existed at least the rudiments of a civil society and a politically interested public. The message went out from Tbilisi and Kiev that electoral fraud was a risky business for the powers-that-be in any system that was at least partly pluralistic. President Akayev's reaction to this message, long before the recent parliamentary elections in his country, showed that he was most unsettled.

First analyses of Georgia's "Rose Revolution" were skeptical about whether it would set a precedent. Not even Ukraine was considered a possible next candidate, but developments there showed that Georgia did not remain alone. Holidaying together in the Carpathians, the new Ukrainian president and his Georgian counterpart issued a joint statement about "a new wave of liberation." But in this euphoria they overlooked the fact that the structural preconditions for peaceful regime change within the CIS differ: the compactness of the ruling elite, the level of organization and political maturity of

the opposition, the vitality of civil society, and how readily the population can be mobilized—these factors all vary from country to country. The parliamentary elections held in the spring of 2005 in three states—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova—and also the way the disturbances in Kyrgyzstan diverged from the events in Kiev five months earlier, show that differences can be significant.

Tajikistan was ruled out early as a candidate for regime change. The population was virtually not involved in any political activities in the lead-up to the elections. President Imomali Rakhmonov is firmly in con-

trol, the opposition—leaderless and dis-united. What is more, the Tajiks associate concepts such as “change of government” with the terrible experiences of the 1992–97 civil war. The regime intentionally exploits this mental connection and the high degree of depoliticization in society. It thus comes as no surprise that the president’s party, the Democratic People’s Party of Tajikistan, won an overwhelming parliamentary majority of over 80 percent of the vote; the degree of electoral manipulation is not the issue here. The consolidation of the regime fitted into the pattern of development after the end of the “national reconciliation” process that was intended to heal the wounds of the country’s civil war—initially the Tajik political system was a paragon of political pluralism, in which even an Islamic party could share power, but then it gradually devolved into a presidential autocracy so typical of the region.

Most attention was directed long in advance to the elections in Kyrgyzstan on February 27 and March 13. The situation here was not dissimilar to that in Georgia and Ukraine—with the president’s period of office set to expire, dissatisfaction with the “Akayev regime” among the elites and in the population, a somewhat more liberal political climate than in neighboring states, an opposition attempting to unite, and a relatively lively civil society.

The Erosion of the Akayev Regime

In the first half of the 1990s Kyrgyzstan presented itself as a model of “democratic development” in Central Asia. It thus distanced itself from neighboring states such as Uzbekistan and capitalized on this self-portrayal: it became the highest per capita recipient of Western financial aid in Central Asia, amassing a huge foreign debt in the process. A brief “parliamentary spring” blossomed in this smallest Central Asian state. But by 1995 at the latest, President Akayev, who had ruled since 1990, had transformed the state into a presidential autocracy using referendums and constitu-

tional amendments. The last such referendum, in 2003, confirmed him in office until 2005. Before the referendum his position had been weakened by a bloody clash between security forces and demonstrators in the southern Akсы region.

The regime did not recover from this. The ineffectuality of state institutions and the regime’s increasing lethargy—its inability to react to crises—further undermined the President’s authority. There are clear parallels here to the final stages of the Shevardnadze era in Georgia. The corruption that had become inherent to the system also aroused criticism within the ruling elite. Political appointments were increasingly made for payment rather than according to competence. This style of recruitment led to very bad governance—and this in the face of the country’s grave problems (high foreign debt, poverty, unemployment, and drug trafficking). The President repeatedly replaced his cabinet and senior staff. Most of those ejected found themselves together again in the opposition. Its current leaders—Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Feliks Kulov and Roza Otunbayeva—once held high posts in government and the diplomatic service. Discontent in broad sections of the population as well as the business community was aggravated significantly by the amalgamation of political and economic power in the “clan.” This core group of the regime, which in addition to members of the presidential family included close friends and staff, controlled the most profitable sectors of the economy and increasingly also the most influential media. It is this interlinking of power and property in all post-Soviet states that makes regime change through elections so difficult—and explosive. When the ruling elite loses office, it must fear not only for its political sway but its economic privileges as well.

This question caused acrimony at the last presidential elections in 2000, when Akayev was only allowed to stand again thanks to a Supreme Court ruling. The ruling party pinpointed and eliminated its

most serious rival, Feliks Kulov, who in the late 1990s had looked set to overtake the President in terms of popularity—a formality was found to prevent him from standing as a candidate; after the elections he was charged with abuse of authority and sentenced to 10 years in prison, which put him out of the running.

Like the opposition in most post-Soviet states, the Kyrgyz opposition showed considerable weaknesses—it was fragmented, poorly organized, its lineup changed from election to election, and it was personality-driven rather than focusing on political programs.

The beset regime portrayed the opposition in the crudest possible way—as troublemakers who were only out to destabilize the country. A “velvet revolution” supported by the West in this region, so the argument went, would end not in a peaceful change of government, but in civil war. To strengthen his position, Akayev also raised the issue of Kyrgyzstan’s geopolitical role in Central Asia. Shortly before the first round of elections he announced that the U.S. would not be allowed to station AWACS reconnaissance planes at Ganci air base (Manas airfield) near Bishkek, while the Russian presence at the Kant air base would be allowed to expand. This message was directed at Moscow—Kyrgyzstan, home to both Russian and Western military bases, saw Russia as the more reliable partner because it did not promote “democratic coups” in the CIS.

The Coup

In view of the above-mentioned weaknesses of the opposition and the initial concentration of its protests in the southern provinces of Osh and Jalal-Abad, it came as a surprise that the anti-regime movement spread and was soon mounting demonstrations nationwide. On March 24 the regime collapsed virtually overnight, putting up little resistance. Its helplessness astonished even its critics. But if the opposition’s goal in the coup in Bishkek was a “velvet revo-

lution” à la Kiev and Tbilisi, it missed it by a wide margin. The events were no neat “tulip revolution,” with disciplined and nonviolent mass demonstrations and nary a broken pane of glass—looting and street battles dominated the picture. But the opposition’s leaders, especially its acting “security coordinator” Feliks Kulov, were surprisingly quick to restore a minimum of peace and order to the capital. The gravest dangers for the success of the coup—the uprising in the south, acts of violence by the mob in Bishkek, and the dual-power scenario between the old and the new parliament—seemed to have been banished by the end of March.

But the situation remains tense. The OSCE has expressed great concern and appealed to the sense of responsibility of all involved, in Kyrgyzstan and abroad, to maintain peace in the country. It remains to be seen to what extent the new leadership will be able to avoid power struggles in its own ranks in the next few weeks in the lead-up to the new presidential elections called for July. In view of the political and social turmoil in the country, this is a very short time in which to organize trouble-free elections.

Kulov’s resignation from his function as chief of the security services, which are still largely in the hands of Akayev faithful, led to speculation about internal power struggles and the ambitions of Kulov, who was freed from jail on March 24. Will he really let the interim president Kurmanbek Bakiyev assume political leadership of “postrevolutionary” Kyrgyzstan? Or is his departure from the interim government a tactical move to gain leverage in advance of the presidential elections?

In a country where politics is strongly shaped by regional loyalties and clan structures, great significance is attached to political figures’ origin. Will leaders of the interim government such as Bakiyev and Otunbayeva, both from the south, be able to master one of the most important political tasks in Kyrgyzstan—reconciling the south with the north? Bakiyev’s fol-

lowers were limited initially to his home region of Jalal-Abad, where the most violent demonstrations took place after the elections. But as former prime minister, governor of the central Chu Province, and deputy in the national parliament, he has gained sufficient political influence and respect at the national level as well. The same is true of Feliks Kulov, a representative of the political elite of the north, who was long at the center of power and has since gained nationwide prominence as the best-known opponent and former prisoner of the old regime. It remains to be seen whether politicians with a strong local following like Azimbek Beknazarov, whose arrest in 2002 sparked off the disturbances in the Aksy region, will enter into the post-Akayev power struggle.

An urgent task for Kyrgyzstan's new leadership is to dispel fears in the Russian- and Uzbek-speaking sections of the population about ethno-nationalist tendencies within the interim government. The unrest in the south awoke memories of the inter-ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks which claimed hundreds of victims in that part of the country in 1990. A stereotype has arisen that sees Kyrgyz as opponents of the regime and Uzbeks as supporters of the old order, but in reality Uzbeks also took part in the south's anti-Akayev revolt.

The central challenge for the new leadership is the economy. After Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has the worst socioeconomic data of the whole region. The political unrest after the elections, which had elements of hunger revolts, caused further damage to the economy. Bakiyev is considered competent on the economy. The new leadership in Kyrgyzstan, like in Georgia and Ukraine, has the difficult task of distancing itself as far as possible from the corruption and kleptocracy of the former regime. Accordingly, Bakiyev has made the fight against corruption his main objective.

The Regional Context

Some of the unsolved challenges faced by the new political leadership in Bishkek also concern other parts of the Central Asian region. This is the case with one of the country's most obvious structural problems—its geographic, ethno-demographic, cultural, economic, and political division into four north and three south provinces. It was manifested in the concentration of oppositional activism in the southern provincial centers of Jalal-Abad and Osh. The integration of the south into Kyrgyzstan's state and nation building has been the unfulfilled task of every political leadership in Bishkek. This part of the country with its potential for inter-ethnic conflicts (a third of the population here are Uzbeks), its distinctive feeling of being politically disadvantaged by the north, and its economic underdevelopment, lies in the most critical subregion of Central Asia—the Fergana Valley, where the borders of three states intertwine. This is also the hotbed of Islamist opposition activity in the region, which is driven by one particular group—the international Islamic extremist party Hizb ut-Tahrir. This pro-Caliphate movement, which combats the entire political order in post-Soviet Central Asia, allegedly has three thousand supporters in Kyrgyzstan. It has called for a boycott of the elections.

But another specter is haunting the presidential palaces of Central Asia—if the change of government in Bishkek proceeds more or less peacefully, it will set a most unwelcome precedent. The counterparts of toppled President Akayev have no interest in a successful “tulip revolution” in their neighborhood.

It was here in Central Asia, where a series of elections took place in 2004 and more are scheduled for 2005, that the ruling elites reacted most vehemently to the shock waves sent out by the “rose revolution” in Georgia. By 1999 at the latest, the Central Asian autocrats had made out Islamist subversives as their main political opponents, but since November 2003 the

“export of rose revolutions” has become another political threat. The rulers have now taken on the type of argument cultivated in Russia: regime change like that in Georgia, so the line goes, was a tool of the West’s geopolitical expansion into the former Soviet sphere of influence. Uzbekistan, which like Turkmenistan is a repressive Central Asian presidential autocracy *par excellence*, provided the earliest example of preventative measures by pruning the suspected buds of a “rose revolution.” The authorities introduced harsh restrictions against international non-government organizations. In April 2004 the Open Society Institute (OSI) in Tashkent, financed by the Soros Foundation, was forced to close. In January 2005 President Islam Karimov spoke before parliament and warned of the destructive influence of foreign ideologies and NGOs, which served as tools of foreign powers.

In Kazakhstan in November 2003 parliamentary deputies demanded a new electoral law and pointed to the dangers that would result from electoral fraud—and which in Georgia had led to the coup. The elections of September 2004 were then indeed suspected of having been rigged. Western observers were relatively restrained in their assessment of this electoral fraud, but some voices within the Kazakh political elite condemned it sharply—the incumbent chairman of the parliament, Zharmakhan Tuyakbai, spoke of a massive violation of voters’ rights. This statement was of great significance because Tuyakbai was also co-president of the governing party which won at the polls; after this he went over to the opposition. Representatives of one of the country’s leading opposition parties, “Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan,” appeared side by side with Viktor Yushchenko’s supporters during the Ukrainian election campaign. After their return to Kazakhstan and under the impression of the “Orange Revolution,” on December 11, 2004, the party called upon “all healthy forces in society” to take “resolute action, including civil disobedi-

ence” against the “illegitimate” government. A court then ordered the dissolution of the party. The Kazakh authorities also took action against international NGOs—in particular the OSI. But Kazakhstan is not considered a candidate for regime change; despite growing criticism from within the political and economic elites, Nursultan Nazarbayev’s apparatus seems to have political life in the country still under control. The dissatisfaction of the population also does not compare with that in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan before the respective change of government; after all, resource-rich Kazakhstan is the most successful state in the region in economic terms. But presidential elections are to be held in 2006, possibly even in December 2005, and this increasingly raises the question of Nazarbayev’s successor.

It was the Kyrgyz president who reacted with the angriest rhetoric. In an article in the Russian newspaper *Rossiyskaya gazeta* in June 2004, Akayev compared foreign democratization policies with “Bolshevist export of revolution.” In September he warned in a speech in Moscow that the further spread of “rose revolution technologies” was aimed at destabilizing the CIS. The closer the elections came in Kyrgyzstan, the more radically and one-sidedly he depicted the opposition as a product of a foreign conspiracy that would lead to national disaster.

Foreign Interference?

The foreign connections of civil society organizations, in particular the Soros Foundation, which since 1993 has maintained a network of OSI branches in the states of the CIS, were cause for commentators in Moscow and other capitals in the region to depict “democratic regime change” as something launched from abroad. The difference between international foundations and organizations supporting processes of democratization on the one hand, and direct interference in favor of regime change on the other,

was sometimes intentionally obscured. For example, commentators regarded statements by U.S. ambassador Richard Miles encouraging the Georgian opposition as exerting direct influence there. Before his posting in Georgia, Miles was Chief of Mission to Belgrade, where he was said to have had close connections with the anti-Milošević opposition. On November 20, 2003, America for the first time publicly accused a post-Soviet state of rigging elections, thus precipitating the fall of the Shevardnadze regime. In Kyrgyzstan, too, statements by U.S. ambassador Stephen Young warning President Akayev not to extend his period of office—due to expire under the constitution in 2005—were interpreted as Western interference in the internal affairs of the country.

The influence attributed to the Soros Foundation in particular is long-term and complex. Specifically, it aims to provide information about elections and strengthen civil society. Youth and student organizations such as Kmara (“Enough!”) and Pora (“It’s Time!”) were among the foreign-sponsored forces to challenge the rigged election results in Georgia and Ukraine. They are modeled on the Serbian student movement Otpor. In Kyrgyzstan youth movements such as KelKel were formed, which maintained relations with their counterparts in Georgia and Ukraine.

No recognizable pattern has yet emerged in Western reactions to regime change in the CIS region. In the fall of 2003 the West supported the change of government in Georgia; but it was very reticent to criticize the dynastic transfer of power within the Aliyev family in Azerbaijan, which took place against the background of electoral fraud. In view of this, the ruling elites of the CIS came to the conclusion that the West only aids regime change where there is a coherent, organized and articulate opposition, when support for it in society is recognizably broad, and when the regime is unmistakably decrepit. In Azerbaijan, one could thus conjecture, the opposition’s alternative to “stability under Aliyev” evi-

dently did not merit foreign support.

The consequences of this calculation were summed up by the Azeri commentator Ali Abasov: “The West’s recognition of the presidential election results in Azerbaijan made it easy for the government to smash all opposition critical of the system.” Dissidents in Armenia also increasingly complain about what they see as the inconsistent reaction of the “West” (particularly the EU) to antidemocratic steps by their government. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, too, the West continued to support Akayev’s “policies of reform” long after they had been recognized domestically as empty rhetoric.

“Geopoliticization” of Domestic Developments

Following the events in Georgia and Ukraine, pundits in the CIS predicted a new phase of political transformation in post-Soviet Eurasia, a new period of qualitative change both within states and in their relations to each other. Some saw two camps emerging in the CIS—one of “revolutionary Westernizers” and one of Russian-leaning “indigenous conservatives.” If this were accurate, a range of regional organizations in post-Soviet Eurasia would be affected. A change of course in Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy would affect regional institutions such as the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*, the *Central Asian Cooperation Organization* and the *Eurasian Economic Community*. Kyrgyzstan is a member of all of these overlapping forums for economic and security cooperation. The change of government in Ukraine has already called into question the existence of a regional structure particularly fostered by Russia—the *Single Economic Space*—which Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus are involved in. To date, however, the interim government in Kyrgyzstan has indicated continuity in its foreign policy. The new foreign minister Roza Otunbayeva was ambassador to Washington and London, and UN representative

in Georgia during the “rose revolution”; as such she has diplomatic contacts to the West and will continue to cultivate them; but a one-sided pro-Western course involving a turn away from Russia is not to be expected of the new leadership.

Nevertheless, since the diplomatic debacle in Ukraine and the coup in Kyrgyzstan, a sense of disillusionment has been growing in Russia regarding its own leading role in the CIS region. Under the influence of Washington—so the conservative CIS camp fears—new regional structures with a definite pro-Western orientation could arise, or a conglomerate like GUUAM (an acronym for Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova) could be revived. This was a bloc initiated in 1996 by Georgia and Ukraine, which stood out for its rejection of Russian hegemonic policies in the post-Soviet region and its pro-Western orientation in security matters. President Mikhail Saakashvili hopes to relaunch this forum under new conditions: “It will become an organization of new democratic states on the territory of the former Soviet Union.” But Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan—which has pulled out of the group again—obviously cannot be considered “new democratic states”. Even Georgia’s democratic development ushered in by the “rose revolution” is still far from consolidated, an assessment shared by external observers, Western diplomats in Tbilisi, human rights organizations, and the Council of Europe.

Russia—A Status Quo Power

Russia has made particular efforts to exploit the unease among Central Asian ruling elites caused by the “rose revolutions” in order to strengthen its own strategic position in the region. In January 2005, for example, presidents Putin and Nazarbayev voiced their concern at the “export of revolutionary technologies” to the CIS region. Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, Russia’s defense minister asserted that Moscow’s

interests in CIS countries were a strategic priority. Russia would therefore “react very sharply to the export of revolutions to the CIS countries.” In commentaries on the change of government in Ukraine, Russia presented itself as a status quo power in the former Soviet sphere of influence. Some analysts compare this stance with the role of czarist Russia in the Holy Alliance in the first half of the nineteenth century when conservative Russia was at the forefront of the European monarchies in combating the “revolutionary plague of 1848.”

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Russia reacted differently than it did during the Ukrainian elections. At a meeting with his Kyrgyz counterpart, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov ruled out taking sides in elections in CIS countries. Shortly before the polls opened, Russian officials spoke with leaders of the Kyrgyz opposition. These allegedly assured the Russians that the opposition was not pursuing an anti-Russian course. Russian analysts have also learned lessons from the diplomatic debacle in Ukraine—they increasingly emphasize that relations with neighboring states must take account of the whole society, not just the ruling elite.

The status quo alliance in the CIS is opposed by a camp developing under the leadership of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Meeting in Chişinău in March, the presidents of Georgia and Moldova signed two declarations—one on democratic values, the other concerning secessionist regimes supported from abroad, which they termed “black holes in Europe.” Both countries oppose Russia’s role as a mainstay for autocratic regimes in the CIS region and supporter of separatism in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

The advocates of the status quo rallied above all around Russia and its criticism of the OSCE. From Minsk to Tashkent, ruling elites are growing increasingly frustrated with the OSCE election monitors in the CIS region. In 2003 the CIS set up its own election-monitoring body, which proceeded to qualify even the most blatant electoral

farces in the region, for example in Belarus, as “open, free, democratic, and legitimate.” The Russian foreign ministry accused the OSCE of being prejudiced against the post-Soviet region, complaining that the organization restricted its criticism of deficits of democracy to the states of this region and, through its fixation on democracy and human rights, ignored central issues of security policy.

But Russian commentaries did not assess the change of government in Bishkek in the same geopolitical terms as they did the earlier events in Georgia and Ukraine. Konstantin Zatulin, director of the Russian CIS Institute, put it laconically: “There is no anti-Russian conspiracy, not here.”

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