

# Understanding and Explaining the Kyrgyz–Uzbek Interethnic Conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract:** The violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 has shocked many who thought of Kyrgyzstan as the most liberal country and the strongest democracy in Central Asia. That conflict, still, has not been explained and understood very well. Opposing and rival explanations often accuse one or other party, or certain obscure and even foreign forces. Many analysts, on the other hand, rely only on the internal Kyrgyzstani affairs in order to explain that conflict. This article tries to find explanations and offer an understanding of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz interethnic conflict. Its aim is beyond a mere description and understanding of a single case. It will use different kinds of data in order to offer analytic explanations of the events. The legacy of the Soviet nationalities policy, in combination with regional peculiarities – particularly its ethno-demographic features – were the ultimate causes of the eruption of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz conflicts in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1990 and 2010.

**Keywords:** ethnic-demography, ethno-territorial conflict, inter-ethnic violence, Kyrgyzstan, national redistricting of the Central Asian Republics, regional clans, Soviet nationalities policy, Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan

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## Introduction

In June 2010 Southern Kyrgyzstan was again the scene of ethnic conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.<sup>1</sup> Aside from the civil war in Tajikistan, Central Asia had been free of large-scale violence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The violence in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks has shocked many, particularly those who thought that the hostility between these two ethnic groups had already been lost in the darkness of history. The former



Uzbek–Kyrgyz conflict in Kyrgyzstan was often blamed on the post-*perestroika* deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the former Soviet Union. Most analysts, certainly those in the West, thought that even though ethnic stereotypes existed between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks similar to those between other ethnic groups worldwide, violence and hostilities had already subsided in 1990 after order was re-established.

Arguably, the 2010 conflict was a re-eruption of the earlier conflict in 1990, which had remained dormant after violent hostilities subsided. Although the 2010 conflict was fought only over a short period of time, it is rooted in a longer history. Like many other ethno-territorial conflicts elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, its roots go back to the establishment of the Soviet Union and its nationalities policy and national territorial (re)divisions. As a result of these divisions, a large Uzbek population now lives in the territory of Kyrgyzstan contiguous to the Uzbekistani border.

Traditionally, the people known today as Uzbeks<sup>2</sup> were largely sedentary while the Kyrgyz were traditionally nomadic. Although there have been periods in which nomads attacked and pillaged the sedentary population, the relations between the nomadic Kyrgyz and the sedentary Sarts – the ancestors of modern-day Uzbeks and Tajiks – were not always violent as they saw benefits in peaceful coexistence and trade. Nevertheless, Soviet – and to some extent earlier imperial Russian – policies vis-à-vis these peoples were such that the interests of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz seemed to be incompatible and hence came into open violent conflict with each other.

The aim of this paper is to provide an explanation and a better understanding of the Kyrgyz–Uzbek conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan, also known as the so-called Osh Conflict. The Kyrgyz–Uzbek conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan could be characterised as an ethno-territorial conflict. It was a violent conflict with an ethnic character. Although its territorial character was not as accentuated as in the other cases of ethno-territorial conflicts in the Soviet Union, it still had a territorial character. There existed Uzbek separatist agitation during the 1990s. Even though such sentiments might have existed among a segment of Uzbeks and the perception existed among the ethno-nationalist Kyrgyz, especially those in southern Kyrgyzstan that Uzbeks are separatists (see e.g. International Crisis Group 2012), no meaningful active separatism existed in 2010.

The 2010 conflict could best be regarded as a largely one-sided violence against the Uzbeks. The extremist ethno-nationalist Kyrgyz regarded ethnic cleansing as a just option in order to cleanse ‘the Kyrgyz land’ from the ‘tenant’ Uzbeks. In reality, however, the Uzbeks were native to this area and have lived there for many generations. In this case, the Uzbeks regarded the cities in Fergana valley in southern Kyrgyzstan as their historical living areas. The Kyrgyz were traditionally absent in the cities. However, the Soviet Kyrgyzstan, dominated and ruled by the ethnic Kyrgyz, had relocated many Kyrgyz in the cities and towns in Fergana valley. The ethno-nationalist Uzbeks regarded

this as an assault to their ethnic ownership of this area, while according to the ethno-nationalist Kyrgyz these areas were located in Kyrgyzstan and, therefore, belonged to the ethnic Kyrgyz.

## **Political History of Central Asia**

Central Asia has always been a crossroads between many cultures and civilisations. Both sedentary and nomadic peoples have lived in Central Asia. Nomadic–sedentary relations in the past have been complex. There have been periods of violence between nomads and the sedentary population. In most of such cases nomadic tribes harassed and pillaged the sedentary population. The most notable case is the Mongol invasion of Central Asia. On the other hand, the relations between the nomads and the sedentary population were not always violent. Needless to say, the nomadic pastoralists and the sedentary agriculturalists saw more benefits in peaceful coexistence and trade.

Central Asia was also visited and influenced by many merchants as it was the heart of the Silk Road. Many people have migrated and settled there peacefully. Central Asia was conquered and suffered under many conquerors. All these events and interactions have contributed to the political history of Central Asia in one way or another. Parts of Central Asia have been parts of many ancient and medieval empires, kingdoms, emirates and khanates. To name but a few, parts have belonged to the Achaemenid, Kushanid, Samanid, Saljuqid, Mongol, Timurid and Afsharid empires. The cultural orientation and political affiliation of Central Asia, like the Caucasus, were more towards the South than the North. This situation changed drastically, however, in the last few centuries, and particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

The northern parts of Central Asia, which consisted of vast steppes inhabited by nomadic tribes, were gradually conquered and settled by Russians during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the mid-nineteenth century, Russia was inclined to conquer the southern part of Central Asia, which had a long tradition of urban settlement and (native) statehood. The Russians completed their conquest by subjugating the Turkmen tribes and conquering the Pamirs. Russia was involved in an expansionist type of geopolitical rivalry with the British Empire, known as the ‘Great Game’. The Russian desire to reach the open seas of the South and the British desire not to lose its Indian dominions resulted in the Russian conquest of Central Asia, while Afghanistan became a buffer-zone between the two empires.

Directly prior to the Russian conquest of southern Central Asia in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, there existed three political units that controlled much of the sedentary centres of Central Asia. Nomadic tribes were to varying degrees subjugated to them. Many nomadic tribes were only nominally subjugated to them and many more, especially in the northern part of Central Asia, were totally independent of them. These three political units were the Emirate

of Bukhara, the Khanate of Khiva and the Khanate of Kokand. Next to the establishment of a Russian Turkistan governorate in Central Asia, the first two retained a degree of semi-independence and became Russian protectorates. The Khanate of Kokand, on the other hand, was abolished in 1876 after a short period of vassalage since 1869 and was incorporated into Russian Turkistan.

Kokand was a khanate in which the Sarts<sup>3</sup> – ancestors of modern-day Uzbeks and Tajiks – predominated in and inhabited the many urban centres, many of which were located in the southern part of modern-day Kyrgyzstan in which the Osh region is located. Many Kyrgyz tribes were incorporated into the Tsarist Russian Empire already before the abolishment of the Khanate of Kokand. October 1963 was officially proclaimed by Soviet historiography as the voluntary incorporation of Kyrgyz into Russia (Bohr and Crisp 1996: 404, note 4). The arrival of the technologically advanced Russians could mean a liberation from, or at least could balance the power of, the Kokand rulers, who governed the Kyrgyz with increasing brutality. The predominantly Sart-inhabited areas in Fergana Valley were incorporated into the Russian Empire only after the defeat and hence abolishment of the Khanate of Kokand.

In the early Bolshevik period, three republics were established in the southern part of Central Asia (see Figure 1). The Bukharan People's Soviet Republic and the Khorezm People's Soviet Republic were the successors of, respectively, the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva. The rest of southern Central Asia became the Turkistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with Tashkent as its administrative centre. The territorial demarcation of the territorial units in Central Asia was subject to change in the ensuing years.

In 1924 the issue of 'optimal design' was raised (Gleason 1997: 573). In that year the Politburo issued a resolution, 'On the National Redistricting of the Central Asian Republics'.

The Soviet nationalities policy politicised ethnicity and created a hierarchic ethno-political system, which caused different modes of ethnic competition at different levels (see e.g. Bremmer 1997; Brubaker 1994; Martin 2001; Rezvani 2013: 69–91; Smith 1996; Wilson 1996). The population of the Soviet Union was divided into officially recognised ethnic groups – *national'nosti*, which is often translated as 'nationality' in English.

The largest nationalities were offered SSRs (union republics), which were elevated as independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. SSRs could incorporate autonomous republics (ASSRs) and autonomous *oblasts* (AOs), which were designed as autonomous homelands of relatively smaller ethnic groups. In addition, many ethnic groups did not possess any territorial autonomies inside a union republic. A few of these ethnic groups, however, lived contiguous to other union republics, where their ethnic kin lived and often were titulars.

Within a certain union republic the titular ethnic groups – those whose homelands bore their own names; e.g. Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, Turkmens in Turkmenistan etc. – had a privileged position and the non-titular minorities a

subordinated position. A titular position was a source of association of ethnicity with territory. It gives a perceptual ethnic entitlement to certain territory. Although this perception in Kyrgyzstan may not have been as high as it were in many other former Soviet republics (e.g. Georgia, Armenia, Lithuania) still an association was made between territory and the ethnic nation.

While different ethnic groups or nationalities saw each other as potential rivals, they saw Moscow – the Soviet Centre – both as a master and a protector at the same time. Obviously, the non-titulars sought also protection and mediation from their ethnic kin in the neighbouring republics against the excesses of their ethnic overlords in the host republics. This system worked well as long as the Soviet Centre was powerful and functioned properly. With the Soviet Union's demise, however, ethno-national strife gained salience and ethnic fears manifested themselves. The openness created after *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, as well as the emerging anarchy, offered opportunity to rebel. The emerging anarchy itself contributed to the awakening of ethnic fears and hence to ethnic rivalry and conflict.

After the first round of national redistricting of Central Asia, the present-day Kyrgyzstan was incorporated into the Russian Federative Soviet Socialist Republic (1924) as Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous *Oblast* – Kazakhstan was initially named Kirgizistan, as Russians at that time called Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, respectively, Kirgiz and Kara-Kirgiz. One year later the Kara-Kirgiz Autonomous *Oblast* was renamed the Kirgiz Autonomous *Oblast*. In 1926 its status was elevated to an ASSR within the Russian Federative Socialist Republic and to an SSR in 1936, the direct predecessor of the modern-day independent Kyrgyzstan. The predominantly Uzbek-inhabited areas such as the cities Osh, Jalal Abad and their vicinities in Fergana Valley, became part of the Kirgiz SSR instead of the neighbouring Uzbek SSR (which was established in 1924). There may be many reasons, for example a deliberate and purposeful divide-and-rule policy or poor ethnographic data (Megoran 2002: 35–38) why this happened. However, there is also another reason: to provide the nomadic republics with viable urban centres (Rahimov and Urazaeva 2005:10; Reeves 2010).

The creation of Uzbekistan was a remarkable case and dissimilar from most other cases in the former Soviet Union. In certain ways the modern Uzbek nation and Uzbekistan is a product of Bolshevik concession to Jadidi ideologues with Pan-Turkist inclinations. The prospective Uzbek nation was a blend of different Iranic- and Turkic-speaking groups (see e.g. Abazov 2007: 15). Almost in all cases in the Soviet Union an ethnic nation (*natsional'nost'*) was first identified and recognised and awarded with a homeland. The Uzbek case was different; first the territorial realm of the emergent Uzbek nation was roughly identified, which encompassed the lands earlier inhabited by the Sarts, and then various entities tried to mould a nation out of its diverse populace. In fact, a territorial Uzbek nation was first made and then a language based on Jaghatay (Chaghatay) Turkic was imposed on them.

The first territorial designs of Uzbekistan were very different from what is today the case. Tajikistan was first included in Uzbekistan as an ASSR in 1924. The Tajik ASSR did not include the Leninabad (Khujand; Xujand) region. It gained that region only when it became a separate SSR in 1929. There were also demands that Samarkand and the region of Surkhan Darya (Surxondaryo) be transferred to the new Tajik SSR, but these demands were refused on the basis that Uzbekistan would lose its border with the non-Soviet outside world – that is, its border with Afghanistan (Masov 1996). The basis of these demands was that these areas are Persian-speaking and hence they should be recognised as Tajik. The fact remains that, to date, a large population of Persian speakers has gone into the Uzbek nation-building project (see e.g. Abazov 2007: 15; Hotamov 2001: 270–271). This, in addition to the similarities in material and non-material culture, is yet another fact which makes the ethnic boundary between Uzbeks and Tajiks blurred and the distinction between them debatable and artificial at times.

Finally, Uzbekistan was enlarged by the incorporation of the Karakalpakstan ASSR in 1936. In that year Kazakhstan (called Kirgizistan until 1925) was promoted from an ASSR within the Russian Federation to a separate SSR. It lost Karakalpakstan to Uzbekistan, however.

The ‘national’ territorial delimitation (*natsional’no-territorial’noe razmezhevanie*) of Central Asia was complete in 1936. However, its ethnic composition

Figure 1: Central Asia in 1922  
(Source: Allworth 1967)



changed further afterwards. During the course of the Second World War, many Caucasian ethnic groups such as the Ingush, Chechens and Meskhetians were deported to Central Asia, where there were earlier communities of deportees or forced migrants including even Kurds and Koreans, for example. Many other people seeking jobs had voluntarily moved to Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan. After the independence of these republics, the proportion of non-Central Asian migrants decreased. This was most visible in Tajikistan, which was struck by a bloody civil war.

The Soviet system intended to provide different ethnic groups with ethno-territorial autonomy. However, these 'ethnic homelands' were not ethnically homogeneous and many ethnic groups found themselves in the homeland designed for another ethnic group. As a result a large concentration of Uzbeks ended up living in southern Kyrgyzstan, instead of living in eastern Uzbekistan. Combined with the Soviet nationalities policy's practice that the 'titulars' in each republic were privileged, this situation was detrimental for the position of Uzbeks living in these areas.

## The 1990 Conflict

During the Soviet era, and in conformity with the situation elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz as the titular ethnic group held most important positions in Kyrgyzstan. Hence, the highest officials and the militia in the Osh region and the rest of Uzbek-inhabited southern Kyrgyzstan were ethnically Kyrgyz. Uzbeks predominated in the agriculture and service sectors.

Although Uzbeks were a minority in Kyrgyzstan, with approximately half a million people comprising 13 per cent of the total population, they formed a majority of the population in many southern areas adjacent or close to the Kyrgyzstani–Uzbekistani border. In addition, the Uzbek demographic weight in Central Asia was large. Uzbeks were the largest ethnic group in Central Asia, regardless of whether we take the official numbers of the Soviet census or the unofficial numbers that count the number of Uzbeks much lower. Large numbers of Uzbeks lived in all other Central Asian republics. Uzbeks in Uzbekistan outnumbered the Kyrgyz (in Kyrgyzstan or elsewhere) by a factor of more than three.

In the late 1980s and after Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost*' and *perestroika* were initiated, there was more room for opposition and dissent. Kyrgyzstan was one of the poorest republics, and unemployment and underemployment were rampant, with the ethnic Kyrgyz moving steadily to the cities and in serious need of housing (Huskey 1997: 660–661).

The issue of housing for the ethnic Kyrgyz, in addition to the issues of revival and assertion of Kyrgyz language and culture, became one of the main aims of the Kyrgyz nationalist movements and organisations that began to emerge.

In the Osh region the ethnic Kyrgyz organisation *Osh Aimagy* was established, which demanded land for the housing of Kyrgyz in this predominantly Uzbek area. The Kyrgyz-dominated regional authorities allotted 32 hectares of fertile agricultural land belonging to a predominantly Uzbek collective farm for the housing of ethnic Kyrgyz.

On the other side, the ethno-nationalist Uzbeks had organised themselves in the *Adolat* [Justice]) Organisation, which aimed at more Uzbek cultural rights, autonomy and even separatism and incorporation of parts of southern Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan (Asankanov 1996; Huskey 1997: 662). These demands were not only advanced by separatist groups such as *Adolat*, but also by 'well-to-do' Uzbeks and Uzbek *oqsoqols* [elderly people with social prestige]. Declarations of autonomy of and support for separatism of the Uzbek-inhabited areas in southern Kyrgyzstan also appeared in Uzbekistan, even among scholars (Asankanov 1996).

The Kyrgyzstani authorities failed – or simply did not want – to accommodate the local Uzbeks' demands, and to calm down the increasingly strong expressions of Kyrgyz nationalism; hence violent ethnic conflict erupted (4–10 June 1990) in the Osh region, notably in Osh and in Uzgen cities. The Uzbeks were supported by their co-ethnics 'from Uzbekistan, who crossed the republican border in the early stages of the fighting' (Huskey 1997: 662). The Kyrgyz scholar Ablaipek Asankanov (1996) states that according to a KGB report:

The opposing sides, especially Uzbeks, had long been preparing for this conflict. The Uzbeks had probably begun preparations in February 1990 [four months before the conflict]. Some of the Uzbek population in Osh began to drive out Kyrgyz tenants from their lodgings, prompted by the threats of Uzbek extremists to set fire to their houses if they did not expel their Kyrgyz tenants. The result was the appearance of some 1.5 thousand young Kyrgyz men in Osh who joined Osh Aimagi.

The estimates of human casualties of this ethno-territorial conflict remain modest, varying between slightly less than 200 (Tishkov 1995: 134–135; 1997: 137) and slightly more than 300 (Asankanov 1996). Nevertheless, given the fact that the actual fighting took place over only a few days (4–10 June 1990), this ethno-territorial conflict can be regarded as one of the most violent ones in the former Soviet Union. Approximately 5,000 criminal acts occurred during this conflict, many of which had an extremely brutal character (Tishkov 1995: 135; 1997: 135–154).

This ethno-territorial conflict was one of the few cases in the former Soviet Union in which the rebelling minority did not possess an autonomous status in the host republic.<sup>4</sup> Violence subsided after the authorities announced a military curfew, and a treaty of friendship was signed between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in March 1991. Nevertheless, tension still remained between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in this part of Kyrgyzstan (Eurasianet.org 24 January 2006; MAR 2010).<sup>5</sup>

## The 2010 Conflict

The ‘Tulip Revolution’ deteriorated the position of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. It shifted the balance of power in Kyrgyzstan in favour of the ‘southern’ Kyrgyz. After the Tulip Revolution Kurmanbek Bakiyev, with his stronghold in southern Kyrgyzstan, seized political power. As in Tajikistan so also in Kyrgyzstan: clans and locality play a role in political affairs. After the Tulip Revolution, the ethnic competition between the southern Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan gained salience.

After Akayev and his government were removed from office, Uzbeks complained increasingly about discrimination and blamed Bakiyev’s new government for being insensitive to inter-ethnic relations (Eurasianet.org 24 January 2006; Ferghana News 19 March 2007; MAR 2010). During Askar Akayev’s presidency Uzbeks were represented in the local authorities in southern Kyrgyzstan in areas where they are largely concentrated. Following the famous Soviet phrase, ‘Soviet Union is our common home’, Akayev’s government was chanting ‘Kyrgyzstan is our common home’. This fact suggests Akayev’s orientation towards a civic model of nationalism. In any case, his policies of appeasing and accommodating Uzbek demands had positive effects on the inter-ethnic situation in southern Kyrgyzstan.

After the Tulip Revolution, many Uzbek officials were replaced by southern Kyrgyz, who were genealogically and ideologically close to president Bakiyev.<sup>6</sup> Although it is unfair to claim that all Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan were his supporters, it is true that Bakiyev had his stronghold among the Kyrgyz there. Therefore, it is fair to blame the deterioration of the inter-ethnic situation in southern Kyrgyzstan on the policies implemented during Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s presidency. It was conceivable that a privileged position of southern Kyrgyz, accompanied by a deterioration in Uzbeks’ position, would lead to much grievance among the latter.

As Bakiyev’s government was brought down by another revolution, the shift of political power also aggrieved the southern Kyrgyz, who feared they would lose their privileged position. Due to the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy and its practice of the allocation of resources by central government, the southern Kyrgyz possibly began to realise that the aggrieved Uzbeks’ animosity towards Kurmanbek Bakiyev might receive a welcoming ear from the northern Kyrgyz. Whether this was the reality or their own (mis)perception, the southern Kyrgyz’s fear was understandable.

Although usually not leading to inter-ethnic clashes, negative stereotypes of Uzbeks are widespread among the Kyrgyz and also among other ethnic groups elsewhere. The demographic dominance of Uzbeks in the region makes them a despised ethnic group in Central Asia, especially among the nomadic groups such as the Kyrgyz, who traditionally were almost absent in the cities in (what is now) their country. Certainly Uzbeks were seen as capable of posing serious separatist and irredentist demands, such as the first Osh conflict (1990), and

meddling in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries, as they did during the Tajikistani Civil War (see e.g. Horsman 1999). According to Tishkov (interviewed by De Waal 2003: 133), Uzbekistan was another ethnic assimilator, in addition to Georgia and Azerbaijan. Stereotypes of Uzbeks being chauvinists who suppress the minorities in Uzbekistan are common in Kyrgyzstan as well as in other Central Asian countries, particularly in Tajikistan. Nevertheless, ethnic competition in the materialistic sense is a pressing issue only in southern Kyrgyzstan, near the Uzbekistani border (Fergana Valley) where the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks encounter each other. Other areas in Kyrgyzstan are almost void of Uzbeks.

The disorder and chaos resulting from the 'new' revolution and removal of Bakiyev is a factor which has increased the opportunity for unleashing hostilities. Similar to the 1990s, when the whole Soviet Union was in disarray, the situation in Kyrgyzstan became chaotic after Bakiyev was removed from office, and Otunbayeva, together with many members of the opposition, came to power. In this chaos and power vacuum Bakiyev relied on his supporters in southern Kyrgyzstan. Criminal gangs could also carry on and prepare themselves for a potential conflict, be it against the new government or against Uzbeks, whom they mistrusted and viewed as supporters of the new government.

Uzbeks were the underdogs during the second conflict in 2010. This was especially so during the first days of the conflict, but the situation seems to have changed later on. This is obvious from a few facts. The course of the conflict, and its related news, could be followed on the official website of the Kyrgyzstani news agency, Aki Press (Akipress.com and Akipress.org). In the first few days of clashes, the situation was chaotic. As a result, dozens of people died and many people fled the towns. However, it seems that the situation returned to relative calm after many were arrested. The night of 13 to 14 June, a few days after the atrocities began, was reported as being calm in Osh. The number of casualties increased dramatically from 77 (12 June 2010) to 192 (18 June 2010), after 203 persons crossed the border from Uzbekistan into Kyrgyzstan (14 June 2010). Therefore, the increase in the number of casualties may relate to an Uzbek revenge. This is supported by the Kyrgyz minister's claim that refugees were not only Uzbeks but also Kyrgyz; the latter sought refuge in the mountains. It is true that the Uzbekistani president Karimov had taken an isolationist stance in regional politics after 2006. The Uzbek–Kyrgyz border is officially difficult to cross. However, the borders are not totally closed. Uzbek networks operate on both sides of the Uzbekistani–Kyrgyzstani border. The Uzbekistani government uses these informal networks, particularly in order to contain and counter (alleged) radical Islamist (Wahhabi/Salafi) activists (Fumagalli 2007: 115). Certainly, 203 militants, who crossed the border into Kyrgyzstan, are more than enough to account for the sharp rise in the number of casualties. Uzbeks could have resisted the attacks better and even initiated more attacks if the borders were open.

Otunbayeva's government asked an international commission of inquiry to investigate the Kyrgyz–Uzbek inter-ethnic violence. She has also invited the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to assist in peace-keeping and providing security (Golos Rossii 25 June 2010). Even though there exists minor differences of opinion between that commission and Otunbayeva's government, the latter has provided ample opportunity for the former to operate in Kyrgyzstan. Despite the fact that the commission also accused a number of Uzbek community's leaders of instigating violence, the Kyrgyzstani government, however, rejected certain conclusions of its report for blaming disproportionately the ethnic Kyrgyz community for violent conduct (Government of Kyrgyzstan 2011; Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011).

Reeves (2010) reports about the publication of an inflammatory ethno-nationalist and vehemently anti-Uzbek article in the Kyrgyz language newspaper *Alibi*, just a few days before ethnic violence started. Otunbayeva, blaming the 'dark forces' (Ria Novosti 3 July 2010) for the Kyrgyz–Uzbek inter-ethnic violence, accused the ex-president Bakiyev of being behind the instigation of ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan – a claim which he denied.

Although Bakiyev would benefit from the unrest, accusing him personally for the instigation of violence is less than certain, but not improbable. A chaotic Kyrgyzstan will attract foreign intervention and this may jeopardise Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and Otunbayeva's government's legitimacy. It is not totally unimaginable that he was, or people close to him were, behind the ethnic violence. Bakiyev's son Maxim is accused of financing the riots (Ria Novosti 15 June 2010).

It is quite possible that Bakiyev himself or his son or his family have facilitated the instigation of violence, but they would have not succeeded without the support of certain powerful locals. It is very probable that elements from the local (deposed) authorities were behind this violence. They were either deprived of their relatively privileged position in Bakiyev's era or were afraid to lose their position. Uzbeks aggrieved by the Bakiyev's regime back then were (correctly) suspected of favouring Otunbayeva's new government.

Already before the inter-ethnic violence started, the (deposed) local politicians and administrators in southern Kyrgyzstan related to the former regime were accused of having organised mass unrest against Otunbayeva's interim government (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 18 May 2010). Their ability to mobilise the southern Kyrgyz is one more reason to suspect them also for mobilisation towards inter-ethnic violence.

Eyewitnesses report that the Kyrgyzstani state militia were involved in the pogroms against Uzbeks (*The Washington Times* 18 June 2010). These claims are often refuted by the argument that the Kyrgyz mobs had attacked militias and confiscated their weapons, attire and armoured vehicles. Although such a claim might be true, it is also very possible that local officers, particularly Bakiyev's supporters, in the southern cities collaborated with mobs, without

any governmental approval or sanction. The more or less autonomous behaviour of local officers and armed forces is not unimaginable in chaotic times. It has happened even in less chaotic situations in the former Soviet Union, for example in the Prigorodny conflict (Rezvani 2010: 425–426). Nevertheless, the Kyrgyzstani authorities promptly announced an investigation into the security forces' 'illegal behaviour' (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 22 June 2010). Certainly, Otunbayeva and her government have benefitted by order and calmness. Their legitimacy and viability of government would be jeopardised otherwise. The same is true about the current Kyrgyzstani government headed by president Almazbek Atambayev.

According to Roza Otunbayeva, the (interim) Kyrgyzstani president at the time of conflict, the conflict in southeastern Kyrgyzstan cost approximately 2,000 human lives (Ria Novosti 3 July 2010; VOA 16 August 2010; *The Washington Times* 18 June 2010). However, almost one year later (3 May 2011), the Kyrgyzstani News Agency, Aki Press, reported that this conflict has officially cost between 400 and 500 human lives. In addition, according to the United Nations (UN) this conflict has resulted in 400,000 refugees (Reuters 17 June 2010). Although the official accounts provide a smaller number than 2,000, Otunbayeva's estimates do not seem far-fetched if one realises the brutal nature of this conflict. It is not totally justified to regard this conflict as terminated, because its root causes still remain.

Below, different factors and mechanisms will be discussed which could have caused, or contributed to, the Uzbek–Kyrgyz conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan. We rely on empirical data but will embed them in a larger theoretical discussion in order to reach solid and valid explanations.

## **The Relevance of Cultural Factors**

The Uzbek–Kyrgyz conflict in Osh was an ethno-territorial conflict. Culture played a role in the sense that ethnic groups are distinguished from each other by a boundary (c.f. Barth 1969) defined by cultural attributes and denominators. However, an essentialist culturalist explanation of conflict seems to be unsatisfactory.

Asankanov (1996) calls this conflict a Turkic self-genocide. Without approving his wording, this labelling is insightful because lingual and religious affiliations are often wrongly thought to be determinants of ethnic conflicts. Although belonging to different branches, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz both speak a Turkic language and both are Sunni Muslims.

The emergence of this conflict is only one example that casts doubts on Pan-Turkist claims and culturalist explanations that members of an 'ethnic' super-family (of Turks) show a large solidarity and do not fight each other. Needless to say that history proves otherwise, while it also brings evidences of peaceful

coexistence between people speaking different languages and confessing different religions.

Uzbeks belong to the Turco-Iranian cultural realm, while the Kyrgyz belong to the Turco-Mongol cultural realm. Historically there have been tensions between these two peoples. People belonging to the first realm have traditionally been dwellers or agriculturalists, and have been victims of raids by the latter. Traditionally, nomads regarded themselves as superior and had much contempt for the rural and urban dwellers (see also Tishkov 1995: 137–138). Still, many Kyrgyz regard the Uzbeks dwelling in *mahallas* – that is, the neighbourhoods in the older parts of the cities – as conservative and regard themselves as more modern and progressive.<sup>7</sup> However, believing in this type of ‘ancient hatred’ explanation means that there should have been continuous wars and while wars have happened, there have also been long periods of ethnic coexistence. In addition, believing in this kind of explanations implies neglecting many decades of Soviet rule, during which Kyrgyz were sedentarised and adopted a modern way of life.

Being primarily a conflict between the southern Kyrgyz and Uzbeks a religious explanation is not convincing. The Kyrgyz, similar to Uzbeks, are Hanafi Sunni Muslims. The religious orthodoxy among the Kyrgyz is not as firm as it is among sedentary ethnic groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks. The Kyrgyz traditional (popular) Islamic practice is viewed as heterodox by their neighbours, and even by themselves (Abazov 2007).<sup>8</sup> The Kyrgyz are less orthodox compared to ethnic groups that were Islamised at the same time or later, such as Georgians in Turkey or Iran (Rezvani 2009: 53). However, most Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan, similar to most Uzbeks there, are much more religious than their northern co-ethnics. Therefore, different levels of religiosity do not offer a good explanation for this conflict.

Negative stereotypes of the other, or pride in the strength of its own people, may only serve as a catalyst in order to mobilise the people, but are unlikely to explain the outbreak of the violent conflicts. Conflicts cannot break out without organisation and mobilisation and, therefore, it suggests the existence of ‘conflict entrepreneurs’ as well as favourable political and social opportunity structures.

Similar to all other ethno-political conflicts in the (post-)Soviet space, the explanation of the Kyrgyz–Uzbek ethno-territorial conflict, therefore, should also be sought primarily in political and territorial factors.

## The Legacy of the Soviet Ethnopolitical System

The territorial manifestation of the Soviet nationalities policy and the modes of ethnic competition could have brought about ethnic security dilemmas and have served as an opportunity structure for ethnic mobilisation, at the same time. The hierarchical ethno-territorial character and modes of ethnic com-

petition hidden in the Soviet ethnopolitical system could function without causing much trouble whenever the Centre was strong and the political situation was stable. However, this system facilitated conflict whenever the political situation was unstable and chaotic.

The times of eruption of all conflicts confirm the fact that the political instability of the host country is a background condition that enables the eruption of ethno-territorial conflicts. All ethno-territorial conflicts in the Soviet Union and its successor states have emerged at a time when the respective host country was in political chaos. They emerged after *glasnost*' and *perestroika*, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, or shortly thereafter.

The conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan in summer 2010, similar to the first conflict there in 1990, occurred in a time of political chaos. The political situation in Kyrgyzstan was indeed chaotic in June 2010. Ex-president Kurmanbek Bakiyev was deposed in May 2010, while Roza Otunbayeva's leadership was not consolidated yet. There were many riots and much discord at that time, especially in the south of the country. In such a context of political instability, the power of the street mob is a factor which should be reckoned with in the Kyrgyzstani politics (McGlinchey 2011: 112–113).

Another feature of the Soviet ethnopolitical system is its strengthening of ethno-nationalism. In the Soviet Union several ethnic nations existed next to each other and the sense of civic nationhood was absent or very weak. In Kyrgyzstan the perception exists that Kyrgyzstan is only the land of the Kyrgyz and not that of all ethnic groups living in it. According to such ethno-nationalist discourse the Uzbeks are 'tenants', even in such cities as Osh and Jalal Abad that were historically inhabited by Uzbeks and their ancestors (Reeves 2010; Tishkov 1995: 147; 1997: 152).

In addition, owing to the distributive nature of a Soviet planned economy, competition between political clans and regionalism was and remained widespread in (post-)Soviet republics.<sup>9</sup>

Askar Akayev's attempts at moulding a civic nation had a positive effect on the modes of ethnic coexistence. However, the abandonment of these attempts by Bakiyev, in addition to the strong regionalism in the country, had the potential to trigger conflict in the times of political instability after Bakiyev was removed from power.

## **Transborder Dominance**

One of the main conclusions of Rezvani's (2013) study about ethno-territorial conflicts in the (post-)Soviet space was that ethno-territorial autonomy, especially when it is accompanied by the demographic dominance of the titular ethnic groups, enhances the chances of ethno-territorial conflict. In addition, according to the same study (Rezvani 2013) 'transborder dominance' can com-

pensate the lack of ethno-territorial autonomy and demographic dominance therein.

Toft (2003) concludes that a high concentration of ethnic groups in particular areas enhances the chances of separatism. Many elements in her theory could apply to Uzbeks, who, despite not possessing territorial autonomy in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were nevertheless concentrated, and constituted a large majority of the population, in certain areas there.

Often the situation in one country affects the emergence and dynamism of conflict in a neighbouring state. Ethnically kinfolk, diaporas and 'kin-countries' are likely to rally behind and support their co-ethnics or ethnically close nations and ethnic groups in other countries (Huntington: 1997: 272–290; Stavenhagen 1996). Following Horowitz (1991), Kaufman (2001: 31) regards ethnic kinship as a relevant factor in ethnic conflict: 'Demographic threats may also motivate ethnic fears, most insidiously in cases involving an "ethnic affinity problem" in which the minority in a country ... is the majority in the broader region.'

Uzbeks are the largest ethnic group in Central Asia and outnumber most other ethnic groups by many times. In other words they have 'transborder dominance' over their overlords in the neighbouring republics. Transborder dominance brings about external support from the kinfolk. Even if external support is fictional, its hypothetical possibility causes Uzbeks to be mistrusted in the host states/republics and perceived as potential separatists, creates fear among ethnic opponents and may even trigger them to come into conflict preemptively. This fictional fear apparently still existed, even though the Uzbekistani–Kyrgyzstani border was less permeable in 2010 than it was in 1990.

The situation in Uzbekistan does not help either. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have (low-profile) border disputes with each other. Kyrgyzstan claims that Uzbekistan has demarcated the border and put fences in (disputed) Kyrgyzstani territory.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Uzbekistan has pursued a very nationalistic and, in many ways, chauvinistic ethnic policy. Such a perception exists among many of Uzbekistan's neighbours and ethnic minorities in Uzbekistan because of the Uzbekistani ethnic policies. Already in its early years as a Soviet republic, many Persian-speaking groups and unrelated Turkic groups who either spoke an Oghuz Turkic or Kypchak Turkic variety were registered as Uzbeks, despite the latter being a mainly Qarluq Turkic-speaking ethnic group. In fact, in contrast to the Soviet nationalities policy, which identified ethnic nations mainly on the basis of language, Uzbeks were defined as a territorial nation. The task of Uzbek nation-builders was then to make Uzbeks out of diverse ethno-lingual groups, with various degrees of success (see e.g. Abazov 2007: 15; Horsman 1999: 41–42; Koichiev 2001; Masov 1996; Schoeberlein-Engel 1994). This has contributed to the image of Uzbeks as chauvinists and oppressors of ethnic minorities and has added to the negative stereotypes about them.<sup>11</sup>

All in all, it is not very surprising in the (post-)Soviet space, where ethnic nationalism is (still) highly salient, that these 'primordial' feelings of 'Stay away from my ethnic kin, otherwise ...!' exist.

## **Spatial Factors**

In addition to the factors and mechanisms discussed above, the type of ethnogeographic configuration and other spatial factors – for example the terrain and physical environment – also play a role in the emergence and dynamism of ethno-territorial conflict in Fergana Valley.

The Fergana Valley, in which the cities Osh, Jalal Abad and Uzgen are located, is divided between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in a way which looks like a puzzle. The state boundaries do not correspond with the ethnic distribution: many ethnic groups do not possess a titular state or autonomous area; and many ethnic groups who do possess a titular state also inhabit a neighbouring republic. The map of ethnic distribution in the Fergana Valley is fragmented and the ethnic groups traditionally live in relatively homogenous areas; the highlands and hills being predominantly Kyrgyz and the city centres being predominantly Uzbeks (see also Liu 2012: 3–4 and 74–104; Reeves 2010).

Fergana Valley and the southeastern part of Central Asia in general display a mosaic type of ethnogeographic configuration, and hence are conflict-prone:

Regions with an ethno-geographic configuration of the mosaic type display relatively highly homogeneous pockets of ethnic concentration. These are regions with a high density of religious and ethnic concentrations...segregated but in close proximity to each other's ethnic territory ... [W]hen ethnic groups are highly concentrated in a small and highly ethnically homogenous region, they can be mobilized more easily, while due to ethnic segregation and concentration, the target – that is, the ethnic opponent – is relatively easily identifiable. Moreover, the relative homogeneity of the inhabited area may contribute to ethnic cohesion and feelings of belonging to, and ownership of, an area. In addition, the multitude of ethno-territorial groups in a region and their proximity to each other may lead to certain dynamics [for example, the epidemic dynamic] and hence affect ethnic relations in the region in a pressing way ... In [such] regions...the incidence of conflict is higher.... (Rezvani 2013: 63)

There have been many violent conflicts in Fergana Valley and southeastern parts of Central Asia in general: two instances of Kyrgyz-Uzbek inter-ethnic violence; the pogrom against Meskhtians in Uzbekistan in 1989; and the Tajikistani Civil War, in which different factions of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Pamiris fought together or against each other. Similarly, in the Caucasus – a region which displays a mosaic type of ethnogeographic configuration – there are plenty of conflicts. However, the Caucasian mosaic map seems different from

that of southeastern Central Asia. While that of the Caucasus looks more fragmented, that of Central Asia looks less fragmented at the larger scale and more chequered at a lower scale. In the Caucasus a multitude of medium-sized areas of, more or less homogeneous, ethnic concentration exist next to each other. In southeastern Central Asia the number of 'rooted' ethnic groups, and encounters, between them is lower than those in the Caucasus, and there exist also mixed areas. Nevertheless, as said before, the ethnic concentrations are distinguishable from each other even at the town and city level. Moreover, there are more ethnic groups in the region than the 'rooted' ethnic groups. In addition, to Russians, there were and are Germans, Meskhetians, Chechens and other peoples who were either punished and deported by Stalin as, or (were) moved there for economic reasons. Also, the types of emerging conflicts in southeastern Central Asia differ from those in the Caucasus. All conflicts in the Caucasus were protracted, while those in Central Asia, except the Tajikistani Civil war were of a short duration.

The lack of natural shelters and the possibility of easy communication on the densely populated plains diffuse the violence more easily, and the violence often takes shape as pogroms. The location of Uzbeks dwellings on the plain made them vulnerable to attacks. On the other hand, ethnic violence in the mountain areas tends to become protracted armed conflict (Tishkov 1995: 136–137).

## Conclusion

Cultural factors are largely irrelevant in the explanation of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. The primary causal factors should be sought in the political and territorial factors. The most prominent causal factors and mechanisms which have contributed to the emergence of this conflict are the legacy of the Soviet ethnopolitical system along with Uzbek transborder dominance and spatial factors, particularly the mosaic type of ethnogeographic configuration.

The latter factors are 'facts on the ground' and are neither easy nor desirable to be manipulated. A mosaic type of ethnogeographic configuration can be 'undone' only by harsh measures such as ethnic cleansing and (forced) mass migration. Such measures cause more ethnic grievances and are unethical. In addition to these methods, redrawing borders can 'undo' the transborder dominance of an ethnic group. Such an option is also not feasible because states are not likely to cede territory voluntarily, nor is the international community very eager to allow territorial exchange as an ordinary conduct of states. However, these factors do not need to cause conflict if ethnicity is depoliticised. Therefore, the only feasible solution is moving toward a civic model of nationhood in which all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or language, have equal rights and duties.

Kyrgyzstan especially, a country with many sizable ethnic communities, will benefit from a civic model of nationhood. Civic nationalism fits these countries better than ethnic nationalism and may reduce the incentive of separatism and ethnic rivalry. This will only be possible when the Kyrgyzstani central and regional authorities implement suitable policies, and when the ethnic communities themselves consciously adopt a positive attitude towards a multi-ethnic civic Kyrgyzstani nation.

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## **NOTES**

1. This article partially overlaps with Rezvani's (2013) study, especially with its subchapters 'Political Territorial History of Central Asia' (pp. 249–254) and 'Uzbek–Kyrgyz Conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan' (pp. 261–271). An earlier version of this article entitled 'The Ethno-territorial Conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan' was presented on 30 July 2010 at the Second Central Eurasian Studies Society Regional Conference, Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara, Turkey.
2. Uzbek was initially an ethnonym of one Turkic-speaking tribe in Central Asia. They were, however, not the only ethnic group that went into the modern-day Uzbek nation. The largest ethnic group which went into the Uzbek and Tajik nations were the Sarts, who were the sedentary people of southern Central Asia, of Iranian and Turkic roots, Muslim and predominantly bilingual, among whom the Persian language predominated in most spheres. The ethnyonyms Tajik, Uzbek and Sart have coexisted next to each other at times, but had different meanings in different periods of time and different places (see e.g. Abashin 2009; Abazov 2007: 111; Khalid 1998: 87–90, 199–209).
3. 'Sart' was the ethnonym used for the sedentary population of Central Asia, and they were composed of Iranian and Turkic elements. They were one constituting part of the modern Uzbek and Tajik ethnic groups. This ethnonym may be derived

- from *Sughd* or *Soghd* (Sogdian), the ancient East Iranian natives of this part of Central Asia. For other uses of this ethnonym and ethymological hypotheses, see Abashin (2009) and Khalid (1998: 87–90, 199–209).
4. In this respect, this conflict resembles the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova.
  5. During a visit to Kyrgyzstan (August 2008), I noticed that the negative ethnic stereotypes of the ‘Other’ still exist among the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.
  6. This issue was mentioned to foreign scholars by my Kyrgyz colleagues during my fieldwork and a conference in Kyrgyzstan in August 2008. At that time not many believed in a re-emergence of ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan, despite the warnings of deterioration of inter-ethnic relations in southern Kyrgyzstan.
  7. For a discussion of the existing stereotypes of the other, see Liu (2012).
  8. In Kyrgyzstan I witnessed discussions in which Uzbeks were saying (mockingly) that the Kyrgyz are not good Muslims. The Kyrgyz, laughing bitterly, often explained that they follow their own (Islamic) traditions, adding the fact that the Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan are much more religious than those in northern Kyrgyzstan.
  9. For an elaborate account of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz inter-ethnic relations and stereotypes of each other in Osh and other cities in southern Kyrgyzstan, see Liu (2012).
  10. Border disputes and armed skirmishes were still going on in 2013: allegedly one Kyrgyz citizen was killed by Uzbek border guards on 20 June 2013 (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 20 June 2013), and ‘[a]n Uzbek border guard was killed and another seriously injured in an exchange of fire across the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border’ (Ria Novosti 23 July 2013).
  11. It was notable that in northern Kyrgyzstan in August 2008, nearly two years before the re-eruption of the Kyrgyz–Uzbek conflict, driving from the Manas Airport to Bishkek, my taxi driver, an ‘average’ Kyrgyz, added directly after the sentence ‘Uzbeks and Kyrgyz cannot be friends’, the question, ‘Did you know that many Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan are forced to be registered as and become Uzbeks?’ Also following the news on TV channels such as *K+*, it is striking to see that a dispute between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan over water resources and a hydro-electrical power plant has led to ‘nationalist-oriented’ demonstrations in Tajikistan, where Uzbeks do not have a popular image either. It was remarkable that Tajik flags were waved during these demonstrations.

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