

DYNAMICS OF RUSSIAN-KYRGYZ RELATIONS: FROM THE CENTER-PERIPHERY TO UNILATERAL DEPENDENCE?

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By Central Asian standards, Kyrgyzstan is a relatively small country. Its natural riches are limited to gold and water resources; other than that it has nothing to offer on the global and regional scale, which explains its insignificant geopolitical weight. Tucked away in a corner of the region, it is isolated from the main routes of Asian freight turnover and its mountains make transit unprofitable (especially compared with its neighbors).

It cannot deal on an equal footing with its large neighbors—Kazakhstan, China, and Uzbekistan; potential investors prefer to keep away from the region with its unstable or potentially unstable countries, such as Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. The image of a backward country, from which its citizens are leaving in hundreds of thousands to seek employment elsewhere and which is short of skilled workers, does nothing to attract money to the Kyrgyz economy. Its economic environment—closed to foreign investors and non-transparent because of corruption and clientelism—can hardly tempt real money.

The country's geopolitical situation is highly disadvantageous, partly because of outside factors on which the Kyrgyz elite, no matter what shape it is in, has no influence. The country is an

obvious regional, Eurasian, and even Asian periphery.¹

However, in keeping with Mackinder's theory of the Heartland as applied to Central Asia,² people are apt to believe that the country's situation is not hopeless. This looks like an exercise in wishful thinking.

I have undertaken here to explain how the Kyrgyz leaders tried to respond to the geopolitical developments and to trace the dynamics of the relations with the former Center, very much affected by a certain amount of latent momentum in their bilateral relations. The larger part of the local elite regards Russia as a center of gravity that could and should be consulted. Seen from Moscow, the Kyrgyz capital looks like the center of a former Soviet republic, that is, on the periphery of its sphere of influence to be treated, because of its obvious weakness, with a certain amount of condescension. This approach shaped a certain type of relations and contributed, albeit indirectly, to certain obstacles and problems.

¹ On Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical situation, see, for example: M. Suiunbaev, "Kyrgyzstan: A Geopolitical Portrait," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (31), 2005.

² See: S. Matikeeva, "Mackinder's Legacy: Was It a Prophecy?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4 (34), 2005.

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The Trends and Turns of Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Policy

For the reasons described above, the country's choice of foreign policy maneuvers is very limited, but former President Akaev, who dedicated much more time to and poured more efforts into his country's foreign policy than the republic's Foreign Ministry, tried to create the best possible image of his small state worldwide. This approach laid the foundation for several foreign policy program documents, the Silk Road Diplomacy among them, authored by the president himself.³

The multivector nature of the country's foreign policy was the linchpin on which everything else hinged: the republic recognized the interests of several countries (particularly Russia, China, and the U.S.) in Central Asia; and sustainable relations with neighbors formed another foreign policy cornerstone. Kyrgyzstan orientated itself toward the CIS countries as markets for its products. They, primarily Russia, were the guarantors of the republic's security, even though the potential of such guarantees was in doubt. The CIS countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Russia, "import" a large number of Kyrgyz workers, which is reducing social tension inside the country.

The possibility of working together with the developed states (the EU, U.S., and Japan) in anticipation of financial aid was treated as a priority. In fact, in the early years of independence, President Akaev created a very positive image of his republic abroad, which opened access to all sorts of grants from these countries. It was at that time that local and foreign NGOs started mushrooming in the republic in numbers unrivaled elsewhere in the region. Aspersions may be cast on the ways the money was used or the efficiency of the international organizations themselves, yet on the whole the money flow was an obviously positive phenomenon.

Among the other main Central Asian actors, China is critically important for Kyrgyzstan because of considerable commercial immigration from China and Chinese investments and grants. Recently China has also been offering different kinds of loans in order to attract Kyrgyzstan.⁴

The Silk Road Diplomacy presupposes the republic's involvement in building the architecture of regional integration. Its membership in all the Central Asian integration structures (the CSTO, Customs Union/EurAsEC, and SCO) is expected to reinforce the republic's international position. The republic's membership in the WTO and Customs Union (which it joined simultaneously)⁵ fulfilled one of the key political tasks formulated by President Akaev.

The republic used America's fast infiltration into the region in the fall of 2001 in its own interests, but the deployment of the American military at the Manas airport caused a veritable storm in the public and the local media;⁶ the SCO members did not remain passive onlookers either.

The other foreign policy vectors are relatively weak even though the republic's foreign policy doctrine treated the Middle East and Southeast Asia as priorities.

³ See: A. Akaev, "Diplomatia sholkovogo puti. Proshloe i nastoiashchee Velikogo Sholkovogo puti." The text appeared on the site of the Foreign Ministry of Kyrgyzstan as an official document of the country's foreign policy, available at [http://www.mfa.kg/index_ru.php?section=&article=37], 10 August, 2004.

⁴ See: M.S. Imanaliev, "Kyrgyzsko-kitayskie otnoshenia na sovremennom etape," Rukopisi Instituta obshchestvennoy politiki, August 2006.

⁵ See: K. Isaev, "Vostok—delo tonkoe," ili Litso kyrgyzskoy vlasti glazami ochevidtza, TAS, Bishkek, 2006, pp. 113-115.

⁶ The local public treats the American base and the Russian base that appeared in the country two years later differently. While the Americans are treated with a share of caution, the Kant airbase is viewed positively. Any blunder of the American servicemen causes indignation, while the Russians are willingly tolerated. In fact, so far they look like "ours." For more on the military aspects of the relations between Kyrgyzstan and the United States, see: M. Kazakpaev, "U.S.-Kyrgyzstan: Partners in Different Weight Divisions," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (39), 2006.

Kyrgyzstan is pursuing two main foreign policy courses. The first is the Russia-Central Asia-China vector; all of them are the republic's main trade partners, to which the republic sells its products and workforce. Despite its obvious attractions, this course has its shady sides (the far from simple relations with the Central Asian neighbors, China's and Russia's policies, which can be described as post-colonialist, and the contradictions between these two key regional actors).

The second course, which involves distant, but no less important players, is formed by the EU (+ OSCE), the U.S., and Japan. They have not yet acquired definite interests in the region (this is especially true in the case of Europe), yet they may serve as a counterweight to the first course.⁷ The former president favored a policy of mutual complementarity of the great powers in Central Asia.⁸ Balancing is fairly tricky: the gap between the two courses has become dangerously wide. Recently, the close, not distant (and not always reliable), neighbors have stepped up their involvement in the country, which made its foreign and domestic policy a little bit "schizophrenic." The republic is making many promises right and left at present in order to remain everyone's ally: this is costing it its partners' confidence.⁹

Political and Diplomatic Relations

Bilateral relations between sovereign Kyrgyzstan and Russia began in June 1991 when Boris Yeltsin arrived in Bishkek to sign an agreement on the principles of interstate relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the R.S.F.S.R.¹⁰ A year later, in June 1992, the countries signed a standard interstate treaty.¹¹ The permanent representation office of Kyrgyzstan in Moscow became the Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic.¹² In September 1992, Russia reciprocated with opening its embassy in Bishkek. Diplomatic relations became even wider when, on 1 January, 2002, the Russian Federation opened its General Consulate in Osh. Kyrgyzstan opened a similar office in Ekaterinburg, the republic's very important economic partner and a center of attraction for its workforce.

Political contacts and summits are frequent: official and working visits of Kyrgyzstan's premier and president are almost annual affairs; Kyrgyz diplomats visit Russia more often than any other country of the world.

After 2000 when Vladimir Putin became president, the contacts at the top level became even more frequent. The Russian president paid much more attention to the other Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan in particular), yet Kyrgyzstan became Russia's strategic ally.¹³

⁷ See: L. Imanalieva, "The Main Results of the Democratic Reforms and Foreign Policy in Kyrgyzstan during Its Years of Independence," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (12), 2001, p. 82.

⁸ See: A. Shumilin, "Rossia i Tsentral'naia Azia: vzaimnoe pritiashchenie," *GlobalAffairs.ru*, available at [http://www.globalaffairs.ru/live/article.asp?rubric_id=1478&id=4448®ion_id=1299#], 18 February, 2004.

⁹ In 2005-2006, the American base issue was a typical example of this: on the one hand, in 2005, the SCO countries (Kyrgyzstan among them) demanded in Astana that America should remove its troops from the region; on the other, Kyrgyzstan could not reject the much higher rent.

¹⁰ For the text of the treaty see: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.). Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, Compiled and authored by G.A. Rudov, ed. by V.M. Ploskikh, Ilim, Bishkek, 2001, pp. 33-38.

¹¹ Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation of 10 June, 1992. For the text of the treaty see: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 40-45.

¹² See: "Protokol ob ustanovlenii diplomaticheskikh otnosheniy mezhdru Rossiiskoy Federatsiey i Kyrgyzskoi Respublikoy, Kiev, 20 marta 1992 g.," in: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, p. 39.

¹³ This should not be overestimated: Russia acquired many "strategic partners." Strategic partnership with Kyrgyzstan was officially registered in Art 1 of the Declaration of Perpetual Friendship, Allied Relations and Partnership between the

The key event of Vladimir Putin's first presidential term was his visit to Kyrgyzstan in October 2003, when the Russian airbase of the CSTO Collective Rapid Deployment Forces was opened.¹⁴

The results of diplomatic relations were less impressive than their intensity. The declarations were mere words, while Russia turned out to be an unreliable partner: during the events of spring 2005 when Askar Akaev stepped up diplomatic activity¹⁵ in the hope of enlisting Moscow's support, the latter was already investigating the opposition's potential and tilling the soil for alternative developments.

Following the events of March 2005, the former president and his family were granted asylum in Russia, but Moscow was talking about relations with the new people in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ This was easy: under President Bakiev, the pro-Russian vector of the republic's foreign policy became more pronounced. In 2005, even more Kyrgyz delegates visited Moscow; the country's leaders coordinated with Russia everything that was said about the American base in 2006.

This means that in two years the multi-vector balance of the country's foreign policy was tipped; the United States, as one of the important components, lost its position.¹⁷ The republic was drawn into Russia's orbit, something that the public also wanted.

Relations in the Military Sphere

Relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia in the security sphere are close enough; Kyrgyzstan inherited all the military equipment stationed in its territory by the time the Soviet Union ceased to exist, which means that the CIS borders with the outside world were still manned by Russian border guards.¹⁸ They remained there until 1999 when Kyrgyzstan finally negotiated their withdrawal.¹⁹ This was not the end: an operational group of Russia's border guards stayed behind to train the local border guard service.²⁰ Russia retained the Test Base of Anti-Submarine Equipment of the RF Navy on Lake Issyk-Kul and the navy communications center in the settlements of Spartak and Chaldovar.²¹

Russian Federation and the Kyrgyz Republic of 27 July, 2000 signed in Moscow (see: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossiia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 167-173).

¹⁴ See: *Diplomaticheskii vestnik*, November 2003.

¹⁵ See: *Kommersant*, 21 January, 2005. Askar Akaev took part in the celebrations of Moscow State University's 250 anniversary and was present at the reception in the Kremlin.

¹⁶ See: "Feliks Koulov: Rossiia—nash luchshiy drug, a druzey nel'zia meniat. Pervyi vitse-premier Kirgizii," *Kommersant*, No. 95 (3179), 27 May, 2005, available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/news2.php4?st=1117169460>], 1 June, 2005.

¹⁷ It should be said in this connection that Russia took prompt advantage of the worsened attitude of the Kyrgyz public toward America's military presence in the republic. The demonstrative transfer of old aircraft after the incident at the Manas airport was presented as an act of friendship between Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

¹⁸ See: "Soglashenie mezhdru Rossiiskoy Federatsiei i Kyrgyzskoi Respublikoy o statuse pogranychnykh voysk Rossiiskoy Federatsii, nakhodiashchikhsia na territorii Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, ot 9 oktiabria 1992 g.," "Dogovor mezhdru Rossiiskoy Federatsiei i Kyrgyzskoi Respublikoy o sotrudnichestve v voennoy oblasti, ot 5 iulia 1993 g.," in: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossiia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 76-79.

¹⁹ See: "Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoy Federatsii i Pravitel'stvom Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki o poriadke peredachi Kyrgyzskoi Respublike pod okhranu uchastkov ee gosudarstvennoy granitsy, okhraniaemykh Federal'noy pogranychnoy sluzhboy Rossiiskoy Federatsii, ot 17 iulia 1999 g.," available at [http://www.businesspravo.ru/Docum/DocumShow_DocumID_84308.html], 10 August, 2004.

²⁰ See: "Soglashenie mezhdru Kyrgyzskoy Respublikoy i Rossiiskoy Federatsiei o sotrudnichestve po pogranychnym voprosam (Bishkek, 17 June, 1999). Prilozhenie: Polozhenie o poriadke finansirovaniia Operativnoy gruppy Federal'nykh pogranychnykh sil RF v Kyrgyzskoy Respublike," in: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossiia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 154-165 (see also: D. Fayzullaev, "Rossia-Kirghizia: ekonomicheskoe sotrudnichestvo nabiraet oboroty," *Azia i Afrika segodnia*, No. 10, 2005, p. 33).

²¹ See: "Soglashenie mezhdru Rossiiskoy Federatsiei i Kyrgyzskoy Respublikoy o poriadke ispol'zovaniia rossiiskikh voennykh ob'ektov na territorii Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki i statuse voennosluzhashchikh Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiiskoy Fed-

The war in Afghanistan and the ensuing American presence in Kyrgyzstan forced Russia to “discover” idling Soviet military infrastructure in the republic.

Bishkek intended to host the SCO structures, particularly the antiterrorist center, but China and Russia preferred to have Tashkent as the host site.

In Kyrgyzstan, Russia limited its military activities to the CSTO; the agreement on the Russian airbase in Kant was the key event of this cooperation.²² Moscow found it profitable to use the base that formally belonged to the CSTO: it could demand its free use. The results of the 2005-2006 meetings of the two presidents presuppose that the base will be expanded: so far, Russia’s presence is minimal and its military importance is negligible. The base serves to demonstrate Russia’s force.

Moscow allowed Kyrgyzstan—and all the other CSTO members—to buy military vehicles and equipment at Russia’s domestic prices. In fact, this is the structure’s main integration factor, through which Russia “subsidizes” its members’ loyalty. In 2004 alone, Russia supplied Kyrgyzstan with military equipment totaling \$2.3 million.²³

At first glance, military cooperation between Russia and Kyrgyzstan looks active enough, but the real results are much more modest. In Russia’s case, this is the base in Kant. Russia’s air forces will be much less useful in the event of a real threat in the form of small groups of Islamic terrorists acting in Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan’s case, the Russian base makes up for the absence of its own air force. In this way, Russia is cementing its regional status on a highly advantageous basis (at the expense of the CSTO).

The Economic Component of Mutual Relations

The economic reforms in Kyrgyzstan and Russia were carried out according to the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund and caused the most profound economic collapse in the CIS.²⁴ The revival that began in 1995 was cut short by Russia’s default of August 1998. From that time on, Kyrgyzstan became much less dependent on the Russian market than before—Moscow is still the most important, yet not dominant, partner. The plummeting purchasing power of the local people attracted cheap Chinese products. The opening of a gold mining enterprise in Kumtor (on the south shore of Lake Issyk Kul), which extracts up to 17 tons of gold mainly bought by Switzerland, was a very important event against a fairly discouraging background.²⁵

The republic’s state debt to Russia plays an important role in bilateral relations. In 1992-1993, under bilateral agreements, Russia issued Kyrgyzstan loans totaling \$272 million to buy Russian raw materials, machinery, and equipment.²⁶ In the latter half of the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan received more

eratsii v Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki, ot 5 iulia 1993 g.,” in: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 80-87.

²² Intergovernmental Agreement on the Status and the Conditions of Deployment of the Russian Base in the Territory of the Kyrgyz Republic of 22 September, 2003. Ratified and enacted on 11 August, 2005.

²³ See: *Akipress.org*, 26 April, 2004.

²⁴ The GDP level of 1994 is estimated at 63 percent lower than in 1990 (see: N.A. Volgina, M.S. Gafarly, *Slozhnosti i protivorechia perekhoda k sovremennoy rynochnoy ekonomike. Postsovetskaya Tsentral'naya Azia. Poteri i obretenia*, Vostochnaya literature Publishers, Moscow, 1998, p. 321). About Kyrgyzstan’s economy see: L. Tchantouridze, “Kyrgyzstan at a Crossroads: Facing the Economic Causes of the Tulip Revolution,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4 (40), 2006. For an overview of the Kyrgyz economy see: G. Gleason, *Markets and Politics in Central Asia: Structural Reform and Political Change*, Routledge/Curzon, London, 2003, pp. 65-81.

²⁵ See: *Vneshniaia trgovlia stran SNG 2003*, Mezhsudartvennyi statisticheskiy komitet SNG, Moscow, 2004, p. 232.

²⁶ See: *Vneshniaia zadolzhennost' stran-chlenov SNG; sostoianie, dinamika, perspektivy*, IMEPO RAS, Moscow, 1998, p. 31.

loans of a technical nature to be spent on renovating the aircraft fleet of Kyrgyz State Airlines, on equipment for the Bishkek thermal power plant, and on textbooks for Russian-language schools. The money was squandered due to the incompetence of the local bureaucrats and corruption.²⁷ In this way, Moscow increased the republic's dependence on the Russian products, at least in the spheres that particularly interested Moscow. The treaties allowed Russia to use credits to put pressure on Bishkek.

Under the new treaties signed in March 1996, Russia should have acquired the shares of several Kyrgyz enterprises as part of the republic's restructured state debt.²⁸ The issue is still pending. In 2000, Russia restructured Kyrgyzstan's state debt by writing off \$40 million and postponing payment of the rest. According to the statements coming from Moscow, however, this practice will be discontinued.²⁹

After 2000, Russian investments have been rising every year from practically nothing to several million dollars.³⁰ Wimm-Bill-Dann made the largest contribution to the Kyrgyz economy: it bought and refurbished the Bishkeksut plant, and the products are exported to neighboring countries (South Kazakhstan).³¹ In 2003-2004, Russian investments in the republic's economy remained stable at a level of about \$11 million.³²

As in Tajikistan, energy in Kyrgyzstan too is one of the key branches in which Russian companies are interested. RAO UES was expected to finish building the Kambarat-1 and Kambarat-2 hydro-power stations; the corresponding agreement was signed in January 2004.³³ Nothing has happened so far because of the Russian side's vague intentions to study the situation at the facilities. The fact that both hydropower stations were removed from the Law on the Special Status of the Toktogul Hydro-power Stations passed by the republic's parliament in June 2007 may radically change the situation: Russian business might lose the right to complete the projects.³⁴

Energy supplies to the Russian market started in 2003 were suspended; the talks resumed in 2007 are still underway.³⁵ To become a regional energy power, Kyrgyzstan should first attract huge foreign investments; the talks about building power lines did not begin until 2006.³⁶ As distinct from Tajikistan,

²⁷ See: K. Isaev, op. cit., pp. 89-110.

²⁸ The Russian side should have received shares of the Kyrgyz chemical-metallurgical concern in the Kemin District, car engines, a joint-stock company, and part of the Kyrgyzkabel plant together with the Bishkek car assembly plant (see: "Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki i Pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoy Federatsii o sotrudnichestve v oblasti elektroenergetiki, ot 28 marta 1996 g.," "Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki i Pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoy Federatsii o restrukturizatsii zadolzhennosti Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki po gosudarstvennym kreditam, predstavlenym Rossiiskoy Federatsiey, ot 28 marta 1996 g.," in: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 412-414, 442-444, respectively).

²⁹ See: "Rossia ne spishet dolgi bedneyshim stranam," *Centrasia*, 8 March, 2007, available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1173414420>], 9 March, 2007.

³⁰ Russia invests much less than other countries: in the first nine months of 2006, Russia was the sixth in terms of volume of direct investments; its share in the total flow of direct investments being about 3.5 percent, according to the preliminary figures of the Bishkek National Institute of Statistics, available at [<http://www.stat.kg/Rus/Home/express-invest.html>], 7 March, 2007.

³¹ In 2002, the company invested about \$7.5 million, bringing the total volume of Russia's investments to \$17 million a year (see: D. Fayzullaev, op. cit., p. 35).

³² See: *Investitsii v Kyrgyzskoy Respublike 2002-2004 godov*, The National Committee for Statistics of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek, 2005.

³³ See: A. Bel'skiy, "Pokhod Chubaysa na Vostok," *Respublika*, No. 4 (04), 3 September, 2004, p. 12; Press release of RAO UES of 21 January, 2004, available at [http://www.rao-ees.ru/ru/pobeda_60/news/news/pr_archiv/show.cgi?pr210104rap.htm], 7 March, 2007.

³⁴ See: *24.kg*, 19 June, 2007.

³⁵ In 2003, Kyrgyzstan exported 713.9 million kWh of electric power to Russia; in 2004, 1,800 million (see: *Vneshniaia torgovlia Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki 2002-2004*, National Committee for Statistics of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek, 2005, pp. 110-111).

³⁶ Rosatom of Russia, as well as the American AEC corporation, displayed an interest in the project (see: *24.kg* Information Agency, 26 June and 16 December, 2006).

Kyrgyzstan failed to attract foreign investors to create a competitive environment for the fairly passive Russians.

Cooperation with Gazprom, which has been controlling gas deliveries from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan since 2006, is very important for the republic.³⁷

The republic's membership in the WTO (since 1998) has become a stumbling block in its relations with Russia. From the Kyrgyz point of view, the Customs Union (which Kyrgyzstan joined in 1996) profited from the republic's WTO membership, but it was interpreted by the countries of the Customs Union as a violation of the Union's principles. After joining the WTO, Kyrgyzstan acquired the possibility of importing cheap goods from other WTO members (including China and the Southeast Asian countries) and re-exporting them to "its own" sales markets (Russia and Kazakhstan). Bishkek insists that it is highly important to keep petty trade between Russia and Kyrgyzstan alive because trade in Chinese, its own, and other goods is of huge social importance for Kyrgyzstan.³⁸

In the economy, as well as in politics, asymmetry is glaring.³⁹ Moscow is holding onto certain economic tools in the form of limiting Kyrgyz exports to the Russian Federation. Kyrgyzstan cannot respond in kind.

So far the Russian companies that enjoy political support are still in a very favorable position when it comes to investments in Kyrgyzstan. As compared with its rival Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is more open from the point of view of access and communications.

So far, the Russian companies have failed to fulfill their promises, especially in the politically important spheres, of which energy is one. Pointing out their failure to obey the agreements and the threat of inviting Central Asian rivals may help to change the situation.

Russians in Kyrgyzstan

Russians came to the valleys of northern Kyrgyzstan in the last third of the 19th century.⁴⁰ From the very beginning, there was an imbalance between the north and the south in this respect, which explains why under Soviet power and in the post-Soviet period, the people in the north were much more Russified than in the south. Today, this is one of the psychological justifications of the country's division into the north and the south.

In the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan, like its Central Asian neighbors, developed an open anti-Russian bias. Coupled with the ethnic conflict in the south, it created an outflow of Russians. In 1992-1993, 104 and 110 thousand, respectively, left the country; the majority of them were skilled Rus-

³⁷ M. Karayianni, "Russia's Foreign Policy for Central Asia Passes through Energy Agreements," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4 (22), 2003, pp. 93-94. In actual fact, this purely theoretical mechanism failed to deliver Kyrgyzstan from its dependence on its neighbor. Every year, the two countries have to settle problems in the sphere of gas deliveries: the republic cannot pay for its gas on time.

³⁸ See: A. Elebaeva, "Migration in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Nature, Trends, and Types," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (18), 2002, p. 151.

³⁹ On the whole, one can say that in the last few years the volume of trade with Russia has more than doubled. While in 2000, Kyrgyz export to Russia reached the figure of \$65 million, in 2004, it was nearly \$138 million; the figures for import are \$132.6 and \$293.7 million, respectively (see: *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe razvitiie Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki*, National Committee for Statistics of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek, 2006, pp. 110-113). Russia outstripped Switzerland, the largest importer of Kyrgyz products.

⁴⁰ On the eve of the 1917 revolution, there were over 92 thousand Russian-speaking people in the Pishpek and Przhv-alsk uyezds (nearly 40 percent of the total Russian population) (for more detail, see: G. Gorborkova, *Russkaia diaspora v Kyrgyzstane*, Sham Publishers, Bishkek, 2003, pp. 12-48).

sians. By the mid-1990s, the flow stabilized.⁴¹ In 2004, there were 502 thousand Russians in the republic, or 9.9 percent of the total population (the share for 1989 being 21.5 percent). The trend has not yet been stemmed.⁴² The outflow increased after March 2005, even though the revolutionary events were not anti-Russian at all.⁴³ Since 2005, latent nationalism has been mounting, which obviously alarmed those who wanted to and could emigrate.

So far, everyday ethnic relations remain stable: the Russians have preserved their social and material status; as distinct from Uzbekistan, where Russian job seekers are openly discriminated against, there is no discrimination in this sphere in Kyrgyzstan, with the exception of structures where knowledge of the Kyrgyz language is a must. This means that Russians are excluded from state offices, but, as distinct from neighboring republics, they can still be seen in many departments. There is no discrimination in the private sector dominated by the clans, which explains why there are almost no Russians there. Petty trade is still Russian, but Russians are in the minority there.

The Language, Media, and Education as the Outposts of Russia's Influence

The local Russians, the Russian language, education in Russian, the Russian media, and culture are the key factors of Russia's influence in Kyrgyzstan.

In 1996, the Russian tongue was accepted as the means of communication among various ethnic groups, in 1998, it became the republic's official language,⁴⁴ yet this failed to stem the exodus of highly qualified Russian speakers. So far it remains unclear how the law can be applied in practice.⁴⁵ Despite the present state and use of the Russian language at the official and state level, it will gradually lose its importance.

The media, particularly the electronic media, are one of the outposts of the Russian language in the republic: the Russian media are considered to be more influential. In book printing, the situation is more balanced; Russian TV programs are broadcast across the republic under corresponding agreements⁴⁶ and are very popular and influential. Kyrgyz TV has Russian-language programs too. Russian-language TV is very popular because it employs the best journalists; all the influential politicians and economists always find time in their packed schedules to watch Russian programs.⁴⁷ Commercials are also mainly in Russian.

⁴¹ See: A. Elebaeva, op. cit., p. 153.

⁴² See: *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe razvitie Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki*, p. 118.

⁴³ According to the Kyrgyz Committee for Statistics, in 2004-2005 25 thousand Russians moved from Kyrgyzstan to Russia (see: G. Toraliev, "Russkie begut iz Kyrgyzstana. Ostalos men'she 500 tysiach," *Gazeta.kg*, 14 February, 2006, available at [www.gazeta.kg], 16 February, 2006).

⁴⁴ This status of the Russian language is limited to Kyrgyzstan and Belarus.

⁴⁵ See: Law on the State Language of the Kyrgyz Republic of 12 February, 2004, available at [http://www.eurasia-media.ru/law/kr_o_gos_yazyke.shtml], 7 March, 2007. Strangely enough, the Kyrgyz parliament used the Russian language to discuss this law intended to raise the role of the Kyrgyz tongue.

⁴⁶ See: "Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki i Pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoy Federatsii o poriadke rasprostraneniya program rossiiskikh teleradioveshchatel'nykh organizatsiy na territorii KR, ot 28 marta 1996 g.," in: *Kyrgyzstan i Rossia. Istoria vzaimootnosheniy suverennykh gosudarstv (90-e gg. XX v.)*, pp. 434-436.

⁴⁷ For details of journalism in Kyrgyzstan see, for example: A. Sukhov, "Pressa luzhnogo Kyrgyzstana: problemy zhurnalistskogo obrazovaniya," in: *Postsovetskie SMI. Ot propagandy k zhurnalistike*, Kavkazskiy institut SMI, Yerevan, 2005, pp. 128-138.

The Russian language dominates the sphere of secondary professional and higher education; in primary and secondary schools, the share of the Russian language is limited to 15 percent; in higher schools, about 67 percent of students prefer Russian as the language of study.⁴⁸ Urban dwellers prefer Russian-language schools for their children—in large cities demand is much higher than supply. The Boris Yeltsin Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University set up in 1993⁴⁹ is one of the best and most desirable higher educational establishments judging by the number of young people competing for places in it; about 1,000 Kyrgyz students obtain a higher education in Russia annually.⁵⁰

The situation in the media and education remains favorable for the Russian Federation; it seems that the larger part of the political elite will remain Russian-oriented to a greater or lesser extent. The Russian leaders may rest assured that no other cultural or linguistic environment will distract part of the local population—the Russian culture has much deeper roots.

So far Russia has no strategy for profiting from this; it is commonly believed that there is no need to bother and that Kyrgyzstan will remain tied to Russia forever. Other countries, however, might move in with more tempting measures.

Labor Migration

The Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia, as well as labor migrants from other places, are mainly petty traders and workers. They sell their merchandise in Moscow, Ekaterinburg, and some of the other Volga and Siberian cities.⁵¹ They trade in Chinese textiles, fruit, and vegetables. In 2007, their chances were reduced to naught; this not only aroused doubts about the future of the newly introduced rules, but may also undermine Russia's prestige among the Central Asian workers and petty traders.⁵²

Bilateral relations between the two countries and their images are greatly affected by labor migration to the Russian Federation. The main markets of the Kyrgyz workforce copy the key features of Kyrgyz trade. No one knows how many Kyrgyz guest workers there are in Russia: the Ministry of the Interior supplied the figure of 25,000 with permanent addresses and 41,000 with temporary registration.⁵³ They have no bearing on reality: according to different sources, there are between 150,000 and 1 million Kyrgyz working in Russia.⁵⁴ The number of migrants in Russia increased when Kazakhstan (until that time a more attractive country) tightened the rules and deported a large number of Kyrgyz and Tajik citizens.⁵⁵

In January 2007, Russia, in turn, changed the registration rules for the foreign workforce and the possibility of illegal employment became greatly reduced. Theoretically, the rights of Kyrgyzstan

⁴⁸ This is a fairly stable trend; about 30 percent of students in higher educational establishments study in Kyrgyz (see: "Образование и наука в Кыргызской Республике," National Committee for Statistics of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek, 2003, p. 97).

⁴⁹ This provision is envisaged by Art 22 of the Agreement on the Principles of Interstate Relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the R.S.F.S.R. of 21 June, 1991.

⁵⁰ See: *Rossiiskiy statisticheskiy ezhegodnik 2003*, State Committee of the Russian Federation for Statistics, 2003, p. 238. Over time, the number of students wishing to go to Russia will decrease. In 2001 about 300 students began studying in Turkey (see: A. Elebaeva, op. cit.).

⁵¹ Distribution of labor migrants is best illustrated by the maps of the flights from Kyrgyzstan.

⁵² For what Aygul Ryskulova, head of the State Committee of the KR for Migration and Employment, has to say about the problems of labor migration and new rules for guest workers in Russia, see: IA 24.kg, 11 January, 2007. By the end of 2007, it will be clear how much the Kyrgyz traders lost because of the new rules.

⁵³ See: A. Elebaeva, "Labor Migration in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (27), 2004, p. 81.

⁵⁴ See: A. Elebaeva, "Migration in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan: Nature, Trends, and Types"; *idem*, A. Elebaeva, "Labor Migration in Kyrgyzstan." According to a population poll, the permanent population of Kyrgyzstan is 4.8 million.

⁵⁵ Interview of the present author with "shuttle traders" who travel between Ekaterinburg, Astana, and Bishkek, July 2002.

citizens are protected by a set of interstate agreements.⁵⁶ In practice, however, they are not protected against the imperious Russian law and enforcers of order. On the other hand, the ordinary Russian citizens' stereotype about the Kyrgyz differ from that about Tajiks or Uzbeks. Over time, xenophobia and crimes against the Kyrgyz will greatly damage Russia's positive image in Kyrgyzstan.

Moscow may use the factor of labor migration and the threat of its limitation to put pressure on the Central Asian republics, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, even though this may misfire. This strategy may positively affect

- (1) the local population's ideas about Russia and
- (2) the degree to which Kyrgyzstan and the other Central Asian states become dependent on Russia.

This would promote its interests in the region better than the military bases.

Any Kyrgyzstan government should take into account the migrant issue for keeping social tension in check. The leaders should oppose Russia's efforts to limit migration, which will also limit the outflow of workforce to Russia. The phenomenon of labor migration can be described as an important factor of the two countries' relations.

C o n c l u s i o n

Throughout the post-Soviet period, Russia's presence and influence in Kyrgyzstan has remained stable. The country's economic dependence on Moscow and the local people's positive attitude toward Russia are two favorable factors from the viewpoint of the Russian Federation. From Kyrgyzstan's viewpoint, the RF is still the main sales market and the only "window to the West;" other powers have still to acquire all the positive factors that help Russia to keep the republic in its orbit.

Like the Central Asian countries, Russia proved unable to use these relative advantages. Expensive and allegedly important steps, as well as the support of expensive, even though important, projects are preferred to less impressive plans in labor migration, education, culture, etc.

After the March 2005 events, the new Kyrgyzstan leaders confirmed their pro-Russian orientation: they proved even more loyal than President Akaev and his multi-vector policy.

In the future too, Kyrgyzstan will have to reckon with the Russian factor, taking into account the Russian-speaking people, the fact that the local people treat the RF as "ours," and the hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz working in Russia to earn what their own government will not be able to ensure them for a long time to come.

Despite the above, Moscow should keep in mind that its advantages are temporary and that it cannot remain a lifebelt indefinitely. Other global and regional powers—China, the U.S., and Kazakhstan—are building up their influence in Central Asia.

⁵⁶ See: The Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Kyrgyz Republic on the Legal Status of the Citizens of the Russian Federation Permanently Living on the Territory of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic Permanently Living on the Territory of the Russian Federation of 13 October, 1995, available at [http://www.businesspravo.ru/Docum/DocumShow_DocumID_35203.html], 12 July, 2004. The treaty did not come into force until 6 January, 2001.