

KYRGYZSTAN: MENTALITY AND MODERNIZATION

Anara BEYSHEMBAEVA

*Senior lecturer, Administration Academy
at the President of the Kyrgyz Republic
(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)*

There is no need to hold forth about the faults of the republic's political system—everybody knows that the political, economic and spiritual culture is weak. At the same time, however, one can detect symptoms of political and economic stabilization.¹

Here I shall touch upon a more subtle issue that is much harder to grasp: a crisis of Kyrgyz mentality. Is there a crisis? A positive answer invites two other questions: Are there symptoms of the end of the crisis? In which way can the crisis be overcome? In his time, Pitirim Sorokin convincingly described a social crisis as a loss of the vector of mental life by a social-cultural “super-system.” This leads to axiological disintegration and “moral polarization” of public mentality. One can say that in the context of such crisis many personal minds lose their ability, completely or partially, to complete self-realization and adequate self-identity, thus causing a deficit of social subjectivity. At the same time, according to Pitirim Sorokin, deep-cutting mental crises are an inalienable part of the worldwide historical process; in many cases they bring in a new more socially and culturally productive life style. This obviously adds urgency to correct sociological diagnoses and interpretations of the crisis phenomena of our mental life.

Mentality is an extremely important component of any socium: as a sociocultural subject man belongs not so much to the objective world as to the inter-subjective picture of the world painted by mentality. We can a priori presuppose the existence of at least two vectors of Kyrgyz mentality: quietism (rest as an ultimate value: nothing should be sought for, nothing should be rejected) and utopia (of communist, liberal or any other kind). However, disintegration of Kyrgyz society and its mental differentiation are much more complex phenomena and more varied.

Throughout the last few years, society has been living amid continuous economic, political, and social reforms caused by a systemic transfer from one socioeconomic structure to another. These fundamental social changes, an interaction among all trends and directions of development cause qualitative ideological shifts; they change personal and ethnic relationships and the nation's axiological landmarks. As a

¹ See: “O sotsial'no-ekonomicheskom polozhenii KR,” *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 31 January, 2002, pp. 7-8.

result, civil society will come into being. The world looks at Kyrgyzstan as a democratic, secular, socially oriented state ruled by law, yet life of common people has not improved. The country's huge external debt (by late 2002 it was \$1,732.3m, according to the National Bank),² unemployment (over 500,000, according to expert assessment),³ and poverty of the wide popular masses (an average monthly wage, slightly above \$30, is one of the CIS lowest)⁴ do not allow the state to raise the living standards. Economy will deteriorate in the near future, thus making more people poorer. Old-age pensioners (70 percent of them, according to official figures live below the poverty level) and those who depend on the state for survival will suffer most.

This raises two inevitable questions: "Who is to Blame?" and "What Can Be Done?" It seems that the neo-Bolshevist methods employed in our country to plant the market and democracy and to uncritically copy Western experience are to blame along with the maniacal desire to leave behind the so-called shameful past, isolation, and poverty. In other words, the following factors are responsible for the current difficulties of social transformations in Kyrgyzstan.

First, the country failed to formulate a clear national conception of modernization; it armed itself with the so-called catching-up development model and fell prey to the conception of Eurocentrism that ignored the nation's sociocultural traditions. Kyrgyzstan tried to reproduce the "consumer society" way of life and a quasi-Western model of management and market economy. This ruined economy, lowered the living standards, and increased the number of poor people. The country's leaders seem to have forgotten that market economy was nothing more than a condition of social progress and that society's readiness to accept radical changes and suffer sacrifices for their sake was the key to success.⁵

Second, it was not taken into account that the economic system of Kyrgyzstan had certain specific features: a low technological level and the absence of high-quality competitive consumer goods in high demand. Kyrgyz society is also marked by lack of leadership as a political category (personal activeness and independence) and prevalence of the traditions of communality. They do not allow the state to develop innovation projects. Such societies in general cannot accept fast changes and should be offered more substantiated transformation projects.

Third, and most important, the specifics of mentality of the Kyrgyz as the state-forming nation were totally ignored. Each nation has a historically conditioned public conscience and a system of values. Being no exception, the Kyrgyz undoubtedly have their own mentality, their scale of values, and their own specific culture. This should be taken into account so as not to endanger the future of the country and the market reforms. Mentality is always specific and is always conditioned by such factors as affiliation with a social group, civilization, and epoch, which, in turn, within wider mentalities are coexisting in the interconnected mentalities of groups and classes. Both are open to metamorphoses, their speed in various mentalities being different yet, on the whole, not great.

In the absence of a clear idea of the structure of mentality of the nation as a whole and of individual groups, in particular, modernization and market reforms are doomed. The specifics of mentality betray themselves in individual psychological makeup and behavior as constants of sort. They relate individuals to certain ethnoses, sociums and time. All radical changes demand that people's mentality and its axiological structure should be taken into account: deep-cutting reforms always change the basics of people's life intimately connected with the individual values, norms, convictions, and stereotypes.

Fernand Braudel's conception of three types of historical time can be fruitfully applied to an analysis of social processes in Kyrgyzstan. He distinguished between long duration, medium duration, and short duration. Politics is associated with the third type; economics, with the second, and mentality, with

² See: M. Osmonaliev, T. Koichumanov, "Restructuring Kyrgyzstan's External Debt," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (25), 2004, p. 153.

³ See: A. Elebaeva, *Mezhetnicheskie otnoshenia v postsovetikh gosudarstvakh Tsentral'noy Azii: dinamika razvitiya*, Bishkek, 2001, p. 76.

⁴ See: A. Kurtov, "State Power in the Central Asian Countries: Quo Vadis?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (25), 2004, p. 20.

⁵ See: A. Dononbaev, A. Naskeeva, "Political Culture and Modernization in the Central Asian States," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (25), 2004, p. 9.

the first type as the most conservative and less dynamic structure of all.⁶ Mentality, as an intellectual phenomenon, belongs to the history of long duration and vast expanse.

Obviously, the process of changing the values central to national mentality is a long and painful process: it is very hard to adjust one's psychology to the changing picture of the world and a new social environment. It should be said that the "unconscious" in the form of mythologems and ideologems is very tenacious. Willpower of the country's leaders cannot transform it, neither can the nation's readiness to accept the changed values. No wonder, the market reforms in Kyrgyzstan changed nothing but the external forms of social behavior and did nothing to change the axiological system.

To borrow an expression from Kyrgyz researcher Z. Kurmanov, Kyrgyz mentality looks like "puff paste."⁷ The Communists destroyed the bay-manap relationships of the pre-Soviet period and the commonly shared ideas and opinions; however, they adapted certain features of Kyrgyz mentality to new ideological clichés. Clan solidarity that consolidated Kyrgyz society for centuries and an urge toward egalitarianism were used to plant such ideas as collectivism and equality in people's minds.

The above suggests a question about a correlation between modernization and national mentality. Haste should be better avoided. Artificial acceleration may cause a series of unpredictable results because the customs and norms—the sociocultural core of mentality—have lost much of its former influence, while its axiological and meaningful core is nearly ruined. This was what Pitirim Sorokin wrote about: "Reforms should not trample upon human nature and go against its basic instincts."⁸

Having analyzed two possible responses of traditional mentality and life style to sudden social changes French scholar Lucien Febvre concluded that human consciousness either reproduced deviational behavior or panicked and became inadequate.⁹ There is a third possibility: an apathetic attitude to social processes and drifting with the current. This is what happening in Kyrgyzstan, among the men-in-the-street. This approach makes it possible to analyze the changes in the mentality of the autochthonous ethnos and their trends in the context of modernization.

The changes of the last decade demonstrated beyond doubt that the man-in-the-street preferred to remain a passive onlooker and an eyewitness of social transformations initiated by a narrow circle of the political and business elite. Common people refuse to be involved in sociopolitical activity—they are inert. Being absolutely vulnerable and completely dependent on the central and local authorities they try to protect themselves and survive amid the worsening conditions of everyday life. Survival is their only aim even though people are acutely aware of their vulnerability and impotence. This is what guides people in everything they do. We are witnessing a phenomenon of massive and deliberate wish to cut down requirements; to be more exact, this is a phenomenon of self-identification with the modes of social behavior that make civil conscience impossible. The "silent and discontented" majority is made up of those who are radically minded (jobless and casual laborers), that is, of all those who look at themselves as social outcasts. They make no attempt at breaking out of the vicious circle of passivity and remain devoted to the principle of choosing the lesser evil. Their living standards can hardly suggest new behavior models; instead they teach the man-in-the-street to be prepared for the worst. Hence, his obvious pessimism that can be even called a "phobia for the worst."

This phenomenon explains the paradox that baffled Western analysts and that was further explained by the poll called "Kyrgyzstan-2000: Voters' Opinions," carried out by the Center for the Public Opinion Studies and Forecasts.¹⁰ According to the returns, about half of the country's population (and 49 percent of urban dwellers) have no confidence in the future. Caught in the lengthy economic crisis and degradation post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan became one of the poorest countries in the world with no middle class (the social basis of civil society) to speak of. According to Western experts, the standard of living index described by many as unacceptable dropped to the critical level, below which mass protests become inevitable. This has not yet happened in Kyrgyzstan—instead the man-in-the-street developed a philosophi-

⁶ See: F. Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée," *Ecrits sur l'Histoire*, 1969, pp. 50-51, 54.

⁷ See: Z. Kurmanov, *Politicheskaia bor'ba v Kyrgyzstane: 20-e gody*, Bishkek, 1997, p. 7.

⁸ P. Sorokin, *Chelovek, tsivilizatsia, obshchestvo*, Moscow, 1992, p. 271.

⁹ See: L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, Cambridge, 1982, p. 455.

¹⁰ See: "Sprosi u naroda," *RIF*, 2 June, 2000.

cal attitude to life. The common people who form the core of the non-civil society and who learned to adjust themselves to the sociopolitical daily circumstances do not welcome new values and continue living their own lives they alone can understand. They refuse to trust anybody and have no faith in the powers that be.

The years of reforms taught the local people to distrust power and made them individualists. They are no longer prepared to suffer for the sake of the benefit of all. The elite that has busied itself with privatizing profits and nationalizing losses sets the example. In these conditions the market is nothing more than a fight for property obtained through cheating in the first place. Society is developing into a social mass with no willpower to respond to reforms. This is a society of downtrodden people concerned with their own survival being afraid to look into the future they are deprived of. We are witnessing a phenomenon of so-called “black consciousness,” by which I mean a radically negative self-assessment: the majority in the republic is not yet ready to embrace the new liberal values because it cannot detect in them any ideas worthy of it as a nation. As a result, people while losing self-actualization and self-respect turn to the past glory and grandeur in search of ennobling images. Such people refuse to look into the future—they are concentrated on the past. In fact, the large stratum of frustrated people forms the social basis and electorate of the revivalist movements.¹¹

This explains why many of the post-Soviet states (the Central Asian republics in the first place) are living through an upsurge of “myth creation.”¹² The republican leaders are also trying to revive the national spirit; from the very first days of independence the republic has been holding grandiose festivals and jubilees: the 1000th anniversary of the Kyrgyz epos “Manas,” congresses of ethnic Kyrgyz; the 2500th anniversary (!) of the Kyrgyz statehood (in 2003), etc. This is done in an effort to revive historic memory and to perpetuate the images of the best sons and daughters of the Kyrgyz. A new national idea and the nation’s moral code based on the Seven Commandments of Manas (directly borrowed from the epos) was the peak of these efforts.

Some of the slogans offered by the leading circles as the national idea failed to reach their aim because, borrowed from other states, they had no roots in national mentality. This happened to the slogan “Kyrgyzstan is Our Common Home” copied from Russia that described the Motherland as a communal flat (“our common home”). In Russia the slogan is intended to bring together the numerous ethnic groups into a single state, while in Kyrgyzstan, a unitary state, it was devoid of any meaning. Any efforts to unprofessionally exploit our cultural heritage for populist aims will not help us: used as commercial adverts they will kill the state. Neither the epos nor the name of Manas will shore us up because “no one can sleep today on the achievements of yesterday.”

The “black consciousness” phenomenon revived tribalism in public life; everybody knows that politics today is determined, to a great extent, by clan and family relations.¹³ There was a lot of talk in Soviet times about final and irrevocable uprooting of clan and tribal survivals in public life that turned out to be nothing more than wishful thinking: clan and tribal rivalry is alive at all levels. In the conditions of privatization and development of national statehood the problem of tribalism as one of the types of disintegration of Kyrgyz ethnos came to the fore. Today, all state structures are functioning within the framework of client-patron relationships and are constantly shaken by power struggle among tribes.

Tribalism is a negative phenomenon, yet it can play a positive role as well. We know from history that only those of the nomadic cattle breeders (the Kyrgyz among them) preserved their ethnic identity and integrity who consistently followed the principles of tribalism in the absence of their own state.¹⁴ The present revival of tribalism was provoked not only by the tenacity of many of its principles but also by the

¹¹ See: G. Bloomer, “Kollektivnoe povedenie,” *Amerikanskaia sotsiologicheskaia mysl*, Moscow, 1994, pp. 213-214.

¹² For more detail, see: Zh. Abylkhozhin, “Kazakhstan: Ruralization of Cities and Escalation of the Conflict between ‘Modernist’ and ‘Traditionalist’ Identity,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (24), 2003, p. 175.

¹³ See: D. Dzhunushaliev, V. Ploskikh, “Tribalism and Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3, 2000, pp. 116-117.

¹⁴ See: “Neytralizatsia negativnykh izderzhkek tribalizma,” *Natsional’niy otchet Kyrgyzskoy Respubliki po chelovecheskomu razvitiu za 1997 god*, Bishkek, 1997, p. 42.

fact that struggle for survival has come to the fore in individual lives. Finally—this is most important—it acquired a chance to take part in the development of statehood.

The above does not mean that the Kyrgyz society has abandoned the road of modernization and democratization. One should not take local specifics (parties, etc.) at their face value and ignore the fact that, to a great extent, they screen traditional relationships. Extremes should be better avoided: the social and political institutions described above are not purely traditional. There is a blend of traditional and modern elements in them.

These are obvious reasons, yet there is another very important factor: we are living in the ideological and cognitive vacuum. In the context of radical socioeconomic changes, amid the ruined social structures society badly needs to know the aims, methods and optimal possibilities of the current economic, social, political and cultural modernization; people need ideas that can rally them around these aims.

The problem remains very urgent: our society has no experience of democracy and normal market economy and no relevant traditions even though they were chosen as the only possible alternative to the failed socialist experiment. Meanwhile, the reformers have not posed themselves the task of elaborating the knowledge people need in new realities and of offering this knowledge to society. Privatization in the economic sphere realized through technocratic methods and a formally democratic political system were not explained to the nation—instead, people were offered abstract ideological structures and were urged to go into business and enrich themselves. The reformers have left out of sight such vitally important issues as the correlation between the market and social justice and between social and personal morals at the stage of transferring to the market, the socioeconomic rights of citizens, development of their democratic sociopolitical activity, and the role of the state in the period of transition.

This does not mean that the dynamics of mentality is a purely destructive process; that Kyrgyz society consists of “cool” aggressive “new” Kyrgyz and the despondent and embittered victims of market modernization who have lost faith in everything. This image of our society promoted by our media and the Western press has little in common with reality. The study mentioned above revealed that a fairly large population group had psychologically adjusted themselves to reality. Polls in the capital and in six regions that involved various age and social-professional groups showed that even those who were badly hit by the recent changes were inclined to treat the situation soberly and to distinguish between the changes’ positive and negative effects; they still hoped for the best: 42 percent of the polled replied that “they were partially confident in their future.”¹⁵

We can say in this connection that the nation is gradually accepting the democratic ideal based on world experience; yet accepted by society the ideal could become a moving force of social development and a motivation for social behavior only if supported by the knowledge of how to realize them. So far, a deficit of this knowledge is behind the ailing Kyrgyz mentality.

On the whole, an analysis of mass consciousness in Kyrgyzstan confirms that it is antinomial, vague and devoid of clearly structuralized and stable axiological and behavioral orientations. Mass consciousness may develop in both directions: an evolution toward civilized market economy and democracy is possible only if the ideals are materialized in social practice.

* * *

To sum up: the authorities should address the following tasks:

- Create a system of new cultural and moral values otherwise the expendable utilitarian values will destroy the positive image of Kyrgyz society. When building up this system and formulating the strategic aims of domestic and foreign policies the deep-rooted layers of nation’s men-

¹⁵ According to the “Kyrgyzstan—2000: Voters’ Opinion” carried out by the Center for Public Opinion Studies and Forecasting on a grant from PROON in the KR, *RIF*, 2 June, 2000.

tality, through which it identifies itself, should not be forgotten. In other words, power should master the language of geopolitics;

- If power wants to conquer the crisis, reform the country's economy and state structure in the best possible way, it should encourage the nation's political involvement. To achieve this power should seek the best possible contacts with the dominating structures of mentality and arrange relations with the masses within the real social context rather than imitating such relations.

I do not claim the honor of formulating the final diagnosis. The situation described above is a sign of the deep-cutting changes in the nation's mentality and of the changed vector of cultural development. It is quite natural that amid economic and, especially, political transformations everyday structures and the stereotypes of thinking lag behind. It is for a long time to come that we shall be offered pessimistic forecasts, live through local conflicts and feel that we are living amid chaos that offers no way out. This will go on until the nation acquires new ideas and a new social structure.

There is no doubt that we shall have to return to the European rational civilizational project (this process had started back at the turn of the 20th century; later the communist ideology supported the opposition of the mechanisms of traditional mentality). To avoid a repetition we should cushion the opposition as best as we can and make the transformation as painless and as gradual as possible. Kyrgyzstan should not simply borrow the Western ideological clichés and the "wishing machines." We should be aware of our national traditions, specific features of our mentality and our inclination toward existential, rather than social, values.

Today, social psychotherapy is the most urgent task of all power institutions, the reformers, sociologists, in short of all those responsible for ideology and development, mental matrixes and illusions. In other words, we should show people positive aims and fill concrete tasks with immediate idyllic sentiments. It is much easier to legitimize power in the form of confidence in a strong personality that demonstrates paternalism, support for the people and compassion rather than political experience or economic knowledge.
